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The Older Sandwich Generation Across European Welfare Regimes: Demographic and Social Considerations

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Abstract

The lengthening of the amount of time adult children depend on their parents' support and rising longevity have pushed scholars to devote increasing attention to the phenomenon of older sandwich family generations. This brief report develops a descriptive portrait of the prevalence of being demographically and socially sandwiched in the population aged 50 or more years, in Europe. It is shown that the prevalence of social sandwiching is highly sensitive to the types of support utilized to operationalize the concept; also, differences between welfare and transfer regimes are significantly affected by different operationalizations. Next, the analyses highlight the dynamic nature of social sandwiching over the adult life cycle, and show that demographic events and the changing needs of older parents are the main drivers of moving in/out the status of socially sandwiched. Support to adult children is ubiquitous in all European societies. Among the pivot generation family solidarity prevails over competition, but children enjoy a strategic advantage when older parents are in good health.

Keywords Sandwich generation · Population aging · Intergenerational support · Family solidarity · SHARE

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1 Introduction

The term "sandwich generation" refers to individuals who are demographically positioned between children and parents in their family lineages (Železná, 2018). As life expectancy has increased over recent decades, a greater share of sandwich generation members consists of middle-aged or older parents with adult children, and whose own parents are still alive—what has been labeled the "mature sandwich generation" (Silverstein et al., 2020). This demographically sandwiched population is at risk of being socially sandwiched (Vlachantoni et al., 2020) when it simultaneously fulfills the support expectations inherent in being a parent of an adult child (and possibly a grandparent) and an adult child of an older parent. Thus, the socially sandwiched are a sub-set of the demographically sandwiched, potentially providing unpaid informal help and/or economic support up and down the generational ladder. Considering their longer life expectancy and traditional care-giver role within families, women are especially at risk of becoming socially sandwiched in midlife and beyond. (Dukhovnov & Zagheni, 2015; Häusler et al., 2018).

This paper develops a descriptive portrait of the prevalence of being demographically and socially sandwiched in the population aged 50 + of European countries. The paper further explores shifts into and out of social sandwiching over time in the lives of older adults. In line with previous studies that noted the overlap between family systems and welfare state or transfer regimes (Albertini & Kohli, 2013) we investigate the prevalence of various types of assistance provided by the demographically sandwiched across four regimes geographically corresponding to the following regions: Nordic, Continental, Southern, and Eastern European (Albertini, 2016).

2 Definitions and Prevalence of Sandwiched Individuals: Previous Studies

Despite a large body of research on multigenerational care and family relations (Vlachantoni et al., 2020), there is remarkably little research on the sandwich generation in older families. The origins of academic interest in the sandwich generation can be traced to the burdens and stresses faced by women who have primary responsibility for young dependent children and frail older parents (Brody, 2003; Riley & Bowen, 2005). In the last decade or so, this family domain has been redefined as a demographic and even economic phenomenon of interest, as focus has shifted to dual trends of emergent needs in young adulthood and survivorship in the older generation. The amount of time adult children are dependent on their parents has lengthened (Arnett, 2007; Furstenberg, 2010) while rising longevity has increased the amount of time that parents co-survive their middle-aged or older children (Crimmins, 2015; Dong et al., 2016; Wilmoth, 2000). In particular, many in the baby boom generation have reached their sixth and seventh decade with at least one parent still alive (Wassel & Cutler, 2016), while their children have experienced delayed marriage, fertility and workforce entry. Thus, demand for support from this middle generation of baby boomers may extend in two directions.

The dominant demographic definition of the sandwich generation is being mid-layer in a three generational structure between parents and children. However, more recently, researchers have called attention to the increasing number of four generational structures, where middle-aged and older individuals are grandparents sandwiched between three generations of parents, children, and grandchildren (Fingerman et al., 2011; Herlofson & Brandt, 2020; Vlachantoni et al., 2020; Wassel & Cutler, 2016). The potential to be a sandwiched grandparent peaks at the mid-fifties to late sixties, about a decade later than sandwiching between only adult children and parents (Dukhovnov & Zagheni, 2015; Friedman et al., 2017).

Age, gender, and national context shape the prevalence of the demographically and socially sandwiched. For example, in 2013, 45% of adults 35–75 in the USA had at least one child over 18 and at least one living parent (Friedman et al., 2017). Over three quarters of women aged 40–44 in Germany constituted a middle generation, but at ages 55–59 the proportion dropped to less than half (Künemund & Tanschus, 2014). About half of a sample of European respondents who were aged 50 years or older in 2007 were sandwiched grandparents; that is, had a living parent and grandchildren (Herlofson & Brandt, 2020). Yet, among British participants in the National Child Development Study who were born in 1958, the proportion of sandwiched grandparents was just under one-third when they were 55 years old (Vlachantoni et al., 2020). Heterogeneity in prevalence across studies partially stems from variation in the ages considered, but also to differences in fertility and mortality schedules. As a rule, more women than men are located between two generations, since they tend to be younger when entering parenthood (Herlofson & Brandt, 2020; Künemund, 2006).

