

# **Intergenerational Solidarity and Economic Well-Being: Responsibility Toward Younger Generations**

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## **Short abstract**

The present study is framed within the literature on intergenerational solidarity. Focusing on Italian seniors aged 65–84, it examines how intergenerational comparisons in perceived levels of economic well-being affect support for young non-family members. Young non-family members are defined as individuals (aged under 35) with whom the respondents have no direct or acquired kinship tie, such as members of the younger generation in a broad sense, or young acquaintances like neighbours or colleagues. We distinguish three forms of support for young non-family members: financial contributions to associations, foundations, or organizations promoting projects for young people; direct financial assistance to young people who are not relatives; and volunteering in activities aimed at young people. By addressing our main research question, we aim to expand the analyses of intergenerational solidarity beyond family boundaries. We also analyse the mediating role of feeling responsible for the economic well-being of the younger generations: using the KHB method allows us to quantify the extent to which the effect of economic well-being comparisons on support for young non-family members can be attributed to the sense of responsibility variables.

## Introduction

Europe is ageing, rapidly and unevenly. This process is particularly severe in Italy, which has the highest share of population aged 65 and over (24.3%) and the highest old-age dependency ratio (38.4%) among European countries (Eurostat, 2024). The ageing of the Italian population is driven not only by increasing longevity but also by the persistent decline in births, which has reduced the size of cohorts born after the baby boom. This demographic transformation raises urgent questions about the distribution of resources, responsibilities, and opportunities across generations. In this sense, intergenerational solidarity reflects the aspiration for mutual support and cohesion between age groups in the face of demographic change (Zechner & Sihto, 2023; Bengtson & Oyama, 2007). At the macro level, solidarity concerns intergenerational transfers through taxation and public social expenditure aimed at a fair distribution of resources between generations (Walker, 1996). In recent years, an increasing share of public resources in Italy has been directed toward the needs of the growing elderly population, leading to a reduction in resources available to younger cohorts. At the micro level, intergenerational solidarity has mostly been applied to the reciprocal exchange of support between family generations — functional solidarity (Bengtson & Oyama, 2007). Yet, although intergenerational solidarity is not limited to family relationships (Cooley, 1919), exchanges of resources beyond family boundaries remain largely understudied.

The present study is framed within the literature on intergenerational solidarity. Focusing on Italian seniors aged 65–84, it examines how intergenerational comparisons in perceived levels of economic well-being affect support for young non-family members. Young non-family members are defined as individuals (aged under 35) with whom the respondents have no direct or acquired kinship tie, such as members of the younger generation in a broad sense, or young acquaintances like neighbours or colleagues. We distinguish three forms of support for young non-family members: financial contributions to associations, foundations, or organizations promoting projects for young people; direct financial assistance to young people who are not relatives; and volunteering in activities aimed at young people. Moreover, we analyse the mediating role of feeling responsible for the economic well-being of the younger generations. Previous research has also examined the moral and psychological foundations of intergenerational responsibility. However, the literature on this topic has mainly focused on the challenges of tackling climate change and ensuring the fair intergenerational allocation of resources. Watkins and Goodwin (2020) frame climate change as an intergenerational dilemma in which people must make sacrifices today to benefit future generations. They show that reflecting on the sacrifices made by past generations can increase individuals' sense of moral responsibility toward future generations, and that this effect is mediated by feelings of gratitude. However, their findings also indicate that such reflections may elicit ambivalent emotions — including feelings of unworthiness — not translating into stronger pro-environmental attitudes or motivations (Watkins & Goodwin, 2020). There is also evidence that stronger feelings of stewardship are associated with greater allocations of resources to future generations. Stewardship is defined as the extent to which an individual willingly subjugates his or her personal interests to act in the protection of others' long-term welfare (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997, p. 8; Hernandez, 2012). Such evidence suggest that when people are confronted with generous behaviours from past generations, they tend to develop a stronger sense of responsibility to care for future others (Bang, Koval, & Wade-Benzoni, 2017; Wade-Benzoni, Hernandez, Medvec, & Messick, 2008).

We apply this framework to examine whether and how intergenerational comparisons in perceived economic well-being influence seniors' support for young non-family members, both directly and through the mediating role of responsibility. We hypothesize the existence of different mechanisms.

