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**GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE ELDERLY POPULATION: DIFFERENT  
SATISFACTION LEVELS IN SELECTED SPHERES OF LIFE**

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**Summary**

In Italy recent demographic trends have caused an absolute and relative increase in the elderly population. This increase has given rise to a question of redefining old age: improved health status, increased economic spending, greater expectations on the part of the elderly have urged for further distinctions to be made among this age group. The speed with which this phenomenon has occurred differs according to social class, family relationship and gender. In this study an analysis was performed comparing objective indicators and perceived satisfaction distinct by gender relative to different following areas: economic standing, health status, family, friends, leisure time and work.

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## Introduction

In Italy recent demographic trends have caused a drop in natality, with Italy being currently one of the countries with the lowest birth levels both in Europe and world-wide. Moreover, considerable gains have also been made in average life expectancy<sup>2</sup>. This combination has led to an absolute and relative increase in the elderly population. Thus in 1999, the elderly population, that is all those aged 65 years and over, comprised 17.6% of the total population.

This has given rise to the need to redefine old age: improved health status, increased economic spending, greater expectations on the part of the elderly has urged for further distinctions to be made among this age group. While it is well known that “registered” age and “biological” age no longer coincide in the same way for everyone, today another factor, “social” age causes further confusion.

Retirement no longer coincides with a diminished social importance during the remaining life span. Indeed, this phase, which has steadily lengthened<sup>3</sup>, has been further subdivided into the “young old people”, the “old people”, the “old old people” and the “oldest old people” (the numerical size of the four groups is illustrated in Table 1).

**Table 1. Elderly population by age group and gender, in Italy (1999)**

| Age group         | Males | % of males | Females | % of females |
|-------------------|-------|------------|---------|--------------|
| 65-69 years       | 1,409 | 34.0       | 1,711   | 28.9         |
| 70-74 years       | 1,220 | 29.5       | 1,539   | 26.0         |
| 75-79 years       | 856   | 20.6       | 1,373   | 23.2         |
| Over 80 years old | 660   | 15.9       | 1,293   | 21.9         |
| Total             | 4,145 | 100.0      | 5,916   | 100.0        |

Sources: ISTAT - Living Conditions - provisional data 1999

At each of these stages, people lives are organised differently, bringing to the fore issues relating to individual choices, social organisation, family networks and social assistance. Until recently, in Italy, family networks have ensured a stabilising effect, helping to avoid transition crises among the population at different life stages (see Freguja, Sabbadini, 2000). A lengthy stay in a non productive, albeit active, status urges policy makers to have an awareness of the elderly planet and identify destabilising factors which could derive from the failure to satisfy the expectations of such a large population group. In this paper an analysis was performed to study quality of life in later life: that is, to measure objective availability of things and services related to needs and subjective satisfaction. Indeed, perceived discrepancies can exist between what one has and what one wants, between what one has and what relevant others have, between what one has and the best one has had in the past, between what one has and what one expected to have in the future, between what one has and what one needs. (Michalos 1985). Then, subjective dimension of life style become very important in the study of quality of life. Indeed, objective conditions and subjective evaluation determine quality of life. A very simple plan shows four categories of quality of life.

<sup>2</sup> Life expectancy in Italy for men is 74.6 years and for women 81.0 years (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Life expectancy at 65 years, in Italy, is 15.5 years for men and 19.4 years for women (1995)

Table 2 - Objective conditions and subjective valuation: quality of life items.

| <i>Quality of life items</i> |                             |                 |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Objective conditions</b>  | <b>Subjective valuation</b> |                 |
|                              | <i>Good</i>                 | <i>Bad</i>      |
| <i>Good</i>                  | Well-being (1)              | Discrepancy (2) |
| <i>Bad</i>                   | Adaptation (3)              | Privation (4)   |

- (1) Positive quality of life  
(2) Potential situation for protest and change  
(3) Poverty, social outcasting  
(4) Group interested for social policy

From these items an analysis was performed compared objective indicators and subjective indicators. All discrepancies in quality of life are directly and indirectly affected by age, sex, education, income, social support and are functions of human actions and perceived satisfaction. The objective indicators are measures of relatively objectively observable things: e.g. main source of income, member of an associations.... The subjective indicators are measures of personal report of relatively unobservable feeling or attitude: e.g. report of life satisfaction.

The Italian National Statistical Institute each year performs a Multipurpose Sample Survey focusing on aspects of daily life. About 24,000 families are involved and their objective status and perceived satisfaction in different spheres of life are studied. In this study data for those aged 65 years and over were used to gain further insight into an unequal perceived quality of life according to satisfaction levels declared in the following areas: economic standing, health status, family, friends and leisure time.

