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## Life satisfaction among the elderly in Italy in a gender approach

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**Abstract:** Over the last few decades, increasing attention has been paid to the issue of well-being among the elderly, and life satisfaction has been used as an indicator to evaluate older people's life conditions, reflecting multiple and broad domains. This paper sheds some light on this topic with reference to Italy, a country characterized by an increasing ageing population. The aim is to examine life satisfaction among people aged 65 and older and its predictors. We adopt a gender approach to examine whether literature results, which show that elderly men and women have different sources of satisfaction, are confirmed. In doing this, particular attention is given to the role played by the family and its influence on the life satisfaction of older adults. As a Mediterranean country, Italy is assumed to place special importance on these aspects. The data used come from the cross-sectional surveys "Aspects of Daily Life", carried out in Italy by the National Statistical Institute (ISTAT). As we considered the latest available surveys (2010 and 2011), we can rely on a large sample and, thus, test several hypotheses about the predictors of older adults' life satisfaction. The results show unexpected patterns in the determinants of life satisfaction for men and women, and do not confirm previous literature.

**Keywords:** Elderly, life satisfaction, gender differences, family and living arrangement, Italy

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## 1. Introduction

In an ageing society, the well-being of the elderly is an important area for research and at the top of the public policy agenda. Considering the steadily increasing life expectancy, the very low birth rate, and the high proportion of people over age 65 in Western societies, it is easy to understand the growing interest of both policy makers and social researchers for the conditions of aged persons, and the increasing attention paid in the last decades to the issue of well-being among the elderly.

In gerontology, life satisfaction is a concept frequently used to assess subjective well-being (Pinquart and Sörensen 2000, Silverman et al. 2008). A substantial body of research has, indeed, considered life satisfaction as subjective evaluation of the quality of life in general (Fagerström et al. 2007), an important factor in successful ageing (Tate, Lah and Cuddy 2003; Jang 2004; Daatland 2005; Berg et al. 2006), and an indicator of efficacy in old age (Freund and Baltes 1998). Thus, it would be advantageous for policy makers to know how conditions of older people are linked with life satisfaction.

Good health, sound finances, and social integration have all been demonstrated to positively influence the quality of life of older persons (Pinquart and Sörensen 2000; George 2006; Gaymu and Springer 2010); however, the picture is still far from clear (Meléndez et al. 2009). One problem, for instance, is connected with the fact that, since socio-demographic resources are strongly related to one another, their actual effect on life satisfaction needs to be clarified (Fernández-Ballesteros, Zamarrón and Ruíz 2001; Bourque et al. 2005). For example, since physical health problems may inhibit people from interacting with friends and other individuals, their effect could be overestimated if we do not control for social integration. Another problem which is underlined by the literature refers to the fact that the determinants of life satisfaction may differ by age, gender, living arrangements and cultural context (Pinquart and Sörensen 2000; Bourque et al. 2005; Walker 2005). Indeed, subjective well-being is influenced by the individual's aspirations, and these in turn depend on personal preferences and values, which are adjusted according to objective changes in

the environment. Thus, the literature has proposed that the role of the determinants of older adults' well-being may change according to the environmental (cultural and institutional) climate and the individual circumstances in which people find themselves.

With respect to gender, some researchers have argued that well-being models do not apply to older men and women in the same way (Pinquart and Sörensen 2000; Bourque et al. 2005; Gaymu and Springer 2010), because differences in socialization may lead to gender differences in goals and values and, thus, in sources of life satisfaction. Existing literature suggests a stronger relationship between socio-economic status and life satisfaction for men than for women, and a higher importance of social integration and functional ability for women's life satisfaction than for men's one (Bourque et al. 2005).

However, some studies point out that regarding all older men or women as coming from the same mould may distort the results, since gender differences in the predictors of subjective well-being may be also influenced by living arrangements. For example, Gaymu and Springer (2010) suggested (and partially found) that mentioned gender differences in the determinants of life satisfaction do not exactly apply if the older person lives alone. This may be due to the fact that, on the one hand, men do not or no longer have a partner to take care of the social aspects of their life, and, on the other hand, women do not or no longer have the financial support of a partner.

In this paper, we would like to shed further light on these points. Given the availability of a large sample of older adults, which allows us to overcome the dataset limits often reported in previous studies, and of rather detailed individual and contextual data, we aim to analyse in depth the factors associated with life satisfaction of Italian older men and women, and whether these factors differ among elderly living alone. We assume that the same conditions do not predict life satisfaction in the same way for men and women (Cheng and Chan 2006), and that gender differences in determinants of life satisfaction decrease among older people living alone.

