'WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE' AND INTERGENERATIONAL CARING: THEORETICAL AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Vassiliki Lentza & Vassiliki Deliyanni-Kouimtzis

School of Psychology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Περίληψη: The term "sandwich generation" or "women in the middle' is a metaphor used to conceptualise mid-life women who simultaneously care for dependent children and frail elders in family. The welfare state shrinkage and the economic crisis in Greece resulted to the emergence of new forms of intergenerational relationships within families: there's an increase in the number of children that return to their parental home even in their 30s and 40s (boomerang children) and a growth in multigenerational coresidence. On the other hand, the ageing of population and the improvements in longevity have expanded the time living with the elders and their needs in caring. All the abovementioned changes that take place within the family context are indicators of intergenerational solidarity and cohesion but, nevertheless, have increased the burden of caring for women of the "sandwich generation". The aim of the paper is twofold: (1) to discuss the relationship between gender and generation in families using 'sandwich generation' women as a focal point, and (2) to discuss the role of social policy in supporting the caregiving capacity of families and women in particular.

Introduction

Feminist writers argue that the public/private dichotomy, which connects femininity with the private sphere and masculinity with the public one, has reinforced gender division. In this context, women are excluded from the public realm and family-related issues are regarded as feminine (Pateman, 1989). As a result, women are considered to be responsible for care-giving in the family and for childbearing. The public/private binary has been challenged by feminist theory, nevertheless, families are still considered an important dynamic context that formulates women's experiences and identities. In feminist thinking, experiences in families are shaped not only by gender, but gender intersects with other forms of inequality such as race, class, ethnicity (Ferree, 2010). This is called intersectionality and is a central theme in feminist studies (Andersen, 2005).

McDaniel (2001, 2004) adds a new perspective in intersectionality by using the concept of generation as well. Generation is examined as a process that organizes and shapes our experiences just as gender, social class or ethnicity. In other words, generation is viewed as a "structural dimension of stratification, a lens through which to observe and analyze social change, a basis for identity development, a social construct that exists through time, a social relation and a social process" (McDaniel, 2004 p. 27). In this perspective, generations shouldn't be associated with age and with age cohorts. On the contrary, generation is something that we 'do' when we interact with other family members and we adopt positions that are in concordance with our expectations of what a generation is. She argues that if we study together gender and generation as processes taking place in the family context we can gain new analytical insights (McDaniel, 2001, 2004).

In the rest of the paper we discuss the relationship between gender and generation in families using 'sandwich generation' women as a focal point. The articles cited below don't necessarily adopt the above theoretical framework, but the analysis that is going to follow may serve as an indicator of the central position that generation holds in women's experience in the family. Furthermore, social policy considerations will be discussed.

The "sandwich generation"

Demographic changes such as increases in life expectancy and decreases in fertility have transformed family structure. Bengston (2001) has suggested that the best way to describe the modern American family structure is by using the metaphor "beanpole" that is a family structure in which the shape is long and thin, with more family generations alive but with fewer members in each generation. The construction of the beanpole family could be applicable in European families as well, given the broad similarity of demographic trends in developed countries. For instance, the fertility rate in Greece is below the OECD average (1,53). On the other hand, the old-age support ratio in Greece, calculated as the ratio between the population over 64 years old and the working age population, is one of lowest among OECD countries and by 2050 is expected to fall further (www.oecd.org). Having in mind all these demographic tendencies, we could speculate that the "beanpole" family structure could characterize Greek families as well.

These structural changes have increased the number of different generations being alive or even living together. As a result, one generation is n the middle of the needs of the others. The metaphor "woman-in-the-middle" was suggested by Brody (1981) in order to describe the experiences of middle-aged women who are located in-between the demands of different generations within the family. According to Brody (1981) the metaphor best describes the women's experiences in the family since it is more likely family members to count on them and usually women maintain the bonds of intergenerational solidarity (Willson et al., 2003; Werner et al., 2005).

