

Unmarried grandparents providing child care in Italy and England: a life-course approach.

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Background

Ageing populations, and other demographic changes such as more mothers in the labour market and higher levels of relationship breakdown, indicate that grandparents are likely to play an increasingly significant role in family life. Additionally some demographic changes can play an important role in shaping the role of grandparenting. On the one hand increased life expectancy means that it is more common for a child while their grandparents, and even their great grandparents, are alive. On the other hand, delay in fertility behaviour may move forward the timing when older people become grandparent: this may be particularly important in countries, as Italy, where the proportion of births after age 35 (around a third) is particularly high. At the same time falling fertility rates means that the grandparents will have fewer grandchildren compared to the past so they will have the opportunity to form a long lasting relation with their grandparents.

There are striking differences between the two countries in the level and intensity of childcare provided by grandparents. In Italy, as in other Southern European countries, around 40 per cent of grandparents provide regular childcare for their grandchildren compared with less than 20 per cent in the Nord European countries. In the UK around one in three mothers in paid work receives help with children from grandparents (with great differences among families from ethnic different ethnic groups).

Some important factors may shape the relations between grandparents and their grandchildren in different contexts. New generations of grandparents are more likely to experience divorce. While there is an extensive literature on how grandparents step in children's family breakdown, less is known on grandparenting role when they are separated or divorced. Divorce grandparents, or those who have previously been divorced and since remarried, tend to have fewer contact with their grandchildren, take part in fewer activities with them and say they feel less close to their grandchildren than grandparents who have never been divorced (King 2003). These negative effects are stronger for grandfathers and paternal grandparents, probably reflecting less close relationships between older people who have experienced divorced and their children. Widowhood may also affects grandparenting, according to role adjustment theories in family relations.

Research Hypothesis

In this paper we particularly focus on how different aspects of family life (e.g. type and timing of marital disruption) and characteristics of the family structure (timing at grandparenting, number of children and grandchildren, competing demands from different sets of grandchildren) may have an impact on the involvement of unmarried older people in children care.

Data

We used data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), the first longitudinal study of ageing in the UK and the 2003 Indagine Multiscopo Famiglie e Soggetti Sociali (IMF).

ELSA is a nationally representative longitudinal study based on 12,000 people aged 50 and over (and their younger partners) in private households in England. The original sample was drawn from respondents who had previously participated in the Health Survey for England (an annual nationally representative cross-sectional household survey) in 1998, 1999 or 2001. ELSA includes detailed measures of health, economic and social circumstances, as well as information on living kin and receipt of help.

The 2003 Italian “Indagine Multiscopo sulle Famiglie e Soggetti Sociali” (IMF) is a large national survey conducted by the Italian Statistical Office every five years. Sample size is over 60,000 people and the response rate is well above 90%, though is lower for very old people. A section of the questionnaire is devoted to analyse the structure and the exchanges within family members. Information on presence, proximity, and contact with grandchildren are included.

References

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