In doing this, we also have the opportunity to further explore how family resources influence the satisfaction of older adults in a southern European country characterized by a rapid rise in the number of elderly people and by strong family ties (Dalla Zuanna and Micheli 2004). We intend to verify whether – as suggested by some previous studies (Gaymu and Springer 2010) – family and contacts with children are extremely important for life satisfaction, even among recent cohorts of the elderly.

The data used come from the latest two surveys “Aspects of Daily Life”, carried out in Italy by the National Statistical Institute (ISTAT) in 2010 and 2011. The two surveys in conjunction provide a nationally representative sample of almost 18,000 individuals aged 65 or older living in private households. This allows us to have sufficient cases to perform a robust study about the predictors of older people's life satisfaction, both by gender and by gender and living arrangements.

## 2. Background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Gender differences in the determinants of life satisfaction

A number of studies, which considered gender differences in the correlates of elderly well-being, have observed that the same conditions do not apply in the same ways to the subjective well-being of older men and women, and have emphasized the importance of separate analyses by gender (Mroczek and Kolarz 1998; Pinquart and Sörensen 2000, 2001; Berg et al. 2006; Cheng and Chan 2006). More specifically, empirical literature has suggested that older women are more sensitive than men to functional ability and to family and social relations (Pinquart and Sörensen 2000; Bourque et al. 2005; Wilhelmson et al. 2005; Cheng and Chan 2006; Oshio 2012), whereas older men are more sensitive than women to economic security (Pinquart and Sörensen 2000; Bourque et al. 2005). For example, Pinquart and Sörensen (2000) found that social network integration was more closely related to life satisfaction for women, and socio-economic status was more important for life satisfaction and happiness for men. Other studies aiming to analyse the most important aspects for the quality of life found that older women mentioned functional ability and social

relations more often than older men (Bowling 1995; Gurung, Taylor and Seeman 2003; Wilhelmson et al. 2005). Again, regarding the family, marriage is found to provide emotional connectedness to older people, but differently for men and women; the literature showed, indeed, that men rely more on their partners for emotional support, whereas women also report support from their children (Stevens and Westerhof 2006).

Higher sensitivity to functional ability by women's life satisfaction is part of the common suggestion that they are more negatively affected by impairment than men, who are, instead, more likely to distract themselves from negative moods (Nolen-Hoeksema 2001). The remaining mentioned gender differences in the well-being determinants have been explained by the different socialization between men and women. Elderly men have been socialized toward economic success and to develop their occupational careers, while the women grew up and spent most of their young and adult years in a context characterized by limited work opportunities. In addition, older women were used to investing in family care and focusing on roles involving marriage, childrearing, homemaking, and caregiving. Thus, socio-economic status is likely to be important in the evaluation of self and in the determination of subjective well-being for men, whereas family and social relations are likely to be important for the subjective well-being of women.

However, it is worth asking whether these differences are confirmed for older adults living alone. Some authors suggest that the answer is probably negative (Gaymu and Springer 2010). Older adults living alone do not necessarily experience loneliness more frequently than those living with others, but they are surely more vulnerable since they do not have the same material support and care provided when living with other persons. Women living alone do not or no longer have the economic support of a partner, and men do not or no longer have a partner to take care of the social and practical aspects of their life. These considerations have led some scholars to suggest that living arrangements may interact with determinants of the well-being of older men and women: social resources (traditionally considered important mostly by women) may increasingly influence the well-being of older men and financial factors become an important source of well-being even for women. Thus, gender differences in the factors influencing the life satisfaction of the elderly are expected to decrease among older people living alone. The literature seems to partially support this hypothesis. In their study about the determinants of life satisfaction on older people living alone in ten European countries (considered as a whole), Gaymu and Springer (2010) found confirmation to this assumption only for the effect of limitations of daily activities. Less clear results were found with respect to the effects of economic resources and social relations. In fact, empirical evidence showed that some factors connected to social aspects, such as having a child, had a significant effect on the life satisfaction only for men; conversely, some aspects representing economic resources, such as income, affected the life satisfaction only of women (Gaymu and Springer 2010). Unfortunately, the limited size of the samples did not allow a more detailed analysis for each country or at least for geographically differentiated groups of countries.

