

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Report 2006 – 2007

Halle/Saale

Kinship and Social Security (KASS)

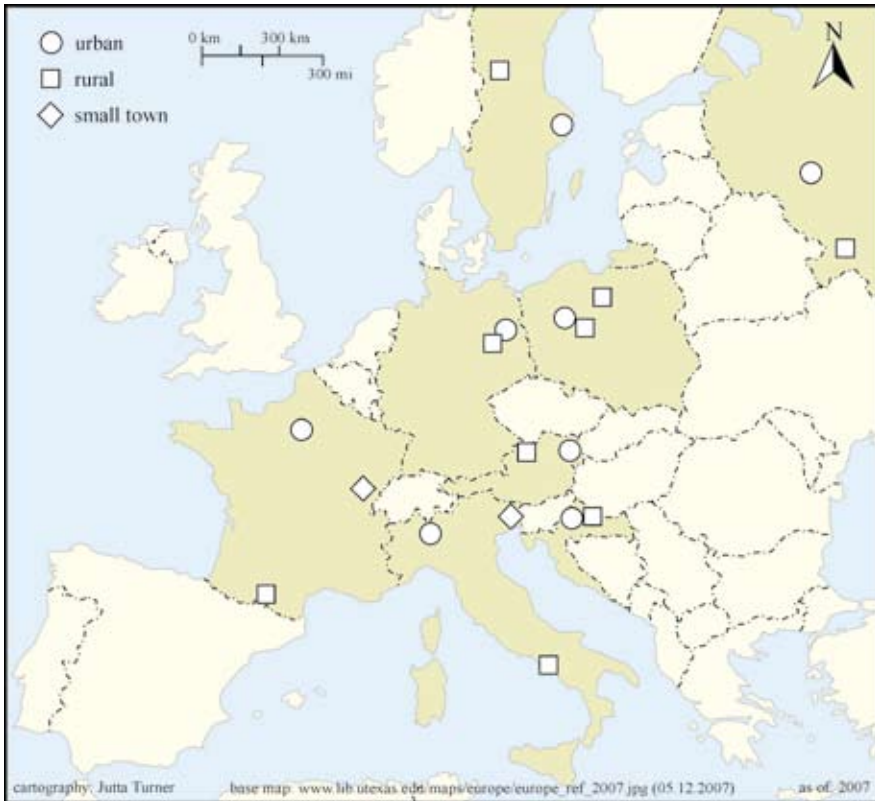
Patrick Heady on behalf of the entire KASS team

In the last few years, a consensus has emerged among policy specialists that “the family” has a central role to play in official plans for the provision of welfare. If this view is meant seriously, and not simply as an excuse for reducing state welfare budgets, it is vitally important for policy makers and social scientists to understand how much and why family members help each other, what the limits of this help may be, and what consequences it may have for other social phenomena such as gender relations and fertility. In a word we need to be able to formulate, and test, theories about mutual assistance between kin – and about the preconditions and consequences of kinship-based cooperation.

During these same years developments in social science have generated new and at first sight contradictory perspectives on family and kinship. The widespread application of rational choice and evolutionary theory to family relationships has opened up the possibility of universally valid explanations for behaviour at the individual level. In apparent contrast to this claim of universality are the facts that western European family patterns are visibly undergoing a period of rapid change, and that there are also persistent macro-regional contrasts within Europe in family-linked behaviour. A further problem for rational choice and evolutionary theorists is that the form of the explanations they give is often rather different from the way that ordinary people describe their family relationships.

None of these contradictions is necessarily insuperable: rational choice and evolutionary theories are about the principles that relate behaviour to context – they do not imply that the same behaviour takes place in all economic and cultural contexts. Nor do they necessarily imply that the principles of behaviour described from an observer’s viewpoint correspond to the conscious motives of social actors – though an effective theory should provide some kind of mapping between observers’ and participants’ viewpoints. But it is equally important to realise that, though there may be ways of reconciling the different explanatory strategies, their compatibility cannot simply be assumed: the solution will require both empirical and theoretical work – and there is no prior guarantee that any particular theory will emerge unscathed from this process.

This is the challenge that we have taken on in KASS, a multinational collaborative project financed through the EU’s 6th Framework programme and coordinated by this institute. KASS involves eight countries, chosen to represent European regions with historically distinct kinship structures as well as contrasting political experiences over the course of the twentieth century, the period during which the welfare state reached full bloom and, arguably, began to decline. The project has four elements: a historical review of the development of family policy and changing family patterns over the course of the twentieth century; ethnographic studies of two (sometimes



KASS countries and field sites.

three) localities in each of the countries – making 19 field sites altogether; the collection of data on kinship networks and the helping relationships within them, by means of interviews at these same 19 localities using a computerised *kinship network questionnaire* (KNQ), followed by quantitative analysis of the results; and, finally, a series of essays, bringing together the historical, ethnographic, and quantitative findings to address the theoretical and policy agendas of the project.

