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The Changing Structure of Living Arrangements and its Consequences for Social Networks and Social Support

Abstract

Providing for the elderly is a challenge to *modern societies, not only with regard to financial assistance and public services, but also regarding informal social support by social networks.* The changing age-composition of the population is accompanied by a change of living arrangements. As it is pointed out by data from the *German Welfare Survey 1984*, different living arrangements imply different compositions of intra- and extra-household networks and special profiles of giving and receiving social support. There must be a balance of giving and receiving of social support between *people and groups who offer such activities and those who ask for it in order to fulfil needs and to avoid dissatisfaction.* Despite a desire to take care of needy and elderly people, one cannot fail to notice an increasing shortage of social support for elderly people because of their growing proportion and the concentration on a few special living arrangements. On the other hand, the potential of social support offered by elderly people will grow presumably.

The significance of the problem

All modern societies are facing a changing age structure with a quite dramatically increasing proportion of elderly people. In the case of the F.R.G. (Fed. Republic of

Germany) for example, the proportion of people older than 60 grew from 16.8% in 1961 to 20.8% in 1987. The proportion of very elderly persons, defined as being older than 80, increased at an even greater rate. It increased from 1.6% in 1961 to 3.8% in 1987. This tendency, presently in abeyance, will resume in the future.

This process of population ageing is mainly interpreted as being a burden on the whole of society, and it is often discussed as a problem of providing for the elderly in terms of financial assets, social insurance and public services. In this regard, the elderly are seen as a non-productive part of the population, as receivers of benefits delivered by other groups in society. The crucial questions here concern the capacities and limits of the market and the state as the referring allocation systems.

The emphasis of our paper is not on these formal supply systems, but on the challenges and opportunities for the social network and the *informal* support system. That is, the relationships to relatives, friends and neighbours inside and outside the household. As for the formal institutions, we have to include the question of capacities and limits. In this case, the prevailing image of the elderly is also that of a more passive part of the population which has to be cared for, but there are also dimensions where elderly people play a significant part in giving social support.

One main aspect which has to be taken into account in respect of challenges and opportunities for social support in the future is, beside the growing numbers of elderly people, their differing living arrangements. The so-called "elderly" comprise, for example, 65-year-old, healthy and active people as well as frail people who are perhaps 90 years old, living as couples or as singles, having children or not. Among the single-living persons, we find many more women than men and many more widowed than unmarried and divorced persons. One has to be aware of a plurality of living arrangements when discussing opportunities and challenges in an ageing

society because it comprises essential preconditions for the giving and the receiving of informal social support.

Conceptual approach and data base

The concepts of social support and of social networks offer operational means to understand informal help as a basic component of a society's welfare. *Social support* is a comprehensive term which includes different kinds of welfare-related activities, such as task-oriented services, material help, information exchange and the mediation of various cognitive and emotional kinds of support (Mitchell, Trickett 1980; Shumaker; Brownell 1984). In this article we will focus mainly on task-oriented services and on emotional support. Social support occurs within *social networks* which are constituted by all social relationships an individual has with kin, friends, neighbours, and other acquaintances. Though not all social relations are supportive, the positive contributions of social networks to individual health and well-being allow us to speak of them as an important welfare allocation system. It is supposed that *reciprocity* in its various forms can be conceived as the main mechanism guiding the exchange of informal support (Gouldner 1960; Wentowski 1981).

In the following we will analyze social support with respect to exchanges between people in the prevailing *living arrangements* of different life-cycle stages. These living arrangements are defined in the way that they comprise people of a homogenous age, and similarly with regard to their household composition, childrens age and personal status. This categorisation allows an illustrative perspective on the informal preconditions of exchange support which is more detailed and adequate than a mere consideration of different age groups. This concept, relying on cross-sectional data, should, however, not be mistaken for a biographical method which studies individual or cohort, specific changes over the life

course (Cobb 1979). We have no data of this kind and so our perspective is focused on simultaneously living people at different stages of their life in different structural settings.

Three groups of elderly persons, here defined as being sixty years and older, are distinguished:

- the largest category are elderly married persons living together either without other persons (13% of all adults in our survey) or with relatives other than their children (additional 0.6%);
- the second group are elderly widowed persons (8.4%). They are mostly female (87% of them) and living alone (78%, the remainder with their children and other relatives);
- the smallest group are elderly married persons living together with their children. These are partly extended families of three generations but they comprise not more than 2.5% of all adults or 10% of the elderly. Living in old age means mainly living as a couple or as a single widowed person.

