Families and social relations in the context of changing family structures

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1. Introduction and context

The people with whom we develop relationships and maintain close bonds influence our beliefs, decisions and behaviours. Such relationships are developed and maintained with family members, friends, neighbours, and people from work. Depending on the type, strength and depth of these social bonds, they are the central source of emotional support, assistance in times of need, advice and guidance. Social relationships also help to construct a sense of identity and in essence give meaning to our day-to-day activities. They develop in specific social and cultural contexts, but are not static.

Generally speaking the size, density and quality of our social relations is culturally constructed and demographically patterned, but also subject to change under the influence of migration, a general mobility and modern communication technologies. Taking these factors into consideration and considering that people tend to establish the most salient social ties with their families, this article analyses changes in family structures and relationships taking a global perspective. It will be argued that understanding these changes is a pre-condition to understanding an individual's social relationships and social networks and thus the person and his or her individual behaviour.

It will further show that although large scale social changes have transformed social bonds geographically, this does not necessarily mean that the family and its inherent solidarity is in danger as a consequence. Thus, migration and mobility does not necessarily lead to a break up of family links, just as it does not automatically lead towards individuation. Instead, adapted nuclear families emerge and maintain the strength of the family as a place of social refuge within but also across cultures. This requires reviewing the common model of family and the interface between the self, the family and culture. This will be done by introducing an adapted and differentiated model of the family which makes it possible to look at families from a cross-cultural perspective but also to capture the manifold patterns and functions of the family today within countries.

2. Changing family structures

For many decades changing family structures were primarily linked to processes of industrialisation, which in the 19th century induced an explosion of geographical mobility. What was different then compared to previous centuries was the amount of intra-European and intercontinental mobility as well as the average distance of movement. In Europe these movements led to a large scale break-up of agrarian-based extended families.

There are indicators that Europe as well as other countries is currently experiencing another explosion of long and short-term mobility of people and that mobility is strongly affecting family structures and social bonds. The reasons for people on the move are manifold. They include economic development, demographic changes, and multifaceted life-plans, perceived labour market opportunities alongside with wage prospects, better affordable as well as accessible transport, and unstable political environments.

Another reason is that in many ways the current phase of globalisation has started to affect people strongly on a personal level. The personal and working environment is increasingly influenced by internationalisation processes where for example outsourcing and imports lead to downsizing and job losses in the local economy. As a result, people not only cross borders to find new employment, migratory landscapes are also changing within countries. One may find the expatriate working away from home for a couple of months or years, the partner who commutes between home and work on a weekly or monthly basis, or the caretaker who regularly crosses borders to take up employment for a couple of months leaving children in the care of family members. However, as will be outlined, to interpret these multifaceted changes as leading to a general breakdown of the family as a social institution throughout the world would be short-sighted.

What needs to be kept in mind is that the term 'family' is commonly used in the Western world as referring to a couple and their offspring, thus describing a two generational[1] or nuclear household. When talking about family in what Kağıtçıbaşi (2002, p. 1) calls the non-western or majority world, i.e. the part of the world in which most people live, the term family commonly also includes the grandparents, uncles and aunts and cousins and at times even non-kin (Georgas 2011, p. 344). Family in this context is understood as an extended family[2] and

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[1] A two-generational family would also include homosexual parents with children and a one-parent family would equally be considered to be a two-generational family including child and the divorced parent, unmarried parent and child or the widow or widower (cf. Georgas, 2006 p. 13)

[2] Extended families refer to families of at least three generations including the maternal and paternal grandparents, the wife/mother, the husband/father, and their offspring, the aunts, siblings, cousins, nieces, and other kin of the mother and the father with variations across cultures. (Georgas, 2006, p. 13)

therefore as a much larger social unit. Although the households' sizes provided by the OECD (2011) show people actually present in the household and should thus not be equated with what people consider to be members of their family, they show that household sizes in the Majority World generally tend to be larger than in highly industrialised countries. They also show that over the past 30 years household sizes have declined in many countries indicating the shift from extended to nuclear households as well as a shift from the nuclear to the sole-parent family and single-households.

