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Differences over time in older people's relationships with children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews in rural North Wales

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ABSTRACT
Based on data from the Bangor Longitudinal Study of Ageing (BLSA) 1979–1999, this paper examines changes over time in the intergenerational relationships of older people (aged 65+ in 1979). The analysis uses quantitative and qualitative data to discuss changes from 1979–1999 for those respondents who survived in the community to 1999. It looks at mothers' and fathers' relationships with their adult children, grandmother and grandfather relationships with grandchildren and relationships between aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews. It identifies four different patterns of intergenerational relationships showing how the rural employment structure impacts on family structure, migration and support patterns.

KEY WORDS – rural, intergenerational, relationships, family structure, migration.

Introduction

This paper seeks to extend knowledge of both intergenerational relationships and ageing in rural areas in the United Kingdom. Intergenerational relationships between older people and their adult children have received much attention from gerontologists. However, the relationships between older grandparents and their adult grandchildren or those between older aunts and uncles and their adult nieces and nephews have been less studied. The paper focuses on relationships between older people on the one hand and their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews on the other.

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Most of what has been written about intergenerational relationships between older parents and their children has been focused on the availability and willingness of adult children to provide care and services to parents whose health or mobility is failing. Less has been written about the relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren, although the roles of grandparents have become an increasingly popular topic. Even less attention has been given to the relationship between old grandparents and their *adult* grandchildren and little attention has been given to the relationships between aunts and uncles and their *adult* nieces and nephews.

This paper on rural Wales, explores the influence of the rural occupational structure on intergenerational relationships in terms of out-migration for employment and in-migration to take advantage of the country environment. We identify differences between the situations of older parents: (1) with family ties involving local family businesses, mostly farms; (2) who are long-term residents with at least one child living within 15 miles and seen at least weekly; and (3) with no child living within 15 miles, half of whom are incomers. Within these categories, patterns of relationships with children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews are described. The difference, however, between parents and those without children is more marked than between different categories of parents and special attention is given to relationships between child-free older people and their nieces and nephews.

Background

Rural kinship is influenced by overtones of 'family farming', in which intergenerational solidarity maintains respect for the land and the easy transfer of duties and property to the next generation (Elder *et al.* 1995; St. Cyr *et al.* 1994; Silverstein *et al.* 1998). Several studies in the southern US found that parents placed obligations for old age support on their children in return for allowing them to settle on their land (Groger 1992). It may be assumed that this is implicit in the UK also.

Economic decline in quarrying areas of North Wales has resulted in the out-migration of young adults since the early 1900s (Morgan 1981). Together with the in-migration of older people from urban areas seeking tranquil retirement locations in the countryside (Green 1992), this pattern has caused imbalances in the age structure of some rural communities in Wales (McAllister 1990). Similar outcomes are observed in other parts of the UK. Technological advances in

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agricultural production and the diminished role of family farming have further made it clear that the pre-industrial *gemeinschaft* is no longer a valid representation of family life in North Wales. Although until the recent crisis in UK agriculture, farmers enjoyed an advantaged socio-economic position. Yet research has consistently shown that social mores and folkways of rural regions persist as a residue of earlier forms of social and economic organisation (Elder *et al.* 1996).

In the UK, long-distance relocation for better amenities includes the popular image of retirement migration by older people – a move made at retirement age to a retirement area. The decision to make this type of move may be made well before retirement. The trigger is often the desire for a change in lifestyle where the retiree can enjoy their new-found leisure time, maybe in a sunnier climate, with amenities geared to their age group (Wiseman 1980). Retirement in pursuit of leisure has developed as a result of several factors: (1) the obligation for older people to leave employment when they reach retirement age (Warnes and Ford 1995); (2) increases in the incomes of some retired people, (3) state pensions available to all retirees (Phillipson 1982); (4) a drop in the number of children that the older population have had to support and educate; and, (5) the rise in home ownership (Karn 1977; Rees 1992; Warnes 1994; Wiseman 1980).

More older people can now afford to live independently of their families. In addition, increased longevity has meant that the last years of life have become a time where plans can be made for enjoyment, rather than the expectations of previous generations that retirement would be a time to wind down whilst experiencing declining health.

There is a substantial number of older people for whom the choice of retirement destinations includes rural areas (Law and Warnes 1982; Rogers *et al.* 1990). The search for new, more dispersed destinations for retirement is spurred on in part by the effect of the increases in proportions of older people in the destinations that have previously been significant 'retirement' areas. This may have had the effect of decreasing the attractiveness and increasing the prices of properties in these areas.

Methodology

The sample for the Bangor Longitudinal Study of Ageing was drawn in 1979 from a cross-section of rural communities in North Wales. It consisted of people aged 65 and over, living in eight communities representing different settlement types. The achieved sample of 534

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people was representative of the region for community size and the age distribution of those aged 65 and over.