Given the previous considerations, our hypotheses on gender differences in the determinants of life satisfaction follow two perspectives. We, first, predict that life satisfaction among older men is influenced by a good economic status (measured by education and economic security) more than among women, whereas the family network (represented by household composition and marital status) and social relations (friends, leisure and consumer activities) as well as physical functionality, are more important for women. Furthermore, we predict that among older adults living alone these differences tend to disappear, since life satisfaction of men becomes more sensitive to physical autonomy, family and social relationships, and that of women to economic status.

## **2.2. Family resources and the socio-cultural context**

Several studies have suggested the importance of examining whether factors associated with elderly well-being hold across institutional and cultural boundaries. According to this perspective, factors are often so contextually bound that they should be seen in relation to both the political framework

of a country (Silverman, Hecht and McMillin 2000; Horstmann et al. 2012), and the values and social norms prevailing in different sets of societies (Westerhof and Barrett 2005; Gagliardi et al. 2010). As a consequence, well-being in old age is not only a matter of individual aspects, but also refers to the various constraints and opportunities available in different societies (Walker 2005), and factors cannot work in similar ways in different settings.

This seems to be, in particular, what happens with regards to some family resources, specifically that of adult children. Even if it is unlikely that adult children confer on their elderly parent the same (at least psychological) benefits provided by a partner (de Jong Gierveld, Dykstra and Schenk 2012), they should be a potential vehicle for the exchange of social, emotional, practical, and financial support. Thus, one should expect that a physical closeness with adult children, as in the case of co-residence or frequent contact, is positively associated with elderly well-being.

However, empirical findings are mixed (Polverini and Lamura 2005; Buber and Engelhardt 2008). For example, de Jong Gierveld, Dykstra and Schenk (2012) found that older people living alone in some countries in Eastern Europe were on average lonelier than those living with adult children. Similar results were found by Chen and Short (2008) in their study on Chinese older adults, in which co-residence with immediate family (spouse or children) was associated with better subjective well-being. However, de Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (1999) reported lower levels of loneliness for elderly living with their children compared to those living alone for their Italian sample, but higher levels of loneliness for their Dutch sample. Similarly, Gaymu and Springer (2010) found that having frequent contact with children was positively associated with life satisfaction for women living alone in southern Europe, but the same was not true for those living in central and northern European countries.

The literature tends to explain these results with normative ideas about family responsibilities and shared households. In Europe, in particular, a North-South (and East-West) axis has been suggested to interpret the different roles of adult children on the well-being of their parents (Glaser and Tomassini 2000; Walker 2005; Gaymu and Springer 2010; de Jong Gierveld, Dykstra and Schenk 2012).

In the more familialistic societies of southern (and eastern) Europe, where intergenerational support is the norm and parents have strong expectations on adult children (and vice-versa), family relationships are the most important source of life satisfaction among older people (Polverini and Lamura 2005), and physical closeness with adult children may have a beneficial effect on a parent's well-being. In these countries, one-person households are relatively rare and co-residence with adult children is the norm (Zunzunegui, Béland and Otero 2001). Thus, living alone may not be the situation older adults expect and co-residence with adult children is assumed to have a positive effect on parents' well-being. Co-residence with adult children is, indeed, consistent with normative ideas about family responsibilities and family cohesiveness, and presumably helps promote feelings of inclusiveness and belonging. For similar reasons, frequent contact with adult children may be beneficial for the well-being of older people who live alone.

In the more individualistic societies of northern (and western) Europe, where the residential independence of older parents and adult children is valued and feasible, co-residence with adult children may be associated with low well-being, and older adults may be more content living alone (de Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 1999). In these countries, the preferred living arrangement seems to be "intimacy at a distance" (Rowland 1991 cited by Carr and Bodnar-Deren 2009), and co-residence with adult children is not particularly relevant for elderly subjective well-being. However, some studies show that even frequent contact with children does not influence the well-being of older parents in Nordic countries (Buber and Engelhardt 2008; Gaymu and Springer 2010).

These considerations let us expect that – within the framework of the hypotheses suggested in Section 2.1 - physical closeness with adult children (in terms of co-residence or frequent contact) is an important source of life satisfaction for the elderly in Italy. Specifically, we predict that among the elderly, the most satisfied are those living with a partner (with or without children), since the

spouse supplies the widest range of social and emotional resources. Next, there are those living with persons other than the partner, specifically adult children, since intergenerational co-residence is in accordance with the expectations and preferences of parents. Finally, the least satisfied are expected to be those living alone, and among them, those who can count on frequent contact with their children should be more satisfied than those who cannot.

