

## **From norms to behavior: A longitudinal, multi-actor study of filial norms and intergenerational proximity**

*Extended abstract, European Population Conference 2026*

Presenter: Fee Van den Eynde<sup>1</sup>

Co-authors: dr. Daniël van Wijk<sup>1</sup>, dr. Jornt J. Mandemakers<sup>1</sup>, Prof. dr. Helga A. G. de Valk<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

Across Western societies, relationships between parents and adult children are being reshaped by three demographic and social transformations. First, population ageing is accelerating as the baby boomer generation enters later life, fertility remains persistently below replacement, and life expectancy overall continues to rise. These trends extend the types and duration of intergenerational ties and intensify potential responsibilities between generations. Second, life-course trajectories have changed, reflecting demographic transitions in different life stages, including the postponement of union formation, increased levels of union dissolution across the life course and delayed childbearing. This changes the context and timing in which caring for young children and ageing parents (in law) are experienced. Third, growing individualization in life-course decisions, combined with a state-led shift of care responsibilities onto families, creates tensions between personal autonomy and enduring expectations of intergenerational support. As institutional buffers weaken, adult children and ageing parents face increasing pressure to reconcile independent life-course choices with caregiving/filial obligations.

Within this context of rising intergenerational care needs, residential proximity between adult children and their ageing parents plays a crucial role in facilitating the exchange of support (Knijn and Liefbroer, 2006). Previous studies on residential mobility and internal migration have shown that individuals often move towards or stay in the proximity of their children and/or parents, particularly if there is a need for intergenerational support (Mulder and Gillespie, 2024). Less is known, however, about why some individuals move closer to family members and others do not. In particular, we know little about the role of norms of filial obligations in shaping moves for intergenerational proximity, even though such norms are likely to be an important role in determining the (perceived) need for proximity. To address this gap, we pose the following research question: “To what extent and under what conditions do norms of filial obligations influence adult children’s and parents’ decisions to move closer to each other or to start co-residing?”

This paper is innovative in three ways. First, we are among the first to study how *norms* of filial obligations are linked to later residential mobility *behavior*. We do so by integrating unique, large-scale survey data gathered in 2013 on norms of filial obligations with follow-up for up to 10 years in the Dutch population registers (2013-2023). Second, we incorporate information on the full family network using newly available registry data, which allows us to study the association between norms and changes in proximity between parents and children taking into account the embeddedness of the parent-child dyad in the larger family network. Moreover, using the registry we are able to move beyond parent-child dyads and also include dyads of children and their parents-in-law. The data provides background information on all these actors. Third, we include information on a variety of structural characteristics to study how they influence the translation of norms into residential behavior, including shifting opportunities and constraints on the housing and labor market.

### *Theoretical background*

The relationship between social norms and actual life-course behavior has recently regained attention in demographic research. While individualization and the de-institutionalization of family life have often been associated with a weakening of social norms, research by Liefbroer and Billari (2010) demonstrates that even in highly individualized societies, norms continue to guide and structure behavior. They are particularly influential in shaping timing, sequencing, and perceived appropriateness of key life-course events. Empirical evidence further highlights the temporal dimension of norms: as adult children age, they increasingly perceive a moral duty to care for their ageing parents (te Riele & Kloosterman, 2015). From a life-course perspective, the principle of linked lives (Elder at al., 2003;

---

<sup>1</sup> Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute – KNAW / University of Groningen, The Hague, The Netherlands

Bernardi et al., 2019) suggests that these norms extend beyond the individual, shaping interdependent decisions within parent-child relationships. Recent research further demonstrates that intergenerational interdependence is evident in residential mobility patterns, with adult children often relocating closer to their parents or to neighborhoods associated with their youth, reflecting both practical needs and family preferences (Michielin et al., 2008; Pettersson & Malmberg, 2009; Mulder & Gillespie, 2023). However, the connection between filial norms and actual residential behavior remains largely unexplored. Therefore, we hypothesize that stronger filial norms increase the likelihood to move closer to a child/parent and increase the likelihood of intergenerational co-residence (hypothesis 1).

However, this relationship is neither direct nor uniform. Translating normative intentions into behavior highly depends on whether individuals have the opportunity to relocate or face constraints that limit mobility. The framework of opportunities and constraints (Grundy & Henretta, 2006; Kalmijn, 2019, 2025) provides a useful lens to understand this dynamic. Within the scope of this study, we focus specifically on structural opportunities and constraints along two main dimensions. (1) Housing market opportunities and constraints, such as housing availability, affordability, size, and ownership shape the feasibility of living close to or with ageing parents (Chen, 2019; Isengard & Szydlik, 2012). (2) Socio-economic opportunities and constraints, including income, education and employment status further condition both capacity and willingness to act on filial norms (Isengard & Szydlik, 2012; Smits et al. 2010). Previous research indicates for example that higher-educated individuals are more likely to fulfill filial obligations from a distance, whereas lower-educated individuals, facing greater financial constraints, may be more inclined toward co-residence as practical form of care (Isengard & Szydlick, 2012). Hence, this study conceptualizes the link between filial norms and residential behavior as conditional and context-dependent: filial obligations may foster intentions to move closer, yet their realization is ultimately influenced by available opportunities and structural constraints. Specifically, we hypothesize that filial norms are more strongly associated with intergenerational proximity and co-residence by adult children and parents who have more opportunities and face less constraints (hypothesis 2).

