

## Consumption of care and intergenerational relations in the Irish context

Catherine Conlon,<sup>1</sup> [conlonce@tcd.ie](mailto:conlonce@tcd.ie), and Virpi Timonen,  
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Thomas Scharf and Gemma Carney  
National University of Ireland, Galway

**key words** care • intergenerational • ageing • Ireland

Intergenerational family relations have been explained using conceptual frameworks of solidarity, conflict and ambivalence (eg Luescher and Pillemer, 1998; Bengtson, 2001; Connidis and McMullin, 2002). Interest in intergenerational relations is usually situated within changing demographic trends and evolving family relations in the context of cultural change associated with globalising processes (see, for example, Connidis, 2010). Concerns about population ageing and increasing levels of dependency give rise to consideration of how care needs will be met, particularly in contexts where family has been the main source of elder care. Personal life and family practices are evolving away from a nuclear family model to more diverse family formations although not necessarily any less embedded social relationships (Smart, 2007; Morgan, 2011). These changes and preoccupations raise the question as to what kind of care landscape(s) will emerge in the future (Connidis, 2010).

Changing Generations<sup>2</sup> is a qualitative study involving 52 women and 48 men across the age and socioeconomic spectra to explore practices, experiences and meanings of solidarity at family and societal levels in contemporary Ireland (Timonen et al, 2013). A legacy of underdevelopment of formal care structures persists in Ireland, reflecting a policy approach that designates (implicitly or explicitly) the family as the place where care should be provided and women as the primary providers of care. And yet women's role in the workforce in Ireland has expanded considerably over recent decades, challenging a policy premised on women's availability to provide informal care.

Ireland was in deep economic recession when we embarked on research to take a new look at solidarities (or lack of them) practised and expressed by people in diverse locations across the lifecourse. The severe impact of the global recession on Ireland has resulted in high unemployment, particularly among the youngest age groups, resurgence of mass emigration of working-age people and high levels of personal indebtedness. Significant economic upheaval and attendant social, economic

and ontological insecurity characterise the context in which we explored the views, practices and exchanges that constitute intergenerational solidarity.

Against this background, we found that strong solidarity is a key feature of relations between family generations in Ireland at this moment. In the face of the severe recession, people across age groups gave accounts of pulling together, helping each other out and thereby keeping struggling family members afloat. At the societal level, too, generational groups tended to express empathy and support for other age groups and the pressures they were observing them coping with. For example, younger and middle generations viewed older people as deserving of the protections and supports they receive from state resources:

‘[Older people] get the pensions but they work[ed] for it, it is their money. The way I see it, they paid enough money over their life time into the state so they should get something back’ (Noelle, aged 19, middle socioeconomic status, employed).

The data reveal a widespread belief that older people have made lifelong contributions to Irish society through raising families, building communities and paying taxes and social insurance. There is correspondingly strong support for age-related supports in the form of social transfers and health/care services that protect older people from poverty and enhance their wellbeing.

Conversely, older people expressed support for younger age groups. At the family level, older people described observing adult children who struggled to pay mortgages, hold onto jobs and raise families, and voluntarily ‘stepping in’ to alleviate these pressures. Supports were given according to the resources the older person had. This was in the form of money, time and ‘care labour’ such as picking up children from school or childcare, offering to look after grandchildren to reduce childcare costs, cooking meals for family members living in other households or including items such as nappies in a weekly shop to reduce the younger families’ shopping bills.

‘That’s where a lot of my disposable income is going. I have an unemployed son who has a family and I have a daughter that I had to support. It’s my pleasure and my privilege to help my children, but I worry about my son because he has a family.’ (Matt, aged 70, high socioeconomic status, retired)

All age groups demonstrated commitment to the wellbeing of children and overall the data indicated a strong ‘downward orientation’ to the generational solidarity people expressed. All generations expressed commitment to ensure that children’s life chances were optimised. In this context, older people tended to express the view that their adult children understandably prioritised care/time commitments towards their own children, even when this was at the expense of being able to devote time to ageing parents and parents-in-law. The evidence from the Changing Generations study suggests that the expectations, obligation and practices of care provision for older family members are being reshaped by a process we call ‘generational observing’. This refers to older family members observing the demands on their adult children (the middle generation), in particular the demands of resourcing children, and (re) calibrating their expectations of supports according to what they consider to be the

middle generation's capacity to give. In many cases, older family members' expectations of receiving help, support or care from their adult children are set at a low level.