By ISTAT data, an analysis was performed comparing objective indicators relative to different spheres of life and perceived satisfaction, distinct by gender, age, family type, education, work and married status.

#### *INDICATORS USED*

Four categories of social indicators were used. Subjective-satisfaction indicators obtained from replies to the question, "How satisfied are you with....", referring to each of the life aspects mentioned above. Four different replies were foreseen: very, fairly, not very, not at all (table 3).

**Table 3. Subjective satisfaction indicators and modalities.**

| <b>Subjective satisfaction indicators</b> | <b>Modalities</b> |
|---|-------------------|
| • Economic status: satisfaction           | Very              |
| • Health status: satisfaction             | Fairly            |
| • Leisure time: satisfaction              | Not very          |
| • Satisfactory friendship network         | Not at all        |
| • Satisfactory family relationships       |                   |

**Table 4. Subjective perception indicators and modalities.**

| <b>Subjective perception indicators</b>  | <b>Modalities</b>  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived economic status of the family compared with the past</li> </ul> | Improved<br>Unchanged<br>Worse                             |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessment of family's economic resources</li> </ul>                      | Very good<br>Acceptable<br>Lacking<br>Totally insufficient |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-perceived health status</li> </ul>                                   | Very good<br>Good<br>Fairly good<br>Poor<br>Very poor      |

The second category comprised self-perceived indicators regarding the family's perceived economic status, in absolute terms (very good, acceptable, lacking, totally insufficient resources), and compared with the previous year (improved, unchanged, worse), as well as perceived health status (very poor, poor, fairly good, good, very good) (table 4). A third category referred to more objective indicators, although obtained from statements by the respondents. These indicators were selected on the basis of options taken regarding free time, relationship networks, economic standing and health status (table 5). The fourth category comprises explanatory variables for the different satisfaction levels expressed. These also include structural variables such as age, subdivided into four 5-year age groups, the last remaining open-ended, education, the elderly person's family structure, employment and marital status (table 6).

#### DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Gender more than any other variable distinguishes the approach taken to old age in light of various considerations, not only demographic, but also psychological and social. In demographic terms women's mortality rates vary according to age group, compared with men, so that the excess female-male ratio gradually increases with age.

Moreover, the age gap in the couple, women being generally younger than men, ensures that there are more widows than widowers. Subsequently, men more often than women live their old age as part of a couple, whereas women frequently live 10-15 years on their own as widows. These coincide with the tail-end of their lives and thus the worst in terms of health.

Psychologically women are better amalgamated into the network of family relationships, while men are more involved in the external world connected to their jobs. Old age acts as an impetus to extend these tendencies. Indeed, on retirement, men more frequently continue with some form of work, while for women domestic and family life become or continue to remain the focal point of their lives.

Socially, women are less well-educated than men and not employed. Thus changes in role with age are less or not at all traumatic.

In light of the above it was decided to perform separate analyses for men and women.

**Table 5. Objective indicators and modalities.**

| <b>Objective indicators</b>  | <b>Modalities</b>  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Main source of income</li> </ul>  | Work related income<br>Pension<br>Unanswered   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A five-days holiday in the last year</li> <li>Cinema, theatre attendance during the last twelve month</li> </ul>  | Never<br>At least once   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listen to the radio</li> </ul>  | No<br>Yes, sometimes<br>Yes, every day   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Watch television</li> </ul>   | No<br>Yes, less than three hours a day<br>Yes, more than three hours a day   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read newspapers</li> </ul>  | No<br>Yes, sometimes (1-4 days a week)<br>Yes, often (5-7 days a week)   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Books read during last twelve months</li> </ul>   | None<br>Yes  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious practice</li> </ul>   | No<br>Yes, sometimes (a few times a year)<br>Yes, once a week<br>Yes, often (5-7 times a week)                                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political involvement</li> <li>Member of an associations</li> <li>Voluntary works</li> <li>Own a cash card</li> <li>Paid service for domestic help</li> <li>Paid service for person who assist an elderly person</li> </ul> | No<br>Yes  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phisycal activity</li> </ul>  | No<br>Intensive training<br>Light physical activity  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of hours per week spent to domestic and family-oriented work</li> </ul>  | None<br>1-7-hours per week<br>8-14 hours per week<br>15-21 hours per week<br>22-28 hours per week<br>More than 28 hours per week |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Housing status</li> </ul>   | Owner<br>Renting   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chronic disease</li> </ul>  | None<br>Only one<br>Two<br>More then three   |

A first stage in the data analysis was to undertake a simple reading of the satisfaction levels declared for the different life spheres. Then, the most significant structural data were used to check the links between perceived satisfaction levels and family structure. A clustering technique was then applied to highlight the different ways of coping with old age. An initial reading of the data provides the stated satisfaction levels (very good, fairly good, not very good, not at all good) for the different life spheres for the four age groups.

