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The provision of support towards multiple generations. How does the ‘sandwiched’ generation balance help towards their family?

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Abstract

There is limited evidence, in particular for the UK, on the recent trends and characteristics of the so-called “Sandwich generation”. This refers to those individuals in their mid-life who are facing the responsibilities of caring for multiple generations, usually towards young/adult children and elderly parents. With the large generation of the baby boomers entering mid and late life and an increasing number of families sharing longer years of their life among 3-4 generations, there is an increasing concern regarding the pressure that individuals could face when they are involved in multiple roles such as simultaneous caring roles as well as paid employment.

In this paper, we use recent data from the 1958 National Child Development Survey to examine how mid-life men and women distribute their time dedicated to provide help to their elderly parents and to their own adult children (in terms of providing grandchild care). Moreover, we investigate the socio-demographic characteristics that distinguish individuals supporting multiple generations from those who provide help only towards one generation, or individuals who do not provide any support towards family members.

Initial results from the research show that around one third of mid-life individuals are ‘at risk’ of providing care to multiple generations, meaning that they have at least one parent or parent-in-law alive and at least one grandchild alive (regardless of whether their adult child who is the parent of their grandchild is alive or not), and therefore may become ‘sandwiched’ between the older generation and the younger generation in terms of providing support. Among these individuals, half provide care to both generations simultaneously. With a broader definition of support provided towards parents/ parents-in-law, we found that being sandwiched between two generations in terms of having support responsibilities is more common than what has been found in previous studies.

Extended abstract

Research and policy debates regarding the population ageing process have rendered much attention to the study of the trends and consequences of the provision of informal caring for elderly individuals in our societies. However, during the last decades significant changes in demographic and socio-economic characteristics of populations have been observed, which pose higher pressures on the individuals providing care for others. In particular, we are referring to the increasing number of individuals who have simultaneous responsibilities of caring for younger and older generations, the so-called "sandwich generation". Although there is still a low percentage of sandwiched individuals (Evandrou and Glaser 2004, Fingerman, Pillemer et al. 2012), an increasing prevalence of a sandwich generation has been observed in the recent decades (Williams 2005, Rubin and White-Means 2009) and increasing support from this group towards individuals from multiple generations (Friedman, Park and Wiemers 2004).

Demographic trends have shown an increase in survival until older ages, thus more individuals in their mid-life will have more years shared with older generations, who in their older age may be more likely to experience an increasing need for help to cope with disabilities or illnesses. At the same time, the delay of events such as fertility and childbearing, longer transitions to adulthood and later independence of children make it also more likely that more shared time will be spent with younger generations and more time will be spent providing support to them. These factors together lead to an increase of multigenerational families, along with the increase in the commitments and responsibilities towards both generations (Evandrou and Glaser 2004, Riley and Bowen 2005). In addition, the increasing incorporation of females to the labour market can also place more pressure on them, as literature has shown that women are more likely to take on caring responsibilities in the family (Dahlberg, Demack and Bambra 2007).

Since the 1980's, when the sandwich generation was first labelled and studied (Miller 1981), the focus of the majority of the studies has been on females and their ability to balance informal caring towards individuals from multiple generations. The traditional female role of taking care of the family is one of the main reasons why this concept is still relevant today. However, few studies have also analysed men's caregiving behaviour in this context, even when there is evidence of their involvement, although at much lower level than women have. For example, a study in the UK by Evandrou & Glaser (2004) has shown that there are some men providing multiple care, and that when it comes to broader juggling of multiple roles –eg. between parenting, caring for elderly persons and paid employment– men's involvement is in fact increasing by birth cohorts (Evandrou, Glaser et al. 2002). Also a more recent study in the USA has shown that males have a similar prevalence of being involved in caring for multiple generations, although with less intensity (Friedman, Park and Wiemmer 2014).