### 3. Data and methods

We use data from the cross-sectional surveys “Aspects of Daily Life”, carried out in Italy by ISTAT. In particular, the latest two available surveys (2010 and 2011) are considered. The surveys were conducted on nationally representative samples of approximately 20,000 households each year, for a total of more than 50,000 individuals. In our study, we focused on the 17,249 individuals aged 65 and over<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the study refers to older people living at home, and excludes those living in nursing homes, hospitals or residential care.

The survey collected information on several dimensions of life. Besides the basic demographic characteristics (age, sex), several items on health, lifestyle, religious practices, and social integration for each household member were recorded. In addition, information on the socio-economic status of the family and on the family structure was gathered.

Life satisfaction, the focus of our study, was assessed with the question: “How satisfied are you with your life on the whole at present?” Answers can range from 0 (not satisfied at all) to 10 (very satisfied). This is our dependent variable in our regression models.

The explanatory variables of interest for the study can be grouped into three main domains: socio-economic conditions, health status, family and social relations.

Two variables were used to describe the socio-economic background of individuals. Education has four categories: low (no schooling), middle-low (primary school), middle (junior high school), and high (secondary school or above). Economic situation is determined through a subjective evaluation of the family’s economic resources<sup>2</sup>: a dichotomous variable was built distinguishing whether the family had poor or insufficient resources (as opposed to very good or good).

Health was described by three covariates. The first refers to a subjective perception of health. Individuals were asked how their health is, in general. We grouped the five available categories into three categories: good health (excellent or good), fair, and poor health (poor and very poor). A second variable referring to the self-reported presence of limitations in usual activities distinguishes three categories: severe limitations, only mild limitations, no limitations. Lastly, the presence of at least one chronic illness (from a list of 15 common chronic diseases) was taken into account.

Family resources were investigated considering a combination of the elderly’s living arrangements and marital status. Living arrangements were separated into four groups: a) living alone, b) living only with their partners, c) living with a partner and with other persons, d) living with persons other than a partner (in the following identified as “alone with others”). In fact, most of these “other persons” living in groups c) and d) are adult children; 89% of the elderly living with their partners and others live with at least one child, and among those living without a partner this percentage is 78%. Unfortunately, the survey does not provide data on the presence of living children not co-resident, or on the frequency of contact between parents and these children. Thus,

<sup>1</sup> In fact, the original sample consists of 19,934 men and women aged 65 or over: among them, 459 respondents did not answer the question on life satisfaction and, thus, were not considered in the following analyses. Similarly, another 2,226 observations were excluded from the multivariate analyses having one or more missing values in the covariates. At the end, the final sample size used in the multivariate analyses consists of 17,249 individuals (7,518 male respondents and 9,731 female respondents). Preliminary analyses showed that the final sample considered is not selected in comparison with the original sample as regards some basic variables, such as gender, age, and education.

<sup>2</sup> In the survey, one question asked whether (taking into account the needs of each member of the family) economic resources in the 12 months prior to the interview were very good, good, poor, or insufficient.

we have no information about the family network of older people living in a one-person household. In order to overcome this problem, the marital status of the elderly living alone was specified (never married, separated or divorced, and widowed), assuming that this could indirectly yield information on intergenerational support and contacts<sup>3</sup>.

Two other domains were examined to describe social relations: social network integration and active lifestyles. Social integration considered participation in the year prior to the interview in different social activities<sup>4</sup>; those who participated in at least one activity were distinguished from those with no participation. In addition, how often individuals met their friends was taken into account (every day, at least once a week, less often than once a week, never or without friends). Active lifestyles were measured considering physical activity, going on holiday, and attendance at cultural activities. Physical activity distinguished between individuals who played sports regularly or occasionally or engaged in physical activity at least once a week, those who were rarely physically active, and those without any physical activity. Holiday and cultural activities considered whether individuals had gone on holiday and to some cultural or entertainment venues<sup>5</sup>, respectively, in the last year before the interview.

Several other characteristics representing possible individual differences were included in the analyses as controls. First, age (five-year age classes) and religiosity (attendance at religious services: at least once a week, sometimes in a month, sometimes in a year, never) were included. Furthermore, we considered the characteristics of the place of residence. Besides the geographical area of residence (northern Italy vs. central-southern), this aspect was measured by the type of municipality (metropolitan area, suburbs, town with more than 10,000 inhabitants, and small town with less than 10,000 inhabitants), and by two other covariates describing the characteristics of the neighbourhood (presence of problems and availability of services<sup>6</sup>). Finally, the year of the interview was considered.