An administered questionnaire survey was conducted in the homes of the respondents in 1979. It was repeated in 1983 for the survivors who had been aged 75+ in 1979, and again in 1987, 1991 (concise questionnaire), 1995 and 1999 with all survivors. As well as pre-coded responses, interviewers were requested to record verbatim answers to a variety of questions and to complete a detailed Interviewer's Report covering the overall situation of the respondent. In addition to the questionnaire survey, intensive unstructured interviews with 30 respondents were conducted over a four-year period, from 1983 to 1987. A detailed description of the methodology is available from the authors. This paper is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected throughout the course of the study on those respondents who survived until 1999 (N = 60).

Data were collected from respondents for migration history; contact with family, friends and neighbours; ability to manage and help with activities of daily living and household tasks; and access to, and use of formal and informal services and support. In writing this paper, all qualitative data from interviews, interviewer's reports and verbatim responses to open-ended questions were examined for references to intergenerational relationships. Particular attention has been paid to developmental aspects of relationships over time.

The variable 'length of residence in community in 1999' was computed for all survivors. Categories used for 'length of residence in the community in 1999' were: 4–9 years; 10–14 years; 15–24 years; 25–34 years; and more than 35 years. If respondents had moved between 1995 and 1999 then they were coded as having lived in the community for less than four years. It was not possible to calculate length of residence for two of the survivors.

Findings on 1999 survivors

Baseline findings (1979) for the original sample of 534 (see Table 1) showed that 25 per cent of the survivors were childless. This was lower than the 31 per cent of the original sample, which included more unmarried women, some of whom had lost fiancés in the First World War. The majority of parents had only one or two children. More than two-fifths of parents saw a child at least weekly in 1979 and by 1999 almost half saw a child at least weekly.

In 1979 at the start of the study just over one-third of the sample had

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TABLE 1. *Numbers of children and grandchildren and frequency of contact with children and grandchildren for the whole 1979 sample and 1999 survivors in 1979, 1987 and 1995.*

Variable:		Total N = 534 1979 %	1999 survivors N = 60 1979 %	1987 %	1995 %
Number of living children	0	31	25	25	25
	1	22	22	16	24
	2	23	24	21	21
	3	10	8	5	8
	4 or more	14	21	19	19
	Missing	1	0	14	3
Frequency of contact with any child	No children	31	25	25	25
	At least weekly	42	44	34	49
	At least monthly	19	22	2	14
	Less often	6	6	10	8
	Never	1	0	2	0
	Missing	2	2	17	3
Number of living grandchildren	0	37	30	27	27
	1	34	35	5	8
	2	19	25	8	6
	3	9	8	6	6
	4 or more	0	0	35	48
	Missing	2	2	19	5
Frequency of contact with any grandchild	No grandchildren	37	30	27	27
	At least weekly	29	35	35	27
	At least monthly	20	24	3	18
	Less often	9	6	13	25
	Never	1	0	3	0
	Missing	4	5	19	3

only one grandchild. Grandchildren continued to be born throughout the study and by 1999, more than half of the survivors had three or more grandchildren. Only two per cent had had a child but no grandchild. Over the course of the study, contact with grandchildren declined. Contact was more frequent when grandchildren were dependent children. In 1979 half the surviving grandparents saw at least one grandchild at least weekly and most saw grandchildren at least every month. By 1999, contact with grandchildren, now mostly adults, was less frequent: a quarter saw a grandchild at least weekly but another quarter saw a grandchild less often than once a month.

On the basis of the 1979 data, respondents had been identified as: *long-term residents*, if they had lived in their present community since before they reached the age of 40; *middle-aged movers*, if they had moved

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in between the ages of 40 and 60; *retirement movers*, if they had moved in from less than 15 miles after age 60; or, *retirement migrants*, if they had moved in from more than 15 miles away after the age of 60. The distribution of these values was concentrated in the long-term resident and retirement migrant categories. Most retirement migrants had come from more than 50 miles away. This clearly represents two distinct categories of older people living in the rural areas.

In discussing intergenerational relationships, there is an important distinction to be made between those who have children and those who have none. Among those in the baseline sample who had no living children, half had never married and half had married but had no children (Wenger 2001). Those who had had no children, naturally have no grandchildren either. However, they may have intergenerational relationships with nieces and nephews or the children of cousins. This paper first discusses the relationships of parents and then the relationships of those without children.

Exploration of the data on the intergenerational relationships of parents quickly indicated that there was a clear distinction between long-term residents and retirement migrants. Further than that, among long-term residents, those 1999 survivors who were associated with farms or with other family businesses appeared to have a different pattern of relationships from those without.

For ease of analysis, the 1999 survivors were divided into four categories: (1) those who were associated with farm or other family businesses (referred to subsequently as farm/business families); (2) others with at least one child living within 15 miles (referred to subsequently as local families); (3) those whose nearest child lived more than 15 miles away (referred to as families at a distance); and (4) those without children. (No survivors had a nearest child living 5–15 miles away.) The distribution of respondents was as follows:

Farm/business family	13
Local family	13
Family at a distance	19 (of whom 14 had no child within 50 miles)
Without children	15

Farm/business families

Twelve survivors (22 per cent) belonged to farm/business families. Most of these respondents had lived most of their lives on farms or smallholdings. In a few cases, the husband had had a waged job as well as running a smallholding. The majority had a direct economic tie to the land. In one or two cases, the family business had diversified

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beyond farming and in one case a butcher was only loosely allied to farming. In most cases, there was a feeling of dynastic succession and family regeneration over the generations.