Whether the sandwich generation adequately describes a majority of families today has been debated. According to Evandrou and Glaser (2004) being 'caught in the middle', in terms of having simultaneous care-giving responsibilities to dependent children and frail parents whilst in paid work, isn't so typical in the U.K. Rosenthal, Martin-Matthews and Matthews (1996) report the same pattern in Canada even though a more recent study provide different information, that is 3 to 10 Canadians

are sandwiched (Williams, 2004). In a review conducted by Uhlenberg (1993), the author concluded that being 'sandwiched' is an uncommon experience. We should note, however, that the majority of the studies cited by Uhlenberg (1993) had limitations since the findings don't derive from a representative, probability sample. On the other hand, in a large longitudinal U.S. study with a representative group of American women showed that the size of the sandwich generation depends on the criterion used: By using only the criterion of co-residence it seems that only the one percent of the participants can be characterised as being members of the sandwich generations. But, when using both the criteria of financial support and of care-giving, it seems that the one third of all women in U.S.A. are 'in the middle' of generations. According to this survey the majority of these women are out of the labour force which gives them the time to provide care for the other family members. However, they have higher family incomes and therefore the means to support family members financially and the ability to work less (Pierret, 2006). Other studies indicate that these women are out of the labour force due to their commitment to the generations in need and to the lack of care services (Marenzi & Pagani, 2004). In a large Norwegian study 3-9 per cent of the women between age 35 and 45 have either both children and parents in need at the same time or they also provide care (practical help or personal care) to parents on a regular basis (Daatand, Veenstra & Lima, 2010).

Regardless of the frequency of the sandwich situation, it seems that being "caught in the middle" might have severe impact when it does occur. Data derived from a Cuban study showed that high levels of stress in women age 40-59 were associated with care-giving for older, sick, or younger family members (Artiles, 2008). Data from Estonia replicate these findings (Laidmae, 2010). Studies conducted in the U.S.A. showed that sandwich generation membership is associated with lower levels of positive health behaviours (Chassin, et al., 2010), with an inability to find a balance in life (Marks, 1998) and with psychological problems (Tebes & Irish, 2000). Other studies, however, show different results. For instance, it seems that being caught in the middle and participating in the labour force does not decrease satisfaction with life (Künemund, 2006) and isn't associated with feelings of loneliness (De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 2008). Grundy and Henretta (2006) criticized the sandwich generation concept on the basis that the mere existence of parents, children and grandchildren competing for attention is not necessarily

experienced as a burden. According to Künemund (2006), the burden that women in the middle have when caring for the elderly doesn't necessarily get worse when they also have children in need. However, De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra (2008) reported high levels of loneliness in cases that support is given to children and not to the elderly maybe due to parents' disappointment when their children didn't live up to their expectations.

The aforementioned inconsistencies in findings have led some researchers to consider the sandwich generation as a myth (Loomis & Booth, 1995; Künemund, 2006). However, a closer examination of the relevant literature taken by Künemund (2006) showed that the findings may reflect a variety of definitions and theoretical frameworks that researchers adopt in studying the phenomenon. For instance, Tsolidis (2011) gives a different perspective by using the term 'sandwich generation' to describe women immigrants in Australia that are between their parents' nostalgia for the land left behind and their own children's increasing distance from this culture. Künemund (2006, p. 16) suggests four structural definitions of the sandwich generation: a broad definition that takes into account the existence of kin of both older and younger generations, a definition that additionally takes into account personal care for a parent or parent-in-law and/ or children and a more restrictive definition that additionally takes into account labour force participation. Depending on all the above criteria and definitions we might have different results.

Künemund (2006) argues that the sandwich situation will be an insignificant concept in the future and he discusses a variety of reasons to establish his position. However, we assume that the picture in Greece might be much more complex and we think that the sandwich situation in the Greek context represents an interesting field of study for a variety of reasons. Intergenerational relationships in Mediterranean countries are based on geographical proximity and frequency of contacts (Hank, 2007) and it is very common to have a traditional family structure such as co-residence (Kohli et al. 2005). Furthermore, it is a common pattern in Greece women to have the responsibility of taking care of their grandchildren and of their elderly parents as well (Symeonides, 1998). On the other hand, Greece is amongst the European countries with high rates of boomerang children who return to the family home and the numbers are expected to increase due to the economic crisis (Iacovou &

5

Parisi, 2009). Therefore, it is of great importance to take into account the cultural patterns that affect the experience of being 'sandwiched' and to produce context specific information in order to gain a deeper understanding of Greek women experiences within the family context. Unfortunately, so far we lack specific knowledge about this issue.