Panel B. **Average household size,**[2] **mid-1980s and mid-2000s**[3]
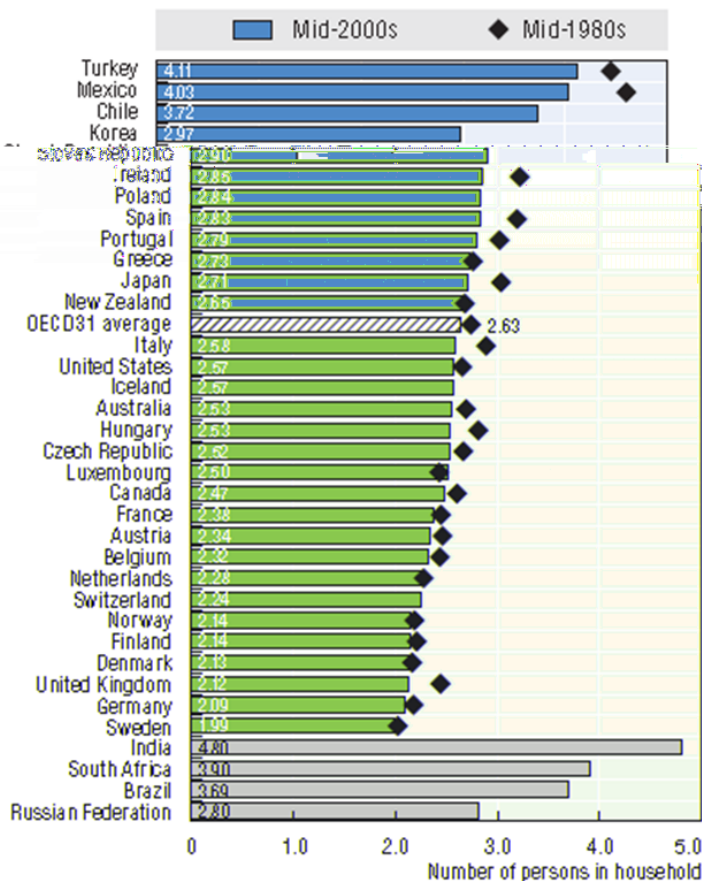
Source: (OECD, 2011, p. 19)

Generally speaking the move from the extended towards the nuclear family has become a worldwide phenomenon, but in the Majority World this shift started a lot later than in the Minority World and speeded up during the past two or three decades as a result of increased trade, industrialisation as well as the influence of telecommunications, information technology and migration (Georgas, 2006, p. 29f.). Another trend are low marriage rates and high divorce rates. For example on average, marriage rates in OECD countries have fallen from 8.1 marriages per 1000 people in 1970 to 5.0 in 2009 and divorce rate doubled over the same period (OECD, 2011, p. 29).

3. Family patterns and social relations

From a structural point of view, there seem to be increasing similarities found across the world. However as Kağitçibaşi (2006, p. 80f.) argues one should not assume that as time goes by non-western countries will follow similar trajectories that were experienced in the west and all societies will 'converge' towards the western family models. The reason for this fallacy is the general notion that only individualistically oriented family patterns are compatible with economic development. Good examples to show that this is misleading are Japan and Singapore. They exemplify the fact that expected changes in family structure do not necessarily go hand in hand with economic development (Kağitçibaşi, 2002, p. 2).

Looking at the number of relational links and the density of bonds among family members, equally show that structural changes seem to take a somewhat different course. An important observation is that nuclear families in urban areas for example are not necessarily '…decomposed into isolated nuclear families' but maintain close links and remain intertwined with the larger family network. (Georgas, 2006, p. 30) This means that families do not necessarily converge to the individualistically oriented independent family units' common in the Western world but maintain an interconnected and interdependent family orientation despite structural adjustments and geographic separation (cf. Kağitçibaşi, 2002 p. 4).

The individualistic orientation commonly linked to the West, in fact, stands in sharp contrast to societies in which family and the maintenance of social bonds takes precedence over individual needs and wants, generally referred to as collectivistic societies. These societies follow social patterns emphasising group membership, stressing the importance of maintaining group cohesion and a harmonious interdependence between the members of their in-groups. In contrast, individualism refers to a social pattern typical for cultures whose members emphasise independence and uniqueness, and favour a self-concept focusing on themselves as an independent self rather than their membership of a social entity. (cf. Markus, et al., 1991 p.224f.)

