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**Well-being of children and labour markets in Europe  
Different kinds of risks resulting from various structures and changes in the labour  
markets**

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**Semi-Dependency in the Relationships between Young Adults and Their  
Parents. An European Study**

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Recent decades have seen many changes in the lives of young people in Europe, having to do with political and economic transformation. The educational trajectories have become longer and the transition from school to work has for many young people become a step which they could not make anymore on their own decision but are dependent on the whimsical turns of economy. Formerly linear transitions from school to work have become long and unforeseeable, full of switches and turns between work, unemployment, further training and again work or unemployment. As a result young people are increasingly dependent or semi-dependent on their families for a protracted period of time (Biggart & Walther, 2005).

Many young persons today gain economic independence only in their late twenties, or even later. They remain for many years in a status of semi-dependency, being socially and sexual-emotionally independent but economically still dependent on their parents or state support, or both (Mills & Blossfeld, 2003). It is not only the young people who have to endure semi-dependency, their parents have to adapt to the new situation as well. They remain longer responsible for their children, not only financially but in many other respects as well. Unresponsive labour markets in combination with a severe shortage of affordable housing are retaining young people to become economically independent. Cuts in social benefits in most European countries put ever more transition costs, material as well as immaterial ones, on the shoulders of the family (Chisholm & Kovacheva, 2002).

While there is much research available about the transition from education and training to the labour market, also in comparative perspective (Shavit & Müller, 1998; Evans, 2002; Walther et al, 2006), less is known about the effects and repercussions of semi-dependency on family relations (but see Dey & Morris, 1999; Bendit et al., 1999; Merino & Garcia, 2006). The recently completed European project FATE<sup>1</sup> tried to fill this knowledge gap.

In this contribution I will look for answers to the *question* how young people and their parents deal with semi-dependency of their grown-up children. I will describe the strategies that both generations develop in order to cope with conflicts resulting from longer dependency. A *leading hypothesis*, which was developed in the course of FATE, was that parental support can and does mitigate possible negative effects of semi-dependency, but the family system is not capable of compensating for structural deficits, deriving from withheld state support.

FATE data refer to nine European regions in the UK/North Ireland, West and East Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Bulgaria. We conducted a survey among young people<sup>2</sup> to gain information about social-economic and educational status, family composition, living arrangements, family climate and family rules, and future plans of the young people. We contacted the respondents when they were about to enter the labour market or further education. One year later a qualitative follow-up study was conducted with 30-45 young people and 20-30 parents in each country/region. The sample was drawn from the survey and according to the same criteria. The interviews took place one year after completion of the survey in order to study more in depth the coping strategies of the young persons while transiting to the labour market (or further education), and what role their parents played during that period.

In order to study family relations with regard to mutual semi-dependence of children and parents, the concept of *conflict management* proved fruitful (see Stauber & du Bois-Reymond, 2006). We distinguish between an *open* as opposed to a *closed* family climate concerning conflict management. An open-minded family climate implies the recognition on the side of the parents that their grown-up children want to lead their own lives and experience as much independence as is possible under the circumstances of still living under the parental roof. *Negotiation* is a leading strategy to deal with different interests and expectations. This can be in an atmosphere of relaxation or to solve conflicts without suppressing one party. In both cases parents and young people encounter each other as equal parties. This is different from a closed family climate where *conflicts* are suppressed and thus *avoided* from from being freely discussed. Parents or young people may prevent conflicts to arise in the first place by complying with the interests of the other party and suppressing own interests, for instance when a daughter complies to the expectation of her parents that she (and not her brother) has to be available for household chores or when parents comply against their convictions to the

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<sup>1</sup> FATE (Families in Transition) was conducted by EGRIS (European Group for Integrated Social Research) within the Fifth Framework of the European Commission 2001-2004. See also [www.socsci.ulst.ac.uk/policy/fate/fatepublications.html](http://www.socsci.ulst.ac.uk/policy/fate/fatepublications.html).

<sup>2</sup> In each country/region 200-250 young men and women were contacted, 1929 in total. Males and females were evenly represented, and all levels of education were included (see for more details Biggart et al. 2003).

wishes of their daughter to go out on herself without saying where she goes or when she comes back.

In what follows I shall first report results which pertain to *general trends* we found in the family relations in all research regions and which can therefore be regarded as part of broader developments in Europe. Then I shall go into *specific constellations* in and differences between the regions, using, albeit with due caution, the typology of welfare regimes which was developed by Esping Andersen (1990) and Gallie & Paugam (2000) and which we have developed further into transition regimes<sup>3</sup> (Walther et al. 2006). I close with some considerations about political consequences in the frame of a European Youth Pact.

