

Changing contexts of family and intergenerational family support

Mutual intergenerational support is a central feature of many, if not all families. How intergenerational support late in life has changed in Sweden as a result of the changing context of family life is unclear. It is also unclear if and how it affects each child within the same family.

Intergenerational families have experienced structural change due to dramatic increases in longevity. Since 1900 families have shifted in shape “from pyramids to beanpoles”, with important implications for family functions and relationships. Longer years of “shared lives” across generations contribute to aging parents and grandparents having greater opportunities to interact and exchange with younger generations (Silverstein et al. 1998). But more years together also bring more years of care and social support of elderly family members and more years of potential intergenerational conflict and responsibility.

The family as a social institution can be characterized as a social network of related individuals that extends beyond the cohabiting nuclear unit. The family is a very important system of resource distribution. Family members provide social and economic support to each other over the life-course as needs arise. Family members mutually provide social and economic support to each other based on need over the life-course (Silverstein et al., 2002); and in relation of what can be expected from each family member on the basis of their resources, this balance of exchange also have to be viewed in relation to what support the welfare state offers or expects (Knijn 2004).

However, changes in family structure during the recent decades have raised concerns about the ability of the family to adequately serve its younger and older dependent members. Moreover, welfare state programmes have been implemented that to some extent are replacing functions of the family. Declining rates of marriage and increasing divorce rates are given as evidence that the public functions of the family have become compromised and that the family as a social institution might have become defective. However, changes in family structure might also imply that the family is **not** less relevant today than it was in the past rather only that it has become more complex. For instance, divorce, remarriage and the reconstitution of blended families may lead to a new supportive family context, increasing the number of family ties across several generations (Bengtson 2001). Changes in family structure also occur late in life, for instance by mortality among older parents.

In Sweden almost all inter-generational transfers are downwards, from older to younger generations (Fritzell & Lennartsson, 2005). Furthermore parents provide economic transfers if they have more frequent social contact with any of their children, and that these time investments pay-off for children who were of higher social class origins. In contrast no support for gender-specific patterns is found. In conclusion, family solidarity seems to have different basis in different social strata (Lennartsson, Silverstein & Fritzell, 2010).

Personal and family characteristics also have implications for intergenerational transfers of support. Intergenerational support is for instance associated with the gender and age of parents and the children, as well as their positions in the family structure (that is, if they are married, widowed, or divorced and if children have children of their own etc.). Furthermore, social class and income are

crucial in providing opportunities for intergenerational support since it is reasonable to assume that different levels of economic and social resources are available to individuals from different social classes and different income strata. Cut backs in social services for elderly people have also shown to be class related (Szebehely & Trydegård, 2007).

In this paper we assume that older adults provide money transfers to their children and children provide instrumental support to a greater extent within intact families than disrupted families. We use longitudinal micro-data from the Swedish Level of Living Surveys, (LNU) about family structure over a period of 40 years. The data gives us the possibility to analyse the changing context of the family. We will also take into account when in time the family was disrupted and reconstructed. Because the age of the child when a family change occurs can have significant implications for later transfers and support.

The gender perspective is of particular interest in this context because intergenerational social support is highly structured by gender and largely involving wives and daughters (Szebehely 1998) and men and women still tend to give and receive different kinds of transfers (e.g. Attias-Donfut and Wolff 2000).

The proposed research on nationally representative data in Sweden will expand knowledge on this topic by considering intergenerational support within the context of one of the most advanced welfare states in the world and within a society that has undergone dramatic changes in family structure over recent decades. In summary, our study proposes that changing contexts of the family will be negatively associated with downward financial transfers and upward social support and that this association will vary by the social class and gender.

Research questions

The first question to be addressed is whether there is a difference between stable and disrupted families in intergenerational support? The second question is whether there is a genetic basis for supportive exchanges? That is, are financial transfers more likely to go to biological children than to non-biological (adopted, foster, spouse) children? And are biological children more likely to help and care for older parents than non-biological children? The questions will be examined from a gender perspective since divorces and reconstructed families may affect men and women differently. We will discuss the findings from a class and gender perspective in the context of the Swedish welfare state.

Data

The data used in this analysis were drawn from the 2010 Swedish Panel Study of Living Conditions of the Oldest Old, (SWEOLD), 2010. The response rate was ~85 percent, corresponding to a response group of about 600 individuals (see www.sweold.se for a description). Our operational sample is restricted to those who are parents and after omitting a small percentage of children (~2.5%) who lived with their parents (a statistic comparable to most northern European countries). Following these criteria we accumulated non-co-resident parent-child pairs that formed our sample of intergenerational relationships. All information about the structure situation of family used in the analysis originates from earlier data collection either from the Level of Living Survey (LNU) in 1991 or 2000 (see <http://www.sofi.su.se/pub/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=5848> for a description). The strength of

SWEOLD lies in the availability of prior LNU data that allows us to examine changing structure situation of family over the life-course and establish how this works within different social strata.

Significant variables

Economic support: The dependent variable economic support indicates whether older parents provided an economic transfer to their adult children. Two questions provided the relevant information: 'Have you, during the last 12 months given any financial support or gifts of a value of SEK 5,000 or more to anyone outside your household?' Those who replied 'yes' were then asked, to whom they provided the transfer. The information about the recipients of financial support was available for each child.

Instrumental support: The dependent variable instrumental support indicates whether an adult child provided care and/or help to their older parent. Several questions collected the relevant information about a specific child who usually helps to buy food, cook, clean, bath, etc. An index of instrumental support was then constructed.

The data material includes information about the characteristics of the child, biological, adoptive, etc. This gives us additional possibility of analysing if there is a genetic basis for supportive exchanges.

To expand knowledge about how important genetics are in relation to different kinds of support we control for child specific attributes and emotional closeness and conflicts within the family. Of special importance is residential proximity especially when looking at the social support given to old parents.

Reference

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