Families in India are evidence to show that changes in structure do not necessarily correspond to changing roles, functions and bonds. Despite the fact that many 'joint' families are breaking up, this does not automatically mean that families also lose their strong notion of 'jointness', a reason why D'Cruz and Bharat rather use the term of an 'adaptive extended family' (Georgas, Families and family change, 2006, p. 30). Other examples of maintaining functions typical for an extended family are poor single working mothers in Jamaica. They not only maintain close knit ties particularly with maternal relatives in the rural areas, but also foster an exchange and support system including child care and economic support between them

and their families and at times other kin in the rural areas. (Georgas, 2006, p. 30) Such systems of interdependence, mutual support and continuing exchange are not only characteristic of single mothers in the Caribbean and South America, but also in parts of Africa. In Namibia for example the link between the rural and urban families is fostered by child care arrangements and the movement of resources such as money and goods (Iken, 1999).

Maintaining close links with their families' even while away from home and keeping strong family ties is also a common feature of many migration projects today. Many of them are transnational in the sense that people on the move maintain multiple ties and interactions that cut across national boundaries. Tse and Waters (2013) for example examined the transnational lives of young adolescents born to Vancouver's Hong Kong Chinese migrants. For many Hong Kong Chinese, migration appears as an on-going process which can take on the form of a circular migration including schooling in Vancouver; work in East Asia and retirement back in Canada as a kind of shuttle between Vancouver and Hong Kong (cf. Tse, et al., 2013 p. 537). As a consequence, families nurture ties in both countries and try to uphold their relationship with their absent children through what Tse et al. call 'a sporadic and fragmented supervision' during visits or phone calls. The case of Ellie illustrates this:

> "Ellie has lived in Vancouver since she was 12. For nine years (beginning immediately after the family immigrated), her father shuttled between Vancouver and Hong Kong on business. Eventually both her parents decided to return to Hong Kong with her younger sister, leaving Ellie and her older sister in Vancouver. They continue to live in the family house and their mother visits every couple of months 'to see how we are doing' and to check up on the house'…She calls her parents 'astronauts' because of the way they 'come back and forth' whenever her father takes an occasional 'holiday' in Vancouver." (Tse & Waters, 2013, p. 539).

Of course the transnational geographical distance changes the character of the intra-family relations and it is not surprising, for example, that the occasional visit or phone call from a parent may in fact intervene in the adolescent life in a way that does not capture the day-to-day reality of a teenager and results in a 'growing emotional detachment' (Tse & Waters, 2013, p. 539). However it nonetheless highlights the strong effort to maintain and keep the family together regardless of geographical distance and that modern communication and affordable transport systems facilitate this.

In order to emphasise the importance and the functioning of the networks through which social and financial resources travel between geographically dispersed family members, the term transnational social spaces has been suggested. It is used to describe the multi-stranded social webs that are spun between the country of origin and country of settlement. It includes many different types of migrants such as migrants who have settled in a foreign land

permanently as well as those whose future place of settlement is still uncertain. It also refers to migrants who move back and forth between countries and who, regardless of their individual migration projects and aims, maintain transnational links illustrating their connectedness, including intra-household and family ties. (cf. Faist, 2006 p. 3)

In the Dominican Republic the term *el hermano lejano or* 'distant brother' is used to illustrate the role of absent family members, thus emphasising kindred solidarity. Resources which travel through these networks have, as Porter (1997, p. 13) argues, '…become a vital means of survival for families and at times communities'. In fact remittances may serve as a strong indicator of family bonds across countries facilitated by the near instant character of communication across borders. Increasingly affordable telephone calls, skype and internet chats to name but a few and thus the 'personal, real-time contact' support the feeling and notion of embeddedness in different social systems, thus not only maintaining family links but also retaining their sense of 'collectivity' (cf. Vertovec, 2004 p. 222). The drastic increase in international calls already between 1995 and 2001 are a clear indicator that phone calls have as Vertovec (2004) calls it, become the 'social glue of migrants'. Calls between Germany and Turkey increased by 54% during this period, between Pakistan and the UK by 123% and 556% to Canada to name just a few (Vertovec, 2004, p. 220). Since then, long distance traffic growth has slowed down partly at the expense of cross-border traffic of skype and TeleGeography maintain that cross-border skype-to-skype calls grew tremendously since 2011. It can be fair to say that if Skype's on-net-traffic would have been routed through phone companies' cross-border traffic would have maintained a growth rate of 13% in 2011 (TeleGography, 2012).

