

EUROPEAN STUDY OF ADULT WELL-BEING

SOCIAL SUPPORT RESOURCES

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The research project “Ageing Well: A European Study of Adult Well-Being” (ESAW) aims at building a European socio-cultural model able to identify which main factors, along with personal characteristics and culture, exert a direct causal contribution to the outcome variable *ageing well*. The components included in the study are the following five: physical health and functional status; self resources; life activity; material security; and social support. The project has been carried out in 2002-2003 in 6 European countries (Austria, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom). It is based on individual interviews administered by means of a structured questionnaire to national samples of 1,800-2,000 non institutionalised subjects (e.g. not hospitalised nor in long term care facilities), aged 50-90, in each of the involved countries.

Social support and participation are important to people at all stages of the life cycle and their contribution to well-being has been well documented. This report presents findings from the ESAW on informal sources of social support available to older Europeans. It provides a cross-country comparison of the characteristics of the sample with regard to satisfaction with relationships, OARS social resources scale


and the Wenger support network typology. Three Support Network Resource Scales are also compared across the countries. The report considers the effect of: country, age, gender, rural or urban residence, ethnicity, household composition, work status, education and income on the aforementioned social support variables.


ESAW countries are classified according to the comparative

levels of participation and engagement in three social spheres, that is family, friends and community.


Key results:


There are both differences and similarities in social support between the six European countries in the study:


 **Age** impacts on satisfaction with relationships, social resources, availability of family, contact with non-kin and community participation. However, it was only for social resources and availability of family that the impact of age was similar for all participating countries. The analyses indicate that in all participating countries the oldest respondents have fewer social resources than younger respondents and fewer available family members.


 **Gender** was a strong indicator of social resources in all countries. Contrary to previous evidence men had greater social resources than women. Gender did not intervene strongly across all countries in the other social relationships (availability of family, non-kin relationships and community participation),

or satisfaction with relationships.


 ESAW identified greater levels of social resources and family availability in the **rural** areas of the Netherlands and Austria than in **urban** areas.

 There are some **ethnic** differences in social support in Sweden. These differences are likely to be due to ethnic-segregation, preferred family forms, filial obligation and settlement patterns. Differences between groups in other countries were not observed, although they may exist, as several distinctly different ethnic groups have been categorised under the terms 'non-European' and 'other-European'.

 Overall, **living arrangements** are very strong indicators of social resources and availability of family in all countries. Older people living alone had the lowest levels of social resources and those living with members of the younger generation had the highest levels of available family.

 **Working status** is a good predictor of social resources and availability of family across the countries

participating in the study. Work was associated with increased availability of family, but decreased levels of interactions with friends and neighbours.

 The associations between **education** and social resources differed between countries. For the total sample, education to only primary school level is associated with lower levels of social resources but higher levels of family availability. In Italy, Austria and Sweden the lowest level of education is associated with high levels of non-kin relationships. Education in later life may not be significant if older people lack the resources to socially participate.

Classification of the ESAW countries according to the comparative levels of participation and engagement in three social spheres (family, friends and community) shows that five of the six countries (with the exception of Sweden) are clustered around the family dimension. Italian elders are family-centred and have lower levels of interaction with friends and

community groups than others. In Luxembourg and Austria multigenerational families are much more common than elsewhere (with the exception of Italy) implying that family relationships are important to these elders. However, both countries have higher levels of community participation than other countries, indicating that the classification of the group should emphasise the salience of the interface between family and community. Older people in the UK are similar to those in the Netherlands, but have lower levels of community participation and are therefore classified as having social relationships that centre around both family and friends. The situations of older people in the Netherlands and Sweden provide complete contrasts in terms of social relationships. Whereas the social relationships of older people living in the Netherlands span all three spheres (family, friends and community), the older respondents in Sweden are less likely than those in other countries to interact or participate in any of these areas.

Policy implications:

The study has highlighted some important crosscutting themes that need to be addressed across Europe. Of particular concern to policy makers should be:

1. The gendered dimension of social resources, which demonstrate higher levels of informal social resources available to men.
2. The social policy implications of the projected increase in the proportion of older people living alone, who currently
3. The differences found between the social resources of those working and not working, implying that major changes may occur in people's access to family, friends and community social resources during the transition to retirement.
4. Income inequities that impact on social resources both nationally and across Europe.

Other documents in the European Study of Adult Well-Being Report Summary Series:

- No 2. Life Activities
- No 3. Physical Health and Functional Status
- No 4. Self-Resources in Advanced and Old Age
- No 5. Material Security
- No 6. European Model of Ageing Well

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