For instance, seniors who express optimism about the economic well-being of younger generations in the future may translate this trust into a stronger sense of responsibility to succession of generations and show greater engagement in activities benefiting non-family youth. Conversely, those with a more pessimistic view may perceive their own contribution as ineffective and, consequently, feel less responsible for shaping the economic well-being/discomfort of younger generations. Comparisons between one's own generation at the age of 35 and today's under-35s may activate two distinct mechanisms. On the one hand, seniors who perceive their generation as more affluent may acknowledge that they benefited from a more favourable economic period and, as a result, develop a sense of responsibility toward younger people, which in turn translates into behaviours aimed at reducing intergenerational inequalities. On the other hand, the same seniors may interpret such differences not as the outcome of structural factors but because of the younger generation's lack of motivation or effort, thus feeling no responsibility for their economic wellbeing/discomfort. Finally, when comparing with past generations, seniors who perceive their parents' generations as economically less advantaged than their own and who feel gratitude toward them may mirror the example of generosity and sacrifice of the past into the future, reinforcing a sense of generativity and encouraging older adults to "give back" what they once received (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992).

## **Research design and methods**

### **Data**

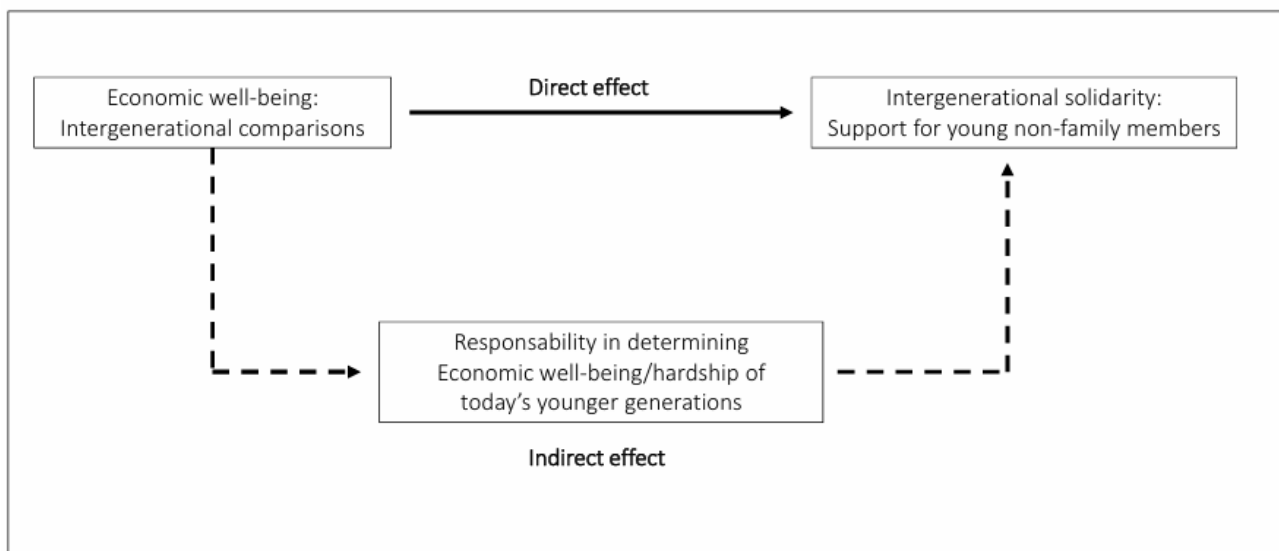
This study is based on data from the *CE Civic Engagement Survey*, funded within the framework of the "Age-It-Ageing well in an ageing society" project and conducted between April and June 2025 in collaboration with SWG, which managed data collection. The target population includes all individuals aged 65–84 residing in Italy. The final sample consists of 6,030 respondents, selected through a proportional quota sampling design to ensure representativeness by: *Region × age group × gender*; *Municipal size × age group × gender*. Data were collected using the methodology CATI, using a fully computer-managed process to ensure data quality and minimize interviewer bias.

### **Dependent variables**

We use participation in three different activities in support of young non-family members as dependent variables. All three derive from the same survey question: "*In the last three years, how frequently have you engaged in the following activities in support of young people who are not your relatives (e.g., neighbours/acquaintances, youth associations, volunteer organizations for young people)?*". Respondents were presented with a list of five items, including: 1) "*I have provided financial contributions to associations, foundations, or organizations for projects aimed at young people (e.g., improving youth employability, sports, cultural initiatives, or addressing social issues)*"; 2) "*I have provided direct financial support to young people who are not part of my family (e.g., helping to cover costs for medical expenses, insurance, education, rent, or loan repayments; contributions to crowdfunding for personal projects, start-ups, or creative initiatives)*"; and 3) "*I have volunteered in activities aimed at young people (e.g., tutoring, craftsmanship workshops, civic education, local history projects, sports activities, event organization, or creation of social spaces for young people)*". Each activity is measured on a scale of 1 ('never') to 5 ('very often'), assessing the frequency and intensity of seniors' commitment.

