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24 Personal social networks in Europe: do people from different countries have different interpersonal solidarities?

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- ▶ Older Europeans maintain close personal social ties with two to three people
 - ▶ Almost six percent report having no close confidants at all
 - ▶ Social ties are generally accessible, emotionally close and personally satisfying
 - ▶ Regional differences in intergenerational and peer solidarity exist in Europe
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24.1 Social networks and ageing well

The social networks in which people of all ages are embedded constitute both an important measure of social solidarity and a crucial mechanism through which to obtain or to maximise meaningful social interactions (Gray 2009). Social networks are also associated with a range of outcomes that contribute to quality of life among their members, as well as comprising, in among themselves, significant measures of well-being (Fiori et al. 2006, Cornwell & Waite 2009, Merz & Huxhold 2010, see also Deindl et al. in this volume). Social networks also play a major role in fostering and maintaining active ageing (Bowling 2008, Cornwell & Waite 2009). As such, personal social networks are an essential component of ageing well in the 21st century.

Using data from the newly implemented SHARE Social Network Module, this chapter describes the social network characteristics of older Europeans in sixteen countries. The analysis considers key selected network measures and the associations that exist among them. In addition, it examines country differences with respect to selected network composition variables. As such, we seek to clarify whether there are, indeed, differing interpersonal solidarities of note among older Europeans.

The current analysis examines the subjective personal networks of older Europeans. Much of the social network literature focuses upon inferred social networks that are measured by means of sociodemographic proxies, such as marital status or number of children (Litwin 1996). In contrast, this inquiry addresses the named confidants of the people in the sample, obtained by a direct probe asking with whom the respondent discussed important matters in the previous twelve

months. This approach enables the analyst to consider the interpersonal ties that are deemed to be the most important to respondents, and thus, most closely reflective of their personal social networks (McPherson et al. 2006).

The analysis looks first at the distribution of network size, relationship composition, proximity, contact, emotional closeness and satisfaction. We then examine the correlations between these network measures. In the third and final part of the analysis, we consider the likelihood of respondents from the respective countries to name three key relationship categories within their confidant networks – spouse or partner, child(ren) and friend(s). The country differences are examined controlling for sociodemographic background (age, gender, education, number of children, grandchildren and siblings), and health (difficulty in performing basic and instrumental activities of daily living and mobility limitation). A logistic regression was employed in which the respective dichotomous outcome (cited the relationship/did not cite the relationship) was considered in relation to country and confounders. Each multivariate analysis was limited to respondents with one or more network members who were theoretically able to cite the relationship in question (that is, had a spouse/partner or children; we assumed that everyone can potentially name a friend). The descriptive analyses employed normalised weights (Malter & Börsch-Supan 2013). The correlation analyses and logistic regression analyses did not.

24.2 The nature of the networks

The frequency distribution of the number of social network members is displayed in Figure 24.1. The average network size among older Europeans aged 50 and older ($n=56,755$) was between two and three members, with a median of two members. Although respondents were permitted to identify up to seven confidants, the small average network size suggests that older Europeans maintain confidant relationships with only a few selected, close, personal contacts. Moreover, SHARE respondents in Scandinavian and Western European countries had larger than average social networks while those in Eastern European and Southern European countries had smaller social networks (see Figure 24.2).

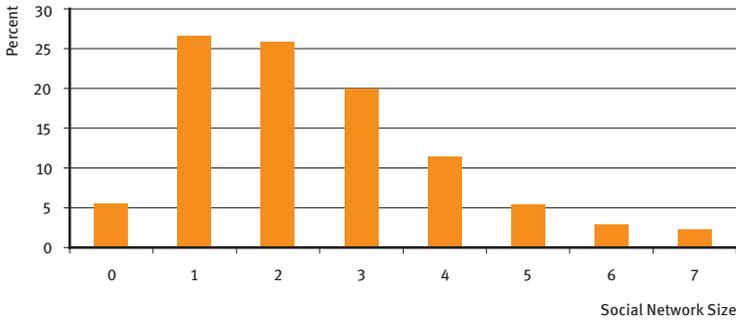


Figure 24.1: Social network size. Weighted observations (n=56,755)
 Source: SHARE Wave 4 release 1