Nine out of the 12 were mothers: four married, five widowed at the start of the study. Two of the three fathers were still married at the start of the study and one widowed. These respondents tended to have larger families than others, ranging from one to 10, with an average of three children (modes two or four). At the start of the study, more than half had more than one child living within five miles. Half lived in the same household as an adult child and the majority saw at least one child every day. In all cases by 1999, children had taken over the running of the farm or business from their parents. In 1999, half were still living on a farm or smallholding, all of whom had at least one child living with them. Most of the others had moved from the farm to other accommodation often on the marriage of a child, usually a son, who had taken over the running of the farm or business. More than the other categories of parents, these people had what might be referred to as *dynastic* family structures, where property and livelihood were handed down from one generation to the next.

It is common to assume that when parents live with their children it is for the benefit of the parent. However, as an earlier paper from the study reported (Wenger 1990), when we look at these families, it appears that co-residence was mostly for the benefit of the adult child. In one case, the youngest child, a single son, remained at home with his widowed father. Over the course of the study, it became clear that this son was mentally unstable, was very dependent on his father and could not cope on his own. In three other cases, mothers continued to keep house for unmarried sons. In one case, the mother was keeping house for three bachelor sons and in another was running a smallholding and caring for a son with learning disabilities.

One mother who remained on the farm was a widow at the start of the study and had only one child, a married daughter. When her husband had died, she transferred ownership of the farm to her daughter and son-in-law, but continued to live there. Her daughter had five children and at the start of the study three grandsons were still living at home. The grandmother and her daughter ran the domestic side of the farm together. She continued to enjoy her role as family matriarch. She and her daughter got up at six every day and shared most of the domestic chores. In 1999, at 95, she was still taking an active role in the household and doing most of the cooking for 7–10 people daily.

Those who had moved out of farmhouses had also acted in what they

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saw as the best interests of their children. At the start of the study, two married men and the husbands of two women were still working daily in their former farm or business. All, however, had handed over their business or farm to their children. The butcher claimed to have retired and to have handed the business over to his son and daughter, but in 1979 still went round every day to help out. In 1987, he said that the business still took up much of his time, but that he now took time off in the afternoons. In 1995 he was still helping out in the butchers shops. He said,

> In a way the business and the family are one. My grandfather was in the same business and I'm proud that my son and daughter are carrying on and that my son's children are also part of the business. I dare say that it's one of the oldest family businesses in North Wales.

This perception of the family as enterprise was expressed in similar ways by others in this category.

Passing on the farm when children married was common. Decisions about where to move from the farm were sometimes constrained by the fact that fathers intended to carry on working on the farm, so proximity was important.

Parents in these farm/business families continue to have clearly reciprocal relationships with their adult children. While children benefit from the availability of employment in the family business and ultimate inheritance, a wider exchange of services is evident. Nearest children are often seen daily whether they are co-resident or not and all these parents saw children several times a week. A high proportion of the daughters were farmers' wives in the same or an adjacent community, and not in paid employment, so were able to be flexible in when they could come to see their parents.

At the start of the study, parents did at least as much for their children as their children did for them. As time passed, some parents needed more help and support but in many cases reciprocity was maintained. Most of the respondents in farm/business families had active family networks and members of the younger generation took on responsibility for help in many areas as the need arose. Sources of help were gender linked with sons more likely to provide help with financial advice, lifts, household repairs and decorating, while daughters were more likely to provide help with domestic tasks, personal care and emotional support. However, where there were no sons or no daughters the available child/ren provided help with what was needed. Parents with no daughters developed close relationships with their daughters-in-law and parents without sons became close to their sons-in-law.

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Parents' expenses for fuel, vehicles, telephones or other overheads sometimes continued to be paid through the farm or business accounts.

By 1999, the surviving farm/business grandparents had between 3 and 15 grandchildren, average 6.6. All but one of those from farm/business families saw their grandchildren frequently; most saw at least one grandchild every day. When grandparents were widowed, grandchildren tended to visit more frequently and to come to stay overnight more often. Grandsons often did chores such as cutting wood, mowing grass or providing transport. Granddaughters also gave lifts.

Contact with nieces and nephews was minimal for most of the respondents in this category. Only five had regular contact. In one of these cases, the nephew involved had lost his mother when he was very young and his aunt had been a surrogate mother to him. This was the most involved relationship with either a niece or nephew.

Local families

Thirteen of the survivors (22 per cent) were identified as belonging to local (non-farm) families. Nine of the 14 were mothers and five were fathers. In 1979, four mothers were still married and five were already widowed; but all four fathers were still married. The male occupations had been associated primarily with the rural nature of the area (shepherd, agricultural worker, tenant farmer, quarry worker and driver). The women had worked in service occupations (teacher, hotel staff, clerk, cleaner, cook and domestic). The predominance of extractive and service sectors reflects the economic base of the area.

The definition of this category was having at least one child living within 15 miles. Only two had more than one child living within five miles. Average family size was 3 children, ranging from 1–7, but in contrast with the farm families the modal family size was one or two. In 1979, three had an adult son living in the same household.