**Table 6. Socio-economic, demographic and geographical variables and modalities.**

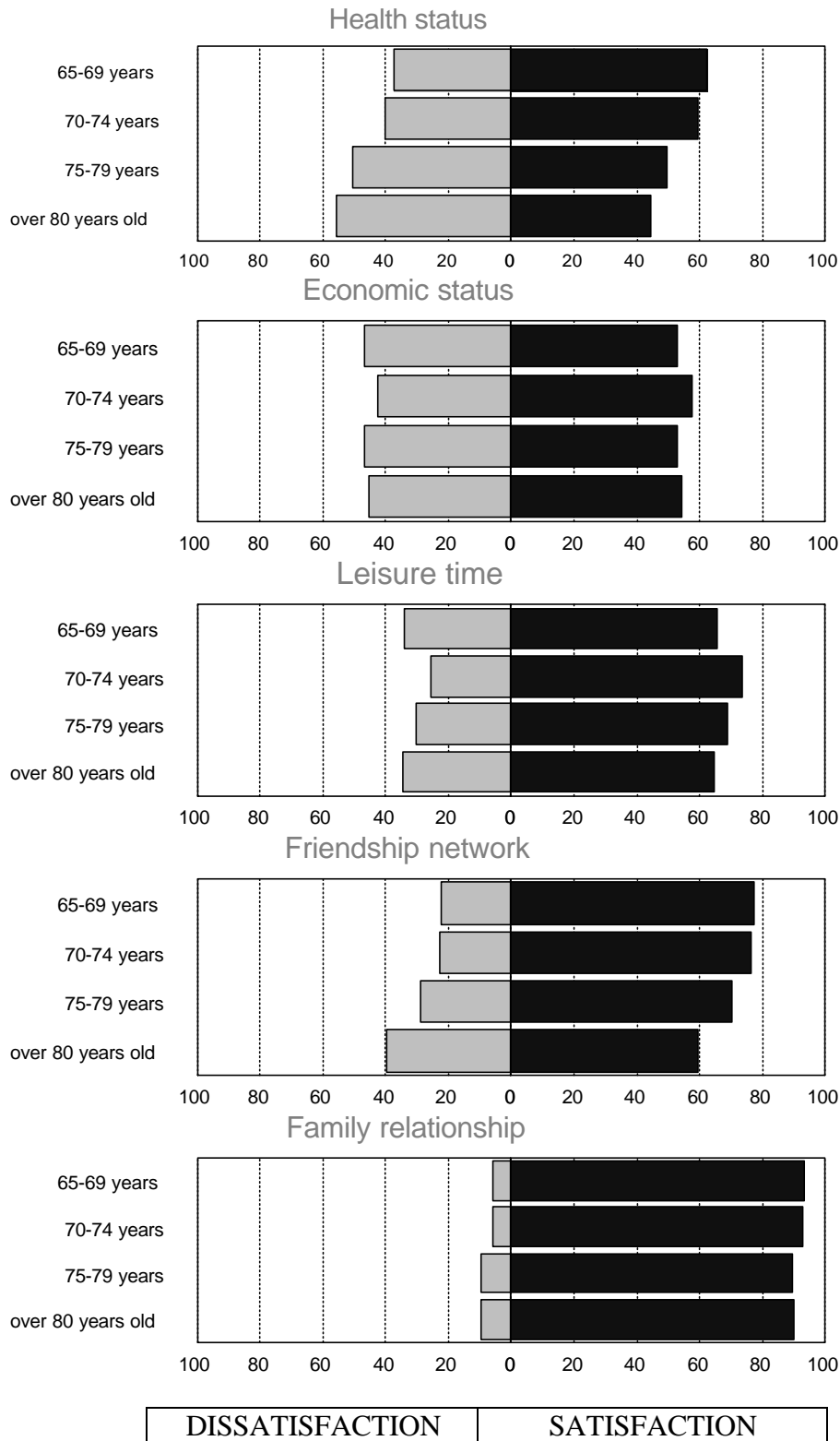
| <b>Structural variables</b> | <b>Modalities</b>   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| • Age                       | 65-69 years<br>70-74 years<br>75-80 years<br>over 80 years old  |
| • Education                 | No diploma<br>Elementary school<br>Junior high<br>High school<br>University   |
| • Family type               | Couple with children<br>Couple without children<br>Single parent with children<br>Lone person<br>Other family type  |
| • Status                    | Employed<br>Unemployed<br>Housewife   |
| • Married status            | Unmarried/separated/divorced<br>Married<br>Widowed  |
| • Geographic regions        | North-west of Italy<br>North-east of Italy<br>Central regions of Italy<br>South of Italy<br>Islands: Sicily and Sardinia  |
| • Type of communes          | Centre of metropolitan region<br>Periphery of metropolitan regi<br>Less than 2,000 inhabitants<br>2,001-10,000 inhabitants<br>10,001-50,000 inhabitants<br>More than 50,001 inhabitants |