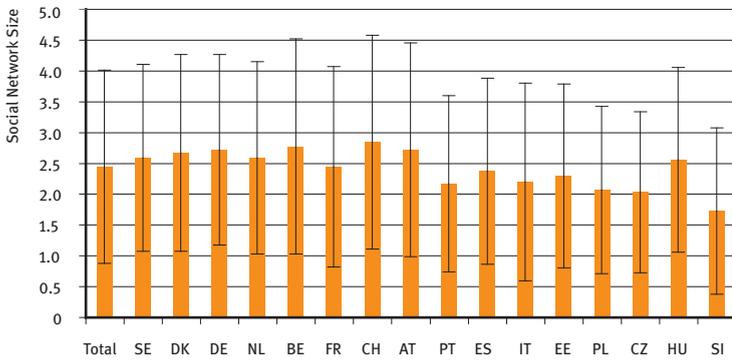


Figure 24.2: Average social network size by country. Weighted observations (n=56,755)
 Source: SHARE Wave 4 release 1

We should note that the social network data were obtained by means of a name generator (discussed in more detail in Litwin et al. 2013). This approach to network delineation allowed us to identify a subgroup of respondents who reported having no confidants at all (5.5% of the sample). Further analysis using two-sample t-tests revealed statistically significant differences (<.001) between these socially isolated older Europeans and their counterparts who listed one or more social network members. Respondents with no personal social network were older ($t(3,413.0) = 23.0$), less likely to have a spouse or partner ($t(3,323.5) = -18.1$), had more depressive symptoms ($t(2,227.5) = 8.4$) and had more limitations in activities of daily living (ADL) ($t(2,993.9) = 19.6$). We can state with some degree of confidence, therefore, that these respondents were more socially marginalised.

As for the majority who had a personal social network, the networks were largely family-based. Sixty-two per cent of the respondents with one or more confidants ($n=53,990$) reported having a social network comprised solely of family members, inclusive of spouse/partner, children, or extended family relationships. The social network of an additional 23 per cent of respondents was comprised of a majority of family members (50–99%). In comparison, only eight per cent had no family members in their network. The personal social networks of these latter respondents were comprised entirely of friends, neighbours, current or former colleagues and formal helpers.

Spouse or partner and children were the most commonly cited confidants of the older Europeans in the sample. Among married/partnered respondents ($n=39,314$), four-fifths included their partner in their social network. Three-fifths of respondents with children ($n=49,087$) counted one or more of their children among their confidants. However, as these numbers reveal, these familial relationships were not always considered to be close confidants. Almost one fifth of the respondents with a spouse or partner did not name that person as a confidant, and approximately two fifths of those with children did not cite their children as members of their personal social network. A bit less than a third of respondents (30%) included one or more friends in their social network, indicating that friends constituted a significant source of meaningful social ties among a minority of older Europeans. More distant relationship categories, such as neighbours, current or former colleagues, clergy, therapists, and formal helpers, were listed among the confidants of only some twelve per cent of respondents.

The analysis revealed that older Europeans mostly live within close proximity of their confidants. Fifty per cent of the respondents lived within five kilometres of all members in their social network. Moreover, 70 per cent lived in the same household or the same building with their geographically closest social network member. A distance of more than 25 kilometres separated less than five per cent of the respondents from their nearest confidant. Additional analysis distinguishing between partnered and non-partnered respondents revealed that this close proximity of social network members persisted even among respondents without a spouse or partner confidant in their household. More than three quarters of non-partnered respondents ($n=15,658$) lived in the same household, same building or within five kilometres of their nearest confidant.