Most saw their nearest child more often than once a week and all saw a child at least weekly. More than half of their other children lived more than 50 miles away and were seen less often than monthly. Families of procreation were, therefore, more dispersed, reflecting the shortfall of employment opportunities in the rural areas and the established pattern of out-migration of young people to find work.

Here too the three parents who had children in the household at the start of the study were in a support role to that child. One adult son had not yet left home; another had recently been divorced. Both (re)married and set up independent homes during the course of the

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study. The third son suffered from Downs's syndrome. All three lived with both parents.

Parents had more involved relationships with their nearby children. These relationships were more reciprocal in the early years of the study, but, as in farm/business families, where the parent remained in good health relationships remained reciprocal. As time went by, parents were more likely to rely on children for help and support but many maintained a high level of independence. Most help and support came from children who lived nearby and, with advancing age, more help was given as needed. When parents gave up driving, children became an important source of lifts and were more likely to help with shopping. Regular telephone contact with children living at a distance was common, and important decisions were discussed with them as often as with nearby children. Distant children sometimes took the opportunity of a stay with parents to help with decorating or household repairs and sometimes took parents home with them for short breaks.

All the local family parents were also grandparents with an average of 6.9 grandchildren, ranging from 2–24. If the one with 24 grandchildren was omitted, the average would be 5.5, and the range 2–10, so typically these families were somewhat smaller than the farm/business families. At the start of the study, contact with those grandchildren who lived within five miles was frequent since most of them were young children living with their parents. Contact with distant grandchildren was less common, and frequent contact with all grandchildren tended to decrease as they grew up and started their own families. Two grandparents had co-resident grandchildren. In both instances, the relationships appeared to be wholly reciprocal.

Four uncles and three aunts had virtually no contact with nieces or nephews and rarely saw any of them. The other 7 (one uncle and six aunts) had varying amounts of contact with nieces and nephews. Where contact occurred it appeared to be either the product of close family interaction or represented some kind of substitution for the absence of another type of relationship (see paper by Keeling in this issue). One uncle and three aunts had special relationships with one nephew or niece. In these cases, nieces and nephews seem to substitute for the absence of nearby daughters or sons. Three other aunts claimed to have regular contact with both nieces and nephews. All had a brother living within five miles and the contact was with his children. In these cases, contact resulted from the proximity of siblings and family comings and goings back and forth.

So what was the situation for those seven (more than half) who had little contact with nieces and nephews? Three of them were women all

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of whom had assumed heavier than normal parental responsibilities as single parents or carers for grandchildren. It is possible that these responsibilities precluded the development of close ties with nieces and nephews. All three women also had daughters. Four men, all still married in 1979, had no contact with nieces or nephews. All had nearby children with whom they had close relationships and most of their nieces and nephews lived at a distance.

Relationships with nieces and nephews for those in *local families* appear to depend on one or more of the following: proximity and a family overflow effect, or on the need to substitute for the absence of proximate relationships with sons or daughters. It would appear that where neither proximity nor need exist close relationships do not develop.

Children at a distance

Families with no child living within 15 miles were categorised as having children at a distance. Nineteen of the survivors (32 per cent) were in this category and 14 of them had no child within 50 miles. Five had a child living between 15 and 50 miles away and one woman had a stepson living between five and 15 miles, seen less often than monthly. Just over half of these parents were retirement *migrants* to the area. One was defined as a retirement *mover*, who had moved less than 15 miles on retirement to return to his natal community. The other eight had been born in North Wales and had lived in their present community since before their children were born, but all their children had moved away.

There were 13 women and six men in this category. At the start of the study, seven women were still married and six were widowed. One of the widowed women, who was previously childless, remarried during the course of the study and acquired a stepson. Of the six men, four were still married and two were widowed. One of the widowed men remarried during the course of the study.

The survivors with children at a distance were more likely than the previous category to be middle class, but more importantly were typically better off than those with children within five miles. Compared with local families (with children within five miles) the occupations of the fathers whose children lived more than 50 miles away tended to be more skilled, including professionals and those who had had some management responsibilities or who had been self-employed. More than half of the mothers had not worked outside the home after marriage and the others included those who worked in family businesses, a self-employed businesswoman and a community

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nurse. The majority of occupations were not tied to the rural context in which they took place. These parents on the whole had skills that were more transferable (between rural and urban areas) and better jobs than the local families discussed above.

The parents of children at a distance had smaller families than others, with an average of two children. Only four had more than two children and eight had only one. Moreover for four of the women, their only children were stepchildren. In two of these cases, previously childless women acquired stepchildren in late life. In two other cases, the only children were from earlier marriages. In another instance, only the child of the second marriage was discussed in the first part of the study. Stepchildren from an earlier marriage of the respondent's husband (who actually lived nearer) were not counted as children at the start of the study. In subsequent interviews they were all listed. In other words, family building for those families with children at a distance was less straightforward than for the other categories and the potential for tensions between family members perhaps greater.

