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Intergenerational relations and support in Italy at old ages

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ABSTRACT:

Research issue:

Recent decades have been characterised by declining fertility rates and increasing longevity in Italy. Since the second half of the 70s, fertility has started a steady decline from a level of 2,4 children per woman to below the replacement level, until the TFR reached the level of 1,3 children per woman in 2001 . At the same time longevity in Italy is very high: in 2001 life expectancy at birth is 76,7 years for men and 82,1 for women in 2001. The proportion of the population older than 65 over the population younger than 14 has increased constantly over the period 1960-2001 from 37,4% to 127%. Moreover, the older population is also ageing with those aged 85 and over making up a greater share of the total older population. These components shape the family structure that as a result will have a vertical structure, usually referred to as beanpole family, where an increasing number of generations are living at the same time but with a declining number of people in each generation. These changes place greater pressure on health and social service provision, as well as informal support networks.

From the theoretical point of view, there have been many contributions of scholars regarding intergenerational relations and support (social exchange, psycho-social t., life-course approach, feminist approach ...). In this study we mainly refers to the paradigm of intergenerational solidarity, based on 6 dimensions of the social network (structure of the network, association, functions,

affection, consensus and the norms) (Bengtson, 1996). Moreover, we also refer to the peculiarity of the Italian family. In the literature, the existence of strong family ties between generations has emerged and it has been shown that it is anthropologically rooted in the Italian society (Micheli, 2000). This is visible at each age in the life course: children are supported not only until they reach the age of consent but also until they have found an appropriate occupational condition. Moreover parents support children when they buy a house and when they have children.

From a preliminary analysis it emerges that in the last twenty years care givers are especially middle-aged, old people and that their proportion has increased especially in the age group 60-64.

The aim of this paper is twofold. We study both components of intergenerational support in which people older than 55 are involved: this population represents an important group either as provider of support to families, especially in light of the macro demographic changes (female labour force participation, fertility decline) and as a receiver of help when illness or impairments occurs.

First, we study how old care givers face ageing on one hand and lack of welfare state support for young families on the other hand. We devote special attention to the role of the network association indicator and to that of the network proximity indicator.

Second, we also study the characteristics of the families receiving informal support. Again we focus on families with at least one member aged 55 or more and we also account for their demographic characteristics such as number of coresident people, number of children, etc.

Methodology and data:

We follow both a micro and a macro approach. By means of a logistic regression analysis we study the probability to be a care giver. The main purpose here is to study the effect of the network density (based upon the frequency of contacts with non-coresident relatives and other family members) and the network proximity indicators (based upon the geographical distance with non-coresident relatives and other family members). Then we also applied an exploratory analysis to shed light on the main characteristics of the care givers, and, according to their profiles, we cluster them into groups.

From the point of view of the help received we focus on families with at least one elderly people.

Data used are based on the Multipurpose household surveys on “Family and social subjects” conducted in 2003 in Italy on a sample of 24,000 households (about 70,000 individuals) based on the PAPI technique. Among other things, this survey aims at investigating the characteristics of family structure and kinship, as well as the existence of a network of solidarity among individuals

who do not cohabit. To such aim, the amount and the kind of support given to non-cohabiting people and received from the family as a whole or from one of its components during the last four weeks, are asked and investigated. Moreover, public and private services from which the family has benefited are asked.

Outcomes:

The solidarity networks are still large, although starting to show signs of crisis. Social groups with less intense relations and with network characterised by a scarcity of ties have emerged. The needs of the elderly population have to “compete” with the necessity for care expressed by working mothers with children, towards which care givers are increasingly paying their attention. Care givers are aging and their capacity of support depend upon their health conditions. Beside women, crucial “pivots” of the informal support network, also more educated people, living the North-east area of the country and with a high occupational position perform most of the workload as care-givers. Moreover, the structure and the association with the social network affect the level of embeddedness in the solidarity network .

Family roles change across the life-course and shape the solidarity network accordingly in terms of kind of help, commitment, receivers of the support. One of the major role in the social exchange network is that played by grandparents supporting their children’s families, especially in the case of working mothers with children. However, fertility postponement implies that the role of grand-parents as care givers is assumed at increasingly older ages, which may contrast with their health status.

Moreover, old generations today take advantage of a protected welfare system that allow them to devote their help to young families and this may contrast with the expected situation for many of the future generations.