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PLENARY SESSION II

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FAMILY DIVERSITY GROWING OLD: THE FAMILY CONSEQUENCES OF THE PLURALIZATION OF LIFE COURSES FOR THE ELDERLY

The pluralization of the life course has led sociologists to stress the diversification of family contexts in young and middle adulthood. In the last decade, such diversification has also received more attention in gerontology (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). However, the diversification of families in old age is not well known and its consequences for their relational resources hardly considered. This presentation explores whether a plurality of family members beyond the household characterizes family contexts in later life, and if so, whether this diversity has consequences for the relational resources of the elderly.

In recent decades, a series of demographic trends has changed the face of the family in old age. Increased life expectancy and the decrease in fertility have shaped “the beanpole family” with a complex mix of family generations (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990). Living longer, older people have a greater likelihood of facing the death of family members of their own cohort, such as their partner, siblings or distant kin, with some individuals even outliving their own children. Low fertility as well as delayed parenthood have contributed to the development of childlessness among different aging cohorts. In addition, new family forms such as step-families have become more frequent since the 1960s, bringing with them the consequence of an increased diversity of pools of relatives in old age (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Moreover, although distinct pools of relatives offer different alternatives for the development of significant family ties, the presence of such pools does not in itself guarantee that meaningful family relationships are developed (Connidis, 2010).

Because life trajectories have become more diverse in cohorts of individuals that currently reach old age, we hypothesize that a diversity of family configurations is present during this life stage. Depending upon the ways in which individuals define their significant family members, we expect them to develop distinct types of social capital. We hypothesize that bonding social capital is more likely to be developed in family configurations focused on partners, children, and grandchildren.
whereas family configurations focused on siblings, extended kin, or friends are expected to develop bridging social capital.