

Family Networks and Support in Later Life: the Perspective of the Demographer

Reti Familiari e Supporto alle Età Anziane: la Prospettiva del Demografo

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Riassunto: L'invecchiamento della popolazione comporta inevitabilmente un aumento nella domanda di servizi di assistenza agli anziani e allo stesso tempo riduce il peso delle generazioni più giovani il cui lavoro è cruciale nell'erogazione di tali servizi. Il processo di invecchiamento ha provocato una serie di reazioni nel mondo politico e scientifico europeo, preoccupato dal possibile futuro trasferimento del carico dell'assistenza agli anziani dalla famiglia allo stato assistenziale. In questo lavoro presentiamo alcuni dei recenti contributi che i demografi hanno dato al dibattito sul futuro all'assistenza agli anziani. L'obiettivo è quello di mostrare come i processi demografici in atto (in termini di fecondità e mortalità ed in misura minore di migrazioni) non creino una situazione sfavorevole dal punto di vista della rete familiare per i prossimi anni.

Keywords: family networks, support, older people.

1. Introduction

Marked increases in the number and proportion of older people in Europe have led to a growing debate about the current and future extent of available family support. This debate is often presented in rather alarmist tones due, in part, to rapid declines in intergenerational co-residence and large increases in the proportion of older people living alone. Family behaviours have also changed, with more women going out to work, and more people remaining childless or with fewer children. Many believe that these changes are responsible for reducing the support very elderly people have traditionally received just as the numbers needing it are increasing. The obvious consequence of this would be a growing demand for the provision of formal services, increasing public expenditure, and quite probably reductions in the quality of life of some disabled elderly people. But such pessimism is not universally shared, and there is considerable uncertainty over how family support for elderly people will evolve in the future.

Demography could enlighten many aspects behind support for older people especially in terms of the availability and the composition of family members and their propensity to support older people. In this paper we provide an overview of the trends in different measures of family support for older people and in the determinants usually associated with these measures across different countries, such as demographic, socio-economic, and attitudinal factors. In fact changes in different measures of family support may be the result either of changes in the composition of the population (*i.e.* the mix of individual attributes associated with the propensity to choose various household

situations) or changes in the strength of relationship between individual characteristics and intergenerational transfers.

Our main point is to show that, demographically speaking, the generations of people that will face old age in the next three decades will be in an unexpected favourable condition compared to past generations. Additionally more sophisticated analyses of individual data show how generations seem to adapt to the challenges posed by ageing societies.

2. Measures of family support

Intergenerational transfers, of which family support to older people is an important component, are usually measured in three main currencies: space (e.g. coresidence), time (e.g. assistance with household tasks including care) and money (including bequests). The focus of this overview is on the first two currencies, even if parental financial help in purchasing a new house for the children and consequences on proximity is also considered