More differentiated distinctions are hardly possible because of too few cases. We will show that this typology accounts for some interesting differences regarding household performance, social networks, and the social support of elderly persons. These three groups of the elderly will be compared with the other groups at different stages of the life cycle, "unmarried young persons" and the "married not-old". Unmarried young persons, aged from 18 to 29 years, are split into three categories:

- unmarried living with their parents (10.5%)
- unmarried living alone (2%);
- unmarried living with a partner (3.7%); (27% of this last group are older than 30 years).

One result contrary to common belief is that

the large majority of unmarried young people still lives with their parents.

According to the presence of children and their age, four categories of married non-old adults are distinguished:

- married adults without children in their household (12.8%). These are adults who either never had children, who had them in the past or who may still have children.
- married adults with small children (10%);
- married adults with school children (16.2%);
- married adults with grown-up children (8.5%).

If people had children of different ages, they were classified according to the youngest child.

Besides these categories which are in accordance with an average life cycle, we consider two further groups which are still somewhat exceptional:

- unmarried adults living without a partner and older than thirty years (3.9%);
- divorced people (3.8%).

These living arrangements already partly represent subsystems of the whole social network of an individual. The household is in general the primary unit of resource allocation (Glatzer 1984; Strohmeier 1983; Morgan 1978). If a household consists of a single person as is often the case among the elderly, then the question is whether the social network outside it can offer complete support (Diewald 1989).

Our data sources are the so-called *Welfare Surveys* available from 1978, 1980, and 1984. They were developed at the University of Mannheim by W. Zapf, W. Glatzer, and H.H. Noll, and they are designed to measure objective living conditions as well as subjective perceptions and evaluations. Questions about household production, social networks, and social support were a special part of the 1984

questionnaire.

The *Welfare Surveys* are samples of all individuals of German nationality living in the F.R.G. and West-Berlin, having reached the age of 18, and living in a private household. The sample size is 2067 usable interviews in 1984. According to official statistics from the German Central Statistical Office, the distribution of socio-demographic variables within the samples fit rather well to the population. The original data set had been adjusted by using weights for individuals and households.

The household as centre of the support network

A household can be conceived as a substructure within the whole social network of a person which is highly correlated with the social institutions of marriage (or cohabitation) and family. Partly due to this overlap, and partly due to the mere effect of living together and with a considerable need for internal coordination, some authors see the household as a distinct major source of social support.

The amount of social support which can be provided from inside the household differs, of course, very strongly according to different living arrangements. Consequently the needs of an ageing population for social support are closely connected with different living arrangements. We will consider three areas of household-based support: domestic work (housework and repairs), nursing care and emotional support.

Some kinds of typical housework are normally done (90% or more) by household members: shopping, preparing meals, cleaning rooms and washing. These tasks are only rarely delegated to the social network outside the household or to the labour market. Most remarkable is the variation in self-support between the three living arrangements of elderly people. We find a steady decrease in self-support from the elderly living with their children through

Table 1:
Performance of different tasks inside the household, F.R.G. 1984

Percentage of households where household members^{a)} usually do the following tasks

	Cleaning rooms %	Cleaning windows %	Washing sheets %	Repairing the water-tap %	Wall-papering %	Handicapped person(s) inside the household %
The unmarried young (aged 18-29)						
Young, unmarried, living with their parents	97	95	98	77	80	8
Young, unmarried, living single	96	83	72	53	69	0
Young, unmarried, living with their partner	96	90	88	81	3	7
The married non-old (aged 20-59)						
Married, without children	98	95	93	72	75	6
Married, with little children	98	95	97	84	82	2
Married, with school children	97	95	95	81	80	9
Married, with adult children	99	98	100	76	68	5
The elderly (aged 60 and more)						
Old age, married, living with their children	100	98	98	75	64	12
Old age, married, living without their children	92	86	90	51	41	23
Old age, widowed	89	78	78	23	26	14
Special singles						
Unmarried and older than 30	96	89	81	49	51	9
Divorced, all ages	94	81	82	50	57	8
Other	95	88	83	57	66	10
Total	96	91	92	66	66	9
eta^{b)}	.15	.21	.25	.37	.38	.21

a) other possibilities: relatives, friends/acquaintances, neighbours, market supply

