

Comparing Patterns of Grandparents' Support for Caring Grandchildren: Italy and Japan

The purpose of this research is to investigate the determinants of grandparents' support for caring their grandchildren in Italy and Japan. Although there is a great geographical distance between the two countries, we can easily identify some similarities. For instance, the total period fertility rate (TPFR) in 2004 was 1.33 for Italy and 1.50 for Japan. Both countries stand at the far below-replacement level. Furthermore, from a demographic viewpoint, they are, albeit with various expressions, conservative in the process of family formation. More specifically, the relatively small number of extramarital births, divorces and cohabitations are marked features in their demographic behaviour, although this is also seen in other Mediterranean and East Asian countries. For example, 14.9% of babies arrived at non-marital Italian couples in 2004, while the percentage for Japanese babies was only 2% in the same year. Moreover, both countries share a strong population ageing due to both reduced fertility and to increased survival, with life expectancy being among the highest in the world (78,6 and 85,5 years for men and women respectively in Japan and 77,4 and 82,8 in Italy in 2005). We may therefore argue that these demographic characteristics distinguish Italy and Japan from other Scandinavian and North-western countries, where divorces, cohabitations and extramarital births are omnipresent.

The features that Italy and Japan have in common are not limited to a demographic behaviour. It was also pointed out that Italy and Japan have similar characteristics in social institution. Although various arguments have been made to explain the institutional characteristics that the two countries share, it appears to be most proper to describe them as familism. According to this argument, countries classified into the familism have some interesting features in their social institution. First, in this type of countries, a family is regarded as a main institution for the welfare of individuals, whereas the government plays a minor role in maintaining and enhancing the level of people's well being. It is, for instance, known that since public supports for child caring are not so generous in Italy and Japan as in Nordic

countries. As a result, a family is the main caretaker of infant children. In the second place, there is the clear gender division of labour in the familist countries. Due to this feature, a husband, in most cases, works outside the home as breadwinner, where his wife tends to stay home as homemaker, especially as mother. It is, indeed, pointed out that the percentage of working mothers with infants is relatively low in Japan and Italy, compared with those in other industrialized countries. The third feature of the familist countries is that a family has strong intergenerational ties. In particular, children have a strong psychological connection with their parents. Due to this feature, a considerable number of young adults live with their parents in Italy and Japan before they get married. This pattern of leaving home is quite different from that in North-western European countries, where young adults tend to leave their natal household soon after their childhood.

As mentioned above, scholars have so far been pointed to social characteristics seen commonly in familist countries such as Italy and Japan. It is, however safe to say that the most primary concern lies in the family relation. For instance, as seen in the “Strong family vs. Weak family” argument, the particular interest has been placed on the strength of the connection between parents and children in the familist society. In short, the characteristics of Italian and Japanese families have been explained from the viewpoint of the parent-child relation. Nevertheless, few studies have been carried out concerning the relationship between parents and grandparents in the familist society. From a demographic viewpoint, the extension of human lifespan will make a three generational family more viable, thereby increasing the opportunities of grandparents helping their children. In the familist countries where public support for child caring is not ample, grandparents’ assistance may be particularly important for mothers who wish to make employment and child rearing compatible. Taking these points into consideration, it is important to investigate the patterns and determinants of grandparents’ support for their children’s child caring.

In this research, we will employ national survey data conducted in Italy and Japan, which are part of the research collaboration between the Italian GGP and the

Japanese GGP project. The Italian data is obtained from the Multi-purpose family survey in 2003. The Japanese counterpart was collected in the International Comparative Survey on Marriage and the Family in 2004. Since the two surveys include similar questions about grandparents' involvement in caring for their grandchildren, we can make a comparative analysis of Italy and Japan regarding the support of grandparents for their children.

In the analysis of this study, we will first compare and contrast the patterns of grandparents' support for caring their grandchildren in Italy and Japan. Subsequently we will, from a comparative perspective, examine the determinants of the patterns of grandparents' support in the two countries. Through this analysis, we attempt to investigate similarities and differences in family relationship in the two familist countries.