Figures 1 and 2 show histograms for the percent frequencies of declared satisfaction levels for each life sphere and by gender. Distinguishing between satisfaction, on the right, and dissatisfaction, on the left, the four different age groups are specified for each sphere. What immediately emerges, for both genders, is that health and economic status are most frequently found to be dissatisfactory.

Dissatisfaction increases with age for men and women with regard to their health. Ageing does not seem to affect women's and men's assessment of their economic situation, but dissatisfaction is more high for "young old women" than for "young old men": then ageing seems to affect women's assessment and men's assessment in different way. The above observation confirms a number of known facts. Indeed, research into poverty in Italy shows that such a risk is greater for women. Psychological studies, on the other hand, show that men are more intolerant of disease and sickness and, thus, the physical decline accompanying oldest age is immediately translated into dissatisfaction.

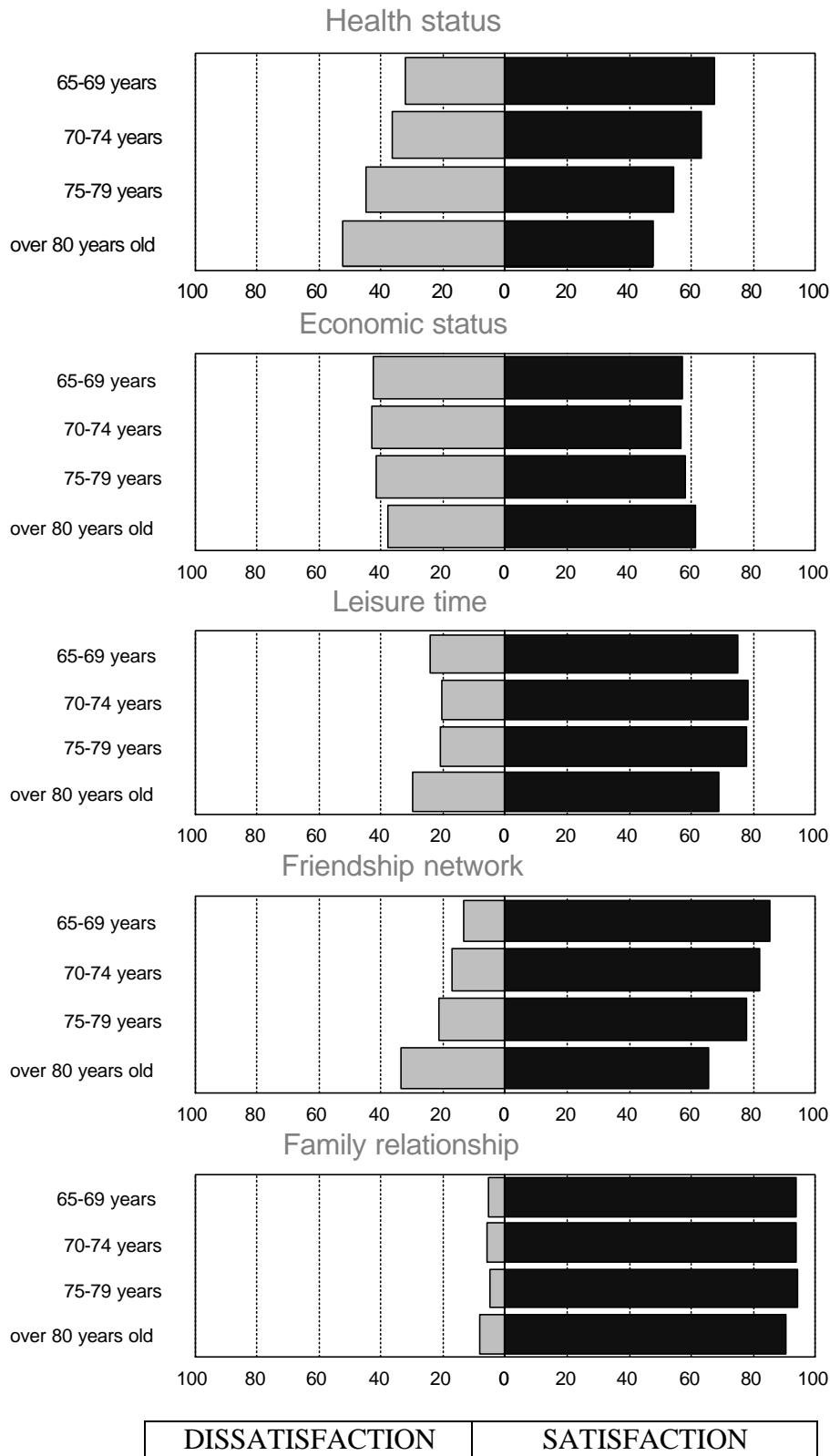
With age friendships are increasingly unsatisfactory both for elderly men and women, but somewhat more so for women, while assessment of leisure time remains largely unchanged for both. The assessment of family relationships confirms the continuing existence of a family network in Italy despite changes in family structure and behaviour. Both genders, irrespective of age, clearly state satisfaction with their family relationships.

