Variations in kinship networks across time & space

Over time, the focus of interest in empirical social research has expanded from consideration of individuals' behaviour to that of the groups in which people live together, families and households. However, modern trends make the existence of wider kin networks potentially much more important than hitherto. For example, in Britain, there are now over four million divorced people the great majority of whom have a former partner alive, and three million dependent children living apart from one or both natural parents, one million living in stepfamilies. These children have complex networks of relations and differing degrees of contact with both natural and stepparents, and other kin such as grandparents. At the other end of the age range, there were three million people aged 65 and over living alone in Britain in 1991, the majority of whom have living kin who form a major resource for social contact and support, but do not live with their elderly relatives as would have been common in the past.

From a life course perspective, an individual will move through a variety of household and family states and many of the relationships made will remain important long after they were formed. Relatives such as grandparents, aunts and uncles with whom an individual never lived may also be important figures. The boundary between the co-resident group and the rest of the world is not as impermeable as many studies assume. Although the importance of wider networks is recognised, data on them have frequently been lacking. Key data sources such as censuses and surveys usually collect information only on individuals and households.

There has been a prolonged debate about whether kinship is 'weak' or not in contemporary industrialised societies, and whether kinships ties are likely to decline in importance over time. However, 'weak' in rarely quantified and to that extent, such labelling is arbitrary. There are also divergent views about convergence in such systems: Segalen's (1997) opening sentence in a recent book, Family and Kinship in Europe, stated: 'family patterns in Europe are becoming increasingly indistinguishable', and that while it is not inescapable, 'there will come a time when we shall lose our national and regional distinctions and uniformity will reign with European families responding in the same way to a common policy'. On the other hand, Reher in an article in Population and Development Review in 1998 drew a sharp distinction between 'weak-family' societies; Scandinavia, the British Isles, the Low Countries, North America, parts of Germany and Austria and Mediterranean 'strong-family' societies (which includes Italy). He states that there is a major discontinuity between such societies: 'the elderly who do not maintain regular contact with their children are a small minority of the population [in strong-family societies such as Spain], much as are the aged in weak-family societies who receive regular weekly or daily visits from their children'.

Some authors argue that contemporary kinship systems reflect patterns existing for many centuries. Few other aspects of contemporary society are believed to be so persistent, and it is implied that kinship systems will retain their distinctive nature in decades to come. However, it has been difficult to test this assertion, since few nationally representative data sets exist and even fewer comparable cross-country sources, therefore the possibility of making comparisons over time and between countries is very limited.

However, International Social Survey Programme collected information about contact by people with a range of relatives including parents, children and sibs. Information is available for seven counties for two time points, 1986 ands 2001 (Australia, Austria, West Germany, GB, Hungary, Italy and USA), which cover the range of 'strong' kin societies (such as Italy), and 'weaker' ones such as Great Britain. Thus it is possible to show how such patterns are changing over time, and whether 'strong' kinship societies are more resistant to the declines in kin contact which appears from the fragmentary evidence from 'weaker' kin societies.

In addition, the 2001 ISSP collected similar information on 19 add ional countries, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Israel, Japan, Latvia, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland, which extend the types of societies for which analysis is possible to non-European ones.

Although information was collected on a wide range of living adult kin types including father and mother, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, aunts and uncles, in-laws, grandparents and grandchildren of all ages, attention will be concentrated on the three primary kin types of parents, sibs and adult children. The information collected on these kin groups included whether they were co-resident with the respondent, and the frequency and types of contact. The indicators of kin contact used subsequently for each of these three kin types are as follows

1 does the respondent have any such living relative?
2 if there are living kin, does the respondent live with at least one of them?
3 if there are only non co-resident kin, does the respondent meet or visit at least one of them once a week or more often?
4 as with 3., but based on all forms of contact including writing, phoning etc. at least once a week
5 for those with only non co-resident kin, whether any live within 30 minutes journey time from the respondent.

The main variables used in the analysis are as follows

1 age-group, sex, marital status and availability of kin as demographic factors
2 educational level and social class as socio-economic factors
3 country and religious participation as reflecting cultural factors.

While such a typology is simplified, it serves to indicate which of these broad domains are likely to provide the best explanations of differentials in patterns of kin interaction. As a demographic variable in addition to age, sex and marital status, we use the number of the relevant kin type since how kin interaction varies with the number of kin is not obvious. For example, if visiting parents is considered to be a chore to be shared among sibs, then the more sibs, the less expected interaction per sib. However, if large families have more overall contact, then seeing parents may be more frequent among those with more sibs.

We use educational level as the main example of a socio-economic variable for a number of reasons. It

is available for all countries; there are very few missing variables compared with occupationally-derived measures such as social class; it is a variable that is largely fixed across a person's adulthood; and it is highly associated with other indicators of social status such as social class and income, and correlated with proximity. Because number of years of schooling varies substantially between age groups and countries, the same number of years of schooling could indicate a highly educated older person, but a poorly educated young person, since the overall level has increased over time. Therefore within each country, sex, and age group, the quantiles of years spent in education are calculated and the educational level variable divided into three groups of approximately equal size, the bottom third, the middle third and the top third. Thus it measures the value relative to comparable groups rather than the absolute level. This method of construction has the added advantage of ensuring that education is uncorrelated with age and country of residence.

Country is used as the principal indicator of 'culture' in this analysis. Space precludes discussion of the definition of this term, see Hammel (1990) for an extended discussion. Other variables that might be expected to reflect aspects of 'culture' were also examined. For example religion has been shown to be associated with different patterns of kin interaction. Religious denomination is highly correlated with country, and may in part reflect ascribed and passive, rather than achieved or active status. Therefore we have used frequency of church attendance as an additional cultural variable.

Because sample sizes in each country are generally small, often abut one or two thousand, multivariate analysis is used to identify statistically robust findings. Preliminary analysis suggests that there is no evidence of countries forming distinct clusters, but rather of a steady trend stretching from countries such as Italy at one extreme, to countries such as the USA and Australia at the other (where, of course, geographical distances and population mobility are likely to inhibit face to face contact). Using a series of measures of kin contact, countries are placed along this continuum. It is also possible to show how countries have changed over time, for example the decline in contact with parents in Britain over the past 30 years is similar to the difference observed at a single time point between 'strong' and 'weak' kin societies, suggesting that the argument that kinship systems have a particular resilience to change may be incorrect. Of course, kinship systems are adaptable in that face to face contact is substituted by other means such as telephoning, but the possibility that these reflect a more fundamental weakening of kinship patterns should not be discounted on spurious arguments that - uniquely - kinship is unaffected by wider social trends. Variation in contact by country shows the more pronounced differences than by socio-economic differentials within countries, although variations by age are large.