

Does the Likelihood of Parent-Child Estrangement Differ by Migration Background? Evidence from Germany

Michael Zaslavsky¹ & Flavia Mazzeo^{2, 3}

¹ University of Wisconsin-Madison

² Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR)

³ University of Trento

Introduction

Social scientists have long investigated the nature of family relationships and their implications for life outcomes, both within nuclear families and increasingly from a multigenerational perspective (Bengtson 2001). Fears of declining intergenerational solidarity and the demise of the family have waxed and waned over time as family complexity has increased, and demographic trends such as increasing life expectancy and low fertility reshape families from more horizontal to vertical (Popenoe 1993; Silverstein and Bengtson, 1997; Seltzer and Bianchi 2013; Fingerman et al., 2020; Alburez-Guttierez et al., 2023). What has emerged clearly is that, far from weakening, the centrality of the parent-child relationship remains as a critical link and site of support between the generations.

It is in this context that research on family estrangement has increasingly drawn the attention of sociologists and demographers. Family estrangement is typically defined as substantially reduced physical and emotional contact with family members, “often due to intense conflict or ongoing disagreement” (Agllias, 2011, p. 107), with scholars subtly differing in their conceptualizations of this social phenomenon. Initially studied by clinicians and psychologists qualitatively, more recently there has been an uptick in quantitative studies that have increased our knowledge of family estrangement at the population level. There are now prevalence estimates of parent-child family estrangement for both Germany and the United States. These studies have amply demonstrated a gendered aspect of estrangement: children are much more likely to be estranged from their fathers than their mothers (Arranz-Becker & Hank, 2022; Reczek et al., 2023). Beyond this, there is evidence indicating that divorce is correlated with a higher likelihood of estrangement, and may differ between subgroups defined by sexual orientation and race/ethnicity (Reczek et al., 2023).

Largely absent from this burgeoning literature has been the examination of how parent-child estrangement may differ between immigrant and non-immigrant groups. Such an oversight overlooks the unique challenges that immigrants and their children (both first and second generation) face in destination societies that may increase tension and conflict within families, and that is likely not present in “native” families. If found, differences in parent-child estrangement by migration background could have a role in shaping social inequalities, as family estrangement

limits access to family resources (Scharp, 2023) and is generally linked to lower levels of wellbeing (Hank 2024).

What could shape differences in parent-child estrangement by migration background? On the one hand, it may be that immigrant families feature particularly strong intergenerational bonds because of a shared cultural background and shared experiences of adversity and adaptation to a new culture (Albertini et al., 2019). This may be the case especially for first-generation children as they adapt to the new institutions and culture present in the destination country, although this has documented as well for some second-generation immigrant groups (Farley and Alba, 2002).

On the other hand, there are potential stressors associated with the actual migration event for parents and their first-generation children. Furthermore, there is a substantial literature that documents the particular challenges that second-generation children and parents face, as the former navigate growing up in a culture that may be at odds with their parents' background, and the latter grapple with parenting in a context with significantly different social norms (Alba and Foner 2015; Foner 2011; Hank 2025). These obstacles are heightened if the immigrant parents and children in question face discrimination in their host societies. Because of this, second-generation immigrant children could be particularly vulnerable to estrangement from their parents, compared to first-generation and native children.

With this study, we fill this gap by asking: *how does parent-child estrangement differ between first-generation, second-generation and third-generation children?*

Data and Methods

We draw on the Germany Family Panel (henceforth pairfam), a German longitudinal dataset that was funded by the German Research Foundation from 2008 to 2022. It is a representative study whose initial sample features 12,000 randomly selected people in three birth cohorts: 1971-1973, 1981-1983, and 1991-1993. Pairfam is one of the few datasets that is ideally suited to studying estrangement, as it includes variables that measure both the quality of intergenerational relationships and frequency of contact. Our dependent variable, parent-child estrangement, follows Arranz-Becker and Hank's (2022) operationalization of Gilligan et al.'s (2015) definition of estrangement by equaling 1 if either the respondent reports having no contact in the previous year with their parents or reports having contact less than once per month, combined with feelings of emotional distance. We select only adult children (i.e. older than 18 years old) who do not coreside with their biological parents. The final sample comprises of 8,665 father-child dyads (37,752 person-years) and 9,761 mother-child dyads (44,041 person-years).