Multivariate analyses were applied to study the association between older people's life satisfaction and their living circumstances; since our dependent variable is continuous, linear regression models were considered. In using linear regression analyses, we tested for violations of assumptions, and none were found. Normal P-P plots of regression standardized residuals showed no deviation or minor deviation from the expected cumulative probability. Separate analyses were

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<sup>3</sup> Other analyses on data from the nationally representative survey "Family and Social Subjects", conducted in Italy in 2009 show that the marital status of the elderly living alone is strongly associated with the presence of children, with their place of residence, and with the frequency of contact between the elderly parents and their children. The proportion of childless men among never married individuals living alone is 99% (93% among women); the corresponding percentage among separated or divorced men is 19% (20% for women), and 10% among widowed men (12% for women). In the same direction, 29% of fathers (and 45% of mothers) living alone who are separated or divorced have at least one child living within one kilometre, and 51% (80% for women) have contact with their children daily or more than once a week. Among widowed individuals, these percentages are higher indicating more intergenerational support: 47% of fathers (and 62% of mothers) have at least one child living within one kilometre, and 79% (86% for women) have contact with their children daily or more than once a week.

<sup>4</sup> Participation in the following social activities is considered: meetings of political parties, associations or voluntary groups, ecological associations, civil rights or peace activities, cultural associations, trade associations, union meetings, electoral meetings, demonstrations, free activities for voluntary or non-voluntary groups or associations, free activities for a political party or for a trade union.

<sup>5</sup> Theatres, cinemas, museums, concerts, discos, monuments, and archaeological sites.

<sup>6</sup> Problems in the area of residence are investigated considering the answers to 10 items on the questionnaire asking whether some problems (filth in the streets, difficulty in parking, difficulty in links with public transports, traffic, air pollution, noises, criminality risks, bad smells, poor illumination of streets, bad conditions of road surfacing) are present, with answers ranging from 1 to 4, meaning, respectively, "very much present" to "not present at all". The scores of the five items are added and then divided by the number of given answers to create a composite measure, with higher scores indicating areas with fewer problems. Similarly, availability of some services (chemist, first aid station, post office, grocery, supermarket) is investigated considering the difficulty in reaching them, with values ranging from 1 ("no difficulties") to 3 ("many difficulties"). A composite indicator with higher scores indicating more difficulty in reaching services is obtained.



developed for both men and women as a whole and for men and women living in one-person households.

#### 4. Describing the sample characteristics in a gender perspective

At first glance (Table 1), women 65 or over declare to be on average slightly less satisfied with life than men of the same age. This is in line with the literature (Pinquart and Sörensen 2001; Inglehart 2002). However, men's and women's living circumstances differ in several respects.

**Table 1. Percentage distribution of variables for all men and women of the sample and for those living alone.**

	All individuals		Living alone	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
<b>Mean life satisfaction</b>	7.08	6.86	6.82	6.70
<b>Mean age</b>	74.43	75.84	76.33	78.63
<b>Education</b>				
High	22.1	13.3	22.7	12.7
Middle	21.2	15.2	20.5	13.8
Middle-low	47.1	52.4	44.0	51.0
Low	9.6	19.1	12.8	22.5
<b>% with poor or insufficient household economic resources</b>	40.5	44.3	40.1	48.8
<b>Self-perception of health</b>				
Good	36.5	26.2	35.9	22.4
Fair	47.0	51.6	46.2	52.2
Poor	16.5	22.2	17.9	25.4
<b>Presence of limitations in usual activities</b>				
Severe limitations	14.2	18.7	15.9	21.7
Some not severe limitations	33.9	38.5	33.9	40.5
Without limitations	51.9	42.8	50.2	37.8
<b>% with at least one chronic illness</b>	48.8	41.9	47.0	38.8
<b>Living arrangement</b>				
Never married living alone	4.2	4.2	25.3	11.1
Divorced living alone	3.2	2.2	19.8	5.8
Widowed living alone	9.0	31.2	54.9	83.1
Couple alone	52.7	32.2	--	--
Couple with others	25.0	11.9	--	--
Alone with others	5.9	18.3	--	--
<b>% participating in at least one social activity</b>	24.6	12.4	21.7	11.4
<b>Meet friends</b>				
Every day	22.4	11.5	26.7	14.0
Often	39.4	39.2	37.7	38.1
Only sometimes	26.9	31.8	24.9	29.0
Never or without friends	11.3	17.5	10.7	18.9
<b>Physical activity</b>				
More than once a week	40.7	26.0	39.7	24.5
Rarely	11.4	10.2	11.1	8.6
Sedentary	47.9	63.8	49.2	66.9
<b>% with at least one holiday in the last year</b>	28.6	24.1	22.0	20.8
<b>% with at least one cultural activity in the last year</b>	36.8	25.8	35.4	23.4
<b>Church attendance</b>				
At least once a week	33.9	51.1	30.5	52.9
Sometimes a month	14.7	14.2	14.1	12.6
Sometimes a year	30.4	19.4	31.1	17.8
Never	21.0	15.3	24.3	16.7

