

Social Aspects of Ageing

H. Sibel Kalaycıoğlu¹

Abstract. Although in comparison to many European countries, Turkey is still characterised by a relatively young population, two demographic factors are noteworthy. First, the fact that due to the fast transformation in family structure from large extended families to smaller nuclear households and the increasing occupational careerism of women in the labour market the total fertility rate is expected to decrease sharply in the foreseeable years. Second, as a by-product of in socio-economic and medicinal advancement, the life expectancy in Turkey is also projected to increase sharply by the end of the next decade. The government is conscious of the Turkey's impending scenario and the past decade witnessed many ageing-related policy developments. The article concludes that there is an urgent need for advanced research on individual and population ageing in Turkey, but especially on the need to interconnect the field of population ageing across a range of disciplines ranging from the biological, behavioural and social sciences.

Keywords: Ageing; older persons in Turkey; ageism; elderly care

Introduction

The ageing of humans, besides being a biological phase in the life cycle of all living things, has an additional aspect of being a social phenomenon, and displaying a social diversity with respect to historical processes and varying from culture to culture. Experiences related to ageing and old age are attributed different meanings in different societies. Yet, the consideration of old age as a 'research problem' covered by research and included in the discussions of various approaches is quite recent. The perception of the ageing process of human beings in different societies is shaped in the context of the lived experiences and culture of respective societies. It is the given structural and cultural formations of a society that determine whether ageing is perceived as 'negative' or 'positive' or as a 'problem' *per se*.

¹ Department of Sociology, Middle East Technical University, Universiteler Mah. Dumlupınar, Ankara, Turkey.
(ksibel@metu.edu.tr)

In this sense, the social and economic differences in a society, as well as the cultural attitudes running parallel to these differences, may diversify experiences and hence the perceptions of ageing. Human ageing is also a socially constructed phenomenon that is affected by various social factors like social class, gender, marital status, family size, the nature of family, place of living (rural-urban), and degree of solidarity. In turn, ageing also shapes and determines the social, economic, political changes in the society. This present article explored all these factors which are key influences to the ageing transition.

Socio-demographic aspects

Turkey is still a relatively 'young' nation with an average age of 28.5 years. However, the proportion of people over 65 is growing. According to 2015 Turkish Statistics the older population comprised 8.2 per cent of the total population and according to projections, by 2023 it will become 10.2 per cent, by 2050 it will rise to 20.8 per cent, and 2075 it will rise to 27.7 per cent (1). The median age in 2015 is 31 but it is expected to rise to 34.6 by 2023. Life expectation for women in Turkey is 80.7 and for men is 75.3, which is below European Union figures. All these facts indicate that Turkey will become an 'old' nation in the very near future. The demography of Turkey indicates that even if the ratio of older persons in the population is not very high in the society the process of fast ageing is the significant aspect of demography in Turkey.

Another significant aspect of demography is the number of older persons living in the rural-urban areas. Although the rural population has decreased to 7 per cent of the whole population, it is also a fact that majority of the rural population are older persons who still live in the villages. In the rural population the ratio of older persons is 11.5 per cent and in the urban areas 6.0 per cent (1). Some of the older persons living in the rural areas are spending 6 months in the urban areas with their children during winter, whilst during summer they stay in their villages. Older persons living in the rural are the most vulnerable in terms of access to income, and socio-health care services in general. Even if they get help from their children, older persons living in the rural areas lack major public services and support from state institutions. On the other hand, older persons living in the urban areas enjoy more privileges in terms of access to health care and medicine, but they also lack mainly income and the support for care at home or in the nursing homes. In Turkey gender differences needs special consideration for demographic aspects of older persons. Since women live longer than men among the older population, especially among those aged 70-plus, women make up a larger group. On the other hand, due to economic and socio-cultural reasons women's educational and employment achievements are very low during youth and middle age. Women's labour force participation in 2015 is still around 30 per cent according to official figures. Hence, the majority of women in Turkey are dependent economically and socially on their husbands, fathers or sons. Therefore, there is a major problem for older women without any income or education in Turkey. These women are bound to live with their families, sons or daughters as they do not have any means to survive on their own. Some of old age women who are not supported by their families experience a deep poverty.

