CHAPTER 1

Intergenerational solidarity and family support networks in cross-cultural perspective

In a family where the old do not fear death, the young do not fear life.
Erik Erikson

1.1 The graying of the Western world and intergenerational solidarity

This study deals with one of the most crucial social issues of our times – generational relations, familial organization, and the support that elder generations can expect to receive from their adult children and the wider kin group. This topic has only recently found heightened attention, owing to rapidly aging societies in the Western world over the last few decades, a process that after a time lag will also affect the developing countries. The combined effects of higher life expectancy and a decline in birth rates have been producing fundamental changes. By the middle of the twenty-first century, the old and the young will represent an equal share of the world's population. Globally, the proportion of those aged 60 years and over is expected to more than double, rising from 10 to 21 percent between 2000 and 2050, while the proportion of children will decline by a third, from 30 to 21 percent. We will soon enter an unprecedented period of history in which persons over 60 years old will outnumber those aged 15 years and younger. The same trend is expected in developing countries, where the proportion of elderly persons is expected to rise from 8 percent at present to 19 percent by 2050, while the proportion of children will fall from 33 percent to 22 percent.[1] Just one hundred years ago, the average life expectancy was somewhere in the mid-forties in Western Europe; at the turn of the millennium it had reached already the late seventies and is expected to rise another 10 years by the year 2050.[2] In comparison, the average life

[1] United Nations 2002: §§3, 4. [2] Maddison 2001: 28–30.

expectancy in the ancient world was somewhere between the early twenties and early thirties depending on the local disease environment.[3]

The graying of many modern societies goes hand in hand with considerable medical, social, and financial long-term consequences, a process that has alarmed social scientists, politicians, and the public alike. To give just one example, while in Germany today roughly 2.5 working adults support one retiree, in 2020 there will be only 2 workers for every dependent pensioner, and in 2050 the projected number is 1.3 working adults for every retiree.[4] Increasing life expectancy and decline in fertility will lead inevitably to higher taxation of the working population and/or reductions in the financial support of the elderly, if more drastic measures such as the development of private pension alternatives or the delay of retirement age are not taken very soon. Lagging far behind traditional discourses about equity between classes, milieus, genders, or races, discourse about equity between generations has thus gained momentum and is currently one of the most fiercely debated issues in many developed nations. As the aging society endangers the stability and sustainability of social security schemes, policy makers faced with these national challenges in dealing with an aging society are advocating measures to strengthen intergenerational solidarity. Some scientists argue that the expansion of public welfare has negatively influenced the foundation of family solidarity. For the history of the modern welfare state beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the twentieth, we can see in general an increasing involvement of the state in the life of the individual through the implementation of national programs on health, housing, and income security – not only for the elderly but also for other weaker members of society, such as widows, orphans, the ill, and the unemployed.[5] The question of intergenerational support is therefore tightly interwoven with broader issues in the development of modern Western society.[6] Industrialization, urbanization, the demographic transition, increased migration, and globalization have also been accused of contributing to a deterioration of traditional intergenerational obligations and the erosion of the extended family network, ostensibly perceived to provide a safe haven for the elderly.[7] Increasing divorce rates, single

[3] Scheidel 2012a, in press a. See also Livi-Bacci 1992: 31; Parkin 1992; Frier 2000: 787–816; Scheidel 2001a: 118–62; 2001b: 1–26. For classical Greece, see Hansen 1985, 1988; Sallares 1991: 42–293. For Roman Egypt, see Bagnall and Frier 2006: 87–8, who restore for females an average life expectancy at birth of 22.5 years.

[4] Mayer and Hillmert 2003: 74–100. [5] e.g., Mayer and Müller 1986. [6] Kertzer 1995: 365–6.

[7] Cowgill and Holmes 1972; Cowgill 1974, 1986; Caldwell 1982; Treas and Logue 1986. More recent studies expose this view as too simplistic: Hermalin 2003; Aboderin 2004.

parenthood, delayed childbearing, decreasing family size, and voluntary childlessness are further factors which significantly transformed the dynamics of family ties and solidarity. Some scientists have even warned of an intergenerational warfare over limited resources, a discourse that manifested itself in an astounding media hype in the 1990s.[8] These fears have been mitigated, however, by more recent studies. Generational relations and networks prove to be quite resilient to these changes.[9] In addition, increasing economic wealth has not only benefitted the working generation but has also caused the standard of living for the elderly to rise constantly.[10]