The demographically sandwiched becomes socially sandwiched when it provides labor and/or economic support to both adjacent generations. Labor support is defined in terms of the provision of unpaid informal assistance or helping activities and includes instrumental or practical help with such tasks as transportation, babysitting, home maintenance, chores, paperwork, and personal care (Friedman et al., 2017; Gans et al., 2013; Herlofson & Brandt, 2020; Turgeman-Lupo et al., 2020; Vlachantoni et al., 2020; Železná, 2018). The labor demands made of the older middle generation often extend to providing care for grandchildren which serves as an indirect transfer to adult children. Although there is wide variation in how informal assistance is empirically measured, the common feature for all tasks is that the fixed resource of time is expended by the provider (Cravey & Mitra, 2011; Dukhovnov & Zagheni, 2015; Herlofson & Brandt, 2020; McGarrigle, Cronin & Kenny, 2014; Železná, 2018). Economic support in this context is generally defined as providing tangible resources of economic value, such as inter-vivos monetary gifts, loans, and large material gifts (Dukhovnov & Zagheni, 2015; Friedman et al., 2017; Gans et al., 2013; Grundy & Henretta, 2006; McGarrigle et al., 2014; Pierret, 2006; White-Means & Rubin, 2008).

Studies have found that sandwiched respondents who reported providing help to one generation were more likely than others to report providing help to the other generation. These findings tend to support the notion of intergenerational solidarity or complementarity of transfers (Grundy & Henretta, 2006; Silverstein et al., 2020; Železná, 2018), rather than competition between generations for the limited time and

money of the middle generation (DePasquale et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2016). Yet, when considering the extent of giving, sandwiched individuals tend to differentially allocate resources for the benefit of young-adult over older generations. For largely financial reasons, delays in the transition to adulthood have raised the importance of parental resources for emerging adults (Furstenberg, 2010). Hence, the sandwich generation tends to give more to their children than to their parents–especially if the children are young or have children of their own (Cullen et al., 2009; Wiemers & Bianchi, 2015; Friedman et al., 2017; Grundy & Henretta, 2006; White-Means & Rubin, 2008). Research on variation by type of support reveals that sandwiched individuals more frequently provide economic support to adult children and labor support to older parents.

As nation states vary in family culture as well social policies, some studies examined social sandwiching within the context of different welfare regimes. The political economy gradient suggested by the welfare state typology maps well with filial obligations, which varies inversely with the degree of welfare development (Höllinger & Haller, 1990). Research suggests that sandwich generation members are less likely to provide social support to their parents in Continental, Mediterranean and East European welfare regimes, but more likely to do so in Social-Democratic welfare regimes (Silverstein et al., 2020). This evidence supports the hypothesis that well-developed welfare states "crowd-in" more casual forms of family support to older individuals (Brandt et al., 2009).

Finally, it is worth noting that the division of labor in informal support and care remains tilted toward women, such that being in the sandwich generation is more likely to impact women than men (for example, Evans et al., 2016; Grundy & Hernetta, 2006; Kunemund, 2014; Wiemers & Bianchi, 2015). Indeed, helping aging parents while at the same time helping adult children and caring for grandchildren remains a gendered behavior with inequitable outcomes for women. (Cullen et al., 2009; Dukhovnv & Zagheni, 2015; Friedmand et al., 2017; Gans et al., 2013; Helforson & Brandt, 2020; Vlachantoni et al., 2020; Weimers & Bianchi, 2015).

3 Research Questions

The present research is informed by two interconnected processes that are reflected in the literature on the sandwich generation: (1) being demographically sandwiched as determined by forces of family formation, fertility quantum and tempo, and longevity; and (2) being socially sandwiched as determined by the demand and capacity to provide support to other generations. We estimate the prevalence of demographic and social sandwiching and evaluate whether estimates of the prevalence of the latter are sensitive to the type of support considered (i.e., social support, monetary support, and co-residence).

Next, we ask whether the prevalence of social sandwiching is associated with welfare and transfer regimes, and whether this association varies according to the specific types of support considered. Finally, we focus on transitions in and out of being socially sandwiched over a span of several years and identify the most common sequences entering and exiting a sandwiching status.

4 Data and Analytical Strategy

The following analyses are based on data from the Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE, www.share-project.org). SHARE is a longitudinal, multidisciplinary, cross-national survey representative of the non-institutionalized population aged 50 years and over in several European countries.

In line with our research questions we articulated our analytical strategy in two steps: in the first part of the analyses we adopted a static view in defining and measuring the phenomenon of the sandwich generation. The analytical sample utilized in these analyses is made of individuals between 50 and 75 years of age,[1] who participated in wave 6, conducted in year 2015. In these analyses, we first identify individuals who we define as *demographically sandwiched* and *socially sandwiched*.

