

# You are my favourite! Parent-child relationship and satisfaction in later life

(very preliminary draft, please do not quote!)

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## ABSTRACT

Intergenerational transfers measured in several currencies (e.g. coresidence, contact, proximity, support etc.) have been always considered as important indicators for family solidarity. Most of the studies on intergenerational transfers look at the structural characteristics of such exchanges (as distance, frequency, type, motives) emphasising the potential positive association between the structure and the quality of the parent-child relations. Additionally, while most of the surveys include questions on the structural indicators of family exchanges, it is rare that they comprise assessments of the relations between parent and children as well. Using the Italian 2009 Gender and Generations Survey this study analyses the personal rating of the parent-child relations among parents aged 65 and older. After examining the association of such variable with the structural indicators of intergenerational exchanges (frequency of contact), the individual factors associated with a good satisfaction of the relation with a child using a multinomial logit model with robust option with the family as unit have been analysed. Additionally different models with both parents and for mothers and fathers only have been performed. This study shows high satisfaction of Italian older parents in their relation with their children. Additionally a not strong, but statistically significant relation between structure (e.g. contact) and satisfaction has been found. This study shows that satisfaction is positively associated with being mothers, being married, living in Northern Italy, with high parity. Some of these variables have different impact for fathers and mothers. Additionally better relations with daughters than with sons have been found especially by fathers.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to answer several research questions. Since several studies have been using structural indicators of intergenerational exchanges (e.g. frequency of contact) as proxy for strong parent-children relations we initially looked at the statistical association between frequency of contact and satisfaction indicators to confirm such hypothesis. Secondly this study contributes to the literature for the analysis of the factors that are associated with satisfaction with the relation with a child. To our knowledge this is the first Italian study to investigate the determinants of high satisfaction of parent-child relation in later life. We have been able to consider each single parent-child dyad while taking into account the parent's characteristics. We were interested to understand whether there were gender differences in scoring the relation with children and equally we were interested to check whether there is a gender partiality when assessing relations with children. Additionally we try to understand whether the presence of a coresident child may affect the relation with a child living outside the household.

## DATA

The 2009 Italian IMF (Indagine Multiscopo sulle Famiglie e Soggetti Sociali) was used to analyse the satisfaction with children relationship. This cross-sectional survey is carried out every five years on the private household population of Italy by the Italian Statistics Institute (ISTAT) and it includes approximately 15000 people aged 65 years and over. The response rate of the ISTAT survey is more than 80%. The unit of the sample is the “de facto” household selected from the Register of Population. The survey covered a wide variety of topics, including questions on household structure, demographic background, socio-economic characteristics, housing, and life histories. Since 2003, the IMF represents the Italian variant of the Gender and Generation survey.

Relevant for this study is the section on family exchanges, including: household composition, kin availability (children, parents, grandchildren, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives), exchanges with no-coresident children (in terms of face to face and phone contact) and satisfaction with the relation with a specific no-coresident child. In this study, we selected parents older than 65 with at least one child living outside the household since the question on the satisfaction with the relation has been asked to no-coresident children only. The resulting sample size is of 6888 individuals. Therefore we have been excluding parents with all their children living at home, that represent 8.4% of the total sample of parents.

To each parent, information on no-coresident children have been asked up to three children. Among those who have children outside the household, parents who have up to three children represent 89.8% of the sample. For those who have more than 3 children living outside the household, the questionnaire was restricted to the three ones living closer to their parents.

In order to create a dataset where each record is referred to a dyad parent-child, the file was restructured preserving the information of parents, but having for each parent one, two or three records depending on the number of children living outside the household with a final sample of 14525 dyads.

### *Dependent Variable*

After having listed sex, age, proximity and frequency of contact with up to three children, a parent is asked to rate the satisfaction on the relation with the specific child with a scale from 0 to 10. Parents answered to all the questions about their children, but a small percentage (5.7% of the dyads considered) did not answered to the specific question on the satisfaction. We therefore analysed the disparities between the total sample and the sample without the missing cases according to all the covariates used in the model, showing no significant differences between the two groups. The missing cases have been excluded from the analysis leaving a sample of 13691 parent-child dyads.

## *Independent Variables*

As covariates we have a set of characteristics pertinent to children and others to parents.