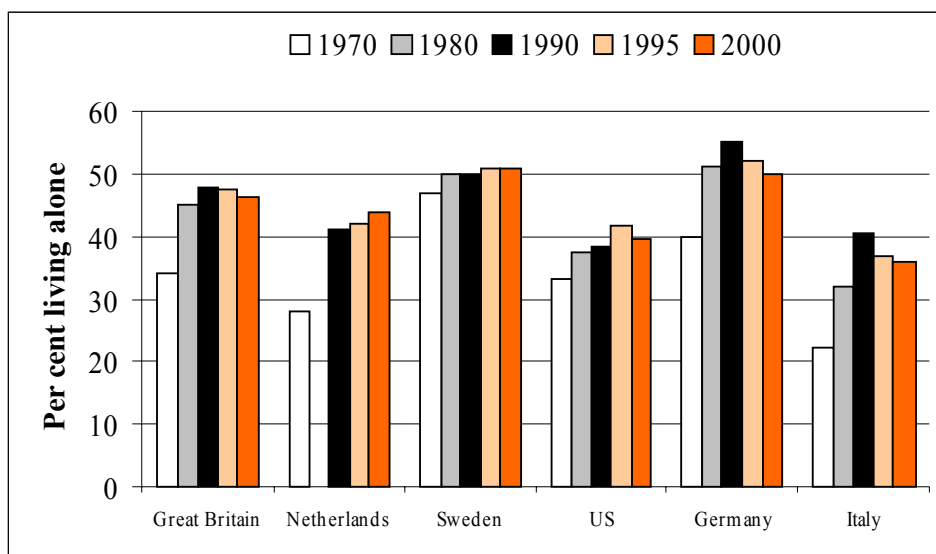
2.1 Coresidence

A very extensive literature has documented variations over time and space in the living arrangements of older Europeans (Grundy 1996; Palloni 2001; Pampel 1992; Sundström 1994; Tomassini *et al.* 2004; Wolf 1995). While coresidence does not in itself imply provision of support by adult children to elderly parents (and in some cases may in fact be indicative of support provided by elderly parents to adult children), coresidence may be regarded as a vehicle for the provision of social and financial support and thus retains some value as an indicator of family solidarity.

There has been a well-documented rise in the proportion of older people living alone throughout Europe, as well as in other industrialised countries, since the Second World War, and a correspondingly large decline in intergenerational coresidence (Palloni 2001; Pampel 1992; Sundström 1994; Tomassini *et al.* 2004). However, Figure 1 shows how in the 1990s some countries showed a reversal of earlier trends toward solitary living among older women (Tomassini *et al.* 2004). As co-residence with relatives has declined, the proportions in other types of households, particularly households composed of a married couple alone, have increased, due to both the increased survivorship of partners, and rises in the proportions ever-married in those cohorts which now constitute the younger old population (Murphy and Grundy, 1994). For southern European countries, but also for the US, the decline in solitary living has been attributed to increases in the availability of kin with whom older people may co-reside, a result of the ageing of the baby boomers' parents (Macunovich *et al.*, 1995), coupled with increases in the age at leaving the parental home among more recent generations of young people due to longer education, later marriage and later age at establishing stable employment (Billari *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, while trends in industrialised countries show similar patterns, intergenerational coresidence continues to vary and is higher in southern Europe than in other industrialised countries. Trends in living arrangements of older people should also include the changes in the proportion of older people living in communal establishments. Many European countries experienced increases in their

institutionalised population in the 1980s. The policy response to this expansion was new legislation implemented in the 1990s (e.g. the UK 1990 National Health Service and Community Care Act) which reaffirmed the objective of allowing older people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. Sweden, the Netherlands, and a number of other countries have also implemented explicit policy objectives to reduce institutional care use and consequently data show a decline in institutionalisation in these countries during the 1990s (Tomassini et al. 2004, OECD 2005)

Figure 1: *Proportion of women aged 65 and over living alone in private households: 1970–2000 in selected European countries*



Source: Tomassini et al. (2004)

2.2 Proximity

Recent findings on proximity using a true comparable European dataset showed that in total, 85% of parents aged 50 or older have at least one child with whom they coreside or who lives within a 25 km radius from their own residence (Hank 2005). In Italy data on intergenerational proximity derived from the ISTAT surveys shows that among fathers aged 65 and over in 1998, 37 per cent were living with their children, 13 per cent in the same building and 20 per cent within one kilometer from them. For mothers the percentages were 34, 16 and 20 per cent respectively. It is possible that in Italy a shift from coresidence to close proximity may have occurred in recent years, especially when young couples find it difficult to purchase a new home and need parental assistance in order to get one. A relationship between parents helping their married children in purchasing a new home and proximity with the set of parents that has provided such help has been demonstrated in the literature (Tomassini *et al.* 2003), suggesting a very strong relation between intergenerational transfers and closeness between parents and children.