In meeting the theoretical challenge of KASS we can also draw on a growing body of research literature – some of it stimulated specifically by the new policy agenda. This research has already shown that close kinship ties in contemporary Europe are stronger than was once thought – and include both substantial financial transfers passed down through the generations, as well as, in many countries, a notable tendency for younger and middle-aged adults to live with or near their elderly parents. However, the increasing awareness of European family ties on the part of social scientists should not be conflated with the proposition that family ties are becoming more important. This is hard to assess, because the data on such things

as intra-family financial transfers were not available before. But the evidence we do have suggests that family ties in most of Europe are growing weaker.

Figure 1 shows that the proportion of one-person households – which by definition involve either a choice of independence over close family relationships, or the refusal of relatives to accommodate the person concerned – has been steadily rising in all eight KASS countries for the last 60 years, with no apparent tendency for the trend to slow down. If fertility rates were plotted over time, they would show an equally dramatic downward trend, reaching a point at which none of the eight countries is producing enough children to replace their parental generation – and in six of the eight countries (the exceptions are France and Sweden) current fertility ratios are below 1.5 children per woman. This too suggests either a turning-away from traditional ideals of parenthood, or an accumulation of circumstances that make these ideals harder to reach in practice. Overall, the impression is one of an increasing fragility of European families. Given the recent accumulation of evidence that family-based assistance has been playing a hidden but important role in supplementing state-based social security, there seems now to be a risk that, rather than a transfer of responsibilities from the state to families, we may be confronted with a simultaneous decline in the availability of help from both sources.

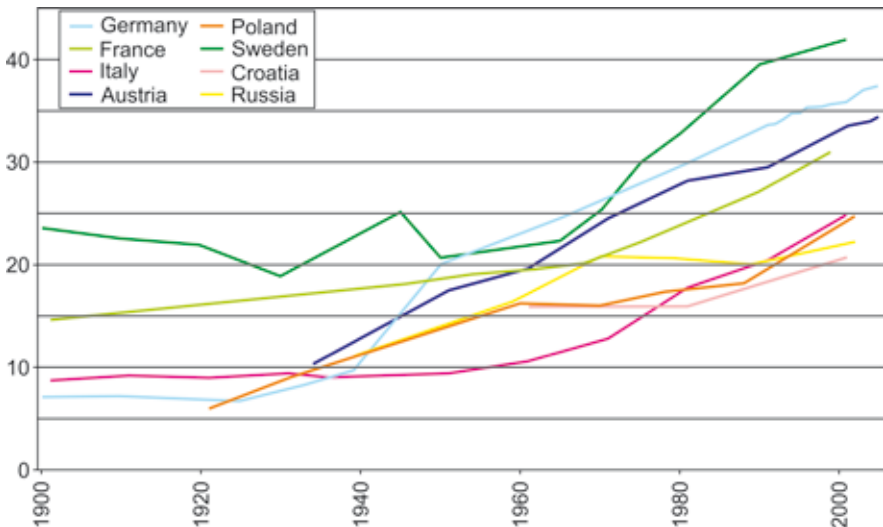


Figure 1: Percentage of one-person households in eight European countries between 1900 and 2005.

Figure 1 is consistent with two of the main stories that are told about changing family arrangements in Europe. One is modernisation theory, which sees the decline of agriculture, and the subsequent rise of skilled and education-based work in industry and services, as a process of individual emancipation – freeing people from

traditional rural power structures rooted in kinship and religion. Another is based on the findings of family history – and contrasts a northwest European cultural pattern of weak family ties with a southern and eastern European pattern that stresses family ties far more. Over the past century, the percentage of single-person households – a classic indicator of weak family ties – has consistently been highest in Sweden and lowest in Italy, Croatia, Poland, and Russia, while the figures for France, Germany, and Austria have fluctuated between them.