### *Child characteristics*

In order to assess our first research question on the association of the structural indicators of intergenerational transfers with the subjective evaluation of the relation with a specific child, we analyse the variables on face to face and phone contact. The questionnaire investigated on the frequency of such exchanges (once a day, more than once a week, once a week, less than 4 times a month, few times a year and never). We recoded face to face and phone contact in three categories every day (as reference category), at least once a week and less than once a week. Other control variables include sex, age (as continuous) and proximity to parent's home. The latter though has not been included in the model due to the high correlation with the variables on contact (the closer you live the higher is the probability to see your parent more often).

### *Parents characteristics*

Sex, age and marital status of the parent have been included in the model. We perform a joint model with both sexes and two separate one for mothers and fathers to assess gender differences in the association of our selected variables on the outcome. Age was introduced in the model as continuous. Marital status coded with married parents as reference category, separated or divorced and widowed parents. The number of living children and whether there is a coresident child have been included in the model.

As socio-economic indicators we included education (those with a secondary degree or more against those with compulsory schooling only) and tenure as a dichotomic variable that distinguished owner-occupiers from those in other tenures. Two indicators compare the centre and the south of the country with the north. Presence of limiting long standing illness has been used as health indicators: we preferred this indicator to self perceived health status and presence of chronic disease (both present in the survey) since it could be more related with need of support. These socio-economic characteristics have all been identified as key determinants of late-life exchanges in previous studies (citations).

## **METHODS**

To address the study's first research question, Spearman rho tests were performed on the original variables of the questionnaire regarding face to face and phone contacts with the satisfaction of the relation with a child.

### *Statistical model*

The outcome variable, satisfaction with the relation with children, was coded as a 10-Likert scale. Figure 1 shows how negatively skewed the variable is. The analysis of the frequency distribution jointly with a multiple correspondence analysis run on the outcome variables and the covariates, it has been decided to operationalise the outcome variable with 3 categories: Low satisfaction (with scores from 1 to 7), high satisfaction (scores from 8 to 9) and top satisfaction (score 10).

The outcome variable has a natural ordering among the levels, ranking from 1 ('low satisfaction') to 3 ('top satisfaction'), and could be modeled using an Ordered Logistic Regression. But ORL imply an important assumption: under this model, the odds ratio assessing the effect of an exposure variable for any of these comparisons must be the same for each subsequent category. In our data, this condition is not verified, so it has been decided to use a Multinomial Logistic Regression, with "Low satisfaction" as the reference category. Additionally since the characteristics of children were not independent, we used the *cluster* option in Stata to specify that the observations were independent across groups but not within group (family). The standard errors have been corrected for intragroup correlation. The covariates used in the model were all categorical, except for age of children and age of parents. All tests were considered significant at a 5% level and all analyses were performed using STATA software (release 12.1; StataCorp, College Station, TX).

### **RESULTS**

The Spearman  $\rho$  indicates that there is a small, but significant relation between the original structural indicators of exchanges (face to face and phone contact) with the original 10 scores variable for satisfaction. For both sexes Spearman  $\rho$  was .281 for face to face contact and .217 for phone contacts ( $p$  values  $<.000$ ). Fathers tend have higher level of correlation when considering face to face contact (.298) compared to mothers (.267) and smaller correlation when considering phone contact (.214 and .230 respectively).

Table 1 presents the main characteristics indicators of parents aged 65 or more years in 2009 having at least one child living outside the household (N=6888). Mothers were more likely to be older than men and to suffer of limiting long standing illnesses, while fathers were more likely to be married and to have higher education. The other characteristics were similar for men and women as the number of children and geographical distribution.

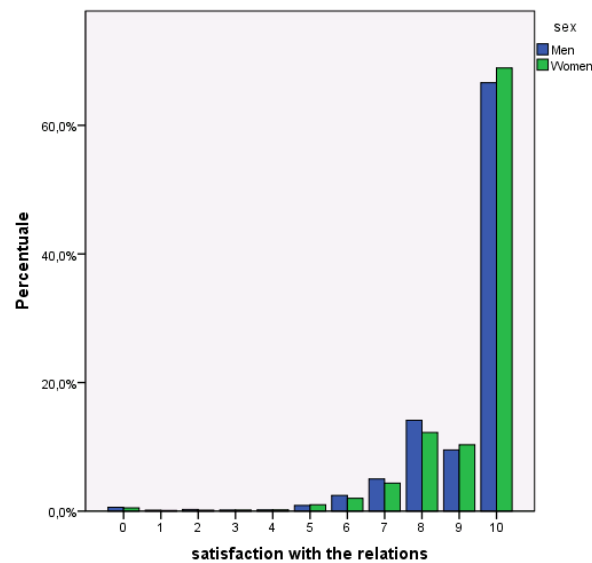
Regarding the parent-child dyads, mothers and fathers have similar patterns in face to face and phone contact with their children.

