Chapter 10
Attitudes Towards Population Ageing and Older People

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Abstract The prospect of an older population composition, and more particularly the decreasing numbers of people in working age, is regarded by policy-makers and members of the research community as a threat to the sustainability of the existing welfare regimes. The fact that large proportions of citizens consider the rising number of older persons to be a worrisome evolution may be interpreted as a sign of a lack of intergenerational solidarity; apparently, the increasing numbers of older persons are rather regarded as a “menace”, and not as a positive evolution (greater longevity). Citizens’ opinions regarding the rising number of people aged 65 and more covers a broad topic. Citizens may regard the evolution as being “bad” because of its negative implications for the social security systems, such as the high costs for medical care and pension payments. Their opinion does not necessarily reflect their attitude toward older persons per se. This chapter is a mix of a “visual exploration” and of the application of a multivariate technique (GLM). The results show quite important differences between countries. Moreover, GLM estimates indicate that the most important individual characteristics are age and sex. As such, the results point to the importance of a “life course strategy” for enhancing true intergenerational solidarity.

Keywords: Intergenerational solidarity · Aged people · Attitudes · Life course strategy

10.1 Introduction

Europe’s populations are “ageing” rapidly. In 1950, the proportion of persons aged 65 and more was 8.2%; by 2000 the proportion had risen to 14.7%, and by 2050 it is expected to be as high as 28% (UN 2005). The prospect of an older population composition, and more particularly the decreasing numbers of people in working age, is regarded by policy-makers and members of the research community as a threat to the sustainability of the existing welfare regimes. The fact that large proportions of citizens consider the rising number of older persons to be a worrisome evolution may be interpreted as a sign of a lack of intergenerational solidarity; apparently, the increasing numbers of older persons are rather regarded as a “menace”, and not as a positive evolution (greater longevity). Citizens’ opinions regarding the rising number of people aged 65 and more covers a broad topic. Citizens may regard the evolution as being “bad” because of its negative implications for the social security systems, such as the high costs for medical care and pension payments. Their opinion does not necessarily reflect their attitude toward older persons per se. This chapter is a mix of a “visual exploration” and of the application of a multivariate technique (GLM). The results show quite important differences between countries. Moreover, GLM estimates indicate that the most important individual characteristics are age and sex. As such, the results point to the importance of a “life course strategy” for enhancing true intergenerational solidarity.

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composition, and more particularly the decreasing numbers of people in working age, is regarded by policy-makers and members of the research community as a threat to the sustainability of the existing welfare regimes (see, for example, Schoenmaeckers, 2005). The solutions to the problem would be higher productivity and higher activity rates, including the postponement of retirement age (idem). To achieve these objectives, researchers and especially policy-makers underline the need for intergenerational solidarity (as exemplified in the “Green Paper” of the European Commission, 2005a).

However, the fact that large proportions of citizens – some 70% (IPPAS) – consider the rising number of older persons to be a worrisome evolution may be interpreted as a sign of a lack of intergenerational solidarity; the increasing numbers of older persons are apparently regarded as a “menace” rather than, to use the words of Frank Notestein (1954), “a great triumph of civilization”.

Studying these IPPAS survey data by age revealed that the age effect is rather limited (Schoenmaeckers et al. 2006, see especially Fig. 2.1.2b, p. 19). In only two countries (Belgium/Flanders and Slovenia) is there evidence of an age effect. Here the share of those evaluating the growing number of older persons as “bad” or “very bad” falls with increasing age of the respondent. However, the question as to the opinion of the rising number of people aged 65 and more covers a broad topic. Citizens may regard the evolution as being “bad” because of its negative implications for the social security system, such as the high costs regarding medical care and the payment of pensions. Their opinion does not necessarily reflect their attitude towards older persons per se. At the same time, a positive attitude towards older persons seems to be a *conditio sine qua non* for the existence of intergenerational solidarity. This led to the idea of investigating more closely attitudes towards the elderly, and the extent to which these depend on socio-economic characteristics.

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### 10.1.1 Construction of an Index Variable: The “Old-age Perception Index” (OAP Index)

The “old-age perception index” (or OAP index) is a variable constructed for the sole purpose of the present analysis; it has no general significance.

The IPPAS database includes in total seven variables measuring citizens’ attitudes toward older persons. Each of them refers to the position of older people in society:

- (A) “With their great experience, the aged are still socially useful”;
- (B) “The aged guarantee maintenance of traditional values in society”;

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