We use panel logistic regression models to predict estrangement by migration background, defined as native (third-generation or above), first-generation and second-generation immigrants. Following previous literature, we include controls on relevant sociodemographic characteristics found to be related to parent-child estrangement, such as gender, family structure (whether

biological parents have divorced before the respondent turned 18, and if so, whether the parents have a new partner), age, age squared, education, and current relationship status.

Preliminary Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of individuals in our two samples that ever experienced estrangement from a father or a mother by migration background during the observation period. Confirming previous research, the prevalence of father-child estrangement is higher than mother-child estrangement (16.5% vs. 4.4%). However, both father-child estrangement and mother-child estrangement differ by migration background. Second-generation immigrant adult children report father-child estrangement at the highest level, with 19% having ever experienced it within the observation period. First-generation children instead reported father-child estrangement at the lowest proportions: 14.9%. For mother-child estrangement the pattern is slightly different: first-generation immigrant adult children reported being estranged at least once from their mothers at the lowest proportion of 3.3%, while native and second-generation children reported virtually the same levels of ever being estranged from their mothers at 4.4%.

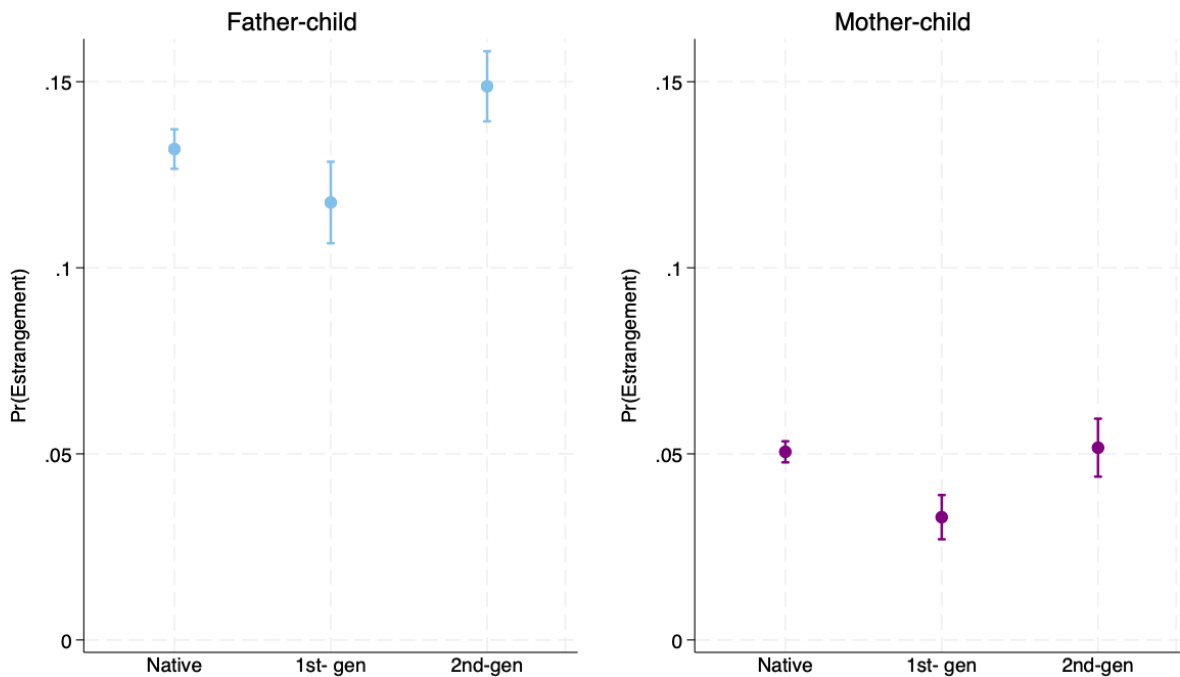
Table 1. Proportion of children ever being estranged from fathers and mothers by migration background in the observation period (2010-2019)

Ever estranged	Native	1st-generation	2nd-generation	Total
Father-child	16.46%	14.89%	19.02%	16.51%
Mother-child	4.39%	3.29%	4.43%	4.26%

Next, we regress two random-effects panel logistic regressions on both father-child estrangement and mother-child estrangement, respectively, with the abovementioned control variables. We report the predicted probabilities calculated from these models in Figure 1. In the panel on the left, we see that, net of controls, second-generation immigrant children are significantly more likely that first-generation children and children with no migration background to be estranged from their fathers. In the panel on the right, we see that first-generation children are significantly less likely to be estranged from their mothers relative to both second-generation immigrant children and children with no migration background.