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing was produced during the United Nations World Assembly on Ageing in 2002. It recognizes the vital role the family still plays for the well-being of the aged, and further advocates respect for their dignity, equality, and non-discrimination. The Plan promotes intergenerational interdependence, solidarity, and reciprocity in order to ensure support and care, alleviate poverty, especially in developing countries, and integrate the elderly better in society to advance their health and well-being.[11]

While today functions such as education and old-age support are mediated by the state, this sphere was, in earlier times, almost exclusively organized by the family and household. Thus these institutions will be the main focus of our study. In antiquity in the absence of public provision the household was the most important institution for the health and welfare of its members, and the basis for redistributing resources between generations, which depended on their stage in the life cycle, their special needs, and their capabilities during this phase. The household played a critical role in caring for the vulnerable members of society: children, the ill, the disabled, and the old. Both kinship by blood and bonds established by marriage and joint living were important. Household social networks could balance needs and authority, while organizing housework, childcare, care for the elderly, and financial assistance. To make such an endeavor work, it

[8] First proclaimed and widely publicized by the right-wing group Americans for Generational Equity, or AGE, who predicted that the underprivileged young who have to shoulder the growing expenses for the elderly will eventually mobilize against the elderly to reclaim their share of the pie (see, e.g., *Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 1986; cf. Hess and Warren Markson 1991).

[9] Pelting and Smith 1991; Kertzer 1995: 363–83; Troyansky 1996: 233–43.

[10] Knodel and Chayovan 2008.

[11] United Nations 2002. Governments in many developing states are in fact banking on the preservation of such cohesion and mutual assistance between family members as a cornerstone for their approach to dealing with population aging, which is also on the rise in their countries. In sub-Saharan Africa we are dealing with a serious problem of its own sort, however: owing to the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, many elderly people have been increasingly forced to care for grandchildren orphaned by the disease, even though they themselves are living in poverty and need support.

was necessary to put the interests of the family and household above those of the individual. The fulfillment of these obligations to provide mutual support and assistance was based on traditions, social expectations, affection, and reciprocity. Informal codes of behavior and traditional patterns of family support that formed public opinion were supplemented by formal laws that regulated the measures of intergenerational support. Household formation, economic means, and the availability of kin, seem to have been the most determining factors. Many, if not most, of these strategies involved the interplay of different generations from one family.

However, this model mediated by the family, not the state, also had its demographic pitfalls. High mortality left many children orphaned and many elderly parents without children. We can thus observe a multitude of strategies that were used to cope with life's uncertainties, such as widowhood, childlessness, early orphanhood, and frail old age. The regulations, debates, and struggles concerning these challenges left their traces in our sources, providing us with precious information about intersections of family relations and family economies in the society of Roman Egypt.

1.2 Intergenerational solidarity in the ancient world

In this study I want to ask what were the normative ideals of intrafamilial support in Graeco-Roman Egypt, and how did these ideals play out under real-life conditions. By intrafamilial support I mean the duties and the responsibilities of parents towards their children, on the one hand, and of adult children towards their elderly parents, on the other hand. My study pursues these questions on the household level, the basic unit of society, often described as a microcosm of society in which social relationships, economic systems, and cultural norms find their reflection. In a comparative, cross-cultural approach with specific emphasis on other preindustrial patriarchal societies, I want to study the role of intrafamilial support as a source of security and mutual assistance, and shed light on the question of how these patterns of mutual assistance and support were formed over the course of life.

In the present study I do not aim to portray old age or the elderly, but rather to provide insights into intergenerational interactions among family members of all ages. I would like to explain how these continuing interactions generated expectations and how they should be seen as strategies to secure support in later life. I will further discuss different forms of property transmission from one generation to the next, and link them to different family types and household patterns. Inheritance and succession patterns of

a society reveal information about its cultural values, the idea of reciprocity between generations, the relationships between parents and their children, males and females, the relationships between siblings and those between spouses. The study focuses on the urban and rural middle class as documented in our papyrological material from Roman Egypt: individuals who owned some property but were not rich, small and moderate landowners, veterans, small traders, craftsmen, merchants, doctors, and scribes are the focus of this study.[12] The elite and upper social classes, which dominate the literary accounts, will take a back seat. Such a study, looking explicitly at intergenerational solidarity on the household level of the common population, is lacking not only for the ancient world, but for many other pre-industrial societies as well.