What these examples show is that families are dynamic social institutions which are continually changing and adapting to social and economic circumstances, but that these changes do not follow a prescribed and uniform pattern. They also show that focusing on structures and thus living arrangements when analysing families does not reveal much about relationships, networks, bonds and bridges between family members. In fact family relations appear to be too complex to follow a unitary path of change in the context of modernisation and globalisation. This also means that families do not necessarily converge from a system of interdependent and interconnected family relations towards an individualised notion of the self with needs of individualisation and self-actualisation, values which are at the core of the individualistic society.

Consequently an approach is needed which not only captures changing family structures across the world and within societies but also allows for an analysis of the different forms and levels of adaptation. To this end, Kağitçibaşi (2006, p. 84) developed a general family change model which enables an analysis of the family within its cultural and socio-economic contexts and living circumstances. This model highlights the mutual relationship between socialisation

values and family interaction and socialisation and the influence of this on a person's view of him or herself in contrast to others. It also shows the influence the family structure has on this.
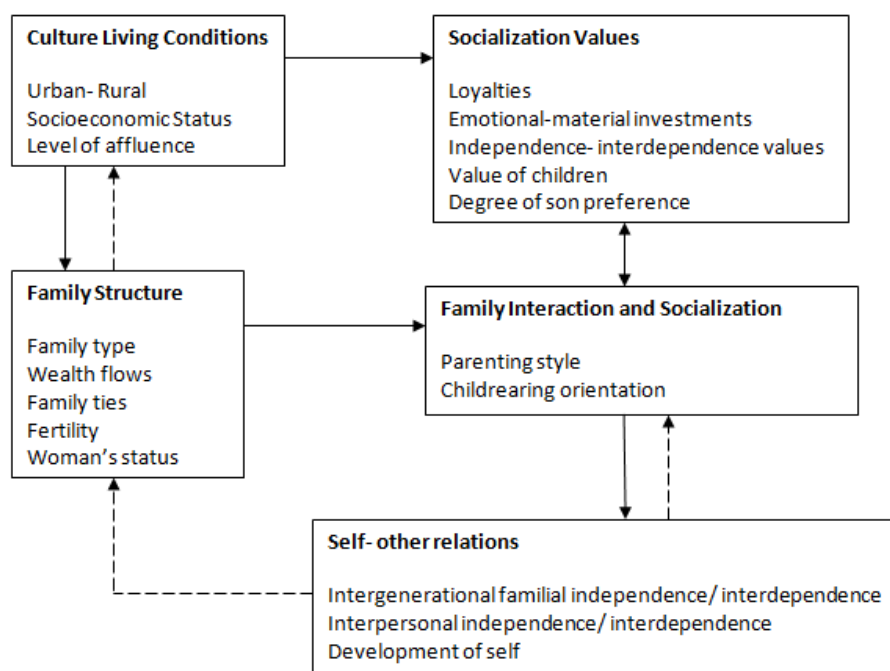
Figure 1: General family change model
(Source: Kağitçibaşi, 2006)

Such a model can be applied to families across the world and be used for cross-cultural analysis. To illustrate this, Kağitçibaşi (2006 pp. 84-85) uses the example of a typical rural setting in the Majority World and a family in urban contexts with a low socio-economic status for whom intergenerational interdependence is vital for making a living.

In the former family situation, children are expected to assist working on the fields and later by providing support during old-age. In such a context the more children a family has the more people are able to contribute to the household income and thus maintain a strong economic and utilitarian value. High fertility rates as well as a strong preference for bearing a son to take over the family estate are thus crucial societal success factors. This coupled with a childrearing orientation towards obedience and patriarchal structures are supportive in keeping families together and thus ensuring their wellbeing. (cf. Kağitçibaşi, 2006 p. 84f.). In such families the culture of relatedness and interdependence are fostered and considered to be highly valuable as an independent minded child may leave and focus on his or her own self-interest and thus become a threat to the family livelihood. (cf. Kağitçibaşi, 2009 p. 411)

In contrast, a Western middle-class affluent urban nuclear family with a sustainable income from employment would follow socialisation values based on an individualistic world view. As a starting point they are likely to strive to have one or two children and support these to become self-reliant and independent. In such a context the focuses of socialisation is vested in intergenerational independence and as older people have their own income and insurance benefits and the support of children becomes less of an economic imperative, it may even be seen as unnecessary or even unacceptable. (Kağitçibaşi, 2009, p. 411) In such environment autonomy, self-actualisation and individualism is considered central for ‚healthy human development' (Kağitçibaşi, 2006, pp. 84-85).