## **GENERAL TRENDS IN THE INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS UNDER CONDITIONS OF SEMI-DEPENDENCY**

Although there are big differences, in all our research regions the transition trajectories of young people have become more precarious and unforeseeable than they were in the time when the parents were young. That influences the expectations of the parents in a different way from those of their children. They have a reference point for comparison which their children have not; they hope for linearity of occupational career and, possibly, a gendered biographical life plan, while their sons and daughters are confronted with the immediacy of social and economic changes. This holds especially for post-socialist countries where economic and political changes have impacted dramatically on the older and younger generation. The parent generation in these countries experiences a devaluation of their own knowledge and cannot guide their children on their way to adulthood; they are less able to advise their children in occupational matters.

All parents, as their children, know or have learned how indispensable a good education is in these days, even if they themselves might not have acquired an education as high as their children will get or have gotten one. They all are aware that they are part of an economic system which moves rapidly toward a knowledge society.

In all regions we found gender roles persisting in the parent generation, more so in the south eastern than the northern countries, with the *mother* taking the main load of communication in the family on her. They are the first to be approached by their grown-up children in personal and emotional matters, while the fathers are more responsible for financial, occupational and practical matters. Mothers play in case of conflict a decisive role and we found that their strategies are more oriented towards looking for acceptable compromises than insisting on parental wishes whereas the fathers would withdraw from confrontation as much as possible.

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<sup>3</sup> Transition regimes refer to country clusters which are based on relations between socio-economic, insitutional and cultural facotors framing youth transitions.

Conflict avoidance strategies are generally more typical for and in the relationship between mothers and daughters than fathers and sons – a well known given in youth research, which our study confirms in comparative perspective. That points to a still gendered family life even if the daughters acquire as high an education as the sons – or even higher – but are drawn into family responsibilities more than their brothers. This became especially visible when asking about supporting their parents in case of illness or old age; if at all, it were the young females who felt responsible, not the males.

In sum we found the *negotiation household* to have become a leading model in European families. Countries with patriarchal traditions, like Bulgaria, Portugal and Spain adjust to this trend while welfare societies like Denmark, Germany or the Netherlands have worked out this model since longer (du Bois-Reymond 1998).

## DIFFERENCES

When grouping our research countries according to the welfare state typology of Esping Andersen and others, *Bulgaria* and *East Germany* are examples of post-socialist transition regimes which are characterized by the breakdown of the political system and the entry of neo-liberal capitalism in combination with state withdrawal. For both countries this change is an encounter, among others, with semi or full economic dependency of young adults on their family. Despite many obvious differences, the young people and their parents in both countries/regions had to adjust to this situation. The family as a “Notgemeinschaft” (East Germany) and a “Solidargemeinschaft” (Bulgaria) became again urgent. Under state communism, the German Notgemeinschaft was a wall which separated the private from the official sphere and protected the individuals from too much state and party intervention. Today, it serves as a haven for their members, young and old, who have to adjust to new risks. In Bulgaria, traditional family resources, like subsistence economy and support within a three-generation family, are reactivated and are needed to keep ends meet. In view of extreme housing shortage, the parents might even go as far and give their sleeping room to their grown-up children to provide them with some private space.

In the families of both transition countries adjustments to new circumstances do not go without conflicts. We found more examples of a *closed conflict climate* than in other countries, an observation which we interpret as a sign that the burden laid on families with semi-dependent children in these countries/regions, in combination with exceedingly high rates of (youth) unemployment, is straining the family members. In Bulgaria, migration of the young is a strategy to “solve” semi-dependency and attached conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> During the past decade Bulgaria has lost more than 10% of her (young) population through emigration (Jasiukaityte & Reiter, 2004).

*Italy, Portugal and Spain* are examples of sub-protective transition regimes which share insufficient state support with the post-socialist countries but which diverge from them through a longer affiliation with Western-style capitalism and democracy. Precarious trajectories of the young on account of (very) high unemployment rates are typical and shape family life. Yet there are substantial differences between the three countries, especially between Italy and the other two.

The Italian family is known for her warm and relaxed climate (Sgritta 2004), and it is here where we found most negotiation and harmony in comparison with the others. Italian families have developed, over many years, a “culture of harmony” despite semi-dependency of the younger family members. At the same time, certain patriarchal structures remain: sons are much more spoiled than daughters, even to the point of not *wanting* to move out of the parental home. Consequently they have much fewer conflicts than their sisters who have to find a “third way” between occupational and private emancipation and parental expectations as to practical help and future support in old age.