(continued)				
<b>Area of residence</b>				
North	43.5	43.8	44.7	44.3
Central-South	56.5	56.2	55.3	55.7
<b>Type of municipality</b>				
City centre	11.5	11.4	13.1	10.6
Suburbs	7.9	7.5	5.8	6.7
Town > 10,000 inhabitants	43.9	44.7	41.8	44.8
Town < 10,000 inhabitants	36.7	36.4	39.3	37.9
<b>Problems in the area of residence (mean)</b>	2.942	2.922	2.996	2.914
<b>Services in the area of residence (mean)</b>	1.307	1.363	1.352	1.459
<b>Year of survey</b>				
2010	49.8	49.3	46.8	49.2
2011	50.2	50.7	53.2	50.8
<b>N</b>	7,518	9,731	1,236	3,651

First, women are on average older than men, and this clearly influences other conditions, such as the living arrangements; women are found to be more likely to live alone as widows (31.2% vs. 9%) or with others (18.3% vs. 5.9%), and less likely to live with a partner (44.1% vs. 77.7%). In addition, as found in other studies (Eurostat 2002; and studies cited by Ross, Masters and Hummer 2012), women are generally more disadvantaged than men, having poor or insufficient household economic resources in higher percentages (44.3% vs. 40.5%), lower educational levels (19.1% of women have low education, in comparison with 9.6% of men), higher percentages of disabilities (57.2% vs. 48.1%), and poorer perceived health (22.2% vs. 16.5%). Men present higher social integration than their female counterparts, since they have more contact with friends, and participate more in physical, social, and cultural activities (22.4% of men meet friends every day, compared to 11.5% of women). As regards background characteristics, women are more involved in religious practices than men (51.1% attend church at least once a week, for men, this decreases to 33.9%). However, no differences are found between men and women with respect to the context of residence, in that there are no distinctions in the quality and services within the neighbourhoods or the type of municipality.

Similar remarks hold for the elderly living alone. As Table 1 illustrates, they may be a selected group of individuals since, although on average are older than those living with other individuals, they have, for example, similar self-perceived health and social integration.

## 5. Results

Results of separate analyses for men and women considering all elderly as a whole suggest only slight gender differences in the determinants of life satisfaction<sup>7</sup> (columns 2 and 3 of Table 2).

We found that economic conditions are relevant in the same ways for life satisfaction for both men and women (the subjective evaluation of household economic resources has a significant effect, whereas education does not). The greater importance of functional ability on life satisfaction for women than for men found by some previous studies was only partially confirmed. For both men and women, either subjective perception of health or limitations in usual activities are predictors of life satisfaction, but for women the effect of these limitations is significantly negative, even in cases of minor impairments. With respect to social and family relationships, evidence shows a rather complex picture. On one hand, men's satisfaction seems to be slightly more sensitive to family resources than that of women. For both men and women, living as a couple has a significant and positive impact on their life satisfaction. Living only with a partner increases the score of satisfaction of 0.396 points for men and of 0.269 points for women with respect to the

<sup>7</sup> Preliminary analyses considering all men and women in only one model and controlling for gender showed no gender effects.

condition of living alone; however, only among men, living with a partner and other persons is a (weak) source of life satisfaction. On the other hand, women's satisfaction seems to be slightly more sensitive than men's one to benefits of social integration. Having contacts outside the family (meeting friends often and being physically active) has a significant and positive effect on life satisfaction of older people, independent of gender. For example, never meeting friends reduces the score of life satisfaction of 0.506 points for older men and of 0.393 points for older women compared to elderly who meet friends every day. However, life satisfaction for women is more sensitive to cultural activities than that of men. Thus, contrary to what we assumed in Section 2.1, we find neither evident gender differences in the determinants of life satisfaction of older adults as a whole, nor differences which clearly move in the direction suggested by the literature: that older women's life satisfaction is shaped much more by social and health aspects than men's one, and that men are more sensitive than women to economic factors.

