

EUROPEAN STUDY OF ADULT WELL-BEING

CONTEXTUALISING ADULT WELL-BEING: SOCIO-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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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.

This report addresses key socio-cultural differences between European Union (EU) nations as a means of contextualising the empirical findings of the European Study of Adult Well-being. In this respect, an understanding of cross-cultural variation underpins any attempt to generalise findings from different models of *ageing well*, and acts as a pre-condition for recommending the potential sharing of social policies, institutional structures

or good practices between nations.


The report consists of three parts: the demography of ageing, the geographical context of ageing and characteristics of the political and social policy systems of EU / ESAW nations.


Demography of Ageing


Analysis of demographic trends in the EU/ESAW countries reveals elements both of uniformity and


diversity between European nations:

Unity highlights


 A growing importance of older people in society both in absolute numbers and in proportion.


 Life expectancy is increasing for both men and women throughout the EU; women still significantly outnumber men in the oldest age groups.


 The older population is ageing itself.


 The heterogeneity of the older population is increasing.

Diversity highlights

 Italy is now the EU's most aged country.

 Italy has a high focus on familism, where multi-generational households are still quite common.


 Sweden is associated with a strong degree of defamilization. Sweden also has a low proportion of households in which older people live with persons other than their partner.


 The remaining ESAW countries can be regarded as

a heterogeneous 'Western Europe' cluster, characterised by familism and defamilization, and a relatively intermediate aged population.

The Geographical Context of Ageing

It is necessary to incorporate an understanding of culture in approaches to modelling *ageing well*. This is especially relevant within the European context, where cultural diversity remains strong despite the influence of socio-economic processes that tend to promote homogeneity.


 Analyses of national approaches to public policy, socio-economic and cultural dimensions, value orientations and family structures point to the persisting relevance of the nation as a context for *ageing well*.


 While all ESAW countries can be classed as post-industrial societies, the relative importance of industrial production in the economies of Austria, Italy and Luxembourg, and the persisting role played by agriculture in the national economies of Italy and Austria should not be overlooked.


Overview of Political and Social Policy Systems

National political and social policy systems can be seen to exert a direct impact on adult well-being, whilst also influencing the development of national age structures.


Political systems


 Democratic systems evolved slowly over time in four nations (UK, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden) but were imposed by external actors in Italy and Austria.


 A moderate multi-party system predominates in Austria, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden. Italy is judged to be in a state of transition in relation to its party system. The UK has an established two-party system. Austria has a fully developed federal structure.


 There is a striking degree of similarity between Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden in terms of their political systems. Austria and Italy also share some common features. The UK stands out as having a political system that differs in key ways from that of other ESAW nations.


Social policy systems

 The UK represents an isolated example of an Anglo-Saxon welfare state that displays residual characteristics. The result is a high degree of inequality in old age, and relatively limited resources devoted to health and social care.

 The Swedish welfare state has been subject to change in recent years, however, there is still evidence of its universalistic characteristics in the way in which it provides for the material and social well-being of its citizens.

 While the Netherlands displays elements of the Nordic model in relation to universalistic provision of key benefits and services, its social security system is based on the aim of maintaining individuals' existing positions in the social hierarchy.

 Austria and Luxembourg correspond most closely to the traditional corporatist model of a welfare state.

 Italy represents something of a paradox. Alongside its 'Bismarckian' social security system and a

universal system of health care, it maintains a social care system founded on a traditional familistic model.

Conclusions

Analysis of a range of factors underlying a contextual understanding of *ageing well* reveals a remarkable degree of diversity across the EU/ESAW nations. While it is possible to group nations together on some key characteristics, there is considerable variation when other factors are drawn in.

The challenge in interpreting the results of the empirical analysis of ESAW data is to locate these findings firmly within this contextual framework. Not only will it be necessary to provide explanations for cross-national variation based on contextual differences, but it will also be important to develop an understanding of why cross-national similarities arise despite the existence of such contextual differences.

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

- No 1. Social Support Resources
- 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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