As noted above, contact with children is affected by distance. Between them parents in this category had 30 children. Most children were seen less often than monthly. Only five children were seen more often than monthly and four of these lived within 15 miles. The telephone plays a very important part in family life for these parents. Even at the start of the study, when only two-thirds of respondents had telephones, those who had no nearby children were more likely to have a telephone than others (Wenger 1984). By 1999 most of the survivors had telephones. In some cases, distant adult children had put pressure on their parents to have a telephone and even paid for its installation, so that they could keep in touch and reassure themselves that their parent(s) were all right. This is another instance where the perceived benefit to the older parent is perhaps of greater benefit to the younger generation.

Regular telephone calls are typical and this is true for children living abroad as well as for those in other parts of the United Kingdom. Sometimes calls are routinised: a monthly call from Australia or a call every Sunday morning at 9.30. Those who live nearer and visit more frequently also keep in touch on the telephone in between visits. The frequency of calls increases if the parent is in poor health, recently bereaved, physically frail or becoming confused.

Patterns of visits and face-to-face interaction between the generations for parents and children who live at a distance tend to be more structured. Especially for those who live more than 50 miles from a child, visits need to be planned. When grandparents and grandchildren

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are younger, adult children may take holidays, staying with their parents in the rural environment. In a few cases, where the grandparent continued to be in good health, grandchildren subsequently brought great-grandchildren to stay for holidays. While grandchildren are still living with their parents, visits to the grandparents are constrained by the school holidays and visits tend to be concentrated into these periods.

Early in the study, many parents were still able to travel alone to visit their children. With the passage of time, the older people gave up driving and/or found the journey by public transport too tiring. Travelling from a rural area is seldom straightforward and usually involves more than one mode of transport and changes along the way. This may initially discourage parents, especially those who are widowed, from visiting children. As time goes on, parents tend to receive more visits from children and make fewer visits to them.

The parents often become dependent on their children for transport. Sometimes children come for a short visit and then take the parent home with them for a short holiday. This means that they then have to bring them back at the end of the holiday. The longer the distance, the more time and energy consuming this becomes for both the parent and the child. Many of those in their 80s and 90s prefer to stay at home.

Children at a distance rally round when a parent is ill. They may come to stay for a few days and, if and when the parent is fit to travel, frequently take a parent to the child's (usually a daughter) home to convalesce. Children often invite recently widowed parents to come to stay with them for some time after the funeral. Some parents may do this but most prefer to remain at home. Once parents are widowed, older children may try to persuade the surviving parent to move to live closer to them or to move in with them. The respondents in the study were not asked about moving closer to their children, but it is evident that the distance from children was a worry for some of them or for their children. More than half – four fathers and six mothers – talked about moving closer to children but the majority did not do so. What comes across clearly is the importance of independence for most of these older people. The desire to remain independent and not become dependent on others was more apparent amongst parents living at a distance from their children than for other parents.

Changes in the circumstances of a child can subsequently show that a move might not have worked out as planned. Children may need to make subsequent employment-related moves. In a couple of instances, parents who might have hoped that distant children would look after them were faced with situations that made that impossible. One couple

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had thought of moving to live nearer their only daughter in the South of England but property prices in the south convinced them to stay where they were. In another instance, there was no chance that an only son would be able to look after his father because they had had the daughter-in-law's parents living with them for years and these parents now needed a lot of care. In one or two cases, for reasons not connected with family care, children moved to live nearer to their parents during the course of the study. This meant that there was more frequent contact than previously. In a few other cases, it was the adult child who needed the support of the parent.

The survivors with families at a distance also had far fewer grandchildren than the two other categories of parents. All but two had grandchildren with an average of 3.5, range 0–15. The mode was one grandchild, and 13 of the 17 grandparents had 1–4 grandchildren. Two mentioned 'step-grandchildren'. One was the child of a stepchild and the other was the grandchild of a second spouse.

Not unexpectedly, these older people had less frequent face-to-face contact with their grandchildren. Most saw a grandchild less than monthly throughout the 20 years of the study. By 1999, four saw a grandchild more often than monthly and three never saw a grandchild. Several had great-grandchildren but they did not feature centrally in conversation about the family. They seemed to be most appreciated as a milestone in family development. Most great-grandchildren were, of course, still quite young in 1999.

For these grandparents too, grandchildren were frequently mentioned as a source of pleasure. Visits from distant adult grandchildren were usually planned in advance and so looked forward to, but unexpected visits seemed to give particular pleasure. Early in the study, visits to grandchildren from grandmothers were frequently associated with providing childcare for very young grandchildren, often when daughters or daughters-in-law were having the next grandchild. During this period, grandchildren were younger and many could only visit with their parents. While these visits were looked forward to, they were often tiring. Visits from teenage or adult grandchildren were less demanding. While most grandparents saw these older grandchildren less often than monthly, visits were often widely spaced as the demands of adult life descended on grandchildren.

Grandchildren who lived abroad were not uncommon in this category of grandparents. Other grandchildren travelled abroad during the study exploring the world or serving in the armed services. Telephone contact with adult grandchildren was important but was not usually regular nor as frequent as contact with adult children.

