

Providing Informal Care to Loved Ones at the Expense of One's Social Relations?

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Project description

Population ageing results in a growing need for care, which increasingly falls on informal caregivers: those people in the personal network of the person who needs help. The PhD project is a part of the SOCION research consortium. It explores the consequences of providing informal care for the quality of caregivers' social relations. If informal care provision harms the quality or quantity of caregivers' relations with their partner, family or friends, informal carers lack the network they need once they require care themselves. Combining sociological and social-psychological theoretical mechanisms, this project answers the question of whether, why and under which conditions providing informal care has consequences for informal carers' social relations. As such, it provides key insights into how benefiting from these insights may optimize care arrangements.

Aim of the project

Against the background of an increasing care need due to the ageing population, this PhD project analyses how caregivers' informal care activities influence their social relations with other people in their environment. The aim of the project is threefold. First, it assesses how informal care affects informal caregivers' social relations, thus providing an empirical foundation for the size of the potential social problems this raises. This adds to our understanding of informal care consequences, which the literature has so far largely ignored. Second, by unravelling the mechanisms through which informal care affects informal caregivers' social relations, the project provides theoretical development as well as input for effective policy tools. Third, by specifying and testing conditions under which informal care has negative or positive consequences for informal carers' social relations, it contributes to insights into the role of institutions at meso- and macrolevels.

Research design

The project will rely on large-scale, longitudinal survey data from the Netherlands, such as the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel as well as the Retrospective Caregiver Career module collected as part of this survey. Additional data may be collected in the project. The data will be analyzed with advanced statistical research techniques, such as longitudinal and multilevel models.

Informal caregivers are positioned at the individual level, but obviously informal care always takes place in a dyad of caregiver and care receiver. Informal caregivers are embedded in their direct social network, most notably the partner, family members and friends; those social contexts can be characterized by their prevailing norms, the sharing of care and available alternatives to care provision.

Longitudinal analyses will reveal whether and to what extent providing informal care affects one's social relations and which explanatory factors can account for this. Cross-level interactions will be applied to gauge the extent to which the relationship between informal caregiving and the strength and quality of social relations, as well as certain mechanisms that may explain this relationship, depend on characteristics of the context. Interviews and vignette studies may be conducted to gain deeper insights into the caregivers' experiences and test hypotheses about conditions under which informal care has positive or negative effects for caregivers' social relations.

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