

# Status and role of families in ageing populations: interdependencies.

Jaco Hoffman

DOI 10.1515/pophzn-2016-0010

Population ageing drives much of the contemporary debates and discourses about families, and families continue to be a key theme in population dynamics (Aboderin & Hoffman, 2015; Hoff, 2015, Keating & De Jong Gierveld, 2015; Keating, 2011). Among approaches to managing population ageing across the globe, families in all its different configurations are considered – albeit from a range of different perspectives – as a key social group in which older adults are embedded and supported. Generally these approaches and discourses range from familialism to (members of) families as deficient in the support and care they provide. The backdrop for understanding these concerns related to population ageing includes increasing austerity measures and concerns about the sustainability of health and social care systems, poverty, pandemics, and changing family structures and obligations.

All the contributions in this issue illustrate that the interdependence of generations to support and care (or not) for their members in need, is shared across societies. Interdependence is, however, not only an issue on the micro level between family members of different generations. Interdependencies on the public / private levels also have to be considered: how demographic change (longevity, fertility, migration) and public policies relate to actual family structures and dynamics.

This issue of Population Horizons examines later-life families at the demographic change / policy and cultural context / gender / emotional connectedness interface. In gauging the status and role of these later-life families in the context of population ageing three broad themes are addressed, namely family structure and the constellation of ageing families, the roles of older people within families, and support and care for older people.

Juxtaposing two typologies of household living arrangements in which older persons (60+) live, namely household composition based on family nuclei and the generational structure of households overlaid on the population of selected countries as a whole, Založnik provides us with a schematic descriptive backdrop on how the prevalence of different later-life household living arrangements varies across countries and across different population groups. Obvious are the regional and gendered differences.

Dykstra and Hagestad move beyond the household and examine how demographic patterns and social policies shape interdependence between members in the family realm. They argue that linkages between family members should not only be understood from a social-psychological perspective but also be analysed on the macro level through demographic change (altered fertility patterns and the gendered rise in co-longevity) as well as national policies either ‘reinforcing or lightening’ the interdependence between older and younger family members. Conceptualizing interdependence on the basis of European data might offer a plausible entry point for a more joined-up discourse about families in respectively the global North and South. Taking up the Dykstra and Hagestad finding on the policy-interdependence interface, Bluestone rightly expands the discussion and suggests that we situate their analysis in the even broader context of international agreements that influence national policies. With specific reference to two agreements, namely the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015) and the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health (2016-2020) he explores the possible implications of the interlinked and intergenerational nature of the different goals and targets. Bluestone then suggests

---

\*Corresponding author: Jaco Hoffman, E-mail: [jacobus.hoffman@ageing.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jacobus.hoffman@ageing.ox.ac.uk)  
Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, University of Oxford, UK / Optentia Research Focus Area, North-West University, South Africa.

 © 2016 Jaco Hoffman

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>)

that we actively seek to understand how different policies influence outcomes.

The next contributions further illustrate intergenerational dynamics with older persons as contributors as well as recipients of care.

In their article on 'Grandmothers migrating, working and caring: Latvian women between survival and self-realisation' King and Lulle describe older Latvian women and their multi-dimensional lives as economic migrants and transnational supporters of diverse family members (younger and / or older) who remain in Latvia. These transnational grandmothers are pivotal in maintaining their multi-generational families back in post-Soviet Latvia (children and grandchildren and often, elderly parents too) as well as enhancing their (own) economic wellbeing. Reine and Tomsony highlight in their commentary on the King and Lulle article, that in spite of transnational migration, these older women do not necessarily 'escape' their traditional care giver roles and care responsibilities, however geographically removed from the family that stay behind. In the context of changed settings and environments these women rather complement it with 'new transnational gender identities' where they take up an economic empowered role with an accompanying altered agentic self-perception.

With the steep decline in fertility over the past four decades in China and the subsequent 4-2-1 family constellation (four grandparents, two parents, and one grandchild); grandchildren taking care of grandparents as legally sanctioned under Chinese law; and drawing on the 2014 wave of the Chinese Longitudinal Aging Social Survey, Silverstein and Xu in their article 'Grandchildren as Support and Care Providers to Disabled Older Adults in China' examine the link between family structure and capacity with the care needs of disabled older family members. Their main finding indicates that older Chinese secondarily

request support from their grandchildren when they experience a need and a spouse, son or daughter is not available or are compromised in their capacity to assist. This supports the compensatory or substitution role of grandchildren as sources of support and care for their grandparents within a gendered family system and suggests the adaptive potential of the family.

The conceptualization and context of later-life families might differ substantially across and within regions but for a deeper understanding of the interrelated dependencies within these families they will have to be extensively examined at the private-public / micro-macro interface. These interdependencies within and across levels as well as between older and younger generations should rightly attract a special degree of scrutiny if researchers, policy makers and practitioners hope to understand and respond to the support and care questions related to and raised by population ageing.

## References

- Aboderin, I., & Hoffman, J. (2015). Families, Intergenerational Bonds, and Ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue canadienne du vieillissement*, 34(3), 282-289.
- Hoff, A. (2015). Current and future challenges of family care in the UK. Future of an ageing population: evidence review. Foresight Report, Government Office for Science. London: UK.
- Keating, N., & De Jong Gierveld, J. (2015). Families and Aging: From Private Troubles to a Global Agenda. *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue canadienne du vieillissement*, 34(3), 261-263.
- Keating, N. (2011). Critical reflections on families of older adults. *Advances in Gerontology*, 24(2): 343-349
- UN. (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/RES/70/1. [http : /www.un.org /ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E).
- WHO. (2016). Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health. A69/17. [http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/WHA69/A69\\_17-en.pdf](http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA69/A69_17-en.pdf).