**Figure 1. Satisfaction levels for each life sphere for females.**





**Figure 2. Satisfaction levels for each life sphere for males**



A second stage consisted of drawing up a graph of the original matrix (AMADO). AMADO (Analyse graphique d'une MAtrice de DONnées) is part of the SPAD.N software and reorders the data matrix, as a bar graph or histogram, by means of successive permutations, placing columns and rows which are similar near each other. The aim is to obtain a triangular matrix showing trends in the variables in correspondence to the unit groups.

This immediately showed the frequency of choice as well the groups declaring more or less frequently than the average different satisfaction levels. Whether their distribution is linked to all the modalities of a single variable or only to some is also shown.

As stated above, the underlying purpose of this research was to establish what effect family structure has on satisfaction levels in different spheres of life. It is hypothesised that living arrangements influence the elderly person's life and thus their satisfaction levels in all spheres of life. It emerged that satisfaction with family networks, more so than marital status, was linked to the elderly person's family structure. The matrix constructed with different family structures (family structures were identified as follows: CNC - Couples without Children, CWC - Couples with children, SWC - Single parent with children, LP - Lone person, OFT - Other family types) and age groups, along with self-perceived satisfaction levels are reordered in figures 3 and 4.

The figure shows that replies for women were more homogenous than those for men, irrespective of which level of satisfaction was declared. Moreover, for men, the presence of their wives and the fact that their children had left home was essential for them to appreciate their family network. At all ages, men living as part of a couple, without children, declare more frequently than average to be very satisfied with their family network.

The continued presence of sons and daughters<sup>4</sup> still at home for men negatively compromises the quality of their family network. Among those in a couple, with children still at home, only the "old age group (75-79 years old) expressed satisfaction, slightly more frequently than the average. For other age groups "quite satisfied" was mostly expressed, betraying an evident fall in enthusiasm with this type of living arrangement as they became older. In the absence of a wife, and should they remain a lone parent, the number of very satisfied falls considerably below the average for all ages, and for over 75 year olds, a large number declare that they are not very or not at all satisfied. The impression we are left with is that the continued dependency of children of an adult age is a major source of worry and concern, tingeing on men's psychological and material well-being, particularly in the absence of a wife, a context which appears to further exacerbate inter-generation conflict.

Women show a different attitude from men of the same age, particularly with regard to being a single parent at the oldest extreme (80 and over), where they express above average satisfaction with their family network. We could generalise by saying that men are very much dependent on their wives with