The demographically sandwiched are individuals who, at the time of the interview, had at least one adult (i.e., older than 17 years) living child—including adopted, foster, and step-children—and at least one living biological parent- or parent-in-law. These individuals were considered at risk of having to simultaneously provide informal support to both younger and older family generations.

Among those who belong to the demographically sandwiched individuals, we further distinguish the *socially sandwiched*. We identify socially sandwiched individuals using three different definitions: (1) provides social support to at least one parent- or parent-in-law and, simultaneously provides social support to at least one adult child (including looking after grandchildren); (2) provides social support and/or economic support to younger and older generations; (3) provides social support, and/or economic support, and/or a shared residence to younger and older generations.[2]

In the first part of the analyses, using the data from the wave 6 of SHARE, we assess the prevalence of the demographically sandwiched generation among the aging European population, and we also report on its variation across different welfare regimes. We then estimate the prevalence of intergenerational support from sandwiched individuals to older and younger generations and identify those who are socially sandwiched as well as those who provide support to only one generation.

Our analysis is based on slightly less than 67,000 cases from the following countries: Sweden and Denmark (Nordic regime), Austria, Germany, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg (Continental regime), Spain, Italy, Greece, Israel, Portugal (Southern European regime), Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, and Croatia (Eastern Europe regime) (Albertini & Kohli, 2013; Silverstein et al., 2020). The results from these analyses allow us to estimate the prevalence of the phenomenon of being generational sandwiched from a static point of view, only considering the 2015 survey.

[1] Only individuals younger than 76 years have been included in the analytical sample because it is rare that respondents beyond this age have a living parent.

[2] The original question through which the information on social and economic support was retrieved are reported in Appendix 2.

In the second part of the analyses, we shift to a dynamic view of sandwiching by examining the sandwich position of respondents using all waves in which they participated in the survey. We perform a sequence analysis of respondents' trajectories across five different possible states: (1) not demographically sandwiched vs. demographically sandwiched; demographically sandwiched and (2) providing support only to adult children (including looking after grandchildren); (3) providing support only to parents and/or parents-in-law; (4) providing support to both children and parents; (5) not providing support to any other family generation. The analyses are repeated using the three different definitions of "sandwiched generation" reported above. We consider data from waves 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 of the SHARE and, since we focus on sequences of statuses, we include in the analytic sample all individuals who participated at least in two regular waves of the survey. In this second stage, data from the Netherlands are also included within the Continental regime. The total number of observations is close to 212,000 derived from 74,513 individuals. Sequences are analyzed while removing gaps (if present), left aligning the beginning of each sequence and applying same-order similarity criterion.[3] Differences between welfare regimes are also documented.[4]

5 Results

5.1 Cross-Sectional Estimates

When taking a cross-sectional view of intergenerational sandwiching, we find that about one out of four respondents was demographically sandwiched (Table A1). However, the share of those who are socially sandwiched between multigenerational support obligations is much lower. Slightly more than two percent of SHARE wave 6 respondents reported having provided social support to both non-co-resident adult children and older parents in the twelve months before the interview. The

[3] Removing gaps and left aligning means that sequences of the same states, which have the same length and start in different waves are considered the same, e.g., a sequence generated by a respondent who was sandwiched in wave 4 and 5 and then only transferring to children in wave 6 (S–S-C) will be considered as identical to one of an individual being sandwiched in waves 2 and 5 and only transferring to children in wave 6, and not participating to wave 4. Applying the same-order similarity criterion means that an individual observed just twice, as sandwiched in wave 1 and only giving to children in wave 2 will generate a sequence identical to the ones observed above (i.e., S–S-C will be the same as S-C). It is important to note, therefore, that length of the episodes and the potentially different distances of consecutive individual observations are not accounted for in these analyses.

[4] It is worth noting that, both when adopting a static and a dynamic perspective, the analysis of between-regimes differences only serves a descriptive purpose. These differences may result from a number of compositional differences—e.g., by age, gender, health status, or average age at childbirth—and explaining which factors are connected with the risk of being demographically and socially sandwiched is beyond the scope of this brief research report. Nevertheless, in the appendix 1, we replicate some of the analyses presented in the main paper by focusing only on subsamples of respondents who are grandparents, female, and aged between 50 and 65 years (see Tables A3, A4, A5, and A6). These analyses represent a first approximation of controls for potential compositional factors driving between-regimes differences.