2.3 Contacts

It has long been recognised that co-residence is only a partial indicator of family solidarity and support and that information on other types of transfers are also needed (Shanas *et al.* 1968). A number of comparative studies generally show that frequent family contact, as well as co residence, is more usual in southern than in northern Europe (Farkas, Hogan 1995; Höllinger, Haller 1990). Not all of these studies have been able to take account of differences in the availability of children, an important limitation as there are wide variations in Europe in the proportions of childless older people (Prioux 1993). These differences raise several important questions about possible explanatory factors and the evolution of family relationships in ageing European populations. On one side the notion of the familistic culture has been advanced to explain apparently stronger family ties in southern than in northern Europe (Banfield 1958; Reher 1998) although this of course leaves the question of why cultural differences in family related behaviour evolved and have persisted. An alternative view might attach greater weight to differences in social and economic policies and living standards which may enable older people in some countries to have wider support networks, including provision of care, extending beyond the family (Daatland, Herlofson 2003). This raises the possibility that as these characteristics become more widespread, levels of contact and other indicators of family exchange may decline. Similarly the spread of characteristics which are currently very rare in Southern European older populations but more common in the North, notably divorce (and the underlying shifts which have resulted in divorce becoming more acceptable) may also be seen as a potential future challenge to family solidarity across a wider range of countries than is the case at the present. A range of studies, particularly in northern Europe and the U.S., have shown that parental divorce is associated with lower levels of contact and exchanges of support, particularly between fathers and children (Dykstra 1997). A recent comparison of several European countries showed how paternal divorce was associated with a reduced probability of frequent contact between fathers and children in all countries (less for mothers). However possible future scenarios of contact with children that combine the observed effects of the explanatory variables with hypothetical changes in population distribution (as for example large increases in the proportion of divorced population or in the proportion of parents with only one child), suggest that concerns about declining family networks among older people in Europe may be overstated, given the observed high level of frequent contact between parents and adult children and the small effects of the explanatory variables (Tomassini *et al.* 2004).

2.4 Care

In most industrial societies, the great majority of the care received by older people continues to be provided by family members including other elderly people, particularly spouses, with only a small portion of care provided by public social services (Sundström, 1994). Formal carers rarely constitute the majority of carers; only in Denmark (which has the most extensive home care services) do a large proportion of older people receive regular help or assistance from public social services (Walker, Maltby 1997). Once again, as with intergenerational contacts, there are few cross-national studies looking at variations in provision or receipt of care among older people

(Sundström 1994; Walker, Maltby 1997; Alber 2004). Results from the 1999 Eurobarometer survey show that provision of co-resident care to older relatives is higher in southern than in north-western European countries. For example, 1 per cent of Dutch respondents were providing co-resident care for an older relative in comparison with about 7 per cent of Greeks. However, when total care provision is taken into account (i.e. caregiving both within and outside the household), Dutch adults show the highest prevalence of informal care activities among the EU member states and southern European countries the lowest (e.g. Italy, Portugal and Spain). There is little data on trends in the receipt of informal and formal care. Changes in social policy mentioned above (which seek to target services to the most disabled older individuals) are based on the assumption that families will be increasingly willing and able to take on the care of frail older relatives. This appears to be the case in Sweden, where there has been a significant decline in home help provision to elderly people, and an increase in the number reliant on family care (Sundström *et al.* 2002). In Italy data on the receipt of informal, formal and private care have recently been collected together with information on the composition of the family network by ISTAT. Surprisingly, information on care provided by household members is missing (CGIS 2006).