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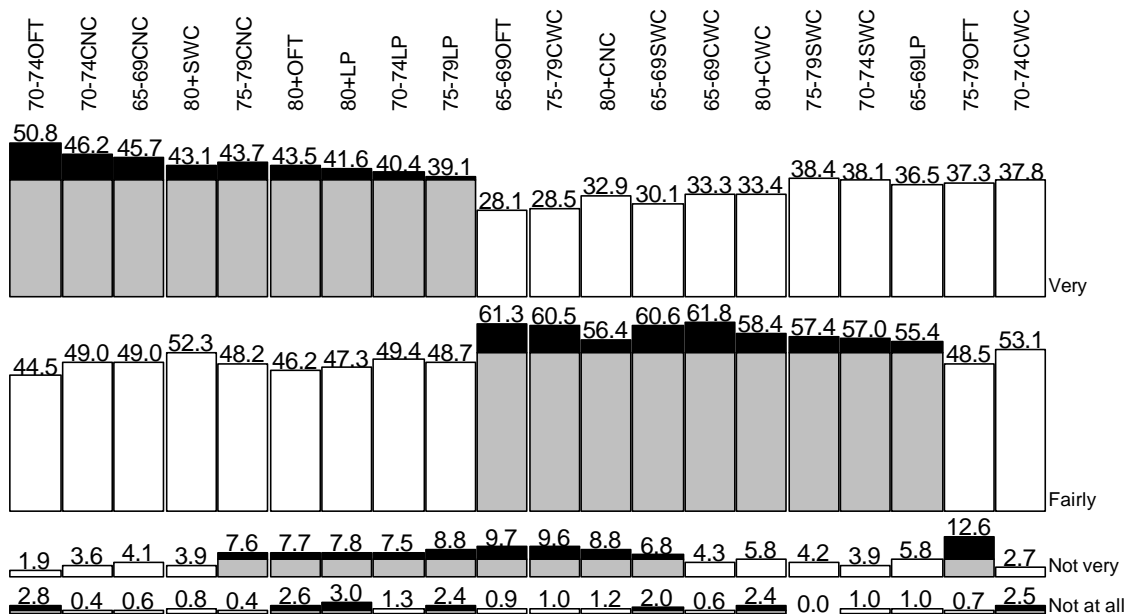
<sup>4</sup> Of all the developed countries, Italy is that in which children tend to live longer at home. The "extended family" depends on structural factors: length of studies; economic - difficult in finding a first job; cultural - whereby leaving the family of origin coincides with creating a new family, there being no gap in between.

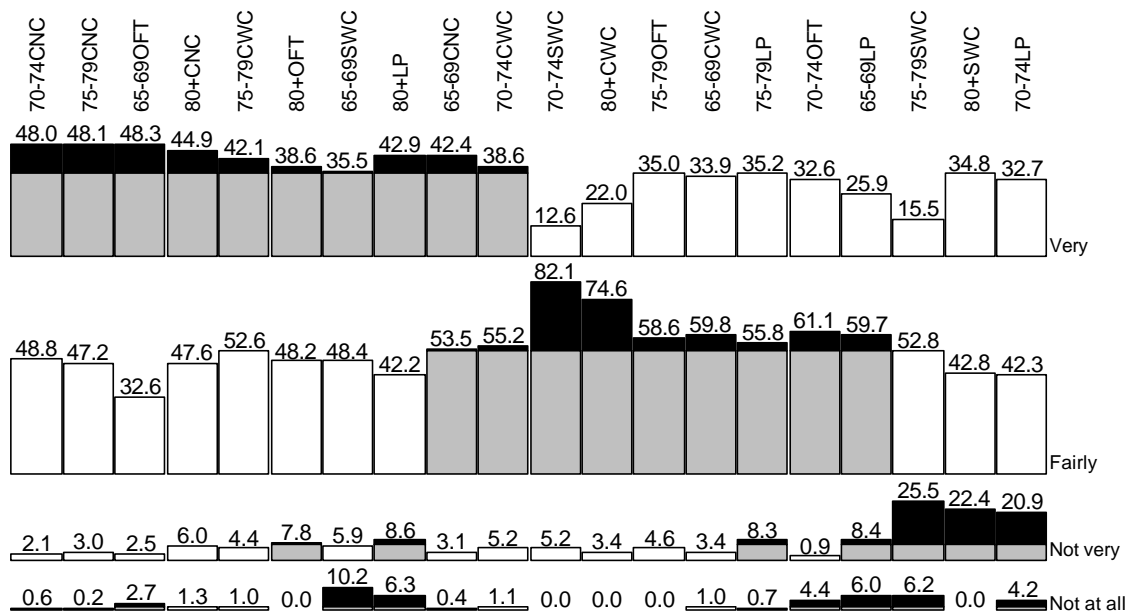
regard to their family relationships, while elderly women base these more on their children, even more so if cohabiting.