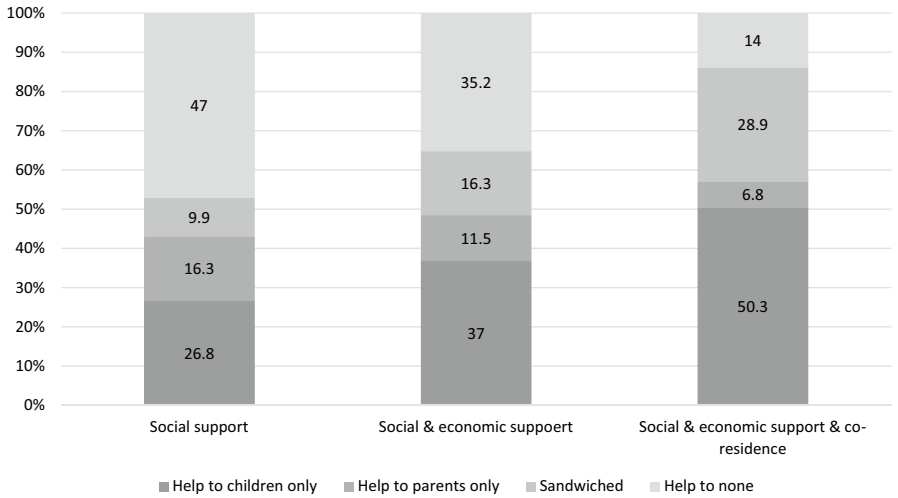

Fig. 1 Distribution of different states, among individuals who are demographically sandwiched—by three different definitions of intergenerational support. (*Source*: Own calculations on SHARE wave 6 data, weighted results)

prevalence of socially sandwiched individuals increases with more inclusive definitions of intergenerational support: they are 4% when we take into consideration economic support in addition to social support; when intergenerational co-residence is also included, the proportion increases to slightly less than 8%. Nonetheless, these figures are rather small compared to most previous studies, as they represent the entire population of persons aged between 50 and 75 years and not only middle-aged persons.

As noted earlier, social sandwiching can only occur when one is demographically sandwiched. Hence, it is useful to consider the incidence of being socially sandwiched conditioned on being at risk. Thus, Figs. 1 and 2 report social support exchanges only for respondents who are demographically sandwiched. Within this group we find that the socially sandwiched represent between 9.9 and 28.9%, depending on the definition used (Fig. 1).

Breaking down statistics by welfare regime (Table A2), we observe considerable variation. The number of socially sandwiched individuals is the highest in Nordic European countries and lowest in Southern Europe. The socially sandwiched are almost five times more numerous in Nordic than in Southern European regimes (Fig. 2, panel a). It is important to note, however, that the between-regime differences are significantly reduced when considering intergenerational co-residence as a form of support: using the most extensive definition of intergenerational support reduces this ratio to 1.5 (Fig. 2, panel c). This latter finding clearly stems from the fact that, as already pointed out in previous studies (Albertini, 2016), intergenerational co-residence and the support it provides is frequently adopted in Southern and Eastern European societies. More generally, these results show that adopting different definitions of sandwiched generation makes quite a significant difference

