

FAMILY DISRUPTIONS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG OLDER PEOPLE ACROSS EUROPE

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1. Introduction

An area of rising interest has been the impact of aging populations on the provision of support to older persons by friends and family. Several factors have given rise to concerns about the future of family support. First, improvements in survival have led to increases in those aged 85 and over (i.e. the age group most likely to need care). Second, the number of older people with needs for assistance is projected to increase (even assuming falling disability rates) (Jacobozone *et al.* 1998). Third, many European countries have acted to limit the availability of formal care. Finally, there have been significant changes in family structure and relationships; for example, declines in marriage and childbearing and rises in divorce and cohabitation. It is therefore surprising how little researchers know about the impact of such trends on intergenerational relationships in later life (and on support in particular). Most of the work on the impact of family disruptions has focused on outcomes for children; there have been fewer investigations of the consequences for support in later life. Therefore, this paper focuses on a review of the literature on the relationship between family disruptions and instrumental and emotional support (contact) in later life across Europe.

2. Evidence on the Consequences of Divorce

Studies on the long-term effects of family disruptions for support in later life generally show that divorce and remarriage decrease contact and relationship quality with adult children as well as perceived support from children (Aquilino 1994, Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991, Cooney & Uhlenberg 1990, Eggebeen 1992, Lye *et al.* 1995, Shapiro 2003). Recently, studies have begun to focus on transfers between parents and their adult children and here the evidence is less clear: some studies report no relationship between parental divorce and help given or received (Aquilino 1994, Eggebeen 1992), others a positive one (Barrett & Lynch 1999, Glaser *et al.* 2008a, Tomassini *et al.* 2007), and still others a negative relationship (Dykstra 1998, Furstenberg *et al.* 1995, Kalmijn 2007, Lin 2008, Pezzin & Schone 1999, Pezzin *et al.* 2008).

Studies have established some variations in the long-term outcomes of partnership dissolution and identified influential factors. Parent's gender is clearly important, for partnership dissolution appears to have a greater negative impact on late-life support for men in comparison to women, which is generally explained in terms of mothers being closer than fathers to their children (Furstenberg *et al.* 1995, Kalmijn 2007, Lin 2008, Pezzin & Schone 1999, Pezzin *et al.* 2008, Shapiro 2003).

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The existence of stepchildren is another factor, for older parents are less likely to receive assistance from stepchildren than biological children (Pezzin & Schone 1999, Pezzin *et al.* 2008). Divorce is not the only form of disruption that affects later life relations with children. Some studies have also investigated the association between widowhood and support. Unlike parental divorce, most studies have shown no significant relationship between widowhood and contact (Lye *et al.* 1995); however, the few studies able to examine widowers separately have shown lower contact levels compared with fathers in intact marriages (Kalmijn 2007). With regard to measures of instrumental assistance, most research has shown that widowed parents received more support from children compared with married parents (Barrett & Lynch 1999, Ha *et al.* 2006). However, a recent study showed a negative relationship between widowerhood and instrumental assistance (Kalmijn 2007).

3. Changes over time in family disruptions and support

Changes over time in the relationship between partnership disruption among older people and support are inevitable as sequential patterns of divorce and remarriage become increasingly common. In most Western countries, the post-war baby boom generation will bring with it far more complex family relationships, especially with both biological, step-and half siblings involved in care negotiations (Agree & Glaser 2009, Cherlin 2009, Hughes & O'Rand 2004). A recent study by Glaser and colleagues (2008) investigated changes over time in the association between partnership disruption and support (i.e. coresidence and contact with children, and help given to and received from children) among 61 to 69-year-old mothers and fathers using data from two nationally representative British surveys. The authors found that despite an increase in the experience of partnership disruption in the time period considered the percentage of older people receiving support from (and providing help to) children largely remained stable; moreover, when a change was observed it reflected increases (and not decreases) in intergenerational assistance given or received (Glaser *et al.* 2008b).

4. Marital transitions and changes in support over time

There has been some investigation of *changes* in support (e.g. instrumental and emotional) at older ages (Broese van Groenou & van Tilburg 1997, Field & Minkler 1988, Geerlings *et al.* 2005, Kelman *et al.* 1994, Krause 1999, Martire *et al.* 1999, Stoller & Pugliesi 1991, van Tilburg 1998, Utz *et al.* 2002); however, few of these studies considered the impact of marital disruptions. With regard to such disruptions, studies reported that losing a partner had no effect on the onset of informal care in the Netherlands (aged between 55 and 85 years at baseline) (Geerlings *et al.* 2005), while others showed an increase in instrumental support and contacts in the Netherlands (55-89 years) and in Detroit, Michigan (65 years and over) (Broese van Groenou & van Tilburg 1997, Utz *et al.* 2002). However, most of these studies did not distinguish whether the marital disruption was due to death or divorce. Most likely this is because studies are largely based on relatively short time intervals (one to five years) resulting in small numbers of older adults experiencing such

disruptions. Findings over a ten year period showed that marital disruption (and widow(er)hood in particular) increased loss of support (i.e. perceived support and contact with friends) (Glaser *et al.* 2006). Widowhood had a similar effect to divorce on reducing contact with friends even when health status was taken into account, but was not significantly associated with perceived support. Shapiro's (2003) study, based on a shorter period and focusing on late-life divorce, showed that fathers who became divorced experienced a decline in co-residence and contact with their adult children.