In light of the close proximity between older Europeans and their social networks, the frequency of contact with social networks is understandably high. Four-fifths of older Europeans reported having daily contact with their most contacted confidant. In comparison, fewer than five per cent reported contact of twice a month or less with their most contacted confidant. In addition, 36 per cent had daily contact with every member in their network. This high level of contact

frequency persisted even among unmarried or non-partnered respondents who may not be as likely to live with a member of their network. Among this subgroup of respondents ($n=15,244$), nearly two-thirds had daily contact and an additional 23 per cent had contact several times each week with the most frequently contacted confidant.

Respondents also reported high levels of emotional closeness with social network members. Only seven per cent were somewhat close or not very close with every member of their confidant network, compared to 71 per cent who reported being extremely or very close with all of their listed confidants. Taking into account the degree of closeness with the emotionally closest social network member, the data revealed that 56 per cent had at least one confidant with whom they felt extremely close, and an additional 37 per cent had at least one confidant with whom they felt very close.

When asked to rate the level of overall satisfaction with the relationships with the social network, on a scale of 0–10, respondents with one or more confidants and not missing data on the network satisfaction variable ($n=52,027$) were overwhelmingly well satisfied. Forty per cent were completely satisfied (10) while an additional 48 per cent reported high levels of satisfaction (8–9). Less than three per cent reported being dissatisfied (0–5). Among the sub-group having no social network at all and not missing data on the satisfaction variable ($n=1,722$), only ten per cent expressed complete dissatisfaction with this situation. Twenty-three per cent had very low levels of satisfaction (1–5), but nearly half (45%) reported being very to completely satisfied (8–10) with their having cited no meaningful relationships or confidants.

24.3 Are components of social networks related?

The strength and direction of the relationships between the social network measures were examined in the second stage of the analysis by means of Pearson correlations. Only respondents who reported having one or more social network members were included in the correlation analysis ($n=53,990$). The results are displayed in Table 24.1.

As the table shows, network size was strongly correlated with network relationship composition, proximity and frequency of contact. Insofar as larger networks are facilitative of a more diverse composition of members, the correlation between network size and the relative proportion of members from different compositional categories was to be expected. Moreover, network size was negatively correlated with the proportion of network members living in close proximity and

Table 24.1: Bivariate analysis of social network measures: Pearson correlations

	Network Size	% Spouse or Partner	% Children	% Friends	% 5 km or less	% Daily Contact	% Very to Extremely Close	Network Satisfaction
Network Size	1							
% Spouse or Partner		1						
% Children			1					
% Friends				1				
% Within 5 km					1			
% Daily Contact						1		
% Very to Extremely Close							1	
Network Satisfaction								1

Significance: *** = 1%

Notes: Unweighted observations = 53,990; excluding respondents aged < 50 and without a social network.

Source: SHARE Wave 4 release 1

with the proportion of the network that maintained daily contact. Positive correlations were found between network size and the proportion of members that were children or friends, in contrast to a negative relationship that emerged with the proportion of the network that was represented by a spouse or partner. Stated differently, this last finding confirms that exclusively spouse-based networks were also the smallest.

Satisfaction with one's social network was positively correlated with all of the other network measures, with one exception – the extent of satisfaction was lower when friends constituted a greater proportion among the cited network members. The strongest positive correlations were observed between satisfaction and when respondents maintained daily contact and very close emotional connections with a larger number of their social network members. Another important correlation of note is the positive association between network size and satisfaction. Overall satisfaction with the social network increased when more confidants were named.

The correlation analysis also revealed two unique characteristics of the social networks that are comprised mostly of friends. First, a higher percentage of friends among the confidants were related to a lower proportion of social network members living within close proximity. Second, having more friends in one's social network lessened the proportion of confidants with whom daily contact was maintained and with whom very close emotional ties were reported.