Social and demographic aspects of ageing have implications on the social, cultural, economic and political life of a country. The changing age structure brings changes in all areas of life but mainly on the family size and kinship relations, social solidarity in the society, social welfare and social security systems, the economy and especially in the job market, as well as on political and cultural aspects of life. Moreover, with an ageing population new issue areas and needs emerge like new care sector, geriatric health care, new and inclusive social policies, as well as the need for a change in the urban infrastructure like a new road system, changing buses and buildings.

Changes in family and kinship relations

In Turkey, there is a rapid change from traditional extended families of 7 or 8 persons towards smaller size nuclear families of 4 persons. The migration from rural to urban areas, increasing employment of women in the labour market, decreasing fertility rates and changing preferences about family and marriage are effective factors in this change. However, when we consider the fast ageing population this means that there are less members in the households for care and supporting older persons. Increasing employment of younger and educated women means that the gender division of labour in the households has to change and care which was culturally understood to be a task of women, becomes a major problem for majority of the households. Moreover, the traditional roles of older persons in the households about caring for their grandchildren loses its significance with changing education system, increasing importance of pre-school education and need for more professional care for children. Therefore, older persons living in households gradually lose their functionality and roles in the household and turns out to be an increasing 'burden' of care.

On the one hand, due to lack of state support or care services, the task of care for older persons creates an ambivalence for the family members who have to attend their jobs and also take care of older persons living at home. Additionally, loss of functionality by older persons also creates a risk of isolation for older persons either living in their own homes or in nursing homes. According to a research conducted by Kalaycıoğlu and colleagues about the living arrangements of families in Ankara, Turkey, with 400 older persons and their relatives, findings suggested that to live together with the family and the children are assigned primary importance in old age (2). Respondents would care for their spouses in old age and trust that their spouses would care for them. People also count on their children to provide them care in old age. Men are more optimistic than women about their spouses taking care of them in old age. Women by contrast are more concerned about being left alone. The majority of older persons live as spouses in their own homes. This pattern is supported by hired care takers living in the house, for one or both of the spouses and under the periodic controls of the children or other relatives. However, upon the death of one of the spouses, especially men, older women usually start living with their children and mostly with sons. If women die earlier, then the men are usually given to a nursing home by the children or relatives. On the other hand, there are other forms of living arrangements with relatives, such as an older woman living with her niece or cousin or sister. Two women or men as friends living together in old age is also seen but not frequent. The expectations of older persons is that the majority think about old age as a period of suffering, ill health, disability, disrespect from their social

environment, people being reluctant to stay with them, and other similar negative perceptions and expectations. So the major discourse among the older respondents was “not to be a burden on their family members and to die early if they become very ill”. This kind of expectation and discourse indicates that even if family based on reciprocal and mutual support between members, is a strong institution still in Turkey, with changing social and economic conditions ageing is perceived as a burden by both the older persons themselves and also by their relatives. This research tends to overlook nursing homes, with views on long-term care facilities being based on information gathered from television series, films and news programs rather than on actual experience. Older persons and their relatives describe nursing homes as institutions where old people are abandoned, as crowded institutions, as older persons being kept there in isolation, and mostly felt pity for those older persons ‘abandoned’ by their families in the nursing homes.

Another important research is conducted in 2010 by the Prime Ministry General Directorate of Family and Social Research Department of Research on Family and Social Problems about an ‘Assessment of the expectations about old age’ which included 4,000 respondents aged 40-plus, living in rural and urban Turkey (3). According to its findings, the expectations of the respondents from the family change with socio economic status (SES). Compared to the lower SES groups, upper SES group respondents expect to be healthier and better equipped to make good use of their time in old age. Compared to the upper and middle SES groups, lower SES groups are more worried about health issues, being left alone and in need of help in old age. Also compared to urban respondents, rural ones have greater confidence in their children taking care of them in old age, but they are more worried about their future than are their urban peers. The findings of the research suggest that favourable conception of old age grows stronger with increased social activity. Respondents who have the highest level of social activity are also the ones who are more certain of their spouses’ caring attention, of good health and of making good use of their time in old age. Many of the respondents preferred getting help from family members in case of need for long-term personal care, hygiene and housework. Only a very little percentage would like to get help from government agencies or other public institutions. The most preferred family members are spouses and then daughters and then sons. The research suggests that the desire to live with children grows stronger with increasing age. The preference for living alone or with one’s spouse when too old to care for himself/herself is widespread only in upper SES group and decreases in middle SES group and in the lower SES groups. Hence, those with upper SES since they can afford to hire care workers and the expenses of a separate house and private health care they prefer living on their own or with spouses. Also living alone or with a spouse is favored more by the respondents mostly in good health whereas living with children is more strongly associated with poor health. Parents with functional limitations also expect serious support from their children when they get older. As regards their preference of a nursing home, few respondents asserted that they actually prefer to take up residence in a nursing home in the foreseeable future, though preference for living in a nursing home is positively correlated with SES. The choice of living in a nursing home is associated with two main tendencies: ‘unfavorable attitude towards the family’ meaning being unwanted by one’s children, and ‘favorable attitude towards the nursing home’ meaning the desire to be with peers.