Social policy considerations

It has been mentioned that there might be differences in the intergenerational relationships and in the intergenerational caring depending on the welfare state provision of each country (Daatand & Herlofson, 2003). Hank (2007) illustrates this argument by giving the example of Scandinavia where parents don't count on support provided by their children given the services provided by the welfare state. This tendency is called crowding-out which is the case when high service levels results in reduced levels of family help, meaning that intergenerational caring is replaced by state care (Künemund & Rein, 1999). However, that doesn't mean that the intergenerational solidarity is in stake. There are evidences showing a different connection between family and state care (von Oorschot & Arts, 2004). For instance, Motel-Klingebiel et al. (2005) showed that the stronger infrastructure of formal services, the greater support provided to older people by family members. It seams like formal services encourage and stimulate family care since the carer is more supported and doesn't feel obliged to take on this responsibility. In these cases the intergenerational relationships are warmer because care is not considered a burden (Simoni & Trifiletti, 2004). Public resources usually are provided in cases that there is no private social safety net (Singer, Biegel & Ethridge, 2010). Nevertheless, family support services shouldn't be seen as a substitution for intergenerational caring provided only in cases of extreme need but should be available to all families since they strengthen family ties and enhance family relationships.

Taking into consideration the demographic changes together with the economic crisis and the rapid economic changes that are taking place in Greece, there might be an aggravation of the burden of women in the middle. The shrinkage of the welfare state as a result of the economic crisis in Greece may increase the elders'

dependency on their children. The reduction of services, pension or benefits towards the elders, on one hand, and the high rates of unemployment amongst young people on the other, means that the responsibilities placed on women in families are getting even heavier. The situation is more intense in families that lack the economic recourses to support all family members since the women that take on the caring role find it hard to participate in the labour market or they reduce the intensity of their working. This reflects great resources flows for the economy but this is only one part of the picture; women's options and possibilities are limited and income inequalities are exacerbated. According to Marenzi and Pagani (2004), family support policies that help families to sustain the burden can increase the number of women participating in the labour market and improve women's position.

Evandrou and Glaser (2004) give another perspective arguing that women in that position usually opt for part-time or flexible work resulted in a reduced pension and in limited benefits and they stress the need both paid and unpaid work to be recognised. What is most concerning is that old-age poverty of women carers is a significant possibility in Greece (Viitanen, 2005). McDaniel (2011) discusses the balance between paid and unpaid work or care by using the social provisioning concept based on Power's work who argues that caring and any domestic labour are integral parts of any economic system. Under this perspective, paid work and caring or any other kind of unpaid work shouldn't be separated since they all contribute to the economy and they constitute important aspects of the economic activity. In other words, as McDaniel (2011, p. 217) puts it: "Provisioning characterizes all we do for our families and ourselves, whether in paid work or in family, in private or in public".

McDaniel (2002) connects women's intergenerational caring with the neo-liberal agenda: women's participation in the labour market is valued, however, any kind of unpaid work such as caring is considered private and it is devalued. In this context, women's unpaid work in the family is necessary, since they sustain the family cohesion without any costs, but it isn't taken into consideration in discussions about women's citizenship (McDaniel, 2002). The mainstream notions of citizenship have been constructed on the public/ private dichotomy and they associate citizenship with the public sphere. For instance, empirical evidence from Greece has shown that understandings of citizenship remain gendered, meaning that citizenship is associated

both with the public realm and with masculinity (Deliyanni, 1999; Arnot, Araujo, Deliyanni, & Ivinson, 2000). The feminist citizenship theory has challenged the above association and a broader definition of citizenship is suggested that includes private sphere values as well (Arnot, 1994). The idea is that caring should be acknowledged as a significant dimension of citizenship for both men and women (Kershaw, 2005). Therefore, social policy initiatives such as promotion of women's employment or recognition of unpaid work aren't enough to increase gender equity. Caring should be considered an important aspect of masculinity as well and policies should aim to encourage men to perform care activities and to enable both women and men to participate in caring and employment (Fraser, 1994).

Conclusion

The current paper aimed at illustrating the way that gender and generation intersect in order to shape the experiences of women within the family. To do so we used the example of women who are between the needs of both their parents and their children or grandchildren. The women's connection with the private sphere and with caring has supported their subordinate position which is getting even worse when examined in conjunction with the concept of generation since intergenerational relationships increase demands on women to care. On the other hand, it seems that caring is an important dimension for the construction of women's identities in the family. Women 'do' generation by caring for others. In other words, they verify their relationships as generational based on caring.