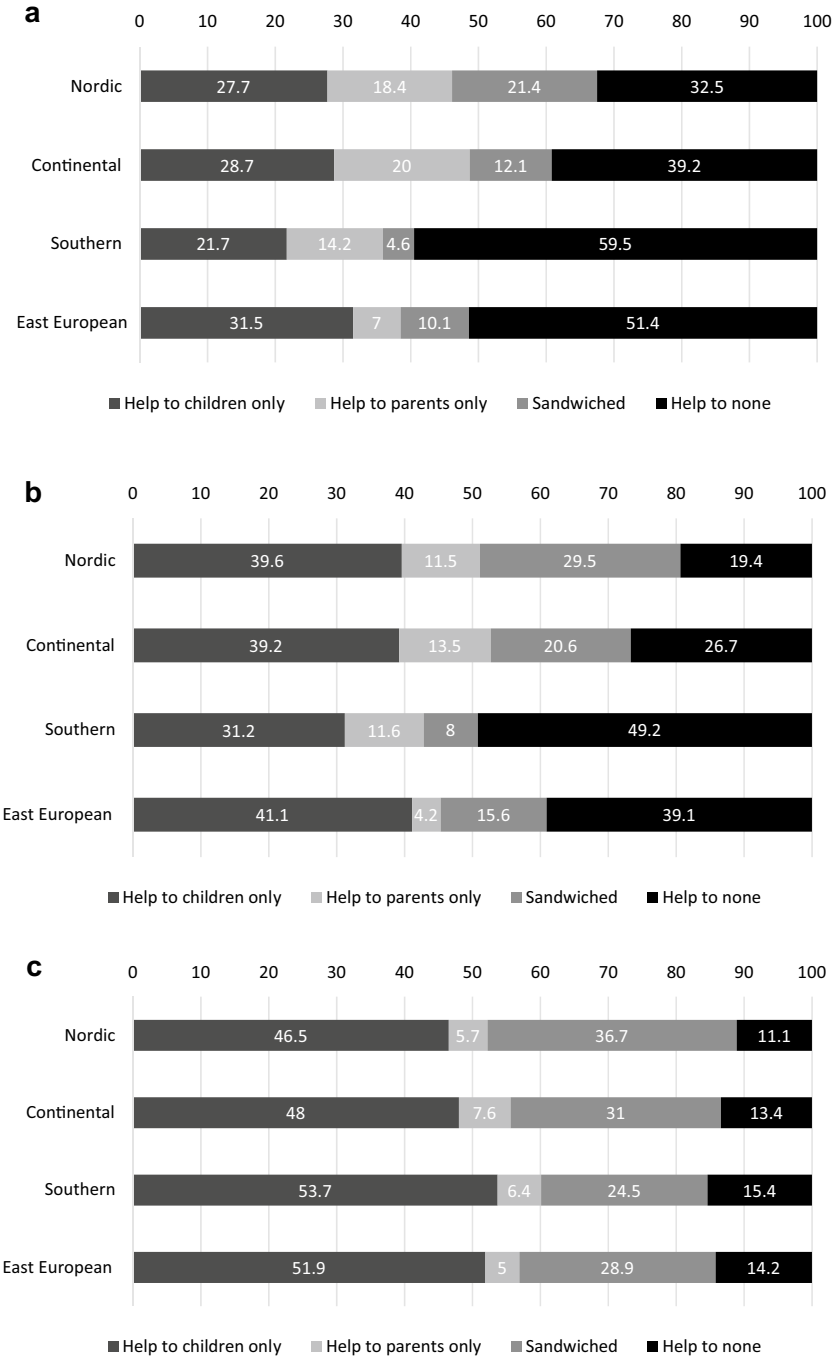

Fig. 2 Distribution of different states, among individuals who are demographically sandwiched-by regime. *Source*: Own calculations on SHARE wave 6 data, weighted results, *N*. Panel **a**: Intergenerational Support defined as social support. Panel **b**: Intergenerational support defined as social support and economic support. Panel **c**: Intergenerational support defined as social support, economic support, and co-residence

when estimating the prevalence of the phenomenon. If we focus on the demographically sandwiched, they represent up to one-fourth of the aging European population. If, instead, we consider the socially sandwiched, their prevalence ranges between 1 and 10%, depending on the specific definition adopted and countries considered,[5] with slightly higher levels being recorded among female respondents (Table A4).

5.2 A Dynamic Perspective

The data reported above provide a cross-sectional snapshot of the prevalence of sandwiched individuals at a specific point in time. These data, however, are still limited vis-à-vis the aim of measuring and describing the extent to which the 50 + European population is experiencing the phenomenon of sandwiching. We can reasonably expect that the condition and experience of being demographically and socially sandwiched, and its consequences on individuals' wellbeing, can take place at very different points of an individual's life course. Sandwiching may be experienced repeatedly during an individual's life, and may have a long or short duration. SHARE data do not allow observation of very long periods of respondents' life. However, its panel structure permits us to take first steps in the direction of adopting a dynamic perspective on the phenomenon. Moreover, this first step offers a preliminary picture of individuals' trajectories in/out of the status of socially sandwiched.

In the following analyses, we examine individuals' transitions between the five different statuses described above in the data section. Tables 1 and 2 report the main characteristics of these sequences: the largest share of respondents–about 71%—did not experience any change in status during the period in which they were observed (Table 1). Depending on the specific definition adopted of socially sandwiched, we find that between 5 and 13% of respondents are observed in this status in at least one wave. Among those who are socially sandwiched at least once, the average duration of the sandwiching episode, measured in the number of consecutive SHARE waves, equals about 1.3.[6] The pattern of between-regime differences (Table 2) mirrors that observed in the cross-sectional analyses. The Nordic countries show the highest prevalence of socially sandwiched individuals (17%), using the broadest definition of intergenerational support, followed very closely by Continental Europe (14%). The percentage of socially sandwiched individuals remains lower in Southern and Eastern Europe, even when including co-residence as a form of support (about 10%).

[5] In further analyses, we also produced the same estimates on the subsamples of those individuals who have at least one living grandchild at the time of the interview, females, and individuals aged between 50 and 65 years. The patterns of differences between different definitions of socially sandwiched and different regimes do not significantly diverge from the ones reported in Table A2 (see Tables A3, A4, and A5). The only notable difference is that, when adopting the third definition, among grandparents and female respondents the percentage of socially sandwiched individuals is essentially the same in Eastern and Continental European countries.

[6] It should be stressed that here we are only considering the number of consecutive waves in which the individual is observed; we do not account for the actual number of years passed between observations—which may vary among waves, countries, and individuals.