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Despite the lack of regular or frequent contact, grandchildren were clearly important. Visits from grandchildren were consistently mentioned as sources of pleasure and the successes of grandchildren were much valued and reported with pride. Grandchildren could also be a source of worry. None mentioned grandchildren as sources of instrumental help or emotional support.

Relationships with nieces and nephews were mainly perfunctory. Over time, the pattern of these relationships was more varied than with grandchildren. Of the 19 survivors in this category, most saw a niece or nephew far less often than monthly and more than half had no niece nor nephew, or had no or rare contact with them. For some, regular contact was infrequent and they never saw one another face to face. For most, contact had declined further by 1999. Only two survivors claimed in 1999 to see a niece or nephew weekly. In both cases, the older person had become a surrogate parent.

In summary, relationships with nieces and nephews for most of those with families at a distance are primarily symbolic, perfunctory and infrequent.

Survivors without children

At the beginning of this paper, we commented that the differences between parents and the childless or child-free were greater than differences between different categories of parents. Intergenerational relationships for those without children are obviously more restricted since without children and grandchildren of their own, they are dependent for this type of relationship primarily on their nieces and nephews or, in some cases, on the children of cousins.

There were 15 survivors (25 per cent) who were without children at the start of the study. Ten of them had never married and the others had married but had no children. They included one woman whose three children had died in childhood and another woman who during the study re-married and acquired a stepson. Most of the survivors without children were women (12). Earlier publications from the study (Wenger *et al*. 2000, Wenger 2001) showed that for the original sample of childless respondents, half had married. In 1995, 38 per cent of the 65 childless survivors were men. Those who survived to 1999 indicate the greater likelihood of survival for single women. One of the factors involved in this may be the finding that single women were more likely to develop close relationships with nieces or nephews than either single men or married childless women (Wenger 2001). One man and one woman without children also had no niece or nephew.

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Those who married: Of those five who had been married, there were four women and one man. At the start of the study four of the five had at least one sibling living within five miles, but only two had a niece or nephew living that close. By 1999, only one widowed man had any surviving siblings and he was the only one to have a niece/nephew within five miles.

The relationships with nieces and nephews of those survivors who had married but had no children seemed to be associated with considerations of inheritance. Often, one (or occasionally more than one) niece or nephew was selected and openly acknowledged as the heir. The one man was a farmer, who was already widowed in 1979, had been one of nine children, but said at the start of the study that his relationships with his siblings were based only on duty or responsibility. By 1987, things seemed to have changed and he had more contact with siblings. He saw one brother weekly and was in touch with one niece regularly. He was also said to have nephews in the same community, although he did not mention them. By 1995 a nephew was working on the farm with him, had become his confidant and looked after him when he was ill. He said that they were very close. This nephew, the son of the brother mentioned above, was obviously the designated heir to the farm. Plans had been made for them to exchange houses sometime in the future so that the nephew and family would move to the farmhouse and the farmer into the village. By 1999 his nephew had been made a full partner in the farm. This is a good example of a collateral farm/business family and the social capital associated with land ownership.

One widowed woman had been one of eight children. Her nieces and nephews all lived at a distance, but in 1979 some visited once a year. In 1983 she said she was in regular contact with a niece but saw her very rarely. She corresponded with this niece and four great-nieces. By 1987 she was in regular contact with five nieces and a nephew and was visited by them all two–four times a year. Two unmarried nieces who lived together drove up to see her three or four times a year and she was particularly close to one of them. They had said that they would look after her if she needed care but she said she would prefer the local residential home. In 1995 she was over 90 and the only surviving sibling. She was in regular telephone contact with a married niece and a married nephew and he was the one she saw most frequently. By 1999, at 96 she was planning on moving into residential care following a fall. Her nephew's wife had come up to help her after the fall and would come up again to get her settled into residential care. She noted that she could not visit often because, she is 'elderly and (town) is so far

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away' (over 100 miles). She noted that her niece would be selling her bungalow when she went into care.

In another case, a widowed woman claimed in 1979 to have no relatives. Both she and her husband had been only children. In 1995, however, she told the interviewer of a 'nephew' of her husband's. It is likely that this was the son of a cousin of the husband. She had no regular contact with him, except that he had a second home in the area and came to see her when he and his family were staying there. She said that he would inherit all her antique furniture and his two daughters would inherit the house.

The one case that was not obviously related to inheritance, occurred in a wealthy family. The woman, who had married but had no children, had made a conscious decision when she realised that she would not be a mother that she would try to be 'everybody's favourite aunt'. She was not in paid employment and over the years she was available to help out at confinements, school holidays, weddings and illness for her many nieces and nephews. She was particularly close to the children of her younger sister. One nephew and his young family lived near to her at the start of the study but had moved to the other end of the country by 1987. However, she maintained regular contact with two nephews and one niece and others dropped in to see her from time to time. Unfortunately, they all lived in distant parts of the country. She remained a 'sort of confidant to the nieces and nephews' and was in regular telephone contact. By 1999 she was the only surviving sibling, over 90 and living in a nursing home. The staff reported that 'she gets visits from lots of nieces and nephews' but less often than monthly.

The three other women who married but did not have surviving children did not appear to have close relationships with nieces or nephews. They seemed to have relationships that fluctuated over time.