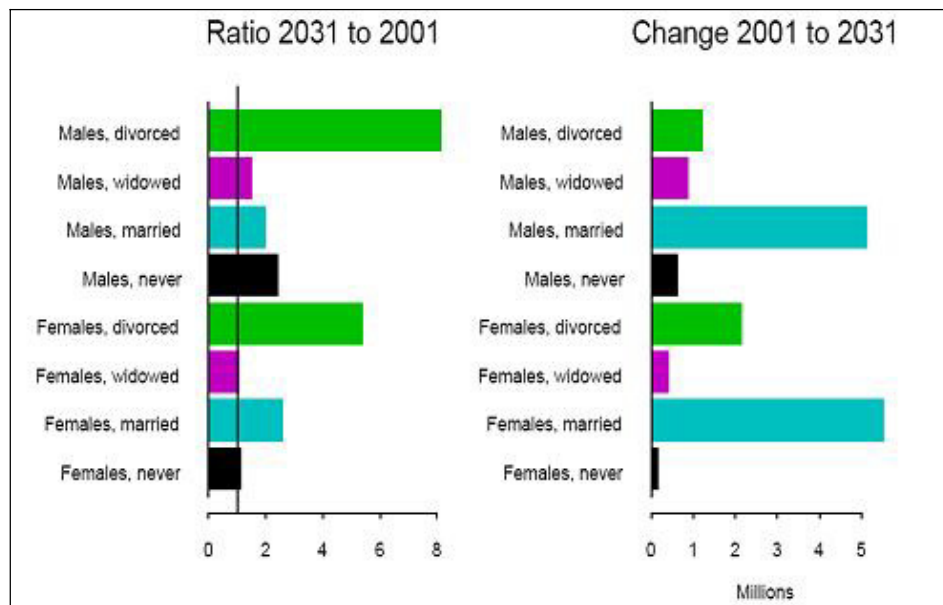
3. What demography tells us?

With this section we want to illustrate the role played by several demographic factors on different measures of family support.

3.1 Marital status

During the last three decades, the proportions of married women at ages 65 and over has increased in almost all European countries (Tomassini *et al.* 2004). The increase in the proportion of older married women from 1971 to 2001 has been small in some countries (e.g. Netherlands and Sweden), whereas it has been over 9 per cent in others (e.g. Italy and Austria). According to these marital status trends, the proportion of older women who have a spouse is higher today compared to 30 years ago, while for men it has not changed significantly. For this reason we find more older women living as a couple in recent years, especially in southern Europe. This rise in the proportions married at older ages partially reflects improvements in life expectancy which have increased the probability that spouses will survive together into old age coupled with the high marriages rates registered in the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore new generations of older people are more likely to survive into old age with a spouse when compared with past generations. Additionally recent projections by marital status in selected European countries clearly show how in the next three decades the number of married older people will increase (Figure 2). Despite the large increase in the proportion of divorced older people, their number will still be small compared to the number of older people with a spouse (Murphy, Kalogirou 2004).

Figure 2: *Increases expressed in absolute numbers and as ratio between 2001 and 2031 by marital status for those aged 75 and over in selected European countries (Belgium, France, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Italy, Portugal, Finland, Germany, Czech Republic)*