b) eta is a correlation coefficient with values between 0 and 1

elderly couples to the widowed who live mostly alone. The former have the highest rate of self-support, the latter the lowest. Young persons living alone and the divorced also seem to lack the resources to manage on their own. And like the older households they profit from being members of the extended family by getting help from relatives, or they call on labour market services. Compared to relatives, neighbours and friends play only a minor role. Repair work needed now and then in every household is normally done by about two thirds of all households. Here we find a more marked variation in self-support between different life-cycle stages than in everyday housework. The direction of differences is the same and is most striking between the three living arrangements of elderly persons. To a higher degree than in everyday housework, the widowed have by far the lowest rate of self-support. This is due to the fact that most widowed persons are females living alone who are still able to do

their housework but are not skilled do-it-yourself workers. Apart from self-support, labour market supply is more common than help from relatives, friends or neighbours.

The picture of a strikingly lower-support performance in the elderly population regarding domestic work gets a counterweight when examining the question of who cares for handicapped people. Altogether, handicapped people and other people needing care are provided for at least as often in families and private households as in nursing homes. In the *Welfare Survey 1984*, 7% of the interviewed said that they had close relatives in a nursing home whereas in 9% of the households, at least one person needed continuous care. This does happen only in households of extended families. Elderly couples also demonstrate the ability of small households to take over a considerable amount of care for handicapped spouses. On the other hand, they also

demonstrate capacity limits. Households caring for handicapped persons have a lower performance of domestic work. Limits to available time and energy for a single household are supposed to cause the negative correlation between these two kinds of support.

Network and support relations outside the own household

Social contacts with kin, friends, and neighbours

Nearly all people have at least one close relative beside the members of their own household; the figure is 90% for all respondents in the *German Welfare Survey*. This percentage is quite stable across the different living arrangements except for the older widowed and unmarried persons for whom the figure is 85%. Regular visits with kin take place mostly between children and parents. The unmarried and divorced older persons are the population groups which have the least contact with kin.

Most people have at least one "close friend" and even more have "neighbours with whom they get on well"; the figures for Germany are 73% for having a close friend and 83% for good neighbours. With respect to both kinds of contact we find fairly strong differences between older and younger people. Younger persons are much more likely to have friends, and older persons have the highest percentage of visits with good neighbours.

An explanation for this result may be that growing old implies the loss of friends by death who cannot be replaced by new acquaintances. We cannot say how far neighbours are a sufficient substitute for lost friends, but they are a certain solution adapted to lower physical resources and reduced mobility. Among the elderly, the widowed have the highest frequency of visits with neighbours and compared to the other elderly, they have the most contacts with

friends; this seems to be some compensation for lacking contacts within their own household. But these contacts cannot prevent this group (together with single old persons) from having by far the highest percentage of people feeling lonely, about half of them report strong feelings of loneliness, and this is eight times as many as the elderly who are married and still living with their children.

Accessibility and request for social support

There can be two reasons why somebody's social support is very small: there is not enough access to social support or there is enough access but the social support is not requested. Though the outcome is the same the social problem is very different. To investigate this question, the *Welfare Survey* questionnaire asked if the respondent knew someone who could give him help in doing different tasks. These tasks were e.g. the repair of a TV/radio set, wall papering, tailorwork and legal advice. This is a selection from a longer list of tasks which are not included here because the results from the shortened list are corroborated by the full results. 57% of all adults in the F.R.G. know someone who would help them with wall-papering and 31% have used such help in the last twelve months. This is a utilisation ratio of nearly 50% which seems to be high. Nearly the same utilization ratio is found for other tasks, though the accessibility of help is much smaller. Only one third of the respondents know people who would help them to repair a TV/radio set, do tailorwork or give them legal advice. Most elderly people have less access to such resources but they sometimes make higher than average use of them. In the end they get rather less task-oriented support than average people. The highest amount of access to, as well as use of, support is found among the youngest people. All in all, older persons are not separated from network resources, but they are integrated on a somewhat lower level.

Subjective evaluations of the received

network support can indicate feelings of deprivation among the old people. These evaluations are not related to particular task-oriented assistance, but refer to the total amount of support received.

9% of all respondents say that they get too little help from relatives, and the differences between the living arrangements are small. Young persons in particular miss some help from their relatives, as do widowed older persons. Similarly help from neighbours is often missed by young people and the elderly widowed. 6% (mostly widowed) think that support from friends is not enough. The greater efforts of widowed people to maintain social contacts compared with other elderly do not provide enough support.

