

**PARENT-CHILD SEPARATION IN SPACE:
A SOCIO-GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT The research purpose here is to have a clearer understanding of the issue of parent-child separation in space in the U.S. from various perspectives. Major findings are (1) white population tends to live farther away from their parents than nonwhite population, (2) those who are socially upwardly mobile seem to be farther from their parents than those who are not mobile, (3) the median distance is increasing from lower, middle, to upper social class (based on occupation), and (4) among the middle-class and lower-class groups, urban residents locate themselves far from their parents than nonurban residents do.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to have a clearer insight of the various factors which could influence the spatial separation between parents and their children from various perspectives. This study is prompted partly by the crucial impact of the baby boom in the U.S. history. On average, a parent in that era tends to have quite a few children available for potential support. However, as baby boomers age, they will have relatively less children available for support in their later lives. The significance of understanding the potential determinants of spatial separation becomes more obvious when dealing with specific kinds of support which are more distance constrained by nature, e.g. help in transportation, housework, and home and car repairs. Hence, the spatial separation will become a critical issue for social geographers and have important implications for policy makers as well.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Basically, interaction and distance are two of the most important variables in the context of family relationship given the strong negative relationship between them. In all relevant studies conducted so far, distance has always been suggested to affect the interaction intensity, among other things. However, very few researchers have discussed how distance is influenced by other variables even though this is an equally important issue.

In fact, the question of how far away family members are from their parental home in the first place has been an under-researched area. So far, the relevant literature available to us is relatively sparse.

Warnes (1984) found that in England daughters lived closer to their retired parents than did sons. Geographical variation in distance of separation was also noted. Later on, Warnes noted that those parents in the higher social classes lived further from their children than those in the lower social classes.

Warnes (1986) also found that the children in nonmanual occupations tend to be farther from their parents than those in manual occupations.

Social mobility, another important variable, is now discussed. Sundstrom (1986) has found that those who have risen socially are less likely to live very close to their parents. Persons who have declined socially (e.g. middle-class to workers) more often live closer than stable middle-class persons. In fact, there seems to be a combined effect of social and geographic mobility on the physical distance separating parents and their adult children.

In Kulis (1987), when distance is the dependent variable, none of the social mobility variables turn out to be significant. At first sight, there seem to be no social mobility effects on distance. However, some doubts can be cast on the validity and generalizability of this finding since the data were collected in 1978 in the New York City and Miami-Fort Lauderdale metropolitan areas only. In this study I like to reexamine the social mobility effect (and hypothesis) in a much larger setting for more recent timeframe. So in general I believe in the original explanation made by Kulis (1987) which holds that social mobility (especially upward one) usually disrupts family ties by introducing invidious comparisons of occupational prestige, or by creating situations of status inconsistency. However, I propose different directions for this effect on the distance of separation. I agree that upward mobility tends to make a larger distance between respondents and their parents due to the adverse or disruptive impact elaborated in Kulis

(1987). On the other hand, even though downward mobility definitely has some separating effect on children and their parents, this effect could be overwhelmed by the higher economic dependence or other reliance on parents.

On racial variation, Adams (1970) had a general conclusion that, "minority status tends to result in strong kin ties for the sake of mutual aid and survival in a hostile environment." I think that this racial difference will be shown by the separation distance between respondents and their parents. This is due to the fact that the tie between parent and child is probably the strongest among various kin ties and distance is definitely one of the most important facets of family relationship.

For rural-urban differential, Lee (1980) has concluded that the more frequent kinship interaction among rural than urban residents might be attributable to distance. A more appropriate approach to testing this hypothesis is to directly examine whether rural residents have a significantly smaller separation distance than urban ones do.

Therefore I propose the following hypotheses regarding distance within the U.S. context: (1) on average, distance is larger for white population than nonwhite population; (2) males have a larger distance with their parents than females; (3) when the no mobility group is the basis for comparison, upward mobility group will be farther from parents while downward mobility group will be closer to parents; (4) when the respondent's social class is measured by occupation index (SEI hereafter), the separation distance gets larger when one moves from lower to middle and then to upper class; (5) as metropolitan status is defined by SMSA/non-SMSA, urban residents (those who reside in SMSAs) will be located farther from their parents than nonurban ones.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

DATA

The National Survey of Families and Households provides a wealth of information on various aspects of family relationships and household structure (Sweet, et al, 1988). The survey consisted of interviews with a national probability sample of 13,017 respondents. Several portions of the main interview were self-administered to facilitate the collection of sensitive information. A shorter questionnaire was given to the spouse or cohabiting partner of the primary respondent. The design was cross-sectional, with several retrospective sequences on earlier experience.