Finally, the correlations suggest that proximity, emotional closeness and frequency of contact are strongly interrelated aspects of the interpersonal environment. That is, living in close proximity to a greater proportion of one's confidants increases the proportion of social network members with whom one maintains daily contact and with whom one enjoys very close emotional ties.

24.4 Do networks differ in different countries?

The third stage of the analysis considered country differences in network composition, specifically, the naming of spouse or partner, child(ren) or friends as confidants. Three separate logistic regression models were run in which the dependent variables distinguished between survey respondents who did or did not include a spouse or partner, child(ren) or friends, respectively, as members of their social network. Because not all respondents had a partner or child, the first and second of the analyses were limited to those for whom it was theoretically possible to cite a spouse or child. However, all the respondents with one or more social network members were included in the third analysis insofar as, in principle, everyone has the potential to name friends.

In order to examine the existence of country differences in regard to network composition, each logistic regression model controlled for an array of sociodemographic characteristics and health measures that might themselves be related to the structure and/or the nature of the networks in question. Cases with missing data on any of the independent variables were removed from the analyses. Effect coding was used to compare countries to the unweighted sample mean. The results of the three logistic regression models are displayed in Figure 24.3.

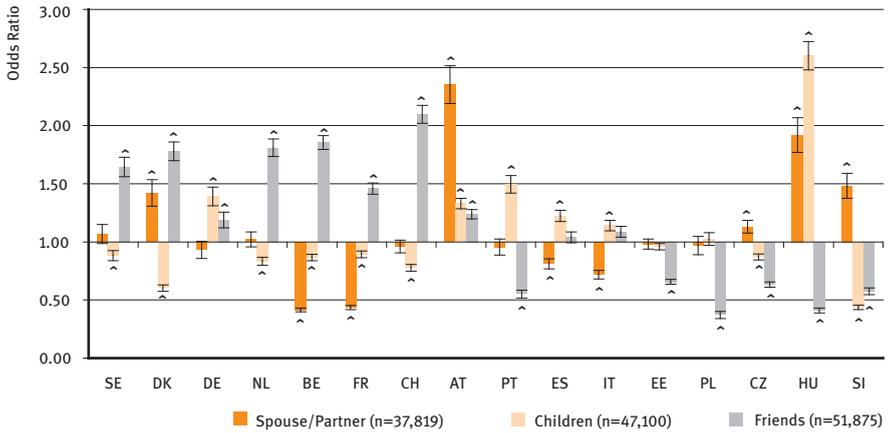


Figure 24.3: Country differences in the selection of spouse/partner, children and friends within named personal social networks

Notes: ^ denotes statistical significance of .05 or less; models are adjusted for age, gender, education, marital status, living siblings, grandchildren, activities of daily living (ADL), instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) and mobility limitations.

Source: SHARE Wave 4 release 1

The first logistic regression model was limited to married or partnered respondents with a social network and analysed the likelihood of naming a spouse or partner as a confidant (n=37,819). Austrian respondents had the highest likelihood of naming their spouse or partner as a confidant. Those living in Denmark, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia also had higher expected odds of including a spouse or partner in their network in comparison to the sample as a whole. In contrast, respondents in Belgium, France, Spain and Italy had lower expected odds.

The naming of children as confidants is an indicator of the strength of inter-generational solidarity. The second analysis focused, therefore, on respondents with a social network who have one or more children (n=47,100). The results showed that respondents from most Northern and Western European countries

had lower expected odds of naming children as confidants. Two exceptions were those living in Germany and Austria. Respondents from two Eastern European countries (Czech Republic and Slovenia) had lower expected odds of including children in their network. However, Hungarian respondents had higher odds of including children, and in fact, had the greatest expected odds of all countries in SHARE. Southern European respondents (Portugal, Spain and Italy) had strong representation of children in their social networks and greater odds of listing children as confidants.