On the other hand, some people say that they get too much help from relatives, friends and neighbours. Several reasons can be assumed: an unwanted obligation to reciprocate, the social control which is exercised by giving support, or the threat to privacy. So 2% to 3% of the whole population say that their social support is too much. But this is not a special problem of older people.

The groups who want more support are not only those who have not received much support. Those who most frequently received extra-household support were the elderly widowed, families with little children, the young life cycle stages and unmarried older persons. So the most needy life-cycle groups do get the most frequent support, but there still remains a gap between the need for support and support actually received.

The performance of social support

We will now consider who provides social support. One cannot expect elderly people to give the same kind and amount of support as younger ones. This may be partly due to restricted physical abilities, partly to antiquated technical knowledge, and partly to various degrees of disengagement.

On these assumptions, all three categories of the elderly give help to less frequently relatives, friends and neighbours than the average of the population. In this respect the three categories of the elderly are very similar except in respect of help to relatives which is, of course, given more often by couples and widowed people than by old people in an extended family. Other groups which give below average help to network members are unmarried persons older than thirty years, divorced people and families with school children, presumably for different reasons. On the other hand, the most important support potential exists in the mid-life stages and among the young ones. At this stage married people younger than 60 years and living with adult children give the most help.

The young unmarried give the greatest amount of support to persons outside the household. They are the only group helping friends even more than relatives. In social contacts, relatives replace friends as the most important support group when people get married.

A smaller amount of social support is given by older persons to those outside their household. This is particularly true of activities performed by younger persons such as car repair, gardening, apartment renovation, moving, and construction work. This seems to confirm the hypothesis of a restricted ability and outdated technical knowledge on the part of older persons.

Help from the elderly is generally below average with two remarkable and important exceptions: caring for the children of relatives and helping with the personal problems of relatives. These tasks requiring diverse abilities may offer scope for the life experience of the elderly. They may also have enough free time to help. We have no data about financial aid which seems to be another helping area of the elderly (Leitner 1976). These three support categories are the main ways in which the elderly can reciprocate services received from younger persons.

Table 2:
Performance of social support, F.R.G. 1984

	Help to relatives ^{a)} %	Help to friends ^{a)} %	Help to neighbours ^{a)} %	Care for children of ^{b)} relatives %	Personal support for ^{b)} relatives %	Nobody supported ^{b)} %
The unmarried young ones (aged 18-29)						
Young, unmarried, living with their parents	21	32	17	17	13	11
Young, unmarried, living single	34	39	9	14	28	13
Young, unmarried, living with their partner	22	34	7	24	30	7
The married non-old (aged 20-59)						
Married, without children	22	17	15	22	22	27
Married, with little children	24	17	15	19	22	19
Married, with school children	16	15	11	10	16	26
Married, with adult children	26	23	22	9	17	38
The elderly (aged 60 and more)						
Old age, married, living with their children	7	8	9	12	26	53
Old age, married, living without their children	13	9	9	22	16	49
Old age, widowed	14	9	9	19	14	59
Special stages						
Unmarried and older than 30	11	18	8	13	24	28
Divorced, all ages	12	18	10	16	18	27
Other	20	24	14	13	26	19
Total	19	18	13	17	19	30
<i>etc</i>	<i>.13</i>	<i>.21</i>	<i>.13</i>	<i>.13</i>	<i>.12</i>	<i>.32</i>

a) presently given support, without payment
b) in the last two years

More than half of the old people in each category said that they had not supported anybody at all. This is by far the highest percentage among all life cycle stages. The young life-cycle stages are at the other extreme in having a very low percentage of respondents who did not support anybody outside the own household.

Limits to support exchange

We found considerable amounts of social support provided and received within informal networks, but we also discovered remarkable differences between younger and older persons and between their living arrangements.

Spouses and parents-and-children proved to be, in general, the most important sources of network social support. This is especially true for the elderly. So the first significant question concerning the support supply for elderly people is how many are married or

cohabitante. Spouses are the main caregivers to handicapped elderly persons rather than children and formal institutions. Couples still maintain a considerable ability to supply support inside their household compared to other elderly persons. Problems of perceived loneliness are mostly connected with the loss or lack of a spouse who does not seem to be replaceable by other members of the social network. Therefore, the percentage of married people among the elderly is an important - perhaps even *the* most important indicator of the ability of the elderly to support themselves.