The importance paid to interdisciplinary methods from historical demography, anthropology and sociology will become evident over the following pages. Graeco-Roman Egypt, thanks to its dry climate, has left us with rich source material not found anywhere else in the Mediterranean, and thus provides the natural regional focus for such an inquiry. Close to 50,000 published documentary papyri give us rare unmediated access to the humble and middle strata of society and their daily lives. Nonetheless, a consistent problem in the study of the ancient family is the lack of evidence for particular aspects of daily life, something which this study aims to deal with in part by investigating the possibilities of comparative studies.[13] Therefore, this study will not only limit itself to the situation in Egypt, but will also raise questions of a broader comparative historical sociological bent, making extensive use of studies on other early modern and modern societies' domestic groups, household complexities, and intergenerational support networks. These societies which will be addressed and taken for comparison in this study share some features: a common base in agriculture, high fertility and mortality rates, a proportion of the population aged over 60 of about 5 percent (compared with 20–30 percent in today's Western societies), a high preponderance of the very young, a patriarchal family system, and the lack of a public pension system and regular retirement.[14]

When studying the ancient family and household, historians usually stay within the realm of the Mediterranean, and thereby tend to localize explanations for phenomena and developments. While a comparative approach is

[12] Cf. Bagnall and Frier 2006: 72–3. [13] See section 1.4.

[14] The transition from high fertility and mortality rates to low fertility and mortality rates is termed the "demographic transition," a process a country typically goes through when it develops from a pre-industrial to an industrialized economic system. This model is based on a theory first proposed by the American demographer Warren Thompson.

still unusual for traditional studies on the ancient family, it is intrinsic to the study of early modern household form and composition.[15] I strongly believe, however, that only by placing the Graeco-Roman world in a wider global context is it possible to recognize general aspects, on the one hand, and specific, particular ones, on the other. Comparative history can liberate historiography from these self-imposed restrictions, and make a less local or regional, or even less Eurocentric, historiography of the ancient world possible. Effects and phenomena suddenly seem less self-evident. Looking at a different unknown society can help to distance oneself from the society one knows best.

Ideally, by using comparison in historical research, we can study two or more phenomena, regions, or events systematically with respect to their similarities and differences, and thereby can clarify the profiles of the respective cases. However, since I want to focus in my study on Egypt in Roman times, I attempt here what Kocka calls an "asymmetric comparison."[16] If I refer to family structures in the Ottoman Empire or early modern China, I do not intend to study these societies in their own right but rather use them as a background and reference point, to instrumentalize these cultures for a better understanding of the culture under question, Roman Egypt.[17] By turning to evidence of early modern Europe and Asia, denser information allows us to reconstruct, by analogy, patterns and facts for Roman Egypt that would otherwise be lost for the ancient world. Because of gaps in our evidence or lack of clear indications, certain patterns and structures that we find elsewhere in early modern societies have escaped the attention of the ancient historian.

Such a form of comparison has, of course, its risks, namely because it does not and cannot pay equal attention to the other societies. We simply cannot reach equal proximity to the original sources of these societies owing to the missing command of ancient Chinese, Arabic, or Hindi, and have to rely on secondary literature with the inherent risks of accepting interpretations of these studies without any possibility of rechecking them. And time constraints also forbid studying the historical context and its continuity in detail. So we merely concentrate on certain issues that are of interest, an approach that risks superficiality and distortion. On the other hand, in this case, it is the only way to open the possibility of comparison at all, and widen our horizon in the study of intergenerational relations, the household

[15] Hajnal 1965, 1982, 1983; Laslett 1972, 1983, 1988. [16] Kocka 2009: 17.
[17] Kocka 2009. Cf. also van den Braembussche 1989; Haupt and Kocka 1996: 9–45; Kocka 1999; Lorenz 1999; Haupt 2001.

and the family. For example, with an understanding of the structures, patterns, and mechanism of household formation in these societies, the case of Roman Egypt can be put in perspective, making common features and respective uniqueness apparent. Comparisons across time and across culture and region will allow the construction of concepts that go beyond one region or period of time, and allow recognition of some "world pattern" of intergenerational support in connection with household composition.