Some researchers challenge and criticise the sandwich generation concept due to the inconsistency in the relative literature. The use of the term maybe is misleading since the word 'generation" refers to a collective experience. Having McDaniel's arguments as the starting point we could say that maybe there are multiple ways of 'doing' sandwich generation. So, the question shouldn't be whether there is a typical experience of being 'sandwiched' or not but rather how these women, even if they are a minority, experience this situation. Furthermore, we might have a multiple interaction of different dimensions of stratification such as social class, race, and ethnicity that can alter this experience. Therefore, this field deserves further research.

Intergenerational relationships and exchanges of support among generations will become even more important for family because of longer years of shared lives (Bengston, 2001). On one hand, intergenerational caring could be an indicator of solidarity in the family. On the other hand, the burden put on women as informal carers is getting heavier. Social and economic trends raise major social policy issues. The availability of state support or of any kind of family support policies can affect positively women's participation in the labour market and can also contribute both to their capacity to adapt themselves to changing economic opportunities and to strengthening family ties. It also remains a critical social policy issue whether caring and unpaid work should be recognised by governments and communities. However, in the current paper we would like to suggest that, for the promotion of gender equity within the family, care-giving should be associated with masculine identities as well and for doing so a wider conception of citizenship must be adopted which also takes into consideration private sphere values. Therefore, social policy strategies should aim at promoting and supporting both men's and women's care-giving roles.

References

Andersen, M. (2005). "Thinking about women: A quarter-century's view", *Gender and Society*, 19, 337- 355.

Arnot M. (1994). "Feminism and Democratic Education", in Santome Tores J. (Ed.), *Rethinking Education,* Madrid: Murata Press.

Arnot, M., Araujo, H., Deliyanni, K. and Ivinson, G. (2000). "Changing femininity, changing concepts of citizenship in public and private spheres", *The European Journal of Women's Studies,* 7, 149–168.

Artiles, L. (2008). "Women in the Middle: Cuba's Sandwich Generation", *International Journal of Cuban Health & Medicine*, 10 (3), 48.

Bengtson, V. (2001). "Beyond the nuclear family: The increasing importance of multigenerational bonds", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *63*, 1 - 16.

Brody, E. M. (1981). "Women in the middle and family help to older people", *The Gerontologist*, 21 (5), 471-480.

Chassin, L., Macy, J. T., Seo, D-C., Presson, C. C. and Sherman, S. J. (2010). "The Association between Membership in the Sandwich Generation and Health Behaviours: a Longitudinal Study", *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 31 (1), 38–46.

Daatand, S. O., Veenstra, M. and Lima, I. A. (2010). "Norwegian sandwiches: On the prevalence and consequences of family and work role squeezes over the life course", *European Journal of Ageing*, 7 (4), 271-281.

Daatland, S.O. and Herlofson, K. (2003). "Lost solidarity or changed solidarity: a comparative European view of normative family solidarity", *Ageing & Society*, 23, 537–560.

De Jong Gierveld, J. and Dykstra, P. A. (2008). "Virtue is its own reward? Support-giving in the family and loneliness in middle and old age", *Ageing & Society,* 28, 271–287.

Deliyanni- Kouimtzis, V. (1999). "Emis fteme…: O logos ton scheseon tvn filon sto plaisio tis provlimatikis yia tin idiotita tou politi (It's our fault…: Gender relationships 'discourses' in the context of citizenship)", (Conference proceedings, Athens 9-10 of February 1996).

Evandrou, M. and Glaser, K. (2004). "Family, work ad quality of life; changing economic and social roles through the lifecourse", *Ageing & Society*, 24, 771–792

Ferree, M .M. (2010). "Filling the glass: gender perspectives on families", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 420– 439.

Fraser, N. (1994). "After the Family Wage: Gender Equity and the Welfare State", *Political Theory,* 22 (4), 591-618.

Grundy, E. and Henretta, J. C. (2006). "Between elderly parents and adult children: a new look at the intergenerational care provided by the 'sandwich generation", *Ageing & Society*, 26 (5), 707-722.

Hank, K. (2007). "Proximity and contacts between older parents and their children: A European comparison", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 157 – 173.

Iacovou, M. and Parisi, L. (2009). "Leaving Home", in Ermisch, J. and Brynin, M. (Eds), *Changing Relationships*, Routledge: New York, London.

Kershaw, P. (2005). *Carefair: Rethinking the Responsibilities and Rights of Citizenship*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Kohli, M., Künemund, H., & Lüdicke, J. (2005). "Family structure, proximity and contact", in Borsch-Supan, A. (Ed.), *First Results from SHARE*, Mannheim Research Institute for the Economics of Aging.