We have now reached the point at which specific findings from KASS’s own data enable us to take the story further. Figure 2 shows both the mean household size and the mean number of contacts with relatives (outside the informants’ households) over the previous month. The findings are consistent with the discussion up to now. The

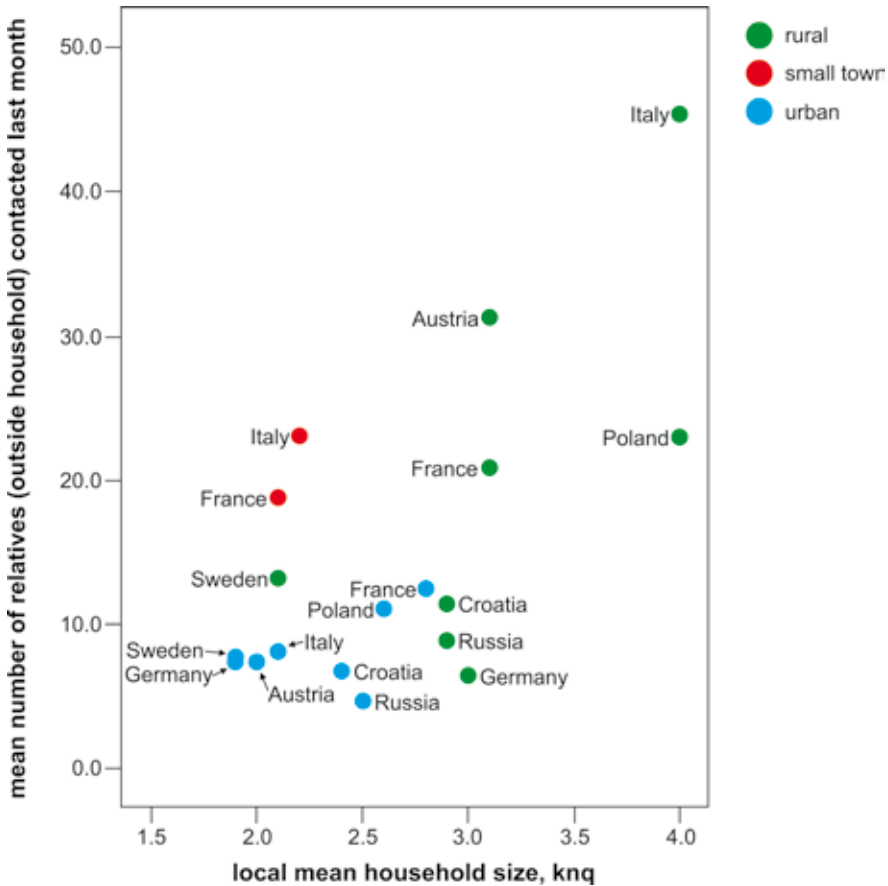


Figure 2: Household size and contact with relatives: average results for the KASS field localities.

extent of contact with kin confirms the importance of family ties in contemporary Europe. The distribution of household sizes supports both the modernisation thesis that family ties are stronger in rural settings and (though less clearly) the existence of macro-regional differences within Europe: the smallest household sizes being recorded in the urban Swedish locality and the highest in rural Poland and Italy.

However, what is really new in Figure 2 is the clear evidence of an association (at field locality level) between household size and contacts with kin. A large part of this is due to simple demographics – higher birth rates generate larger households and more kin – but it is also due to social arrangements. There is a strong association between household size and household complexity, and so the results in figure 2 can also be interpreted in social terms as a relationship between the *involvement* in family ties – the readiness to offer residential support to close kin – and the *involvement* in wider kinship relationships. In some rural areas the extent of this involvement in wider kinship networks is quite dramatic. The maintenance of regular contacts with an average of 30 relatives in rural Austria, and well over 40 in the Italian rural site, is accompanied by an even more extensive knowledge of kinship networks. KNQ informants in the Italian rural site could name an average of over 200 relatives, and in the Austrian and French sites the figure was close to 140.



Rural Austria: celebrating the community's future. (Photo: G. Seiser, 2005)

These figures are consistent with the ethnographic evidence of the difference between rural and urban kinship. In rural areas kinship is often experienced as the basis of the community itself, and so the successful reproduction of each family is

a matter for the community as a whole – a feeling expressed overtly by the ways in which weddings and births are celebrated, and reinforced by the informal pressure of local opinion. It is not just that family ties extend to kinship networks: the existence of a kinship-based community generates both pressures and encouragements that reinforce its component families, and may even help to maintain their birth rates. People in cities are just as attached to the idea of family, but the families with whom they are involved typically include a narrower range of kin. If, like the Austrian pensioner pictured below, they treasure family memorabilia, the sense of community that this offers is largely virtual – reinforced perhaps by visits and family gatherings on special occasions. It is not the basis of the community in which they live.