5. Comparability of impact across countries: the United Kingdom and Italy

There is little comparative work in Europe on the relationship between family disruptions and social support in later life. This is important as one cannot assume that the association between family changes (e.g. increases in divorce) and support is similar across countries. A recent comparative study investigated whether changes in family life in the UK and Italy (both societies have experienced similar changes in family behaviour) are related to the erosion of support in later life (Tomassini *et al.* 2007). The researchers found that in the U.K., older divorced people reported higher odds of receiving support from non-coresident children in comparison to their married counterparts; in Italy this was the case among the lone widowed (the divorced showed a negative association although this was not significant). Lone widows in both countries were more likely to have weekly contact with non-relative friends compared with their married or separated counterparts. In the U.K. family support appeared to be activated in accordance with the older person's needs in line with evidence from the U.S. and other northwestern European (Soldo & Hill 1995). Such findings reinforce the importance of cross-national comparisons as a means of enhancing our understanding of the underlying processes affecting the relationship between family change and support in later life (National Research Council 2001).

6. Summary and Future Issues

Some studies, mainly conducted in the US and the Netherlands, have found evidence of a detrimental relationship between family disruptions (divorce in particular) and support in later life (Aquilino 1994, Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991, Cooney & Uhlenberg 1990, Eggebeen 1992, Furstenberg *et al.* 1995, Kalmijn 2007, Lin 2008, Lye *et al.* 1995, Pezzin & Schone 1999, Pezzin *et al.* 2008, Shapiro 2003). Recent results in the UK largely contradict these findings (Glaser *et al.* 2008b, Glaser *et al.* 2008a, Tomassini *et al.* 2007). With few exceptions, prior research on this issue has been based on those in mid-life or young elderly age groups (Aquilino 1994, Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991, Cooney & Uhlenberg 1990, Eggebeen 1992, Furstenberg *et al.* 1995, Lye *et al.* 1995, Shapiro 2003). This may help to explain why findings for the UK, which are based on parents aged 70 or more years, differ from previous results: most studies have shown that parents are more likely to provide children with household help than to receive it, and that only at the oldest ages (75 or more years) are older parents more likely to receive than to give help (Spitze & Logan 1992). Thus, once frail older parents are in need of assistance, it appears that the family does step in to provide help

regardless of other parental characteristics. Moreover, as previously mentioned, most studies have focused on the relationship between parental divorce or widowhood and contact with adult children (Aquilino 1994, Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991, Cooney & Uhlenberg 1990, Lye *et al.* 1995, Shapiro 2003), until recently fewer studies examined the relationship between these characteristics and transfers of assistance where the results are mixed (Aquilino 1994, Barrett & Lynch 1999, Dykstra 1998, Furstenberg *et al.* 1995, Kalmijn 2007, Lin 2008, Pezzin & Schone 1999, Pezzin *et al.* 2008). Moreover, little is known regarding what it is about divorce or later relationships with parents that affects adult children's propensity to provide care; for instance, whether it is attribution of blame for the parental marriage break-down, loss of contact with the non-custodial parent, the remarriage of parents, or other factors. In addition, although research has shown that the stigma associated with divorce has declined, relatively little work has focused on the implications of this (Gerstel 1987, Thornton & Young-DeMarco 2001).

Finally, although the focus of this paper has been on investigating the relationship between family disruptions and social support at older ages in Western settings, understanding how family structure, marriage and cohabitation are related to family support in later life in the developing world is also an important issue. Despite the tenacity of families in the developing world, these regions are not immune to the same changes that have dominated the picture in the more developed world. Moreover these changes are occurring in societies with little or no government institutional protection for older people is a critical situation (Palloni 2001). Thus research on the impact of population ageing on the support systems of older people in developing societies is also needed.

Policy Recommendations

Government policies in the U.K. and in many other European countries have been based on a view that families supply most services for older people. Recently questions have been raised about the future of care by families given changing social and demographic trends. Empirical research in the UK indicates that, for example, despite increasing divorce and separation many children continue to care for older parents according to their needs. This finding contradicts results from mainly Dutch and North American studies which found a detrimental relationship between divorce and support in later life, especially for men. More research is needed on the long-term effects of family disruptions on care in later life as these contradictory findings have very different policy implications.

Moreover, a number of factors need to be taken into account when considering the future of family care. First, the size of the population needing care is likely to increase given projected increases in the number of older people with functional limitations.⁴ Second, although it is expected that spouses will continue to be the main source of support, they, too, are aging. Third, increasing survival among those with relatively heavy support needs (such as those with dementia) is likely to

⁴ Pickard L, Wittenberg R, Comas-Herrera A, King D, Malley J. Care by spouses, care by children: Projections of informal care for older people in England to 2031. *Social Policy & Society* 2007;6(3):353-366.

mean that some people will be too frail (physically and/or mentally) for family care and will need very intensive support.⁵ Although findings in the U.K. show that family support continues to be central, there remain concerns for the welfare of very old people in the future.

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