Living alone generates unsatisfactory family relationships. For all age groups, those expressing little satisfaction or total dissatisfaction with this sphere of life were in fact those living alone. It is worth noting that women, albeit with low frequency, stated that they were not at all satisfied much less often than men, thus confirming their known ability to adapt to different circumstances.

Other family living arrangements satisfy men more frequently than women. Dissatisfaction is most often expressed by women aged 75-79 years old compared with the highest frequency of being very satisfied among men aged 65-69 years old. Obviously these living arrangements, which guarantee a measure of protection and assistance, are gratifying. Family relationships for elderly men are viewed positively when obligations regarding their offspring are not involved, and given a context where the presence of a wife or another family member guarantees support.

**Figure 3. Satisfaction family relationship - FEMALES**



**Figure 4. Satisfaction family relationship - MALES**

### DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO AGEING

Whether there are different approaches to ageing and, if so, whether these evolve as one progressively ages was the focus of the third phase of the research. A clustering method was applied to pinpoint various types of behaviour in relation to different modalities of the structural variables. Only the most significant modalities were used to interpret the clusters. Four different types emerged, involving both males and females, although with certain distinguishing features depending on gender, and one type exclusively for females.

- *Passive acceptance*

This is the largest cluster comprising 50.9% women and 58.2% men. This group includes those who do not pursue any activity outside the home, have no particular interests, do not read or follow political affairs, nor are involved in any voluntary work. These belong to the lowest educated group and mainly reside in Southern Italy and in medium-small authorities.

How are they distinguished by gender?

*For Women:* are mainly married, aged 75-79 years, pass their free time watching three hours or more television. Although not suffering from any serious disease, they state that they do not feel well. They declare that they are fairly satisfied in all living domains.

*For Men:* aged over 75 years old, pass their leisure time with friends, which they are fairly happy.

- *New interests and commitments*

This cluster comprises 9.2% women and 13.6% men. A strong social commitment is the distinguishing feature of this group, which may take a traditional form such as religion, or more innovative forms - voluntary works, political involvement, or member of an association. These individuals make quality life choices, are satisfied with how their free time is organized, regularly read newspapers and books, go on holidays and arrange trips (tables 8 and 9).

In structural terms this is a medium-highly educated group, living in North Italy.

This cluster contains the most gender differences regarding structural features. Women are more concentrated in the first two elderly age groups, that is aged 65-74 years, while for men the 65-69 year old group is also significant. Women are alone by choice - unmarried, separated, divorced and mainly reside in medium-small local authorities (2,001-10,000 inhabitants). Men, however, tend to be married.

- *Home and family*

This cluster comprises 18.8% women and 21.7% men.

A distinguishing feature of this group is the high level of satisfaction expressed in all life spheres, a steady, good economic status, and for men, home owner and a clear propensity towards family relationships. Men are interested in politics, associations, voluntary work, reading. Significance levels are however very low. Women showed disinterest in all these areas and levels were significant although only slightly so. Education levels were high.

For men is important also the employed status. They still have a work-generated income allowing them to judge their economic status as satisfactory. They are quite satisfied with their work, health and economic status. Employed status, high education levels, belonging to the young-old age group and residence in towns with more than 50,001 inhabitants prevailed among the structural variables.

Regarding structural variables, for women residence in the North-east of Italy and in towns with more than 50,001 inhabitants and belonging to the 65-74 year age group were significant.

**Table 7. Different approaches to ageing: modalities of groups emerged.**

| <i>Group</i>   | <i>%</i>       |              | <b>Social indicators</b>  | <i>Structural variables</i>  |   |
|--|----------------|--------------|---|--|---|
|  | <i>females</i> | <i>males</i> |   | <i>females</i>   | <i>males</i>  |
| <i>Passive acceptance</i>                              | 50.9           | 58.2         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cinema, theatre, books, newspapers: no</li> <li>• Associations, voluntary: no</li> <li>• Health and economic satisfaction: not very and not at all</li> <li>• Self-perceived health status: poor</li> <li>• Assessment of family's economic resources: lacking</li> </ul>  | south and islands of Italy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• status: married</li> <li>• education: elementary school and no diploma</li> <li>• age: 75-79 years old</li> <li>• commune with less than 10,000 inhabitants</li> </ul> | education: elementary school south of Italy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• age: over 75 years old</li> <li>• commune with less than 10,000 inhabitants</li> </ul> |
| <i>Extreme old age</i>                                 | 6.7            | 6.6          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health status satisfaction: not very and not at all</li> <li>• Self-perceived health status: poor and very poor</li> <li>• Paid service for domestic help: yes</li> <li>• Paid service for person who assist an elderly person: yes</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• age: over 80 years old</li> <li>• lone person</li> <li>• education: high school and junior school</li> <li>• centre of metropolitan region</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• age: over 80 years old</li> <li>• widowed</li> <li>• lone person, other family type</li> </ul>                                     |
| <i>Extreme old age (with economic dissatisfaction)</i> | 14.4           |              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health status satisfaction: not at all</li> <li>• Self-perceived health status: poor and very poor</li> <li>• Chronic disease: more than three</li> <li>• Paid service for person who assist an elderly person: yes</li> <li>• Economic status satisfaction: not very and not at all</li> <li>• Assessment of family's economic resources: lacking and totally insufficient</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• age: over 80 years old</li> <li>• widowed</li> <li>• other family type</li> </ul>   |   |