The results of our multivariate analysis are not consistent with our hypotheses even with respect to men and women living in one-person households (see columns 4 and 5 of Table 2). We expected to find life satisfaction equally sensitive for men and women in regards to good health, economic security, and social integration. In fact, the hypothesis of a convergence in the determinants of life satisfaction for men and women is not confirmed. Instead, clear differences between men and women in the aspects connected with life satisfaction are found. Whereas for both men and women economic conditions and self-rated health are important for life satisfaction, some other characteristics are gender-specific. In particular, a high educational level is positively associated with life satisfaction only for men, whereas only for women do physical limitations decrease life satisfaction. In addition, women seem to be more sensitive than men to active lifestyles (cultural activities, holidays, and physical activity).

In summary, it seems that the literature assumptions about differences by gender on life satisfaction determinants apply in an inverted way: elderly living alone have gender differentiated determinants, whereas the same is not confirmed for elderly considered as a whole.

Unexpected results are found even with respect to the effect of family resources on life satisfaction (columns 2-5 of Table 2). As found in previous studies (observed, for example considering loneliness, by de Jong Gierveld, Dykstra and Schenk 2012), living as a couple without other persons in the household is positively associated with well-being for both men and women. These individuals are not only more satisfied than those living alone, but are also the most satisfied in general. However, contrary to our hypothesis, living with persons other than the partner is not always predictive of greater satisfaction in comparison with elderly living alone. Only in the case of men, living with a partner and others has a significant (even if weak) positive effect on life satisfaction. Women living with others, with or without a partner, and men living only with other persons do not show to be more satisfied than their counterparts living alone. Thus, life satisfaction of the elderly living in Italy around 2010 is not particularly sensitive to co-residence with persons other than the spouse (mainly adult children). Moreover, potential frequent contact with children has no significant positive effect, even on older people living alone. Contrary to our expectations, those who are more likely to have (frequent contact with) adult children, such as widowed, are not more satisfied than those who are single or divorced. These results are, indeed, quite unexpected in a country such as Italy where co-residence of elderly with adult children is relatively common and family ties are assumed to be strong.

**Table 2. Determinants of life satisfaction of older men and women as a whole or living alone (coefficient estimates).**

(1)	All individuals aged 65 and over		Living alone	
	(2) Men	(3) Women	(4) Men	(5) Women
<b>Education</b> (ref: <i>high</i> )				
Middle	0.011	-0.051	-0.363**	-0.130
Middle-low	0.007	0.029	-0.320**	-0.062
Low	-0.060	0.059	-0.442**	-0.062
<b>Household economic resources</b> (ref: <i>sufficient</i> )				
Poor or insufficient	-0.341***	-0.319***	-0.265**	-0.259***
<b>Self-perception of health</b> (ref: <i>good</i> )				
Fair	-0.454***	-0.568***	-0.362***	-0.619***
Poor	-1.414***	-1.373***	-1.470***	-1.487***
<b>Presence of limitations in usual activities</b> (ref: <i>no</i> )				
Severe limitations	-0.604***	-0.632***	-0.289	-0.648***
Some not severe limitations	-0.078*	-0.137***	0.039	-0.152**
<b>Presence of at least one chronic illness</b> (ref: <i>no</i> )				
Yes	-0.005	0.004	0.115	-0.042
<b>Living arrangement</b> (ref: <i>never married living alone</i> )				
Divorced living alone	-0.197	-0.132	-0.222	-0.129
Widowed living alone	0.075	-0.058	0.067	-0.079
Couple alone	0.396***	0.269***	--	--
Couple with others	0.186*	-0.046	--	--
Alone with others	-0.026	-0.097	--	--
<b>Participation in social activities</b> (ref: <i>no</i> )				
Yes, one	0.087	-0.074	0.225	-0.103
Yes, two or more	0.057	0.103	0.007	0.049
<b>Meet friends</b> (ref: <i>every day</i> )				
At least once a week	-0.191***	-0.152***	-0.289**	-0.129
Less often than once a week	-0.285***	-0.275***	-0.253*	-0.329***
Never or without friends	-0.506***	-0.393***	-0.441**	-0.544***
<b>Physical activity</b> (ref: <i>sedentary</i> )				
More than once a week	0.115**	0.149***	0.157	0.129*
Rarely	0.066	0.064	0.137	0.034
<b>Holiday in the last year</b> (ref: <i>no</i> )				
Yes	0.141***	0.171***	0.132	0.292***
<b>Cultural activities</b> (ref: <i>no</i> )				
Yes	0.040	0.116**	0.091	0.151*

Significance levels: \*\*\* = 0.01; \*\* = 0.05; \* = 0.1

Models control also for age, religiosity, area of residence, type of municipality, problems and services in the area of residence, and year of the survey.