Perception of old age: Ageism in society

As mentioned above, results in two research studies found that getting older is not perceived particularly as a moment of happiness in Turkish society. Rather the perception of ageing in both researches is that being old is a burden and suffering. Perception of ageing from positive or negative aspects varies depending on variables such as gender, age, place of origin, living arrangements as well as age discrimination experiences in the society. The meaning of ageing is socially constructed depending on moral and material experiences of older persons which differ in different socio-economic groups and may lead to different meanings attributed to ageing. Reaching later life is understood to be loss of independence, being useless, lonely and isolated by the respondents which challenge the major belief in the society that older persons are respected, loved and cherished by their families. In fact, old age is associated with undesirable or unfavourable notions in our society. In the research, older persons talk about withdrawal from social life and becoming isolated since they feel unwanted in public life. In 2003 researching later life gave examples of various service providers like bus drivers, social workers or municipality workers who had negative attitudes towards older people on the busses, streets or in public spaces. This effects their satisfaction from life and prevents their active participation to social activities. Older persons generally found it difficult to speak about the positive aspects of old age. People do not appear intellectually familiar with the notion of good ageing or even find it conceivable. Nonetheless, "experience" for the old age persons is specifically named as a positive attribute towards old age.

Intergenerational networks and elder care in Turkey

In Turkey, as reported by many research, men almost always prefer to get help from their wives. Getting help jointly from one's spouse and children is a strong preference among both men and women in old age. In Turkish culture, just like many developing countries, there are two contrasting and widely held views about getting help from one's children. One looks upon getting help from the children as a right, while the other view says that asking for such help as being a burden on the children. It is a wide spread understanding of all people that they have to provide care/support for their parents although they think that their own children would not be Touching upon the importance of family as an institution in this point, Kalaycıoğlu and Tılıç rather seek to focus on the relation between family and mutual solidarity especially in the old age (4). According to Kalaycıoğlu and Tılıç, family in Turkey serves as a significant mechanism of support. While today only a small proportion of old age people in Turkey can enjoy retirement benefits due to dominance of informal sector employment, a large part of the remaining has to look for their own means or rely on the support of their children as a means social security. Another point is that rather than leaving their holdings as inheritance after their death to their children as a way to guarantee their future, old aged people in Turkey prefer to spend it for their children during their lifetime so that they can live happily with them (5).

The type of solidarity in Turkish family structures changes according to the role of older persons in the family. For instance, within-family transfers may be centric (through a central agent like a patriarch or matriarch) or non-centric (between two neighbouring family members). In the first model, older persons have the right and authority over the distribution

of the common resources accumulated to the needs of the family. However, in the second model these transfers realized without a family head. According to Kalaycioğlu and Tılıc, the direction of the economic and social transfers is from older persons to the adult children contrary to the expectations. In this context, this kind of mutual aid networks function as material support for the young and moral support for older persons in coping with the problems faced in their lives. While more prosperous aged people in particular do not face much trouble since their expectations from their children are not so high, there may be clashes especially in middle-income families. Since middle-income families can hold their present status through solidarity between the old and the young, their expectations are higher and solidarity gets more important too. Coming to low-income families, resources are already scarce and there is no expectation for sharing. However, in the case of low-income families this situation leads to distancing of the old and the young rather than clashes. On the other side of the coin, it is noted that these kinds of transfers within the family could lead to some tensions and interfamilial contradictions and ambiguities. While this does not lead to serious problems in high level economic groups, it becomes a vital issue especially in middle classes, because these groups survive mostly by the help of these mechanisms and the expectations of both sides (older and young members of the family) are bilaterally high. Considering the lower classes, there is not an expectation in general since the resources are scarce. However, this situation leads to growing distance among older and young persons.