Those who never married: Another paper from the BLSA (Wenger 2001) showed that most of those who had never married had local origins, *i.e.* had been born within 15 miles of where they now lived. This was true for all 10 never married survivors. Two had no nieces/nephews. While most had siblings living within five miles at the start of the study only two had a niece/nephew within five miles by 1999. So there is less likelihood of those without children living near a younger-generation relative than there is for a parent to live near an adult child.

There was an observed difference between the never-married men and the women (Wenger 2001). The men tended to have been employed in solitary manual occupations (such as farm labourer, gamekeeper, caretaker, forester), whereas the women were more likely

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to have had middle class occupations, mainly teachers or nurses, and/or to have worked with people, often in their own businesses (such as shops or post offices). It was also possible to discern differences in personality types between the genders. The men were more likely to be quiet, private people, whereas the women tended to be outgoing and friendly. These differences have also been noted in other developed countries (Dykstra *et al.* 2001).

Only one never-married man survived to 1999. In 1987, he said that he was in contact with a disabled widowed sister and her son who lived in London. They were his only living relatives. They talked on the telephone but rarely saw one another. By 1999, he was 94 and his sister had died. His nephew (66) and his nephew's two daughters now came up to (town) for a week once a year to visit him and took him out in his wheelchair every day. He lived in sheltered housing, received state aid and had no obvious assets. He had no phone but went to the pay phone to call his nephew every week.

There were seven surviving never-married women. All but one of them had close relationships with at least one niece or nephew. The particular niece or nephew with whom close relationships developed appeared to be influenced by proximity and shared interests, but it is very often the child of the sibling with whom they had had the closest relationship. In a few cases, where proximity allowed, nieces or nephews helped out with instrumental tasks. However, regular telephone contact was common, often weekly, and most spent Christmas with a niece or nephew. Christmas arrangements often also included the parent of the host, or had until the death of the parent.

Relationships were not always consistently with the same niece or nephew and some fluctuated during the course of the study. By 1999, however, there tended to be one who had become the closest, and in one or two cases was named explicitly as an heir. In at least one instance, a mother had become very jealous of the close relationship of her daughter with her sister (the daughter's aunt), who had specifically named the niece as her heir. There appeared to be a slight preference among single women for nieces over nephews. However, where the closest relationship was with a nephew, there was no niece or nephew who lived close by.

Based on the 1979 data, it had been postulated that amongst those who never married responsibilities shifted from a sibling to a niece/nephew over time (Wenger 1984). This was borne out over the course of the longitudinal study, which has shown that it is the children of the sibling with whom the closest relationship had existed who tend to assume responsibility for the aged aunt or uncle. The closer

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relationships with nieces or nephews appeared to be associated with inheritance. Where there was property, relationships tended to become more involved with at least one younger generation relative.

Summary and conclusions

This paper has focused on the nature of intergenerational relationships over a period of 20 years (1979–1999) between older people (aged at least 85 by 1999) and their younger-generation relatives. The main distinction is between parents and those with no living children. Amongst parents, it has been possible to identify three different patterns of intergenerational relationships. Some of the characteristics of the relationships described in the paper may also apply to families in urban areas and it is not claimed that all the traits described are peculiar to those living in the countryside. However, attention has been paid to the effects of the rural labour market and skills structure on the development of family relationships and structures over time.

Table 2 summarises the nature of intergenerational relationships in the five categories of older people identified. The table highlights the contrast between parents and those without children. Amongst parents it is possible to distinguish two general categories. Those who originated in the rural area and who are tied to the rural location by either property or occupational skills are likely to have at least one child living nearby. Those whose education, occupational skills and earning capacity have made it possible for them to work in more urban areas or in the professions have spent much of their lives working elsewhere and tend to have no children nearby. Their presence in the countryside may reflect country origins but is more likely to represent choice rather than indigenous ties. Some moved to the countryside on retirement.

The farm/business families and the local families, however, have different experiences in terms of intergenerational relationships. The (social) capital and greater security of land-holding and/or property ownership amongst farm/business families results in possibilities for the children to work on family farms or in family businesses and to raise their own families in the rural area, who may take over in their turn. This means that older people who belong to these families are likely to have more than one child living nearby, are more likely to co-reside with an adult child and are in frequent contact with grandchildren who are also more likely to live nearby. Their children have incentives (of employment opportunities and potential inheritance) to remain in the rural area. The social capital and material assets of such families,

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TABLE 2. *Summary of intergenerational relationships*

	Farm/business families	Local families	Families at a distance	Without children
Children				
Average N	3	3	2[1]	None
Range	1–10	1–7	1–7	
Modal distance to nearest child	More than 1 within 5 miles	1 within 15 miles	More than 50 miles	
Average face-to-face contact	Daily	More than once a week	Less than monthly	
Grandchildren				
Mean N	6.6	5.5 (6.9)[2]	3.5[3]	None
Range	3–15	2–10 (2–24)	0–15	
Modal distance to nearest gr.child	More than 1 within 5 miles	More than 15 miles	More than 50 miles	
Average face-to-face contact	Daily	Diminishes over time	Less than monthly	
Nieces/nephews[4]				
Average contact	Minimal as part of normal family interaction	Mainly as result of visits to their local parents	Primarily symbolic, perfunctory and infrequent	Contact increases with age, usually with one person, often associated with inheritance. Single women often have close relationship with a niece or, less often, a nephew.