## Explanatory variables

To address our research question, we use four variables capturing intergenerational comparisons in terms of economic well-being. The first two explanatory variables refer to comparisons between respondents' generation and today's young people. The questions are: "*Thinking about the level of economic well-being of today's young people (35 years old) when they will reach your age, how do you think it will compare to that of your generation today?*"; and "*Thinking back once more to when you were 35, do you think your peers' generation enjoyed a higher or lower level of economic well-being than today's 35-year-olds?*". Response categories range from 1 ("Very lower") to 5 ("Very greater"). The third explanatory variable concerns seniors' comparison with their parents' generation: "*Thinking instead about your parents' generation when they were 35 years old, do you think they enjoyed a higher or lower level of economic well-being compared to your generation at the age of 35?*" (from 1 "Very lower" to 5 "Very greater"). Finally, the last variable measures the level of agreement, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), with the statement: "*I feel grateful for what my parents' generation has done for the economic well-being of my generation*". Two additional variables measuring the sense of intergenerational responsibility towards younger generations are included. The first one refers to seniors' sense of responsibility in determining the economic well-being of younger generations: "*Do you think your generation has any responsibility in determining the level of economic well-being of today's young people?*". The second one concerns seniors' perceived responsibility in determining the economic discomfort of young people: "*And do you think your generation has any responsibility in determining the level of economic discomfort of today's young people?*". In both cases, respondents were asked to answer using a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("very much"). The two responsibility measures play the role of mediators of the effect of comparisons of intergenerational economic well-being levels on the three indicators of support for young non-family members (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Visualization of the breakdown of the total (unadjusted) effect of intergenerational comparisons of levels of economic well-being on support for young non-family members into direct (adjusted) and indirect components.

## Preliminary results

To quantify the extent to which the effect of economic well-being comparisons on support for young non-family members can be attributed to the sense of responsibility variables, we will apply the KHB

method (Karlson, Holm, & Breen, 2011; Kohler, Karlson, & Holm, 2011). This method allows a proper comparison between the unadjusted and adjusted models and decomposes the total effect of well-being comparisons on support for young non-family members into its direct and indirect components (see the model visualization in [Figure 1](#)). In the first step, we will estimate the effect of economic well-being comparisons on the three outcome variables, excluding the responsibility measures (unadjusted models). In a second step, we will include the two responsibility indicators to build our final adjusted models. At the time of writing this abstract, we have run preliminary OLS models to test the associations between our main explanatory variables and the three outcomes, between the explanatory variables and the mediators, and between the mediators and the three outcomes measuring support for young non-family members. Each model was estimated separately for each explanatory variable and each outcome variable. [Table 1](#) reports the coefficients from bivariate regressions between the main independent variables and the three outcomes. The results show that optimism about the future economic well-being of today's 35-year-olds (Youth future) and the perception that the parental generation enjoyed better conditions (Parents) are associated with higher frequencies of financial contributions, direct financial help, and volunteering. On the other hand, perceiving one's own generation as better-off than today's 35-year-olds (Youth-senior) is negatively associated with all three outcomes. Gratitude toward the parental generation displays a weak and negative association, significant for direct financial help and volunteering. [Table 2](#) shows the associations between the main explanatory variables and the two mediators. A higher perception that one's own generation was better-off than today's 35-year-olds, and stronger gratitude toward the parental generation, are positively associated with the sense of responsibility for young people's economic well-being, while perceiving that the parental generation was better-off is associated with a lower sense of responsibility. Optimism about the future economic conditions of today's 35-year-olds and gratitude toward the parental generation are both positively associated with the perceived responsibility for young people's economic discomfort. Finally, coefficients from [Table 3](#) indicate that perceived responsibility for youths' economic discomfort is positively associated with all three outcomes—financial contributions, direct financial help, and volunteering. In contrast, perceived responsibility for youths' economic well-being shows no significant association with any outcome.

**Table 1.** Bivariate associations between intergenerational comparisons of economic well-being and older adults' support for non-family youth (OLS coefficients). Dependent variables: frequency of financial contributions, direct financial help, and volunteering for young non-family members (1–5 scale).

	Financial contributions				Direct financial help				Volunteering			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Youth Future	0.047 ***				0.087 ***				0.063 ***			
Youth-Senior		-0.047 ***				-0.065 ***				-0.051 ***		
Parents			0.161 ***				0.196 ***				0.175 ***	
Gratitude				-0.012				-0.049 ***				-0.041 ***
_cons	1.454* **	1.722* **	1.192* **	1.588* **	1.285* **	1.720* **	1.045* **	1.676* **	1.399* **	1.723* **	1.148* **	1.696* **
N	5598	5761	5606	6030	5598	5761	5606	6030	5598	5761	5606	6030



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