In Germany, 57% of the population over 65 are married. This is rather above the level of other comparable countries like Denmark, Great Britain, or the United States. Due to the longer life expectancy of women, old men mostly live with their wives, whereas women often have to go through a life phase of living on their own. Another important source of social support is the children of the elderly. But according to the 1984 *Welfare Survey*,

14% of the elderly have no children, and, moreover, not all parents have regular social contact with their children. Relationships with close friends do not seem to compensate for these deficiencies.

The argument that old people suffer more from health impairments and are therefore less able to support themselves or to give social support to others is relevant, though this may change. An indicator for the physical condition of a person is the routine use of medication. With this indicator, we found a very wide variation between the different household compositions of young and old: it varied from 6% of the young still living with their parents up to 72% of the widowed. Apart from the fact that the variation of physical abilities is high among the elderly population at large, the risk of frailty greatly concerns the very old. The norm of reciprocity (see below) is a factor limiting, but also enabling, the exchange of social support.

The positive correlation which we found between giving and receiving social support is a hint of the validity of a norm of direct reciprocity: giving has to be returned in the same time period. This seems to be incompatible with the imbalances of people giving and receiving at various life-cycle stages. The widowed demonstrate most clearly that only few give and relatively many receive support. These findings could be explained by the coexistence of the norm of direct reciprocity with two further norms: a norm of "delayed reciprocity" and a norm of solidarity. The norm of delayed reciprocity means that the elderly especially have accumulated credit in a kind of "support bank" so that the support received from their children can be conceived as a return for former support given from parents to children (Antonucci, Jackson 1986). The norm of solidarity means that the elderly can get social support for their needs without regard to the exchange they can offer.

Social support by solidarity is presumably restricted to really basic needs and depends on feelings of equity and fairness. It can be

assumed from our data that the ability of the elderly to maintain support relationships following the principle of direct reciprocity is restricted by several factors. As they grow older, contributing to the self-support of the household gets more difficult, and this is especially true for households with handicapped people. Therefore, many of the elderly are dependent on the principle of "delayed" reciprocity which functions mainly in parent-child relationships. It is not surprising then that the elderly without children, and especially divorced and unmarried persons, report the highest degree of support deficiencies of all respondents.

Prospective outlook

According to our data, the younger and middle-age groups contribute more to inter-household support than the older ones. We should bear in mind that the picture may be different if the emphasis is on life-long exchange. But a problem is created if population ageing continues to increase, as it actually does in the case of very old persons. If the elderly want as much support as before, then the younger ones have to intensify their efforts. If the younger age-groups continue to give the same amount of support as before, then old persons, due to their larger numbers, will have less support than before. This demographic change provokes a tension within the informal social support system which will require some adaptive innovations.

The lack of social support for elderly people will be accompanied by an increasing supply of special support activities which are typically offered by elderly people. It remains to be seen if sufficient demand develops for this. Another accompanying phenomenon is the reduced number of children in future society (Galler 1990). It is sometimes argued that the burdens of elderly people and of their children can be balanced. But there is a question of whether a substitution of different kinds of social support is taking place or

whether uncoordinated balancing of needs and resources is developing.

The tension in the social support system is reinforced by additional demographic changes in the social structure of the elderly population: in the future the elderly population will increasingly include people who had never married, divorced people, and more people with few or no children (Hoffmann-Nowotny 1987; Deutscher Bundestag 1986). These are exactly the groups which have already been proven to be the population with the highest risk of social isolation and serious support deficiencies.

Nevertheless, we do not assume that the ageing society of the future will be a society mainly characterized by social isolation and feelings of loneliness. A division seems more probable between a majority of rather well-integrated and well-supplied groups on the one hand and a considerable minority of people without stable kin integration on the other. A major challenge for them will be a better substitution of kin networks by other patterns of social integration and community support.

The task of completing and/or substituting the informal social support system is mainly ascribed to the welfare state, even more by the elderly than by the general population. Asked in the 1984 *Welfare Survey* who should be mainly responsible for the care of old people, more than half of the old couples and widowed persons said that this should be the state. This figure is significantly above the average of the whole population and it indicates that old people especially claim a public responsibility for themselves. The remainder of the population preferred intermediary groups/institutions or private supply. The coordination of the different sources of social support provides an important challenge for future social policies.

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