To get an idea of daily life as it must have been for people in the ancient world, the best thing would probably be to live in a developing country for some time. Reading studies on daily life in various preindustrial societies, which were also affected by high fertility, high infant mortality, and short life expectancy, but for which we have as well denser sources than for the ancient world, is a step in this direction. Descriptions of the daily routine of the lower social strata, their households, and their families have vastly expanded my horizons, pointing me to discoveries that helped me to understand aspects of Roman Egyptian family life that I would otherwise have missed in my sources. Of course, there is always the inherent danger that whatever distinctive traits there were in Roman Egypt (or any other part of the Roman world) are potentially disregarded in the process of applying a comparative model, and we have to be aware of this. Nonetheless, studies on ancient family life have too often restricted themselves by particularism, ignorant of theories and models developed by social historians of other historical periods for studying the same phenomena. Comparisons between the ancient world and other preindustrial societies do exist, of course, but have taken place mainly in the fields of religion, production, and economic growth.[18] Social history, and especially the history of the family and household, is a further very fruitful area that still awaits exploration. Ancient Mediterranean household formation has never been the object of comparative analysis,[19] even though we have quality data that hardly ranks behind the data from much later societies inviting comparisons. This study will be a first step in this direction.[20]

By conducting this study I came to the conclusion, as far as family and household structures are concerned, that early modern and modern north-

[18] Religion: Borgeaud 2004, esp. 207; Bodel and Olyan 2008; Gwynn et al. 2010. Economy: Meyer 1924; Rostovtzeff 1926; Finley 1973; Frederiksen 1975; Osborne 1991; Rathbone 1991; Parkins 1997; Davies 2007; Saller 2007; Bang 2009.

[19] Huebner 2010.

[20] I have started a further project comparing family and household structures in the Mediterranean from antiquity up to the nineteenth century. In this project we seek to identify significant variables that might explain shared or contrasting features and characteristics of family and household structures between regions and historical periods.

western Europe seems problematic for a comparative approach owing to quite different family and succession patterns. In Roman Egypt, marriage of women was early and universal. The young couple generally joined existing households, and rarely formed new ones. Brothers inherited equally, and often resided together. In contrast, in north-western Europe, the prevalent albeit not exclusive pattern was late marriage for both men and women. A relatively high proportion of men and women never married at all, and young couples generally formed new households upon marriage. When the young couples co-resided with parents after their wedding, it was often only temporary. Early modern and modern southern Europe, however, exhibited quite similar structures and actually provides good comparative material,[21] as do many early modern and modern Near Eastern and Far Eastern societies. Fieldwork studies on households and family life in pre-twentieth century China and India, as well as those on the Arab world, point to remarkable similarities with Roman Egypt, and might give us insights into the potential aspects and realities of ancient family life that cannot be recovered from our Roman Egyptian sources. Furthermore, these studies offer the opportunity to employ methods and theories developed for other periods of history.[22] Although the early modern and modern family in north-western and southern Europe has received a tremendous amount of attention from anthropologists during the past forty years, the same cannot be said of the family in the Near and Middle East. The number of scholars who have advanced groundbreaking studies is still in the single digits.[23] Of particular interest for the family in Roman Egypt are the studies on earlier and later periods of Egypt, that is Pharaonic and Ptolemaic times and Egypt in the Middle Ages and the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that allow us to consider household and family forms in this region as a continuum and not in their usual isolation, thus enabling us to see the developments and broader pictures of Eastern Mediterranean households and family structures.[24]

Discussions on intergenerational equity focus on the economic, social, and moral obligations of the young and middle-aged toward the older

[21] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985; Benigno 1989: 165–94.
[22] Hajnal 1965, 1982; Skinner 1997; Reher 1998; Goody 2000; Engelen and Wolf 2005.
[23] Petersen 1968; Tucker 1985; Ahlawat and Zaghal 1989: 251–73; Al-Haj 1989; Tucker 1993; Cuno 1995, 2005; Okawara 2003: 51–75. Other recent studies on family history in the Middle East include Duben 1985; Tucker 1985, 1988; Gerber 1989; Duben 1990; Duben and Behar 1991.
[24] Pharaonic Egypt: Pestman 1961; Eyre 1984, 1992, 1999, 2004, 2007; Wente 1990; Janssen and Janssen 2007. Ptolemaic Egypt: Pomeroy 1984; Lewis 1986; Clarysse and Thompson 2006. Medieval Egypt: Cohen 2005. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt: Tucker 1985, 1993; Cuno 1995, 2005; Inhorn 1996.