Results from studies of the sandwich generation are difficult to compare over time and across countries since there is no consensus on the definition of the concept and measures used to investigate it. Initially, studies defined sandwich individuals as those who have young (or dependent) children and alive elderly parents, while more recently the concept has shifted to include a broader definition of the younger generation, including adult children or directly the fourth generation of grandchildren. Another important difference is in the age range used to determine individuals in their mid-life: while all studies include the group between 50-54 in the age range, nevertheless there are some studies with a starting age of 40, and some with a maximum age of 69.

Limited research has focused on the UK context, as most of the studies refer to the US context. Moreover, UK studies have been mostly focused on the profiles and descriptive trends of the sandwich generation, with the most recent being in Ireland (TILDA 2013), while few studies take a step further in trying to explore such caring behaviour in greater detail, but with data from two or three decades ago (Grundy and Henretta 2006).

This research will update the knowledge on the current trends and profiles of the sandwich generation for the UK context for both men and women using data from the National Child Development Survey. Moreover, we will examine the determinants of being a dual carer (towards both parents/parents-in-law and towards adult children in the form of grandchild care provision) compared with caring for one generation or none of them. Our target population is both men and women of age 55 who have at least one living parent or parent-in-law, and at least one grandchild alive (irrespective of whether their adult child who is their grandchild's parent is alive or not). Thus we measure the provision of help towards the older generation (respondent's parents/parents-in-law) and towards the younger generation (the respondents' grandchild(ren)). Our research questions are as follows:

- How do mid-life men and women distribute their provision of help between their parents/parents-in-law and the grandchildren?
- Does providing help to one generation reduce the likelihood of helping the other generation?
- Which are the socio-demographic characteristics that distinguish those supporting multiple generations from those who help only one generation or none of them?

The first part of the paper address the first question by describing first the proportion of sandwich individuals and then the prevalence of providing support towards their parents and/or their grandchildren. We describe and explore gender differences in the patterns of support (types of support provided to parents/parents-in-law and support provided by caring for grandchildren), as well as the intensity of support provided by men and women.

We then tackle our second research question where we will test the hypothesis of family solidarity and competing demands by examining whether providing support to one generation could affect the likelihood of providing support to the other generation. We extend the research by addressing the last research question and determining the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the sandwich generation which are associated with providing support for individuals from multiple generations. We will also consider in the analysis the strengths of intergenerational ties (in this case towards one's parents), which could help to shape the flow of support from the individuals upwards (towards one's parents or parents-in-law) or downwards (through the provision of grandchild care).

Data and methodology

The National Child Development Survey (NCDS) started with more than 17,000 children born in a single week in March 1958 in Great Britain and have been followed up through the course of their lives at several ages. The NCDS collected information on provision of help to parents and care provided to grandchildren when the children were aged 55, at wave ninth (total sample of 9,137). Thus our sample comprises all individuals who were interviewed at 55, and were 'at risk' of providing care at age 55 (with at least one parent or parent-in-law alive as well as with at least one grandchild alive) and with no missing information on the co-variables included in the multivariate analysis, resulting in a final sub-sample of 2,601 individuals.

The NCDS asked respondents regarding a wide range of types of help provided to parents or parents-in-law. Wave 9 of the survey included a question concerning the provision of support towards the respondent's parent(s) and distinguishing between different types of help: *Do you regularly or frequently do any of the things listed for your parents?* (Response: No, none of the things listed; Yes, mentioning each of the types of help listed in a card). Using the types of help mentioned we distinguish between the following three categories of help provided:

1. Personal help: dressing, eating, bathing
2. Basic help: washing, ironing, cleaning, cooking
3. Instrumental help: financial assistance, shopping, transportation, gardening and others

Regarding the provision of care towards grandchildren, the survey asked how many grandchildren the individual has, including step-grandchildren and adopted grandchildren (irrespective of whether the children were alive or not). Then, three questions refer to the caring provision towards grandchildren:

- Do you ever look after any of your grandchildren, without their parents being there?
- How often do you look after grandchild/grandchildren, without their parents being there?
- How many hours per week/month do you spend looking after grandchild/grandchildren?
(Including look after them overnight)

The analysis is conducted in three steps, starting with the descriptive analysis of the provision of help towards parents/parents-in-laws and grandchildren by the gender of the carer, exploring also the intensity of the care provided (number of hours of care per week). The second part of the analysis uses logistic regression to estimate the association between helping one generation and helping the other, controlling for several demographic and socio-economic covariates relating to the respondent. The third and last part of the analysis examines the factors associated with the support transfers to both generations compared with providing help only with caring for grandchildren, or help to parents/parents-in-law or to none of them, also controlling for several covariates.

We included as covariates the following characteristics of the respondents at the time of care provision to account for observable heterogeneity: living arrangements (number of grandchildren and parents/ parents-in-law alive, living with parents/parents-in-law), housing tenure, education, marital status, one's own health status and the employment status for both the respondent and their partner (self-employee or paid employment). We do not have information regarding the health of the respondents' parents, thus we are unable to control directly for the level of parental need. However, we use as a proxy the information collected in the survey at the time when the care was provided (age 50). The question is as follows: *As parents get older, are there any aspects of their life that worry you?* (i.e. health, money, limitations with daily activities, etc.). Thus, we have constructed the variable 'Worries about parents' as a proxy for parental needs, under the assumption that it reflects the deterioration of health and living conditions of the parents. We also include a variable referring to contact between and the intergenerational ties between the carer and the parents/parents-in-law. The question is as follows: *How often have you seen your parents/in-laws over the last year?*

Preliminary results

We start our analysis by showing the prevalence of the sandwich generation located between two other generations in our full sample. Table 1 shows the prevalence of combinations of having parents/parents-in-law and grandchildren alive of individuals at age 55. Almost one third of the sample are 'sandwiched', thus they are at risk of providing care towards either to their parents/ parents-in-law, to their grandchildren or to both of them simultaneously.

Table 2 shows the provision of help between one generation and two generations (between grandchildren and parents/parents-in-law) for both men and women within the sandwiched group. Table 2 shows that at age 55 the majority of individuals are caring for one or two generations, with only 11 and 8 percent of men and women respectively not caring for anyone. Thus, the majority of the individuals in this group are caring for both generations, with 50 percent of men and slightly higher for women at 54 percent. It is also interesting that providing care for one generation is higher towards care provision for grandchildren (the younger generation) rather than towards the parents/ parents-in-law (the older generation) for both sexes.

Following the descriptive analysis of the profiles of those caring (type and intensity of caring) for one or both generations, the final paper will include the multivariate analysis of the probability of providing care for multiple generations and the determinants of being a multiple carer within each sex.

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Table 1. Individuals of age 55 by sex and whether they have at least one parent/parent-in-law and grandchild alive

	Male	Female	Total
No parents or grandchildren alive	11.5	13.8	12.7
At least one parent/ parent-in-law alive, no grandchildren	55.7	44.0	49.6
At least one grandchild alive, no parents alive	6.2	12.1	9.3
At least one parent/ parent-in-law and grandchild alive (sandwich individuals)	26.7	30.2	28.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
	4,433	4,704	9,137

Source: National Child Development Survey, wave 9.

Table 2. Support provided to parents/ parents-in-law and to grandchildren among those at risk of helping both generations.

		Whether looking after parents/parents-in-law		
		No	Yes	Total
Male				
Whether looking after grandchildren without parents	Yes	21.0	50.0	71.0
	No	11.3	17.8	29.0
	Total	32.2	67.8	100.0
Female				
Whether looking after grandchildren without parents	Yes	28.5	53.9	82.4
	No	8.5	9.0	17.5
	Total	37.1	63.0	100.0

Source: National Child Development Survey, wave 9.