*Table 1 Main sample characteristics by gender, parents aged 65 or more years, and parent-child dyads, Italy 2009*

	Mothers	Fathers
Mean age	75.5	74.5
% Married	47.3	83.2
Mean number of children	2.5	2.4
Has a coresident child	22.5	23.7
Centre	21.2	21.2
South	30.9	32.5
Presence of limiting illnesses	55.2	46.0
% with high education	12.1	22.4
Home ownership		
Unweighted sample size	3893	2995
% daughters	50.4	50.2
% Weekly face to face contacts	77.7	76.8
% Weekly Phone contacts	82.2	82.6
Unweighted parent-child dyad	7829	5862

Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of the outcome variable by sex of parents. As described in early sections, the distribution is negatively skewed and around two thirds of the sample rated their relation with children with the top score (10). Parents who declared themselves satisfied at level 8 and 9 have been classified as scoring “high satisfaction” while those with a score less than 8 of the relation with their child have been classified as scoring “low satisfaction”. More mothers than father rated with the top score (10) their relation with their child, while father are slightly more likely to rate with less than 8 their relation with their child.

Figure 1 – Distribution of the outcome variable on satisfaction on the relation with children – Italy 2009



The results of the multinomial logit models are summarised in Table 2, that shows the coefficients for mothers and fathers jointly while the analysis for fathers and mothers separately are shown in Figure 2 and 3.

To correctly interpret the relative-risk ratio it is often useful to express it as percentage changes using 100 (RRR-1). RRR greater than 1 indicate that higher values of the explanatory variable increase the predicted probability to be moderate or top satisfied, compared to low; RRR minor than one indicate the opposite.

Table 2 shows that age of children, level education of parents and the number of children living with them are not significant to predict the level of satisfaction with the relation with children.

The odds of being moderately satisfied compared to being less satisfied is reduced by an estimated 67% for at least once a week contacts and 80% for those who see their children less than once a week when compared to parents that see their children every day. Similarly the odds are also reduced by 19% for the sporadic phone contacts meaning that more frequent contact with children increase the probability to be moderately satisfied compared to low satisfaction. Considering marital status the odds are reduced by 45% for divorced/separated parents and by 28% for widowed compared to married parents. Having some limiting illness (- 28%) and by living in South Italy (-40%) also reduced the odds of being moderately compared to being less satisfied. On the contrary, the moderate satisfaction is increased for mothers (by 21%), if the child is female (by 39%) and if parents have three children or more (+53%).

For top satisfaction the trend is similar, but with a greater decrease or increase, respectively, as it is shown in Table 2. Comparing the results of "moderate satisfaction" with "top satisfaction" the main differences concern the variables on tenure, number of children and geographic area, that become all significant. In particular, the odds of being top satisfied is increased by an estimated 41% for owners, by 52% and 68% for

having 2 or 3 or more children, respectively. On the contrary, living in the Centre Italy or in the South reduce the top satisfaction by 29% and 47% respectively.

Figure 2 compares those who declared themselves satisfied at level 10 (top) with those with a low satisfaction of the relation with their child.

Table 2 RRR for being moderately and top satisfied with the relation with children, Italy 2009