However, socioeconomic status<sup>3</sup> features as key in shaping both expectations and practices regarding the provision of care. Expectations regarding future family care from adult children and their families were particularly low among middle and high socioeconomic status older adults whose adult children and children-in-law were in employment. Low expectations regarding family care reflect well-off older adults' observation of the heavy investment of time (and money) by their adult children and children-in-law for their grandchildren, and also the ability to pay for care from private resources. Families with more economic resources can plan to 'contract out' elements of intergenerational solidarity, in particular care of both children and older family members.

The situation of families with lower incomes was markedly different. Participants with limited economic resources described a higher level of need for care among their older generations and a greater need for that care to come from direct time and care labour inputs of family members.

The following cross-generational and cross-class quotations exemplify these processes:

'If I needed care? I don't expect it from my children.... No I don't. As I said we have some investments ... for my wife and I, in our minds, they are to pay for whatever care we need for as long as the blooming investments last or how long we last. I planned to look after ourselves.' (Fred, aged 70+, high socioeconomic status, retired)

'[My daughter] is very outgoing and she is into different things and she has four children and she is always running and racing and she brings them to the sports, she doesn't have a minute so I wouldn't call on her to do anything you know, unless I was sick and I needed shopping.' (Alice, aged 65–70, middle socioeconomic status, retired)

'I do everything [for my grandmother who has dementia], the washing, the drying, the feeding, the bathing ... I have to do everything for her.... Your family is your family.... She is my Nanny, I shouldn't be paid to look after her I feel.... When it's your family I feel like it's kind of your duty.... I love her to bits.' (Stacey, teenager, low socio-economic status, unemployed/family carer)

Our findings show that 'generational observing' is reshaping intergenerational family relations so that *caring for* (doing) is being separated out from *caring about* (disposition) but in ways that are contoured by class. In families of high and middle socioeconomic status, the older generation expects little from adult children who they perceive as 'very stretched' in meeting extensive demands of careers and raising the next generation. Members of the 'middle' generation accept this opportunity to invest most of their resources into raising children, and focus on providing emotional support (rather than 'hands-on' help and care) to the older generations. In lower socioeconomic groups,

interdependencies between generations are more often reflected in the direct provision of care and support. The welfare state context matters too: restricted availability of, and low public expenditure on, formal long-term care is one of the factors driving private expenditure on care by those who can afford it and recourse to family care by those who cannot.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author.

<sup>2</sup> Visit [www.sparc.tcd.ie/generations](http://www.sparc.tcd.ie/generations) for more information about this study and the research methodology followed.

<sup>3</sup> Occupational status categorisation used by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) of Ireland to classify socioeconomic status was selected and regrouped into the three categories of high, middle and low.

### References

- Bengtson, VL, 2001, Beyond the nuclear family: the increasing importance of multigenerational bonds, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, 1, 1–16
- Connidis, IA, 2010, *Family ties and aging* (2nd edn), London: Pine Forge Press/Sage Publications
- Connidis, IA, McMullin, JA, 2002, Sociological ambivalence and family ties: a critical perspective, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, 3, 558–67
- Luescher, K, Pillemer, K, 1998, Intergenerational ambivalence: a new approach to the study of parent–child relations in later life, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 60, 2, 413–25
- Morgan, D, 2011, *Rethinking family practices*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Smart, C, 2007, *Personal life: New directions in sociological thinking*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Timonen, V, Conlon, C, Scharf, T, Carney, G, 2013, Family, state, class and solidarity: re-conceptualising intergenerational solidarity through the grounded theory approach, *European Journal of Ageing*, doi: 10.1007/s10433-013-0272-x