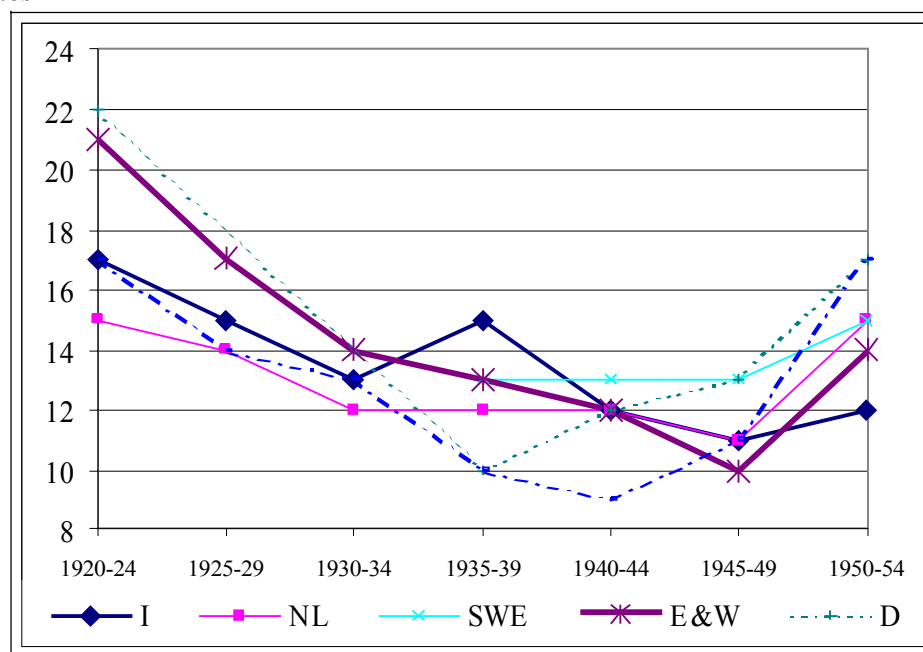


Source: Murphy and Kalogirou 2004

3.2 Kin availability

In many northwestern European countries (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands and England and Wales), cohorts born in the early 1900s are characterised by both lower fertility and higher levels of childlessness when compared with the generations born in the 1940s and 1950s (Figure 3). In other countries (e.g. Sweden) the proportion of childless women by age 45 has not varied greatly across cohorts, even if increases in the percentage of women without children is a common feature among all the countries considered for those cohorts born after the 1950s. When the cohort fertility rate is considered, there is a similar trend across the countries: very old people today are likely to experience a greater scarcity of support from children when compared with cohorts born in the 1940s who experienced higher fertility levels. For Italy, cohorts born in the 1920s had a childlessness level on average about 16 per cent, the same level that was experienced by cohorts born in the early 1960s (Santini 1995). Fertility trends are expected to reverse once again due to higher levels of childlessness among cohorts born in the late 1960s and later. However, even if for the most recent cohorts the pool of children appears to be decreasing, the proportion of people aged 80 and over with a surviving child (i.e. those at greatest risk of needing support) is rising (Murphy, Grundy 2003).

Figure 3: *Percentage of childless women by age 45 by cohort in selected European countries*



Source: Tomassini et al. (2004)

Again recent demographic projections on the availability of children for selected European countries show an increased probability for an older woman to have a living child and this trend will continue for some decades to come. Family projections using microsimulation techniques and the ISTAT projected fertility and mortality rates have shown how in Italy the number of women with one or two children is going to increase substantially between 1994 and 2050, while the number of childless women is going to increase just slightly, from 20.6 in 1994 to 23.9 in 2050 .

It is important to remember that the initial shifts to lower fertility were achieved in many countries through reductions in the number of higher order births and it is not clear that there is much advantage, from a support viewpoint, in having four or five, rather than two or three children (Palloni 2001). It follows that the effects of having fewer children on living arrangements and contacts are ambiguous. Past research that has examined the effect of smaller family sizes on co-residence with children in later life, has shown that reduced fertility has only a modest impact on living arrangements; in many cases fertility declines have been a consequence of a reduction in the proportion of larger families (Wolf 1995). On the contrary in Italy, the crucial factor for co-residence appears to be having at least one surviving child (Tomassini, Wolf 2000). Moreover, fewer children may result in greater postponement of residential independence among young adults through both a reduced influence of the “crowding” effect on decisions to leave the parental home, and greater access to parental resources. Another study (Tomassini, Grundy forthcoming) showed that Italian mothers of only children are older when their first child leaves home than are higher parity mothers; similar results have been reported for England and Wales (Grundy 1999). Several factors could account for this. First, only children may more often be late born children (for which there is some evidence) and second only children may be older when they

leave home. In countries like Italy, where the proportion of women with just one child is increasing, this implies that extended coresidence could partly offset the reduced number of children, although it is important to remember that most older parents are providing support to their children, rather than vice versa, and that onset of health impairments which challenge solitary independent living is unusual before the age of 80.

3.3 Women's labour force participation

Women's labour force participation has led to concerns that increasing commitments outside the home will conflict with their ability and willingness to coreside with elderly relatives in need of care (Dooghe 1992). Female labour force participation at older ages is increasing throughout Europe (Tomassini *et al.* 2004). The increase in female labour force participation is contextual to the general policy response in several European countries to emphasise community care for elderly people, by increasing reliance on family and kin. However, most studies have shown that individuals, especially women, appear to add elder care and other family responsibilities to their portfolio of daily tasks without cutting back substantially on paid work or other competing obligations (Evandrou, Glaser 2002).