	<b>RRR</b>	<b>Robust Std. Err.</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Low satisfaction</b>	<b>(base outcome)</b>		
<b>Good satisfaction</b>			
<i>Gender children</i>			
Male	<i>ref.</i>		
Female	1.214	0.103	<b>0.022</b>
<i>Age children</i>	0.981	0.008	<b>0.027</b>
<i>Gender parents</i>			
Male	<i>ref.</i>		
Female	1.391	0.125	<b>0.000</b>
<i>Age parents</i>	1.010	0.011	0.358
<i>Number of contacts</i>			
Every day	<i>ref.</i>		
At least 1 time a week	0.370	0.054	<b>0.000</b>
Less than 1 time a week	0.203	0.029	<b>0.000</b>
<i>Number of phone contacts</i>			
Every day	<i>ref.</i>		
At least 1 time a week	0.811	0.103	0.101
Less than 1 time a week	0.324	0.046	<b>0.000</b>
<i>Marital status</i>			
Married	<i>ref.</i>		
Single, separated or divorced	0.549	0.111	<b>0.003</b>
Widowed	0.718	0.097	<b>0.014</b>
<i>Educational level</i>			
Low	<i>ref.</i>		
Middle	0.845	0.157	0.366
High	0.856	0.132	0.314
<i>Presence of any limiting illnesses</i>			
No limiting illnesses	<i>ref.</i>		
Limiting illnesses	0.767	0.083	<b>0.015</b>
<i>If the house is owned</i>			
Other	<i>ref.</i>		
Ownership	1.226	0.151	0.099
<i>Number of children living with parents</i>			
0	<i>ref.</i>		
1 ore more	0.828	0.113	0.167
<i>Number of living children</i>			
1	<i>ref.</i>		
2	1.318	0.204	0.074
3 or more	1.534	0.256	<b>0.009</b>
<i>Geographical area of Italy</i>			
North	<i>ref.</i>		
Centre	0.922	0.142	0.599
South	0.598	0.077	<b>0.000</b>
<b>Top satisfaction</b>			
<i>Gender children</i>			
Male	<i>ref.</i>		

Female	1.234	0.097	<b>0.008</b>
<i>Age children</i>	0.981	0.008	<b>0.021</b>
<i>Gender parents</i>			
Male	<i>ref.</i>		
Female	1.505	0.123	<b>0.000</b>
<i>Age parents</i>	1.013	0.010	0.205
<i>Number of contacts</i>			
Every day	<i>ref.</i>		
At least 1 time a week	0.177	0.025	<b>0.000</b>
Less than 1 time a week	0.121	0.016	<b>0.000</b>
<i>Number of phone contacts</i>			
Every day	<i>ref.</i>		
At least 1 time a week	0.441	0.054	<b>0.000<sup>a</sup></b>
Less than 1 time a week	0.174	0.023	<b>0.000</b>
<i>Marital status</i>			
Married	<i>ref.</i>		
Single, separated or divorced	0.481	0.088	<b>0.000</b>
Widowed	0.691	0.089	<b>0.004</b>
<i>Educational level</i>			
Low	<i>ref.</i>		
Middle	1.156	0.208	0.420
High	1.189	0.181	0.256
<i>Presence of any limiting illnesses</i>			
No limiting illnesses	<i>ref.</i>		
Limiting illnesses	0.698	0.072	<b>0.001</b>
<i>If the house is owned</i>			
Other	<i>ref.</i>		
Ownership	1.406	0.164	<b>0.004<sup>a</sup></b>
<i>Number of children living with parents</i>			
0	<i>ref.</i>		
1 ore more	0.843	0.107	0.180
<i>Number of living children</i>			
1	<i>ref.</i>		
2	1.534	0.222	<b>0.004<sup>a</sup></b>
3 or more	1.678	0.262	<b>0.001</b>
<i>Geographical area of Italy</i>			
North	<i>ref.</i>		
Centre	0.713	0.108	<b>0.025<sup>a</sup></b>
South	0.527	0.064	<b>0.000</b>

<sup>a</sup> p-value significant respect the moderate satisfaction.



Figure 2 – Results of the multinomial logistic model (RRR) for moderate vs. low satisfaction