Solidarity between peers is another important facet of relationships during later life and can be measured by the inclusion of friends as social network members. The third analysis included all respondents with one or more social network members ($n=51,875$) and explored the likelihood of naming friends among the confidants. Strong regional differences emerged in this case. Survey respondents from all Scandinavian and Western European countries participating in SHARE had higher expected odds of naming one or more friends in their social network. In contrast, peer solidarity in Southern and Eastern European nations was limited. Survey respondents from Portugal and all the Eastern European countries had lower expected odds of including friends as confidants. Poland had the lowest expected odds among all the SHARE countries.

Comparison of the findings across all three of the regression analyses highlights some unique characteristics in social network composition in different regions in Europe. Respondents from Northern and Western European countries appear to be more likely to count their friends among their confidants. However, among these same countries, the findings for naming a spouse or partner in the social network were less conclusive. Belgian and French respondents had lower expected odds of naming a spouse or partner as a confidant. Danish and Austrian survey respondents had higher expected odds. The rest were not different from the unweighted mean.

In Southern European countries, strong intergenerational solidarity was evident. Respondents in Portugal, Spain and Italy had a higher likelihood of including children as confidants in their networks. These findings provide empirical support for the assertion that family ties and role expectations are still strong in Southern Europe. However, the findings suggest that the naming of confidants in this region do not necessarily extend to the spousal relationship. Spanish and Italian respondents were less likely to list their spouse as a social network member.

Notable distinctions emerged in relation to the Eastern European countries represented in the SHARE Wave 4 sample. In general, personal social networks in these countries were more often comprised of spouse or partners, and fewer children or friends were counted. These findings align with the trend reported earlier that social networks were smaller, on average, among the Eastern European respondents. This suggests that in these countries, confidant networks are

less diverse in relational composition in comparison to confidant networks of other Europeans.

In contrast to the other Eastern European countries, Hungary emerged as having more unique social network composition characteristics. Similar to other countries in this regional block, Hungarian respondents had lower expected odds of including friends in their personal social networks. However, unlike their regional counterparts with lower odds of naming children as confidants, the Hungarian respondents had the greatest such odds among all the SHARE countries. In addition, and similar to Slovenian and Czech respondents, they also had a higher likelihood of mentioning their spouse or partner as a member of their social network. These findings indicate that older Hungarians may consider their immediate family members to be their most important confidants in the second half of life.

24.5 The social networks of older Europeans

In summary, the results of this analysis reveal that older Europeans maintain close, personal relationships with relatively few persons, as evidenced by a median social network size of two persons. Nevertheless, the social ties that they do maintain are geographically accessible, emotionally close and personally satisfying. Notably, almost six per cent of older Europeans report having no personal social network at all. In addition to being older and more likely to be without a spouse or partner, the older adults with no personal social network also exhibit greater vulnerability in regard to health and well-being.

The relational composition of social networks serves as an indicator of solidarity between familial generations and among friends. Personal social networks of older Europeans are largely family based, with more than 60 per cent citing a network comprised solely of family members. In comparison, less than ten per cent include no family members in their social network. Moreover, older persons in Europe maintain a relatively high degree of emotional closeness with the individuals in their personal social networks. They also live within close proximity and maintain frequent, if not daily, contact. In comparison, those with a higher proportion of non-family member confidants live at greater distances from, maintain less frequent contact with and feel less emotionally connected to their personal social networks.

Analysis of country differences in social network composition reveals differences in intergenerational and peer solidarity patterns across national settings. Confidant relationships with children are particularly evident among Southern

European older adults, suggesting strong intergenerational solidarity among the families in this part of the Continent. In contrast, older Europeans living in Northern and Western European countries have stronger connections with friends and are more likely to consider friends as confidants. Eastern Europeans tend to have smaller social networks that are frequently comprised of only a spouse or partner. Additional analysis on how these solidarity distinctions across Europe influence active ageing is clearly warranted.

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