#### *Data and methodology*

This study relies on a unique, longitudinal dataset that combines survey data on norms and care intentions with register-based data on residential moves and structural opportunities and constraints for individuals residing in the Netherlands. The *Onderzoek Gezinsvorming (OG)* survey, conducted by the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) in collaboration with Statistics Netherlands (CBS) in 2013, includes 10,255 respondents aged 18-80 and provides comprehensive measures of reciprocal filial obligations from both adult children and parents. We enrich these attitudinal measures with longitudinal register data in the 2013-2023 period, allowing for a 10-year follow-up of respondents. The register data provides longitudinal information on residential location, internal migration, household composition, housing conditions, and socio-economic status. The combination of survey and register data allows a direct examination of how filial norms translate into transitions to intergenerational residential proximity and co-residence, and how structural conditions moderate these effects.

For the analysis two complementary subsamples are defined: (1) adult children aged 30-64 with at least one living parent ( $n = 4,555$ ), and (2) older parents aged 65-80 with at least one living adult child ( $n = 1,873$ ). These subsamples allow for preliminary insights into intergenerational norms and obligations from both perspectives. We will link respondents to their family networks through the Dutch population register data and create parent-child dyads. From the child's perspective, this allows us to include up to four dyads (father, mother, father-in-law, mother-in-law). From the parent's perspective, we include dyads of parents and all living children. This future linkage will enable multi-actor modelling of residential proximity and co-residence patterns.

#### *Preliminary results*

We currently have access to the data from the OG survey. First analyses have been conducted and show the feasibility of our study; linkages to the population register data have been made and will be expanded for this paper.

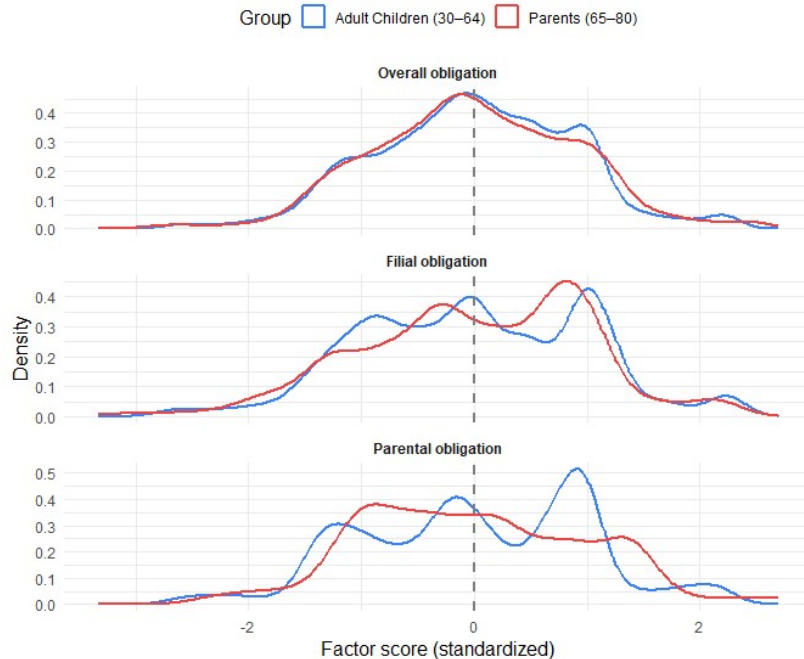
Descriptive analyses of filial and parental obligations are presented in Table 1, showing the mean scores and standard deviations of responses across six items separately for adult children (aged 30-64) and parents (aged 65-80). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Preliminary analyses reveal that adult children express stronger filial obligations than parents, particularly regarding care responsibilities, although both generations show limited support for co-residence. Furthermore, to ensure that the measurement of norms is aligned across items, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis, which confirmed the presence of two distinct scales: filial obligations (adult children’s responsibilities towards parents) and parental obligations (parent’s responsibilities toward adult children). Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the standardized factor scores for both norms by age groups. Scores are centered around zero within each group, meaning they reflect relative positions; higher scores indicate stronger agreement of the norm compared to one’s peers, while lower scores indicate weaker agreement. Overall, these results confirm sufficient variation in normative perceptions, which will be linked to potential differences in future residential mobility.

Table 1. Means and standard deviation differences in item scores by age group.