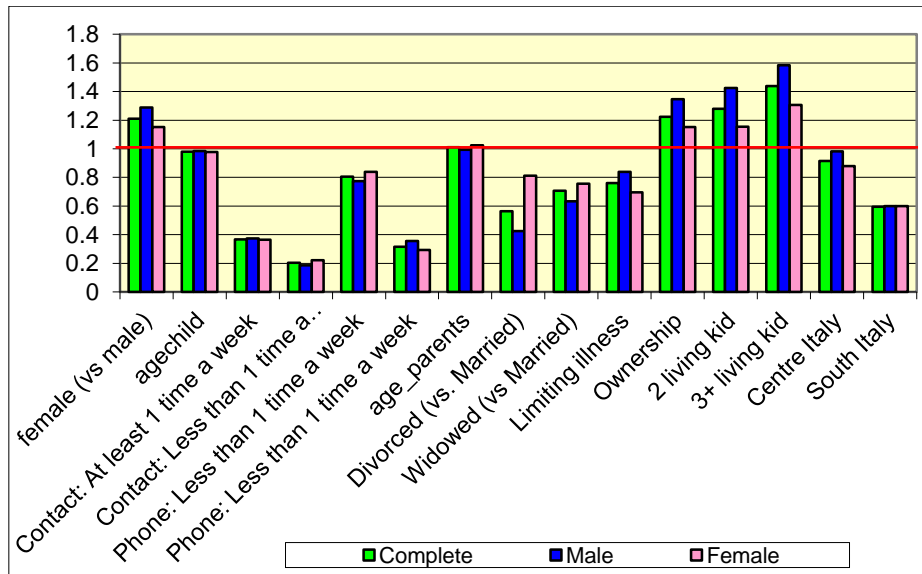
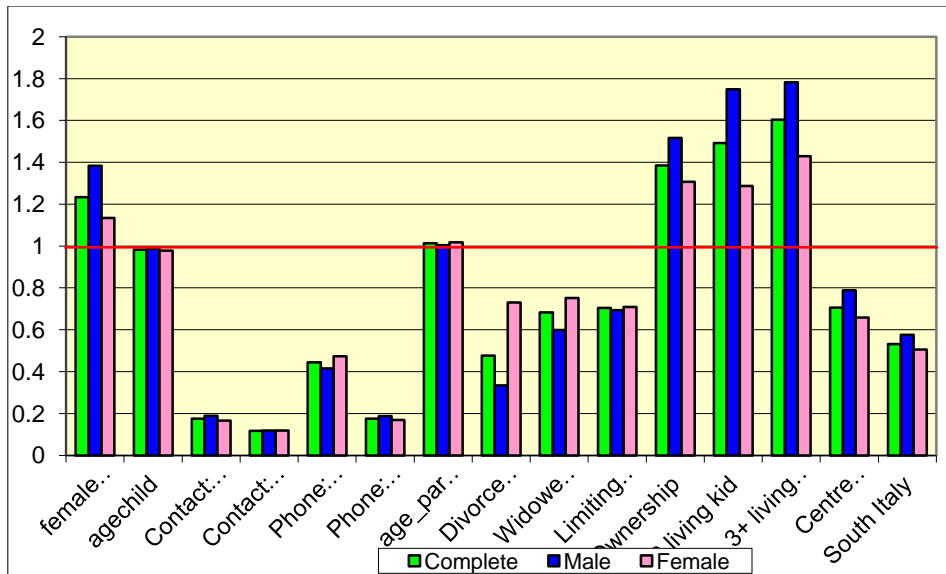


Figure 3 – Results of the multinomial logistic model (RRR) for top vs. low satisfaction



**CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

This study show how high is the satisfaction of Italian older parents in their relation with their children. Two thirds of parents rated their satisfaction with the maximum score and less than 10% of them provide a score of less than 8.

The relation between structure (e.g. face to face and phone contact) and satisfaction indicators is not very strong, but statistically significant. This result may be encouraging in the use in explicative models of contact variables as proxy for good parent-child relations.

Our multinomial models show how satisfaction is positively associated with being mothers, being married, living in Northern Italy and parity. Women tend to have closer relations in terms of care, contact and living arrangement with their children (Tomassini et al. 2004, Tomassini and Glaser 2003) therefore the positive effect of gender was expected. Marital status had also the positive effect anticipated by previous studies. Parents in couple tend to be more satisfied in the relations with their children living outside the household than parents who are widowed or separated/divorced. Older parents with marital disruptions may have experienced a strained relation with children (especially fathers) and this may explain the lower satisfaction of divorced and widowed parents compared to the married.

Interestingly variables such as marital status, geography, tenure, having a daughter have different impact for fathers and mothers. Relations with daughters are better rated than those with sons especially by fathers.

What this variable on satisfaction really means? It may be strongly associated with reciprocity, with expectations and with self-evaluation of the older person as a parent. Unfortunately we have been able to investigate the association of the parent's satisfaction with the relation with a child with structural variables only, so we failed to include emotional and psychological dimension of satisfaction. Additionally the question has been asked to parents only, while it would have been useful to have the same variable asked to the child to study the correlation between the two, but regrettably the questionnaire was restricted to the members belonging to the surveyed household.

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