The focus of study is on the separation distance for those who do not live with their parents. In this study, I will use the adult child as the unit of analysis for reasons of simplicity. Based on the availability and marital status of parents, it is often worthwhile to classify the whole sample into four groups as follows: (1) those who have both parents alive and living together; (2) those who only have a living mother; (3) those who only have a living father; and (4) those who have both parents alive, but living apart. The following analyses are all done for the first group, i.e. for those adult respondents not living with parents and with both parents surviving and living together.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

Basically, breakdown (at different levels for various dimensions) procedure is used. Median value and associated test of significance for differences between various subgroups are utilized in breakdown analyses. The rationale is that mean value for distance in this study can be very misleading when the distribution of distances is much skewed. The detail of the use of median and its test via confidence interval approach can be found in David (1970). And the phenomenon of positive skewness of distance distribution has been illustrated in an earlier paper by Rogerson and Weng (1992).

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

The dependent variable is the natural logarithm of the distance between the respondent and his or her parents. This transformation follows Warnes (1986) and is made due to the huge skewness in the distribution of distance. The value of distance is actual or estimated miles.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

There are several types of variables that might influence the dependent variable. Based upon previous literature, these variables could be classified into the following categories: (1) the demographic characteristics of the respondent (e.g. sex, age, race, marital status, number of living siblings), (2) socioeconomic variables (e.g. educational level, personal or household income, occupation-based socioeconomic status), and (3) social mobility variables (e.g. upward versus downward mobility, or difference of socioeconomic index between respondent and parents). In addition, one geographic variable is included for examining the differential effects prevailing

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according to metropolitan status. In this study, the independent variables utilized are race, gender, social mobility, social class, and metropolitan status.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Table 1, we find that the median distance of white group is significantly greater than that of nonwhite group (25.0 versus 15.0 miles, respectively). However, at the second breakdown level, there is no significant difference for two gender subgroups.

For Table 2, it seems that the likelihood of an upward mobility versus downward mobility is about twofold (62.5% to 34.0%). In addition, compared to people in the nomobility group, those who are upwardly mobile tend to live farther from their parents. However, there is no significant difference between the downward mobility group and nomobility group.

According to Table 3, the median distance in descending order based on social class level is upper class, middle class, and lower class. In fact, there exists a huge difference in distance among those three groups. For example, on average the upper class people live as far as 123.2 miles from their parents. On the other hand, the middle and lower class people are within commuting distance for their parents (40.0 and 12.4 miles). Second, further breakdown by metropolitan status reveals to us that urban people tend to distance themselves from their parental homes than those nonurban people do. A closer look shows that this urban-nonurban difference is not significant for children in the upper class.

From above results, most of the proposed hypotheses regarding separation distance have been supported in the empirical analysis. That is, race, social mobility, social class (based on occupation), and metropolitan status are identified as correlates of separation distance. There are gender difference in median distance for white as well as nonwhite groups though the results are not statistically significant.

CONCLUSION

From the literature surveyed here, I have come up with an impression that so far there has not been any single theory or model which could give persuasive answer to the research question raised here. This study is my preliminary attempt to integrate relevant researches from various perspectives. I think that the breakdown analyses utilized in this paper could shed some new light on the under-researched issue of spatial separation.

In conclusion, this study can make a significant contribution to the state-of-the-art knowledge of family relationship in the U.S. in two ways. First, with the use of the recent NSFH data, we can reinvestigate some hypotheses established in previous studies. Second and more importantly, with some new hypotheses supported here we may better explain the variation in parent-child spatial separation in the United States.

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RACE	GENDER	
WHITE		
M=25.0 N=2744 (25,30) SD=688	MALE	M=30.0 N=1318 (25,35) SD=752
	FEMALE	M=25.0 N=1426 (20,30) SD=623
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N-WHITE		
M=15.0 N=432 (10,20) SD=1014	MALE	M=25.0 N=194 (13,65) SD=1031
	FEMALE	M=10.1 N=239 (8,15) SD=992

TABLE 1

MEDIAN DISTANCE BY RACE AND GENDER

*Confidence intervals are in parentheses.

*M:Median N:Sample size SD:Standard Deviation

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**SOCIAL MOBILITY
CLASS**

	M	N	0	SD
UPWARD MOBILITY	25.0	1983 (62.5%)	(25,30)	783
DOWNWARD MOBILITY	20.0	1078 (34.0%)	(15,28)	689
NO MOBILITY	10.0	110 (3.5%)	(6,20)	405

TABLE 2

MEDIAN DISTANCE BY SOCIAL MOBILITY CLASS

*Social mobility=SEI of child - SEI of father

LOWER CLASS	MIDDLE CLASS	UPPER CLASS
M=12.4	M=40.0	M=123.2
N=1304	N=807	N=354
(10,15)	(30,60)	(95,180)
SD=692	SD=666	SD=943
SMSA	SMSA	SMSA
M=15.0	M=60.0	M=150.0
N=978	N=678	N=301
(14,20)	(40,75)	(100,220)
SD=750	SD=703	SD=999
N-SMSA	N-SMSA	N-SMSA
M=9.1	M=10.0	M=72.2
N=326	N=128	N=53
(6,10)	(5,15)	(20,150)
SD=442	SD=361	SD=431

TABLE 3

MEDIAN DISTANCE BY SEI AND METROPOLITAN STATUS

*Median distance is in miles.

*Confidence intervals are in parentheses.