The two family types are indicative of a culture of relatedness and of lifestyles requiring and reinforcing interdependence on the one hand and a culture of independence and of lifestyles fostering self-realisation on the other. However it is wrong to assume that with urbanisation and economic development families change from the model of interdependence to the model of independence. Instead there are strong indications that families are able to combine and link psychological interdependence with material independence. As with urban lifestyles and economic advancement there is a diminishing need for inter-generational and intra-family support, autonomy is no longer considered a threat and can be tolerated if not desired. At the same time psychological interdependence may continue to be valued as it is 'ingrained in the culture of relatedness (collectivism) and is not incompatible with changing lifestyles' (Kağitçibaşi, 2009, p. 411). Thus a third model emerges linking psychological interdependence with a strong notion of relatedness which means that emotional closeness and bonds remain despite increasing material independence. (Kağitçibaşi, 2009, p. 411f.)

The two prototyped families are also indicative of the contrasting models whereby the model of family interdependence and relatedness is considered more prevalent in the Majority World and the family model of independence and self-actualisation in the Western World. For a long time the prevailing assumption was that as the interdependent family gradually catches up with modernity and socioeconomic development, it would gradually change into a family favouring self-reliance and independence. (cf. Kağitçibaşi, 2006 pp. 84-85). However it appears that such a development in not a necessary consequence, as the countries of Japan, Korea and Hong Kong clearly show. These are countries of great economic advancement and yet have a strong notion of family orientation based on interconnectedness and interdependence. (Kağitçibaşi, 2002, p. 2).

Furthermore, it also came to light that there are migrant affluent families who endorse autonomy and thus a strong notion of individualism and at the same time foster relatedness.

The study by Phalet and Schonpflug (2001) among Turkish immigrants in Germany and Moroccan families in the Netherlands is an example of this. They show that for example the transmission of autonomy pursued by Turkish immigrants in Germany is not only more intense than among Moroccan parent-children dyads, but that this did not go along with separateness. Although parents showed a strong desire for achievement, these values were rather associated with parental collectivism than individualism. (Phalet & Schönpflug, 2001, p. 199)

With growing material independence there is much more room for autonomy and economic advancement in children's upbringing, enabling them to become less reliant on other family members while nonetheless valuing emotional closeness and maintaining strong emotional family links with their family members. Finally, there is also evidence that in Western countries and in particular in Europe, there are families that greatly emphasise relatedness and even value it more than being competitive. We can therefore conclude that it is necessary to consider a family model 'that integrates both autonomy and relatedness' (Kağitçibaşi, 2006, pp. 86-87). Indeed, the model developed by Kağitçibaşi incorporates such settings of decreasing material interdependencies but continuing interpersonal connectedness (Kağitçibaşi, 2006, p. 85). It goes without saying that pursuing such a model has implications for child rearing as parents are likely to support the development of a self which involves autonomy and at the same time relatedness. (Kağitçibaşi, 2006, p. 86)

4. Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that although there is a general trend towards a break-away from large extended families towards a nuclearisation of families and among these a trend towards a sole-parent and single household, this can neither be generalised nor does it mean that changes in structure are automatically followed by a changing patterns of social relations. In fact there seems to be a tendency of maintaining a close network of social relations with family members despite having a small household in particular among families from the Majority World.

Another important aspect is that Majority World families are not per se shifting towards individualistic oriented Western family patterns neither as migrants nor because family patterns are changing. Instead a diversity of family patterns emerges which, from a structural point of view, calls into question the view of individualism and collectivism as two opposing systems with a natural and gradual shift from group orientation towards individualism as societies modernise and become more urban. It even appears as if for many cultures autonomy and relatedness are two basic needs rather than opposites.

This is not to say that from a broad, societal point of view we can no longer make a generalised distinction between societies upholding individualistic values as opposed to societies recognising relatedness as a strong, overarching value system. But in order to acknowledge the increasing intra-societal variations and cater for different family patterns as well as maintenance of family ties within societies, the individual perspective has become an imperative. This is also a point brought up by Gudykunst et al. (1997 p.123) who argue that individuals from a culture 'vary in the degree to which they mirror' an individualistic and collectivistic orientation. Therefore they strongly support the approach of measuring value orientations on a personal level. In other words, country level analysis does not capture intra-cultural variations. (cf. also Leung, 2010) This is of particular importance in intercultural interaction as these variations within cultures help us to understand to which degree the individuals conform to the general mean or the typical members of the society.

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