SUBSTITUTION THROUGH NETWORK COMPOSITION OR HIGHER TIE EFFICIENCY?

Valeria Bordone, Sebastian Schnettler, Thomas Wöhler
Intergenerational relationships

- **Children** are the **main** source of **support** in later life (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Schnettler, 2008; Silverstein et al., 1997; Szydlik, 1995)

- What about **childless** people?

Source: telegraph.co.uk
Background: Childlessness

- Disadvantaged potential & actual support networks
- Smaller network (Dykstra 2006; Künemund & Hollstein 2000; Lang 2004; Schnettler 2008; Wenger et al. 2000)
- Less informal support received (Dykstra 2009; Albertini & Mencarini 2012; Wenger et al. 2007)
- Less support provided (Kohli & Albertini 2009)

- Little evidence of a substitution of adult children in the network of older non-parents
- Childless people have more friends and are more likely to consider them as potential supporters (Schnettler & Wöhler 2016 on Germany)
Our aim

- To understand if & how childless compensate the absence of children in their support network in later life
Data

- Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, 2011 (wave 4)
  - 15 countries: DK, SE, AT, BL, CH, DE, FR, NL, ES, IT, PT, CZ, EE, HU, PL
  - N = 37,272
  - 50+ years old
  - 33,328 parents & 3,944 childless respondents
  - Parents: 71.6% near; 17.9% far away
Dependent variable

- **Isolation** = Mean value from “How much of time you feel: lack companionship; left out; isolated from others; lonely” ($\alpha = 0.85$)
  - Often (=1); sometimes (=2); hardly ever or never (=3)
  - 15.5% isolated; 2% extremely isolated

- Isolation = 1 if often or sometimes isolated
- Extreme isolation = 1 if often isolated
Parenthood

- Childless; Parent with all children >25Km; Parent with at least one child within 25Km

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Childless</th>
<th>Parents, close</th>
<th>Parents, distant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isolated</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely isolated</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Feeling isolated (%)
  - Childless
  - Parents, distant
  - Parents, close

- Often
- Sometimes
Explanatory variables

• Living with **partner**
  - 30.4% among childless; 66.2% of parents, close; 68% of parents, distant

• **Social network** “Over the last 12 months, who are the people with whom you most often discussed important things?” (up to 7)
  - Friends (=0 if none; =1 if 1+)
  - Family members (=0 if none; =1 if 1+)
  - Siblings (=0 if none; =1 if 1+)
## Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Has friends</th>
<th>Has family members</th>
<th>Has siblings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childless</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>63.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent, close</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent, distant</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Descriptives

- Number of friends (%)
  - Childless
  - Parents, distant
  - Parents, close

- Distribution of individuals by number of friends:
  - 0
  - 1
  - 2+

Legend:
- 1CL = Childless
- 2Pf = Parents, distant
- 3Pc = Parents, close
Isolation, by partner status

- Isolation
  - No partner
  - Partner

- Extreme isolation
  - No partner
  - Partner

Legend:
- Blue circle: Childless
- Red diamond: Parent close
- Green triangle: Parent distant
Isolation, by partner status

- Living with **partner** reduces any isolation for childless and parents
Isolation, by friendship

a. control for partner  
b. no control for partner

- Isolation
- Extreme isolation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friendship</th>
<th>Isolation</th>
<th>Extreme isolation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Childless
- Parent close
- Parent distant
Isolation, by friendship

a. control for partner  b. no control for partner

- Childless are the most isolated.
Isolation, by friendship

**a. control for partner**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friendship</th>
<th>Isolation (No)</th>
<th>Isolation (Yes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5 ± 0.2</td>
<td>2.0 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**b. no control for partner**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friendship</th>
<th>Isolation (No)</th>
<th>Isolation (Yes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.0 ± 0.1</td>
<td>1.5 ± 0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Childless are the most isolated
- Controlling for partner, childless are similar to distant parents
Isolation, by friendship

a. control for partner  b. no control for partner

- **Childless** are the most isolated
- Controlling for partner, childless are similar to distant parents
- **Friends** reduce extreme isolation for childless
Isolation, by family network

**a. control for partner**  
**b. no control for partner**

- Family network reduces isolation
- Extreme isolation, especially for childless
Isolation, by siblings

a. control for partner  
b. no control for partner

• Having siblings in the support network has no effect on isolation
Results

- Childless have **more friends**, BUT are **more isolated** than parents.
- Controlling for partner, **childless are similar to distant parents**.
- Living with **partner** significantly reduces (extreme) isolation for both childless and parents.

- **Friends reduce extreme isolation** for childless.
- **Family network** reduces isolation.
  - Extreme isolation, especially for childless.
- Having **siblings** has no effect on isolation.
(Preliminary) conclusions

- Two types of compensation for the childless
  - Through a larger number of friends
  - Through a relatively higher effect of friendship
Next steps

• Include **quantity** of personal network ties
  • Beyond number of friends
  • Consider other types of (lack of) support

• **Longitudinal** analyses
  • Actual support received at wave 5

• **Grandchildren**
  • Childless; parents, distant; parents, close, no grandchildren; parents, close & grandchildren