Urban Austria: a pensioner discusses her family album. (Photo: E. Strasser; 2005)

This picture of the urban-rural contrast is very similar to that painted by modernisation theory – except in two important particulars. The first concerns the connection between kinship and social involvement. One finding of the World Values Survey (WVS, 1999–2001) is that an emphasis on family ties often goes together with a distrust of outsiders, sometimes interpreted as a narrowly focused ‘amoral familism’. However, our findings show that, in rural areas at least, strong families are part of a system of kinship and neighbourly ties that are probably more extensive, though less dispersed, than the social networks of many urbanites. Rather than thinking about kinship involvement as the opposite of social involvement, we need

to analyse the data along two different dimensions: firstly whether social involvement takes a kinship or non-kinship form, and secondly whether the overall level of social involvement is high or low.

We can get an interesting take on this by integrating the KASS findings on involvement in kinship ties with WVS data for the same countries on commitment to friendship ties – and relating both of these to two historic contrasts within Europe. If we contrast Catholic and Protestant areas we find, confirming the results of a number of other studies, that there is a difference in the kind of sociability – with friendship being relatively more important in Protestant areas and kinship in Catholic regions. But when we compare Western and postsocialist areas we get a surprise. Numerous studies have underscored the importance of informal relationships – both of friendship and of kinship – in coping with the stresses of socialism and postsocialism; and this is supported both by ethnographic data from KASS and by the WVS finding that instrumental friendship is considered more legitimate in the postsocialist countries than in other countries covered by KASS. However, this practical involvement in friendship and kinship does not translate into a general commitment to these social ties. In the WVS the postsocialist countries record the lowest rate of agreement to the statement “friends are very important in my life”, and the data from the KNQ shows that they also maintain regular contacts with fewer relatives than comparable communities in western Europe. It seems that the traumas of communist and post-communist experience may still be affecting the quality of social life in these countries.

The second departure from modernisation theory relates to the emotional tone of extended kinship ties. For modernisation theorists, the power of the extended family is essentially oppressive. However, it is clear from our ethnographic findings that, although the pressures are real, the existence of kinship ties can also be a source of joy – in urban as well as rural areas. This finding is supported by KNQ results which show that social and ritual contacts are far more frequent, and also carried out with more distantly related kin, than are acts of practical help. Nevertheless, despite the special problems in postsocialist areas, the extent of help given and received generally correlates with the extent of social contacts between kin.

This is consistent with a picture of the motivation behind assistance between kin that emerges from several of the ethnographies, and which can be summarised by saying that the maintenance of kin ties is elective, but the obligations they involve are not. Help between relatives is not reciprocal, but based on need. However, despite the absence of direct reciprocity, there is a penalty for not giving help: namely to be excluded from the set of socially recognised kin by the relative you failed to help, and also to lose the links to the more distant kin to whom you are related through that person. An exception to the optional nature of kinship obligations seems to be those between parents and children – though even here obligations are sometimes broken, and there is a notable emotional difference between help from parents to

children, which is mostly done with pleasure, and help from children to elderly parents which can be a matter of grim duty.

This ethnographically derived model has something in common with the implications of evolutionary theory – which would predict a readier flow of help from parents to children (including adult children) than vice versa, and also predicts unreciprocated help between kin. It differs from the simpler versions of evolutionary theory, however, in treating effective kinship as a status that can be extended more or less widely and that can be lost by breaking its implicit rules. We are currently using the KNQ data to investigate the conditions in which people exercise their options to extend or narrow the range of their effective kinship ties. In this way we hope to explain the contrasting patterns of kinship involvement described above. We also hope to be able to identify the likely effects of policy changes on patterns of kinship ties and on the extent of mutual assistance in times of need.

Finally, KASS can be seen as a methodological project, exploring the feasibility of incorporating a complex computerised network questionnaire into ethnographic fieldwork – along with the sampling procedures required for statistically valid data. As a result of our experience, we have identified a number of areas for improvement, both in the KNQ design itself, and in the workload it imposed on interviewers and informants, which was sometimes excessive. The average time needed to record KNQ data for one informant was six hours, usually requiring two or more interview sessions – and when networks were large, the time involved could be much longer than this. Nevertheless, where we have been able to check our KNQ results against external sources they have matched well – and have also been consistent with the ethnographic findings. There is now considerable interest, in this institute and beyond, in extending the KNQ methodology to other research projects.

The historical and ethnographic work on KASS is now complete, and the phase of quantitative analyses and review essays is due to finish in April 2008. A successful conference was held at Halle in November 2007, to share the emerging findings with academic colleagues. We hope that this sample of the themes covered by KASS is enough to give readers some idea of the benefits that can be obtained by combining ethnography and quantitative methods with a range of different theories relating to matters of public concern.