members of society, and in return the obligations that the adult generations have to the younger ones. The main aim of policies concerning the aging population is to secure the economic, social, and emotional well-being of the weakest generations of society, the old and the young. The heightened attention this subject received in academic literature, owing to developments in contemporary societies, led in the 1970s to the establishment of the new field of social gerontology, which studies intergenerational solidarity multidimensionally. On the macro level, the field takes into consideration the social-structural and institutional contexts, cultural and religious values, legal norms, and political agendas that govern reciprocal relations among kin. On the micro level, the field takes an in-depth look at single families, studying how they interacted with and were influenced and affected by historical processes. The American sociologist Vern Bengtson and his colleagues developed the theoretical paradigms and frameworks for studying intergenerational solidarity, a model based on social exchange theory.[25] They took on the definition of solidarity by Durkheim as the structural forms by which individuals are integrated within groups.[26] According to their classification, intergenerational solidarity, defined as the bond between parents and children, is based on six variables:[27] (1) structural solidarity, which means the geographic proximity between parents and children, with co-residence as the highest level of structural solidarity; (2) associational solidarity, i.e., the frequency of contact between individuals; (3) affective solidarity, such as emotional assistance and the degree and reciprocity of positive sentiments among family members; (4) consensual solidarity in the form of shared opinions/worldviews; (5) functional solidarity, i.e., the degree of support and exchange of resources among family members, which includes practical assistance; and finally (6) normative solidarity, the persisting cultural and religious norms and values pertaining to obligations across generations. In Bengtson's view intergenerational solidarity is the sum of these six dimensions, which can be substantially divided into two groups: (a) structural-behavioral (associational, functional, and structural) and (b) cognitive-affective (affectual, consensual, and normative) solidarity. More recently, Bengtson and others have turned to the solidarity/conflict model, in part responding to previous criticism that the solidarity model implies an emphasis on harmony and consensus and closes out any negative

[25] Bengtson et al. 1976. Cf. also Mangen et al. 1988; Roberts et al. 1991; Silverstein and Bengtson 1997; Bengtson 2001.
[26] Durkheim 1933. For a review of more recent discussions see Roberts et al. 1991.
[27] Bengtson and Roberts 1991.

aspects of family relationships.[28] Bengtson thus stresses that solidarity and conflict are not mutually exclusive in family relationships and can be present at the same time.[29]

While Bengtson and other modern sociologists study relations between parents and their adult children by conducting quantitative studies testing the model of intergenerational solidarity/conflict through empirical data from surveys and in-depth interviews, this approach is difficult to pursue for studying intergenerational solidarity in ancient societies for which we often have only anecdotal evidence. Nonetheless, we want to read our sources available for the period and region under study with these definitions in the back of our mind. Even if we lack the quantitative data, we will see that we will find all six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity also reflected in our ancient source material.

The study of the history of aging and old age is also a fairly recent field in historical studies, having begun in earnest in the early 1980s with the study of early modern and modern England. At that time Peter Stearns declared the research on the elderly in societies before the industrial revolution "virgin territory."[30] Since then, however, an increasing number of studies have appeared in which scholars approach the subject from a historical, demographic, sociological, and anthropological perspective. This recent interest is not surprising, if we take into account that there are few historical topics that have as much contemporary relevance, involving economic as well as moral issues. These in-depth studies have unmasked the "golden age" theory where the elderly held a high status in societies of the past owing to prevailing moral standards, elderly people's scarcity, and their control of wisdom and economic resources as a historical myth.[31] Laslett has called this phenomenon "the world we have lost" syndrome – people have forever lamented the moral downfall of their own times compared with those of the past.[32] We find many examples of this sort in antiquity as well.[33]

[28] Bengtson et al. 2002.

[29] In recent years the solidarity/conflict model has been challenged by the concept of intergenerational ambivalence. The ambivalence model developed by Lüscher and Pillemer stresses the sociological and psychological contradictions or dilemmas, the coexistence of both positive and negative elements in intergenerational relations. See Lüscher and Pillemer 1998; Lüscher 2002; Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Pillemer and Lüscher 2004.

[30] Stearns 1982: 1.

[31] Quadagno 1982; Stearns 1982; Kertzer and Laslett 1995. Representing rather common opinion: Simmons 1945; Tönnies 1957; Fischer 1977; Achenbaum 1978.

[32] Laslett 1965.

[33] For the Roman world, see, e.g., Cicero's *Cato Maior de Senectute*. For further references: Parkin 2003: 61–7.