Table 1 Sequences of sandwiching statuses, main descriptive statistics

	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Percentage with no changes in status	71.26	70.58	71.43
Percentage with one or more episodes of social sandwiching	5.38	8.41	12.66
Average number of sandwiching episodes | at least one episode of sandwiching	1.04	1.05	1.06
Average duration of sandwiching episodes # of waves at least one episode of sandwiching	1.27	1.29	1.37

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 data, $N = 58{,}557$, weighted results

Table 2 Sequences of sandwiching statuses, main descriptive statistics, by regime

	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Nordic (N = 7319)			
Percentage with no changes in status	69.48	69.42	70.02
Percentage with one or more episodes of social sandwiching	11.35	15.28	17.14
Average number of sandwiching episodes | at least one episode of sandwiching	1.07	1.07	1.07
Average duration of sandwiching episodes # of waves | at least one episode of sandwiching	1.35	1.39	1.41
Continental (N = 24,406)			
Percentage with no changes in status	70.10	69.34	70.19
Percentage with one or more episodes of social sandwiching	6.59	10.43	13.77
Average number of sandwiching episodes | at least one episode of sandwiching	1.05	1.05	1.06
Average duration of sandwiching episodes # of waves | at least one episode of sandwiching	1.28	1.29	1.37
Southern (N = 14,247)			
Percentage with no changes in status	72.94	72.20	73.14
Percentage with one or more episodes of social sandwiching	2.68	4.64	10.90
Average number of sandwiching episodes | at least one episode of sandwiching	1.03	1.04	1.05
Average duration of sandwiching episodes as # of waves | at least one episode of sandwiching	1.24	1.27	1.39
Eastern (N = 12,585)			
Percentage with no changes in status	73.25	72.94	73.59
Percentage with one or more episodes of social sandwiching	4.78	6.24	9.89
Average number of sandwiching episodes | at least one episode of sandwiching	1.03	1.04	1.05
Average duration of sandwiching episodes as # of waves | at least one episode of sandwiching	1.24	1.25	1.29

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 data, weighted results

In analyzing sequences of sandwich status we are able to ascertain the most common pathways in and out being socially sandwiched. We do that by analyzing the most frequent transitions between different statuses experienced by individuals who are observed at least once as being socially sandwiched, and their variation across regimes.

Table 3 focuses on the ten most common sequences, applying same-order similarity criterion, these sequences summarize the transitions experienced by 62 to 75% of all respondents who have experienced being socially sandwiched during the years in which they participated in SHARE. Across all three definitions of support we find that the three most common sequences involve either permanence in a sandwiched status, or change of such status due to moving in or out of demographic sandwiching. In other words, demographic events–such as the loss of parents/parents-in-law or the transition to adulthood of a child–are the most frequent causes of moving out/in the status of socially sandwiched. In the two following sequences we find respondents who move between being socially sandwiched and providing support only to children, while not helping parents and parents-in-law. These patterns are likely to be connected with changes in the health conditions of respondent' parents and parents-in-law combined with a persistent support given to adult children. Interestingly, it is not before the seventh or eighth position that support careers of sandwiched individuals involve not giving to any generation (Nn) or giving only to the older family generation (P).

Turning now to the comparison among the different regimes (Table 4)—and focusing only on the most inclusive definition of intergenerational support—we first see that in Eastern Europe the heterogeneity of the sequences that characterize the sandwich generation is lower than in other regimes, as can be surmised from the fact that the ten most frequent sequences comprise 82% of the total. This percentage is even higher when considering only female respondents. In general, women are characterized by lower heterogeneity in patterns of "social sandwiching career"

Table 3 Ten most frequent sequences including a sandwiched episode

Ten most common sequences	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
I	S-Nd	S-Nd	S-Nd
II	Nd-S	Nd-S	Nd-S
III	S	S	S
IV	C-S	S-C	C-S
V	S-C	C-S	S-C
VI	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd
VII	Nn-S	Nn-S	S-C-Nd
VIII	P-S	P-S	C-S-Nd
IX	S-C-Nd	S-P	S-P
X	S-P	S-C-Nd	Nd-S-C
Percentage of respondents included in 10 most common sequences	62.43	65.61	75.15

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 data, weighted results. Note: [Nd] not demographically sandwiched; [C] help to children, only; [P] help to parents, only; [S] sandwiched; [Nn] help to none

Table 4 Ten most frequent sequences including a sandwiched episode, by regime

Ten most common sequences	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Nordic			
I	S-Nd	S-Nd	S-Nd
II	S	S	S
III	Nd-S	Nd-S	C-S
IV	C-S	C-S	Nd-S
V	S-C	S-C	S-C
VI	P-S	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd
VII	Nd-S-Nd	S-C-Nd	S-C-Nd
VIII	Nn-S	P-S	C-S-Nd
IX	S-P	C-S-Nd	C-S-C
X	S-C-Nd	Nn-S	S-Nd-S
Percentage of respondents included in 10 most common sequences	64.45	68.51	73.61
Continental			
I	S-Nd	S-Nd	S-Nd
II	Nd-S	Nd-S	Nd-S
III	S	S	S
IV	C-S	S-C	C-S
V	S-C	C-S	S-C
VI	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd
VII	P-S	P-S	S-C-Nd
VIII	Nn-S	S-P	S-P
IX	S-C-Nd	Nn-S	C-S-Nd
X	S-P	S-C-Nd	Nd-C-S
Percentage of respondents included in 10 most common sequences	63.71	67.22	74.60