In the next steps, we are planning to examine more thoroughly 1) the differences in duration in estrangement across migration background by using event history analysis, as well as to 2) investigate whether the associations found between migration background and family estrangement are driven by particular ethnic groups. Furthermore, we seek to explicitly link the parent-child estrangement literature to the literature on social stratification by 3) examining whether exposure to parent-child estrangement affects earnings trajectories and how this differs across migration origin groups.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of being estranged from a parent by migration background



Note: Predicted probabilities calculated from panel logistic regressions, one for father-child dyads, and one for mother-child dyads. Both models include the following controls: gender, family structure, age, age squared, education, and current relationship status.

Overall, our study evinces important differences in estrangement from fathers and mothers by migration background. We find that for father-child estrangement, second-generation immigrant children are significantly more likely to be estranged than first-generation children and natives, potentially indicating heightened conflict between second-generation children and their fathers. For mother-child estrangement, we find that first-generation children are significantly less likely to be estranged from their mothers than second-generation children and natives, potentially indicating heightened solidarity between first-generation children and their mothers. Such findings underline the uniquely fraught position that second-generation adult children and their fathers find themselves in, and the strong link that immigrant mothers have with their first generation immigrant children in Germany. They also speak to the important of considering the intersection of gender and migration background in the study of family estrangement.

References

- Agllias, K. (2011). No longer on speaking terms: The losses associated with family estrangement at the end of life. *Families in Society*, 92(1), 107-113.
- Alba, R., & Foner, N. (2015). Strangers no more: Immigration and the challenges of integration in North America and Western Europe.
- Albertini, M., Mantovani, D., & Gasperoni, G. (2019). Intergenerational relations among immigrants in Europe: the role of ethnic differences, migration and acculturation. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(10), 1693-1706.
- Alburez-Gutierrez, D., Williams, I., & Caswell, H. (2023). Projections of human kinship for all countries. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120(52), e2315722120.
- Arránz Becker, O., & Hank, K. (2022). Adult children's estrangement from parents in Germany. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 84(1), 347-360.
- Farley, R., & Alba, R. (2002). The new second generation in the United States. *International migration review*, 36(3), 669-701.
- Fingerman, K. L., Huo, M., & Birditt, K. S. (2020). A decade of research on intergenerational ties: Technological, economic, political, and demographic changes. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1), 383-403.
- Foner, N., & Dreby, J. (2011). Relations between the generations in immigrant families. *Annual review of sociology*, 37(1), 545-564.
- Gilligan, M., Sutor, J. J., & Pillemer, K. (2015). Estrangement between mothers and adult children: The role of norms and values. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(4), 908-920.
- Hank, K. (2024). Emerging Ideas. Family estrangement and its association with life satisfaction and depressiveness in adulthood. *Family Relations*, 73(5), 2937-2944.
- Hank, K. (2025). Intergenerational Solidarity in Native and Migrant Families in Germany: Adult Children's Perspectives in FReDA. *KZfjSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 1-19.
- Popenoe, D. (1993). American family decline, 1960-1990: A review and appraisal. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 527-542.
- Reczek, R., Stacey, L., & Thomeer, M. B. (2023). Parent–adult child estrangement in the United States by gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 85(2), 494-517.
- Scharp, K. M. (2023). Estrangement and impact on family communication. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.
- Seltzer, J. A., & Bianchi, S. M. (2013). Demographic change and parent-child relationships in adulthood. *Annual review of sociology*, 39(1), 275-290.
- Silverstein, M., & Bengtson, V. L. (1997). Intergenerational solidarity and the structure of adult child-parent relationships in American families. *American journal of Sociology*, 103(2), 429-460.
- Van Hook, J., & Glick, J. E. (2020). Spanning borders, cultures, and generations: A decade of research on immigrant families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1), 224-243.