Within the neoliberal and new right agenda of the current government and as a result of shrinking welfare services by the state in line with this agenda, family has gained an importance as a potential substitute to the welfare state more powerful than ever before. So there emerged a need to support the family both ideologically and financially and strengthen the idea of traditional Turkish family. The legitimacy of the substitution of state by the family as a caregiver comes from the assumption that most of the Turkish people want to live with their own families and also prefer the family members to take their care at their old age. In line with the assumption above, in Turkey, currently, 44 per cent of the living children of older persons are cohabitating with their parents. The proportion of older persons above the age of 85 who are cohabitating with their children increases to 57 per cent. So as the age increases, the responsibility of the comfort, health and needs of older persons passes from themselves to their children (6). This information means that currently, the biggest proportion of the caregivers to older persons in Turkey is composed of family members. One thing which is peculiar to this country is that the daughters-in-law as caregivers outnumber the daughters as caregivers. The older parents are most likely to stay with their sons than staying with their daughters. Daughters have to take care of their own parents-in-law who live in the same household.

In contradiction with the expectations, long term care of the old person becomes difficult for the family, both materially and morally. The rapid transition from traditional family structure to nuclear family structure made the nursing and care for older persons complicated (7). Now the family itself increasingly needs support, if it wants to be able to care for its weaker members without having to substitute the responsibilities of the state and public care services (8). This is why current Turkish government introduced something new to the Turkish society such as the financial support to the family carers of older persons. In addition, Brubaker

argued that it can be talked about positive and negative sides of the family as a site of care for the old age period (9). Since, while on the one hand this family life in old ages providing emotional, financial and physical supporting mechanisms, on the other hand the very close and intimate relations could result in stress and some tensions in the members of the family due to the excessive needs of the inter-generational family and expectations of older persons (9). In that sense it can be argued that the most basic mechanism on which the family life is set up is the inter-dependency which depends on the reciprocal support between family members. But this overall dependency between the generations and unmet expectations of older persons from the young mostly result in the increased ambivalence within the intergenerational relations.

Conclusion and discussion

Despite the fact that Turkish culture is very family oriented, in the sense that citizens do not wish to be separated from their children and families, they also do not want to be dependent on them. The perception of older persons about themselves as a burden on his/her adult children has been increasing with the intergenerational ambivalence experienced especially when the long term care of older persons is the issue. Since the changes in the social policies regarding family and long term care in Turkey resulted in a narrowing of the options for older persons other than the family, this situation also creates a problem in terms of the human rights for older persons in Turkey. The family as the only option for the dependent older persons from which they can require their needs to be met is not the best solution for the increasing demands of older persons in Turkey. Instead, this situation brings about the increasing ambivalence within the intergenerational relations and dependency of older persons to the young generation.

The availability of making choice is for the high and middle SES groups, not for lower one. Although we see that the intergenerational relations are still strong although changed their forms in Turkey, the differences among the lower on the one hand, higher and middle SES groups on the other hand show us that there is a big concern for reexamining the current social policies regarding elder care in the country. When the availability of living alone or going to nursing homes is current, older persons feel themselves less as a burden on their children and their relations with their children become more peaceful and less compelling. The intergenerational relations among the older parent and their adult children in Turkey are expected to become more ambivalent, less harmonious as presumed by the government and policy makers as long as the emphasis is given to putting elder care on the shoulders of the family members rather than ameliorating the situation of the nursing homes or providing formal home care. It is, in this way, important that the social policies in a country definitely affect the form and strength of the intergenerational relations among older persons and the young especially when older persons become more dependent and in need of long-term care. Because long term care needs of older persons are very burdensome that not only the family members can overcome by their own means. In this respect, the support, not only financially but also psychologically, has to be given from the state to the family members during their caregiving process. Other than that, the adult children are stuck between the Turkish cultural norms on the responsibility expected from them to take care of their elders and their own

private lives, responsibilities and employment. This situation creates ambivalence within their relations to their parents. The degree of ambivalence varies within different SES groups. The ambivalence is also perpetuated by the current social policies since the individuals (both the older persons and adult children) feel themselves dependent not only in the intergenerational relations but also in their relations with the state. The new policies compelled both parties to be more reliant on each other although their relationships totally changed from more of solidarity-based to ambivalent.

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