Table 4 (continued)

Ten most common sequences	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Southern			
I	S-Nd	S-Nd	S-Nd
II	Nd-S	Nd-S	Nd-S
III	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd	S
IV	C-S	S	Nd-S-Nd
V	S-C	S-C	C-S
VI	S	Nn-S	S-C
VII	S-Nn	S-Nn	C-S-Nd
VIII	Nn-S	C-S	Nd-S-C
IX	P-S	S-P	C-Nd-S
X	P-S-Nd	Nn-S-Nd	S-Nd-S
Percentage of respondents included in 10 most common sequences	59.19	62.09	77.45
Eastern			
I	S-Nd	S-Nd	Nd-S
II	Nd-S	Nd-S	S-Nd
III	C-S	S	C-S
IV	Nd-S-Nd	C-S	S
V	S	Nd-S-Nd	S-C
VI	Nn-S	S-C	Nd-S-Nd
VII	C-S-Nd	C-S-Nd	S-Nd-S
VIII	S-C	P-S	C-S-Nd
IX	S-Nn	S-Nd-S	C-Nd-S
X	P-S	C-Nd-S	Nd-C-S

Table 4 (continued)

Ten most common sequences	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Percentage of respondents included in 10 most common sequences	67.14	70.01	82.31

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 data, weighted results. Note: [Nd] not demographically sandwiched; [C] help to children, only; [P] help to parents, only; [S] Sandwiched; [Nn] help to none

than when considering the full sample (Table A6). In all regimes we observe that the support career of sandwiched people rarely involves periods in which no support is provided, or is provided only to parents. In fact, it is only in the continental countries that we find, among the ten most common sequences, careers involving at least one year in which support was not given to adult children, despite their presence. In all other instances, we find only sequences that combine the three statuses of not demographically sandwiched, giving only to children, or socially sandwiched. Indeed, support to adult children seems ubiquitous, whereas help to older parents is probably strictly connected with their care needs. When observing only female respondents (Table A6), we find no significant differences vis-à-vis the patterns observed in the general population—with the only exception of the pattern "P-S" which was observed among the ten most frequent sequences in Northern Europe.

6 Conclusion

Two important ongoing demographic trends: delayed residential and financial autonomy of young adults and increasing longevity, are pushing scholars to devote more attention to the growing number of older sandwiched generations.

Differently from previous studies that aimed at measuring this socio-demographic phenomenon, in our research report we have: (1) systematically distinguished the demographically from the socially sandwiched; (2) performed various sensitivity analyses, and thus compared the prevalence of the socially sandwiched while adopting different definitions of informal support; (3) compared across different welfare regimes and family systems the prevalence of the older sandwiched generation; (4) moved toward studying the phenomenon of sandwiching as a transitional status.

In this study we delineated theoretical and empirical phenomena of demographic and social sandwiching. We then showed that social sandwiching is highly sensitive to the types of support used to operationalize the concept. Hence, caution is required when comparing estimates of social sandwiching across studies as well as across countries. Compared to most studies on this topic which have focused on caregiving in defining social sandwiching, this study shows that focusing solely on this dimension excludes a sizable portion of the demographically sandwiched who engage in supporting parents and adult offspring in other ways. By considering social sandwiching in a flexibly expansive manner, our findings demonstrate that the comparative study of the sandwich generation is highly sensitive to the definition used for being socially sandwiched across diverse cultures of support.

Our study also highlighted the dynamic nature of social sandwiching over the adult life cycle. While our analysis focused on one point in time revealed that 2–6 percent of the older adults reported being socially sandwiched (depending on how inclusive the definition used of social sandwiching), the number adults who were sandwiched during at least one of the waves of the survey was twice as high.

What points emerge when comparing regimes? First there are some differences in the likelihood of being demographically sandwiched, especially between Southern European and Nordic and Continental regimes, attesting to the differences in fertility and longevity. Second, the extent of variation in social sandwiching across regimes is highly dependent on the measures used. This attests to the different forms

of support applied in various countries so that when using the most inclusive measure differences across regimes are quite small (see Fig. 2).

Our results suggest that future studies should pay more attention to the different possible definitions of intergenerational support: the prevalence of the phenomenon and its variation across countries are significantly affected by the specific definition adopted; in particular, by not considering intergenerational co-residence as a form of support we substantially underestimated the prevalence of sandwiching in Southern and Eastern Europe.

The analysis of transitions revealed that, within a certain degree of heterogeneity, most exits or entrances from/into the status of socially sandwiched are likely connected with the changing composition of the family network—parents' death and children's advancing age—and the changing needs of older parents. Support provided to children was ubiquitous in all societies, confirming both that family solidarity prevails over the competition hypothesis, but also the strategic advantage of children over parents, when the latter are still in good health.

