

Abstract: EAPS, Liverpool 2006

Session: Ageing

The Distribution of Labour in Local Support Networks Involving Older People: A Comparative Approach

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Family and community networks are mechanisms for the redistribution of resources between generations. It is generally acknowledged that older people make important contributions to networks, as well as drawing support from them, and also that there are marked shifts in the content, quantity, and direction of flows of support over time. Networks, however, do not exist merely for old age support, they carry out a variety of functions for different members. The adaptive capacities of networks to respond to several members' simultaneous needs, as well as needs which have differing durations and severity, deserve serious empirical study. Support given to older people needs to be understood as part of this complex. This requires documentation of changes in network composition, and of what may be called the "changing division of labour" within and between the sibling sets that make up a given network, as members respond to the needs and capacities of others located at different positions in the network. This paper draws on ethnographic and survey data collected in longitudinal research on older people and their families in three rural Indonesian communities. These populations contain both nuclear family systems nested in bilateral kindreds, and extended lineage networks; the contrasting adaptive patterns of these different sorts of network raise questions that have a bearing on patterns of support found in various parts of Europe.

The principal focus of this paper will be on networks in which older people continue to play a major and active role, or in which this role has only very recently begun to change. The methodology employed, by combining in-depth life history interviewing with two rounds of representative surveys, enables changes in network composition and in the structure of support roles to be documented. Comparative analysis proceeds via a progressively sharper focus, beginning first with important differences between the communities, then examining differences in network size and composition between socio-economic strata in each community, and finally considering the adaptive patterns which networks in different strata follow in order to reconcile older people's needs with those of other family members. Primary attention will be given to quantitative patterns emerging from the data, and the strategies they imply. A number of important sources of variation in network composition and structure will be considered, including migration and role substitution.

Short abstract:

This paper draws on longitudinal research on older people and their families in three rural Indonesian communities. These populations contain both nuclear family systems nested in bilateral kindreds, and extended lineage networks. Contrasting adaptive patterns raise questions that bear on support patterns Europe. The principal focus is on networks in which older people continue to play a major role, or in which this role has recently changed. The methodology combines in-depth life histories with two rounds of representative surveys, enabling changes in network composition and in the structure of support roles to be documented. Networks do not exist merely for old age support, they distribute collective resources amongst all members. Networks respond adaptively to several simultaneous needs, as well as needs of differing duration and severity. Primary attention will be given to quantitative patterns emerging from the data, including effects of migration and role substitution.