1 Including step-children.
2 Numbers in brackets include one extreme case with 24 grandchildren.
3 Mode 1.
4 No data on numbers of nieces and nephews.

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therefore, are likely to encourage children to remain in the natal area and to maintain close family ties. They are thus available to provide support for parents in old age in the context of lifelong reciprocity.

Since such older people are also likely to have siblings living nearby, contacts with nieces and nephews, although often infrequent, occur naturally in the course of family interaction. However older people are less likely to develop close relationships with these collateral kin because available children and grandchildren meet most of their needs.

Local families, on the other hand, whose property holding is limited, tend to have only one child living locally, while other children have left the area, because of the limited labour market, to seek employment in more urban areas, usually in England. While contact with nearby children and grandchildren is frequent, much less is seen of adult children and grandchildren who work elsewhere. Distant children have the reassurance of a sibling living close to their parents. However, telephone contact with distant children is frequent and these children retain ties with their parents through regular at least annual visits and help out especially in emergencies. The literature notes that the greater caring responsibilities of proximate children, however, do not affect inheritance rights. All children in the direct bloodline tend to inherit equally (Bornat *et al.* 1999).

Contact with nieces and nephews typically comes about as a result of visits to their own local parents. Close relationships with nieces or nephews, in the few instances that they occur, often reflect compensatory strategies in the loss or absence of an adult child for support.

Older people with families at a distance, have less contact with adult children and grandchildren than either of the two other categories of parents. Intergenerational relationships are on the whole more structured and less spontaneous or regular than those of other parents. Visits to and from adult children tend to be regular but infrequent and there is substantial reliance on the telephone. With increasing age, parents are less likely to travel to visit children and anxieties about the coping capacities of parents often lead to children's requests for parents to move to be closer to their children. Parents, on the whole, resist this and place a high value on maintaining independence. Face-to-face contacts with grandchildren are more frequent when the grandchildren are younger children and decrease over time. Most contact with adult grandchildren tends to be by telephone or letter. Relationships with nieces or nephews tend to be infrequent and perfunctory unless an aunt or uncle has been a surrogate parent.

Those without children are far more likely than parents to maintain close relationships with siblings throughout their adult lives. Contacts

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with nieces and nephews are frequently associated with those relationships. Contact seems to fluctuate over the years but in advanced age tends to concentrate on one particular niece or nephew – frequently the child of the sibling to whom they have been closest – and is often associated explicitly or implicitly with the selection of this person as their heir.

The capital assets of older generation relatives appear to influence the nature of intergenerational relationships through providing employment opportunities, holiday or longer term accommodation and potential inheritance. It is clear from the data that relationships with adult grandchildren, nieces and nephews become centrally important mainly in the absence of proximate children. For example, where the older person has been a surrogate parent and a quasi-parental role has emerged, the expectations and responsibilities observed more closely resemble those in parent-child relationships. Similar relationships may develop later in life if no adult child lives close by but an adult grandchild, niece or nephew does. There is a sense in which 'the family' is expected to include several generations and even perfunctory relationships maintain this symbolic image. Close relationships tend to be reciprocal and there are indications that decisions are made for the benefit of the younger generation or 'the family' rather than specifically to support the older generation members.

Modernisation theory states that industrialisation, urbanisation and greater geographic mobility undermines the status of older people (Cowgill 1986). In an earlier paper (Silverstein *et al.* 1998), we argued that older parents in rural Wales experienced more emotional closeness with proximate adult children than those in the US. This was interpreted to result from the more traditional culture of rural Wales and to be compatible with modernisation. However, in this paper we find that it is possible to identify a continuum of patterns of intergenerational relationships. The continuum ranges from the farm/business families, which closely approximate to the traditional rural family, typical in the early decades of the 20th century. The local families would appear to represent family structures, which might be expected in the early years of national modernisation, as children move away for education and better employment opportunities. The family at a distance clearly represents the family type deemed most adaptive to the modern capitalist state. Thus, we have representations of the full range of family patterns associated with traditional societies through to modern nation states existing contemporaneously. Modernisation theory does not provide a sufficiently sophisticated explanation of the

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persistence of more traditional family forms in what is a modern society. The recognition of the multi-generation family as a cultural icon may provide a more convincing theory.

While economic pressures impinge on rural areas increasing the out-migration of younger people in search of better employment chances, this is not true for all those born into land and property owning families, for whom the traditional family form continues to provide advantages. On the other hand, professional people and some retirement migrants may choose to relocate to the countryside away from their urban children. Those without children of their own appear to favour residence close to siblings. However, family solidarity between parents and children is maintained over distance. The rising standard of living in the United Kingdom and other developed western countries, makes it possible to maintain contact and face-to-face visits through the use of technology (telephone, e-mail) and rapid transport. In this post-modern era, while the patterns of intergenerational relationships vary, different patterns indicate the end-result of individual choices and the maximisation of options of all the actors involved.

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