In comparison with Italy we found more conflicts in Portugal and Spain where families are less closely bound to each other while having to endure prolonged semi-dependency nevertheless. Conflicts in these families tend to be subdued or result in open clashes without negotiation, for instance if a young male is so frustrated by prolonged unemployment and restricted housing that he chooses to stay outside the parental house as much as he can; a combination of conflict avoidance through absence and conflict clash if parents criticize this behaviour. The daughters are more obedient – comply more to gendered role expectations – and manage conflicts rather with strategies of avoidance or compromising.

Finally *United Kingdom/Northern Ireland, West Germany, Netherlands, Denmark*: These countries are structured by liberal and employment centered transition regimes with declining state support for young people in transition, except for Denmark which is an example of the Scandinavian universalistic regime with still more state support than the others. In all these countries, the youth transition is governed by the cultural norm of gaining early economic independence through early insertion in the labour market or further study outside the parental home.

Only in Denmark there is enough state support to maintain this model of early independence. That is the main reason why there are hardly any family conflicts. Like Italy, the Danish family enjoys relaxed mutual relations, yet which are differently structured. Danish families “live apart together” forming intergenerational networks with every individual having enough space and privacy for her or himself, within the parental house or outside it.

The Netherlands come closest to the Danish model in the degree of relaxed intergenerational relationships and early independence of the young adults. Despite their longstanding religious traditions, the Netherlands now belong to the most liberal and secularized countries in Europe (du Bois-Reymond, 1998), and that shows in parental tolerance of diverting life plans of their children and in children’s devotion of their parents

and family life. Conflicts are rather solved through negotiation than suppression and avoidance and in both countries gendered expectations are hardly existent.

In comparison West German families “produce” more conflicts although they, too, follow the negotiation model and are highly secularized. But the pressure on account of exaggerated youth unemployment and decreasing state support is high and consequently leads to more stress in the families.

Northern Ireland diverts from this model; religious traditions are strong, youth unemployment is high and the economic prospects were at the time of our research not bright. Conflicts arose about parental expectations that their grown-up children should contribute financially to the household, an expectation which played a minor or no role in other countries. If young people do not earn (enough) money and still have to live in the parental home, the tension is high and grounds for negotiation low.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through prolonged transitions of the young generation families are faced with new demands. We have focused here on the phenomenon of semi-dependency of young people and want that means for themselves and their parents. The FATE research is an example for the fruitfulness of combining family and youth sociology, putting both in a comparative perspective. We could show how the relations between the generations are shaped according to different transition regimes as a powerful macro context; labour market conditions and state policies regarding support for families and young people in transition are main forces in this respect. At the same time, cultural forces exert their influence on the intergenerational relationship as well and lead to *hybrids* of old and new forms. Families do not modernize in a linear way – neither do youth trajectories -, but they change through the interaction between state policies and family member of both generations, parents and adult children, who negotiate traditions, local cultures and new societal demands. The comparative perspective has demonstrated that even countries within one regime type divert substantially in their family relations and the way they treat conflict. It has also been shown that strategies to deal with conflicts arising through semi-dependency are to a lesser or more degree gendered, depending on local and national traditions.

FATE results throw new light on the “generation contract”. Despite still great differences between European countries, it cannot be denied that *all* families individualize and modernize, and although they do that in different ways and to different degrees, their members, old and young, share the desire to combine independence with closeness and emotional engagement. Conflicts arise when independence is not a granted right for young adults, and conflicts are more productively solved when there are enough resources. For European transition policies that means that the state must not refrain from its task of

supporting young people and their families precisely in that difficult period of gaining economic independence. A rigid labour market and activation policy does not solve this problem; youth policy, family policy, education and labour market policy must be combined on individual state member level as well as on European Union level. This is indeed the intention of the recently proclaimed “Youth Pact” where it says:

*Against the background of Europe’s ageing population, The European Council sees a need for young Europeans to benefit from a set of policies and measures forming a fully integrated part of the Lisbon Strategy. The Youth Pact aims to improve the education, training, mobility, vocational integration and social inclusion of young Europeans, while facilitating the reconciliation of working life and family life. The Pact should ensure the overall consistency of initiatives in these areas and provide the starting point for strong, ongoing mobilization on behalf of young people.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union, Brussels, 23 March 2005 (OR.fr).

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