Items on parental and filial obligation	Adult children (30-64)		Parents (65-80)	
	Mean	SD*	Mean	SD
Should grandparents take care of their grandchildren if the parents are unable to do so themselves?	2.9	1.01	3.4	1.05
Should parents provide financial assistance when their adult children have financial problems?	2.79	0.97	3.21	1
When their adult children need help, should parents adjust their own lives to able to support them?	2.6	0.95	3	0.99
Adult children are responsible for taking care of their parents when they need help?	3.23	0.98	2.84	0.98
Should adult children provide financial support when their parents have financial problems?	2.86	0.98	2.62	0.92
When parents can no longer take care of themselves, should children take their parents into their homes?	2.22	0.92	1.83	0.75

Note: n<sub>children</sub> = 4,546, n<sub>parents</sub> = 1,863, \*SD = standard deviation

Figure 1. Distribution of parental and filial scale by age group



### *Future analytical strategy*

The next steps will examine how filial and parental norms predict *future* actual residential behaviors. These models will be estimated once we have access to linked survey-registry data. The survey is already linked and data access is currently pending approval from *Statistics Netherlands*. We expect to obtain access to the linked data in the coming month (December 2025). The combined survey and register data will allow us to construct a dyad-year data file. Parent(-in-law)-child dyads will be censored in case of death of one of the actors in the dyad. Based on average numbers of parents(-in-law) and children in the Netherlands, we expect run models on a dataset of approximately 90,000 parent-child dyad observations where ego is the child (~4,500 children \* 10 years \* 2 parents(-in-law)) and 36,000 parent-child dyad observations where ego is the parent (~1,873 parents \* 10 years \* 2 children).

To test *Hypothesis 1*, we will use the norms measured at  $t_0$  (2013) to predict the likelihood that adult children or parents will move closer to, or start co-residing with each other over time. The dependent variables will be the distance between ego and alter at  $t$  and co-residence at  $t$ , with multivariate analyses incorporating random intercepts to account for clustering at the ego level.

To address *Hypothesis 2*, the analysis will extend the analyses by stepwise incorporation of structural opportunities and constraints. We integrate two key dimensions under this framework; the first dimension covers housing market factors such as availability, housing price, dwelling size, and ownership. The second dimension includes socio-economic factors such as income, education, and employment status. These factors are treated as potential moderators of the relationship between filial norms and residential behavior.

A comprehensive set of control variables will be included to adjust for demographic and family-structure heterogeneity; including age, birth cohort, gender, marital status or partnership, parental health and number of siblings within the kin-networks.

### *References*

- Bernardi, L., Huinink, J., & Settersten Jr, R. A. (2019). The life course cube: A tool for studying lives. *Advances in life course research*, 41, 100258.
- Chen, J. & Jordan, L. P. (2019). Psychological well-being of coresiding elderly parents and adult children in China: Do father-child and mother-child relationships make a difference? *Journal of Family Issues*, 40(18), 2728-2750. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19862845>
- Elder Jr, G. H., Johnson, M. K., & Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In *Handbook of the life course* (pp0 3-19). Boston, MA: Springer US.
- Grundy, E., & Henretta, J. C. (2006). Between elderly parents and adult children: a new look at the intergenerational care provided by the 'sandwich generation.' *Ageing and Society*, 26(5), 707-722. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X06004934>
- Isengard, B., & Szydlik, M. (2012). Living apart (or) together? Coresidence of elderly parents and their adult children in Europe. *Research on Aging*, 34(4), 449-474. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027511428455>
- Kalmijn, M. (2025). Demand-and supply-side perspectives on parental support: Inequalities between and within families. *Social Science Research*, 129, 103181.
- Kalmijn, M. (2019). Contact and conflict between adult children and their parents in immigrant families: Is integration problematic for family relationships? *Journal of ethnic and migration studies*, 45(9), 1419-1438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1522245>
- Knijjn, T. C., & Liefbroer, A. C. (2006). More kin than kind: Instrumental support in families. *Family solidarity in the Netherlands*, 89-105.
- Liefbroer, A. C., & Billari, F. C. (2010). Bringing norms back in: A theoretical and empirical discussion of their importance for understanding demographic behaviour. *Population, space and place*, 16(4), 287-305. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.552>
- Michielin, F., Mulder, C. H., & Zorlu, A. (2008). Distance to parents and geographical mobility. *Population, Space and Place*, 14(4), 327-345. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.509>
- Mulder, C. H., & Gillespie, B. J. (2024). Moving and staying in the context of the family: A review and an introduction to the Special Issue. *Population, Space and Place*, 30(3), e2712.
- Pettersson, A., & Malmberg, G. (2009). Adult children and elderly parents as mobility attractions in Sweden. *Population, Space and Place*, 15(4), 343-357. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.558>
- Smits, A., van Gaalen, R. I., & Mulder, C. H. (2010). Parent-child coresidence: Who moves in with whom and for whose needs? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(4), 1022-1033. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00746.x>
- te Riele, S., & Kloosterman, R. (2015). Familiesolidariteit: hulp aan ouders en kinderen.