

The timing of life events and stopping smoking: How do English men and women behave?

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One of the most important issues emerging with the ageing of populations is health, given the direct link between age and the risk of poor health outcomes: when age increases, risks of mortality, chronic disease and physical and cognitive impairment rise too (Alley & Crimmins, 2010). In this context, several scholars have emphasised the issue of health inequalities in old age in terms of gender differences and socio-economic status imbalances (Arber, 2004; Crimmins, Kim & Solé-Auró, 2010; Grundy & Holt, 2001; Grundy & Sloggett, 2003). In particular, women, who tend to live to very old age, are more likely to suffer age-related disabilities than men do (Alley & Crimmins, 2010; World Health Organisation, 2001; 2002). In this context, however, it is important to adopt a life course perspective, since *gender inequalities in older age result from accumulated gendered disadvantages during the life course* (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2009: 1). The relationship between socio-economic inequalities and health is indirect, since it involves a set of intermediate factors that impact health and that can be gathered in three main categories: material factors, psychosocial factors and health-related behaviours, i.e. smoking, diet, alcohol consumption, physical exercise (Mackenbach, 2006).

Focusing on the last set of determinants, the aim of this paper is to expand on the link between health-related behaviours and health outcomes, analysing what Marmot and Allen (2014) define ‘causes of the causes’, i.e. the drivers of these behaviours. In particular, considering that *stressful circumstances* affect health (Mackenbach, 2006; Solar, and Irwin, 2007), and that *the effect of events may turn out to be quite different, depending on the age at which an individual encounters them* (Dannefer and Settersten, Jr., 2010:7), this paper investigates the link between the timing of life course events and age when people stop smoking. Also, the paper investigates whether the observed relationship is the same for women and men and whether it varies across cohorts.

By defining *stressful circumstances* all those events that force people to cope with new roles and responsibilities and that often lead them to take important decisions about their life projects – such as cohabitation, marriage, childbearing, abortion, interruption of work, job

and residential mobility, kinship ties' rupture – the paper hypothesises that the occurrence and timing of these events can be considered as 'causes of the causes' of health.

Data and Methods

The paper uses data from the third wave of English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), which contains retrospective information on individual health, employment and family and fertility histories, and it focuses on the timing of life events that may affect the decision to stop/keep smoking by a gender perspective.

The analysis considers respondents aged 50 years old and over. The sample is constituted of 3,361 men and 4,201 women.

The purpose is to verify and identify the life events that may lead or prevent people to stop smoking and investigate the relationship between the timing of these life events and the decision to stop smoking at a certain point of the life course.

Therefore, the paper will use Survival Analysis approach with constant time, in order to analyse the risk to stop smoking at a certain age, considering specific life course events that are thought of potentially having an effect on it depending on the age when people experience them.

The paper will study the changing in smoking status across the life course in relation to the individual education, family, fertility, employment and health histories. The final paper will discuss in the detail the assumptions underlying the choice of these specific events as drivers of the smoking behaviour in a gender perspective.

Preliminary results

Preliminary results show that the percentage of people who ever smoked varies by age class and gender (Fig.1).

While for men the percentage of people who ever smoked decreases with age (except for the classes 70-74 and 85-90), the same trend is not observable for women. However, the percentage of people who ever smoked is lower with respect to men in all age groups, but the gap is closing among the younger ages. Among those aged 50-54, 56% of both women and men ever smoked.

Moreover, the age when people stopped smoking varies by gender too (Fig.2).

The highest values for majority of men are registered at stopping smoking during their thirties (age classes 30-34 and 35-39) and at ages 50-54, while for women, the modal age at stopping

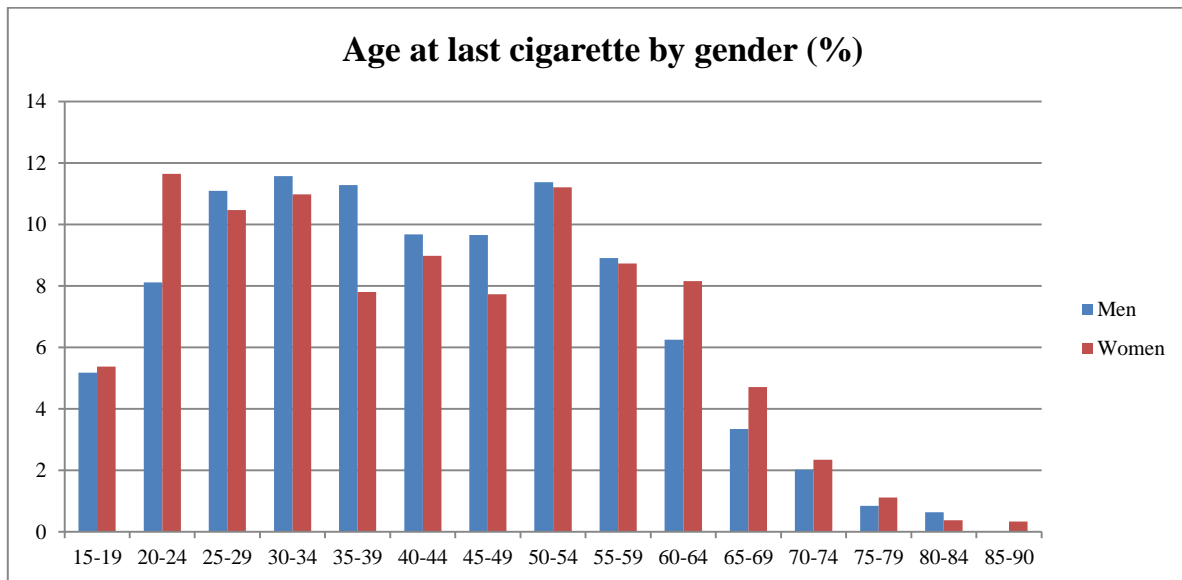
smoking is during their early twenties (20-24). As for men, also for women, the age category 50-54 seems to be an important time for stopping smoking.

Fig.1. Whether ever smoked by age class and gender (%)



Source: ELSA, wave 3

Fig.2. Age at last cigarette by gender



Source: ELSA, wave 3

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