|  |      |      |  |  |  |
|--|------|------|--|--|--|
| <i>New interests and commitments</i>                             | 9.2  | 13.6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member of an associations: yes</li> <li>• Voluntary organizations: yes</li> <li>• Political involvement: yes</li> <li>• Health, family and friendship satisfaction: very good</li> <li>• Self-perceived health status: very good</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• education: university, high and junior school</li> <li>• north-east of Italy</li> <li>• age 65-74 years old</li> <li>• married status: unmarried, separated, divorced</li> <li>• commune with 2,001-10,000 inhabitants</li> </ul> | north of Italy couple with children education: high school 65-69 years old   |
| <i>for women: Home and family for men: Home, family and work</i> | 18.8 | 21,7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (for men) status employed</li> <li>• Books, holiday cinema, theatre newspapers: yes</li> <li>• Chronic disease: none</li> <li>• Voluntary organizations, members of association: no</li> <li>• Self-perceived health status: very good and good</li> <li>• Health status, economic status, leisure time and friendship network satisfaction: fairly</li> <li>• Satisfactory friendship network and family relationship: very good</li> <li>• Assessment of family's economic resources: acceptable</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• age: 65-74 years old</li> <li>• couple with or without children</li> <li>• north-east of Italy</li> <li>• education: high and junior school</li> <li>• commune with more than 50,001 inhabitants</li> </ul>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• age: 65-69 years old</li> <li>• education: university, high and junior school</li> <li>• north-west of Italy</li> <li>• couple without children</li> <li>• commune with more than 50,001 inhabitants</li> </ul> |

- *Extreme old age*

This cluster is quite small, just 6.6% men. For women this cluster is divided in two different groups: one group comprises 6.7% women and second group 14.4% women. Their status is strongly linked to age and the oldest old people are usually affected by two or more diseases (see Gargiulo, Iannucci, 2000). Women enter old-old age status earlier than men, the 75-79 age group being significant in assigning women to this group. A negative perception of satisfaction levels is the main distinguishing factor. Moreover, dissatisfaction with their economic status is more urgent for women of second group than women of first group. Lack of independence among older women with regard to home ownership and income aggravate an already negative situation. In first group, instead, a good perception of their economic status was significant.

## CONCLUSIONS

The fact that almost half part of our population expressed a similar type of behaviour, labeled, “passive acceptance of old age” would appear to belie the hypothesis that, once having retired, the remaining life span could be divided into different stages corresponding to different approaches to old age. What emerges from our results is that only the oldest-old are clearly distinguished by a negative life attitude, which however is related to disease and illness rather than age. Indeed, the size of the group described as “extreme old-age” is less than a quarter of all those aged 80 and over, a significant but not exclusive feature of this group.

However, what is a major differential in the approach to old age is education. Those who do not passively accept old age and who are not conditioned by poor health are divided into two groups: the better educated who opt for new interests and commitments and the less well-educated who freely choose home and family.

Well-educated men are further subdivided into those who continue to work and those who do not. Age also pinpoints a time lag between men and women. Women put off the passive acceptance of old age, so that while found in all elderly age groups, this is only significant among 75-79 year olds. Men put a stop to outside interests and commitments earlier than women, continuing these only during the younger elderly stages, while women continue until they are 70-74 years old.

A time lag also occurs regards opting for home and family, this being significant for women in the 70-74 year old group, and for men in the 65-69 year old group.

The hypothesis that family structure influences satisfaction with all life spheres is contradicted by the multivariate analysis. This hypothesis is only confirmed for the cluster which approached old age by taking up new interests and commitments. This approach was only possible for women who are alone by choice. Such an option for married men is more straight forward, their wives facilitating rather than hindering such an approach.



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