Künemund, H. & Rein, M. (1999). "There is more to receiving than needing: Theoretical arguments and empirical explorations of crowding in and crowding out", *Ageing Societies*, 19, 93-121.

Künemund, H. (2006). "Changing Welfare States and the 'Sandwich Generation': Increasing Burden for the Next Generation?", *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* , 1 (2), 11–30.

Laidmäe, V., Hansson, L., Tulva, T., Lausvee, E. and Kasepalu, U. (2010). "Multi-generation family in Estonia: multiple roles and the stress of living together with elderly people", *The Internet Journal of Geriatrics and Gerontology,* 5 (2).

Loomis, L. S. and Booth, A. (1995). "Multigenerational caregiving and well-being: The myth of the beleaguered sandwich generation", *Journal of Family Issues,* 16*,* 131–148.

Marenzi, A. and Pagani, L. (2004). "The labour market participation of 'sandwich generation' Italian women", http://rlab.lse.ac.uk/LoWER/final_papers/pagani.pdf

Marks, N. F. (1998). "Does it hurt to care? Caregiving, work-family conflict and midlife well-being.", *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* 60 (4), 951-966.

McDaniel, S. A. (2001). 'Born at the right time: gendered generations and webs of entitlement and responsibility', *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 26 (2): 193–214.

McDaniel, S. A. (2002). "Women's changing relations to the state and citizenship: Caring and intergenerational relations in globalizing western democracies". *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 39, 1–26.

McDaniel, S. A. (2004). "Generationing gender: Justice and the division of welfare", *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18, 27–44.

McDaniel, S. A. (2011). "A feminist vision for caring- employment integration in Canada", in Krull C. and Sempruch J. (Eds), *A life in balance? Reopening the family- work debate*, Vancouver: UBC Press.

Motel-Klingebiel, A., Tesch-Roemer, C. and Von Kondratowitz, H.-J. (2005). "Welfare states do not crowd out the family: Evidence for mixed responsibility from comparative analyses", *Ageing & Society*, 25, 863-882.

Pateman, C. (1989). "Feminists critiques of the public/private dichotomy", in Pateman, C., *The disorder of women,* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Pierret, C. R. (2006). "The 'sandwich generation': women caring for parents and children", *Monthly Labor Review*, September, 3-9.

Rosenthal, C. J., Martin-Matthews, A. and Matthews, S. H. (1996). "Caught in the middle? Occupancy in multiple roles and help to parents in a national probability sample of Canadian adults", *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 51B, S274–283.

Simoni, S. and Trifiletti, R. (2004). "Caregiving in transition in Southern Europe: Neither complete altruists nor free-riders", *Social Policy & Administration,* 38 (6), 678- 705.

Singer, G. H. S., Biegel, D. E. and Ethridge, B. L.(2010). "Trends impacting public policy support for caregiving families", *Journal of Family Social Work*, 13 (3), 191- 207.

Symeonides, Ch. (1998). "Morfes kinonikou apoklismou: apascholisi ke anergia stin Ellatha (Forms of social exclusion: women's employment and unemployment in Greece)", (Athens: Sakis Karagiorgas Foundation).

Tebes, J. K. and Irish, J. T. (2000). "Promoting resilience among children of sandwiched generation caregiving: Women through caregiver mutual help", *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community*; 20, 139-158.

Tsolidis, G. (2011). "Memories of Home: Family in the Diaspora", *Journal of Comparative Family Studies,* http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3248/is_201105/ai_n57804906/

Uhlenberg, P. 1993. "Demographic change and kin relationships in later life", in Maddox G. L. and Lawton M. P. (Eds.), *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics,* New York: Springer.

Viitanen, T.K. (2005). *Informal elderly care and female labour force participation across Europe*, ENEPRI Research Report No. 13.

von Oorschot, W. and Arts, W. (2004). "The Social Capital of European Welfare States: the crowding out hypothesis revisited", *Journal of European Social Policy,* 15, 5-26.

Werner, P., Buchbinder, E., Lowenstein, A., et al. (2005). "Mediation across generations: A tri-generational perspective", *Journal of Aging Studies*, 19, 489- 502.

Williams, C. (2004). "The sandwich generation*", Canadian Social Trends,* 5, 16–21.

Willson, A. E., Shuey, K. M, and Elder, G. H. (2003). "Ambivalence in the relationship of adult children to aging parents and in-laws", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 65, 1055-1072.