## 6. Discussion and future research

This paper analyses the determinants of life satisfaction of older people living at home in order to verify whether some hypotheses suggested by the literature hold for Italian elderly alive at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The availability of a large sample of elderly representative at the national level allowed us to examine whether: a) women's satisfaction is more sensitive to health conditions and to social relations, and that of men is more sensitive to socio-economic situations; b) older people living in one-person households present determinants of life satisfaction, which are less gender differentiated; c) physical closeness with adult children (in terms of co-residence or frequent contact) increases the life satisfaction of older men and women compared to those who do not have such closeness. The findings are rather unexpected.

First, we did not find clear gender differences in the determinants of life satisfaction among the older adults considered as a whole. With few exceptions, economic security, functional ability, and social integration are all conditions that, in the same way, significantly contribute to the life satisfaction of older men and women. On the contrary, slight gender differences are found among older people living alone in the direction suggested by the literature for the older adults as a whole. How can we explain these results? We cannot exclude the fact that the differences in socialization of men and women of these cohorts are not strong enough to clearly influence their determinants of life satisfaction when they reach older ages. Moreover, life satisfaction can be influenced by the behaviors and by the preferences of co-resident individuals and, thus, the differences may be less clear if we consider the population as a whole. Instead, if we consider those living alone, we find differences because individuals are less influenced by the preferences of co-residents.

Furthermore, we do not find evidence to support the hypothesis that in a familialistic country, such as Italy, physical closeness with adult children is beneficial for the life satisfaction of older adults. Living with other persons (mainly adult children) has a positive effect only in the case of men who are also living with their partner; in all other cases, co-residence with children does not significantly increase life satisfaction of older people with respect to those who live in one-person households. Moreover, among those living alone, life satisfaction is not differentiated by marital status even if we can demonstrate that marital status is highly associated with the frequency of contact with adult children. Thus, is physical closeness with adult children no longer a positive factor for Italian older people's well-being? Can co-residence with adult children no longer be considered a choice, but rather a constraint and a source of potential intergenerational conflicts? Are more recent cohorts of older people oriented to new more individualistic values? Unfortunately, our data do not provide information directly supporting such interpretation. With respect to older people living in one-person households, we cannot empirically justify the fact that marital status does not influence life satisfaction. Older people of more recent cohorts are increasingly engaged in active lifestyles, implying participation in social activities and consumers of services for free time (ISTAT 2000, 2009). Thus, this result may be the effect of a process of individualization of older adults. However, we need further information to better control for possible heterogeneity of the different groups of elderly living alone. First, we need further information on the relative network (in particular, adult children and grandchildren), which literature has shown to be important for life satisfaction among the elderly (Gabriel and Bowling 2004; Gaymu and Springer 2010). In addition, information on the health of close relatives or on the exchange of care between older people living alone and adult children is needed. Some studies have, for example, found that the feeling of loneliness of older adults is positively associated with an exchange of support, which sees the elderly on the receiving side. In contrast, older adults who were primarily on the giving side were generally found to be less lonely (de Jong Gierveld, Dykstra and Schenk 2012). More detailed data is also needed to examine if the results referring to the elderly living with an adult child (either living with or without a partner) may be interpreted in terms of a convergence toward more individualistic behaviours. Information about living arrangement preferences of older people should, for example, provide a useful contribution to this end. However, in this case, some further analyses, which indirectly allow us to explore the reasons for co-residence with adult children, may indicate that this living arrangement may not necessarily be a source of life satisfaction for the elderly. Such analyses has shown that when elderly live with their adult children, these are mainly never married (78% of older individuals with co-resident children live with at least one never married child); this result suggests that intergenerational co-residence is principally a matter of the child's late transition to adulthood, rather than a matter of co-residence of frail elderly with the child's new family. Moreover, a relevant portion of children co-residing with older people (41%) are not employed; in these cases we may assume that co-residence is likely to be a financial necessity. All this suggests that co-residence of the elderly with adult children may be a constraint rather than a choice. In this context, we could speculate that living with their partner and other persons is less satisfying for women than for men due to the additional unpaid domestic work.

Thus, it could be that Italian older adults in the current population may prefer to be residentially independent from their children more than in the past. More generally, these results suggest some cautions on considering all southern European countries in an undifferentiated familialistic environment; probably, also within this context we cannot exclude that individualistic values are operating.

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