3.4 Mobility

Another cause of concern for policy makers in terms of support for older people is the widespread belief that modern societies are "increasingly mobile" and therefore generations are increasingly living far from each other. Long-term trends in the U.S. demonstrated that overall mobility has generally declined since about 1950 (Wolf, Longino 2005) and generations are not living far from each other, as many social scientists (perhaps influenced by their own experience of high mobility) tend to believe. Demographers in this field complain about the lack of suitable data on family migration in order to study the association between mobility and informal caregiving, while normally statistical sources provide information on individual mobility only.

3.5 Attitudes

Given numerous similarities in the demographic circumstances of older women across the countries considered, differences in intergenerational transfers in Europe are likely to be explained by other factors. It has been suggested that culturally influenced norms concerning family responsibilities and obligations are extremely important. Again the "familistic culture" has been used to explain the strong family ties evident in Southern Europe. For example, intergenerational co-residence in Italy tends to continue until children leave the parental home to get married; and even then children normally live close to their parents. In Northern Europe there is a stronger individualistic culture, involving looser and less geographically close family ties, greater emphasis on individualistic relationships (for example, recent research has shown that friends are becoming more important in older people's 'personal communities' and greater preference for independent living). Therefore attitudes to appropriate support for frail older people also vary considerably between European countries. Results from a

Eurobarometer survey, for example, show that in all European countries feelings of intergenerational solidarity are still strong. A third of the young people interviewed in the European Union think that their generation has a responsibility towards the elderly and just 5% say that they would not like to have to take care of the elderly people in their family (European Commission 1997). Despite the common feeling of responsibility towards older people, it is still true that the young generations have different ideas about providing help to frail parents when in need with Southern European young generations more likely to accept coresidence with a frail parent as a solution for care, while Northern Europeans were more likely to consider the option of a residential or nursing home for frail older people (Tomassini *et al.* 2004). A very interesting point is that there has been little change in these attitudes over time (between 1992 and 1999) and there are few differences between the generations (that is, between those aged 40 and under compared with those aged 40 to 64). These data may suggest that there is no evident sign that the pact between generations in terms of elder care in Europe is weakening.

4. Conclusions

Large increases in the number of very old people in many developed societies will almost inevitably lead to greater requirements for assistance of various kinds, even if several United States studies show how age specific disability rates are falling (Freedman *et al.* 2004). Currently families provide much of this care and despite large falls in co-residence, levels of intergenerational transfers and support are still high. It is important to note that reciprocity is a key feature of such relationships and support flows are often from older to younger people, at least until quite advanced ages (Cox, Rank 1992; Henretta *et al.* 2002). There are several points about the future. First, characteristics which are associated with reduced levels of contact and support, such as parental divorce and higher levels of education are increasing in many populations. At the same time evidence regarding the impact of such characteristics on intergenerational transfers is quite limited. Second, in the mid-term future a decreased proportion of elderly people will have no children. Even in a context of fewer children available for an elderly parent, an important factor associated with family caregiving could be how decisions are made regarding which child provides care. If the *exchange model* is used to explain intergenerational support, the possibility that parents create a special tie with a child (for example in term of housing) may provide parents with a greater probability of receiving care in later life. Therefore even if having fewer children practically restricts the choice of the child with whom parents have privileged exchanges, coresidence and proximity do not seem endangered by reduced fertility. Additionally it is possible that for demographic, and possibly also social reasons, older people will be less able to call on the traditional supports of past generations: for example, never-married middle generation women and other family members (i.e. siblings, nephews and nieces). Third, it should be noted that declines in mortality mean that survival of children into their parents' old age increased considerably in the 20th century (Murphy, Grundy 2003). However, more positively, improvements in the health of older people as a whole may effectively expand the pool of potential helpers as well as reducing the potential conflicts with work and support to younger family members currently experienced by some carers. Estimates of future care needs are, not surprisingly,

generally based on current usage patterns, sometimes with some modification to take account of possible changes in health and disability. More sophisticated forecasts might also sensibly take account of changes in availability of children. These suggest the importance of cultural influences – and the policy importance of nurturing these.

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