Finally, we note that the stress from being socially sandwiched likely has implications for health and wellbeing (Do et al., 2014). Consequences may include increased depression (Hammer & Neal, 2008) and worse self-rated health (Häusler et al., 2018). Research also documents that that sandwiched caregivers are less likely to engage in healthy practices (Chassin et al., 2010; Steiner & Fletcher, 2017), as well as experience stress and depression juggling familial roles and job obligations (Halinski et al., 2018; Malach-Pines et al., 2011; Sahibzada et al., 2005; Turgeman-Lupo et al., 2020). Future research may wish to examine these outcomes within a welfare-state context.

Appendix 1

Table A1 Distribution of respondents according to their demographic and social sandwich status

	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Not demographically sandwiched	73.75	73.75	73.75
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	7.04	9.70	13.20
Help to parents, only	4.27	3.03	1.78
Sandwiched	2.59	4.28	7.59
Help to none	12.35	9.25	3.68
Total ($N=51{,}088$)	100	100	100

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 6 data, weighted results, $N=51{,}088$

Table A2 Distribution of respondents according to their demographic and social sandwich status, by regime

	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Nordic			
Not demographically sandwiched	71.56	71.56	71.56
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	7.88	11.25	13.23
Help to parents, only	5.24	3.27	1.63
Sandwiched	6.08	8.39	10.43
Help to none	9.24	5.52	3.16
Total ($N=5762$)	100	100	100
Continental			
Not demographically sandwiched	71.78	71.78	71.78
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	8.09	11.06	13.55
Help to parents, only	5.64	3.82	2.15
Sandwiched	3.41	5.80	8.76
Help to none	11.08	7.54	3.76
Total ($N=16{,}622$)	100	100	100
Southern			
Not demographically sandwiched	76.12	76.12	76.12
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	5.18	7.44	12.81
Help to parents, only	3.38	2.77	1.53
Sandwiched	1.11	1.92	5.86
Help to none	14.21	11.76	3.68
Total ($N=14{,}204$)	100	100	100
Eastern			
Not demographically sandwiched	75.00	75.00	75.00
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	7.88	10.28	12.96
Help to parents, only	1.74	1.04	1.26
Sandwiched	2.52	3.89	7.22
Help to none	12.86	9.78	3.56
Total ($N=14{,}500$)	100	100	100

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 6 data, weighted results, $N=51{,}088$

Table A3 Distribution of respondents according to their demographic and social sandwich status, Wave 6 of SHARE–*only respondents who are also grandparents*

	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Nordic			
Not demographically sandwiched	74.67	74.67	74.67
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	11.30	12.27	12.54
Help to parents, only	1.75	0.96	0.89
Sandwiched	8.73	9.60	10.05
Help to none	3.55	2.50	1.86
Total ($N=3969$)	100	100	100
Continental			
Not demographically sandwiched	73.30	73.30	73.30
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	13.20	14.07	14.42
Help to parents, only	2.01	1.36	1.23
Sandwiched	5.75	6.87	8.20
Help to none	5.74	4.39	2.85
Total ($N=9877$)	100	100	100
Southern			
Not demographically sandwiched	79.60	79.60	79.60
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	9.85	10.64	11.67
Help to parents, only	1.25	1.13	1.07
Sandwiched	2.23	2.36	4.60
Help to none	7.06	6.27	3.0
Total ($N=7833$)	100	100	100
Eastern			
Not demographically sandwiched	75.85	75.85	75.85
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	10.80	12.48	12.89
Help to parents, only	0.93	0.52	0.95
Sandwiched	3.52	4.68	7.78
Help to none	8.90	6.47	2.53
Total ($N=11{,}069$)	100	100	100

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 6 data, weighted results, ($N=32{,}748$)

Table A4 Distribution of respondents according to their demographic and social sandwich status, Wave 6 of SHARE – *only female respondents*

	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Nordic			
Not demographically sandwiched	72.16	72.16	72.16
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	7.81	10.75	12.06
Help to parents, only	5.69	3.25	1.90
Sandwiched	7.04	9.81	11.36
Help to none	7.31	4.04	2.53
Total ($N=3129$)	100	100	100
Continental			
Not demographically sandwiched	71.29	71.29	71.29
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	8.38	10.74	13.31
Help to parents, only	5.87	3.99	2.29
Sandwiched	4.50	6.78	9.39
Help to none	9.96	7.21	3.71
Total ($N=9119$)	100	100	100
Southern			
Not demographically sandwiched	74.37	74.37	74.37
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	5.19	7.32	12.64
Help to parents, only	3.93	3.15	1.45
Sandwiched	1.43	2.41	7.15
Help to none	15.09	12.75	4.39
Total ($N=7891$)	100	100	100
Eastern			
Not demographically sandwiched	71.49	71.49	71.49
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	9.25	11.26	14.18
Help to parents, only	1.96	1.35	1.2
Sandwiched	4.12	5.54	9.31
Help to none	13.18	10.36	3.83
Total ($N=8327$)	100	100	100

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 6 data, weighted results, $N=28,466$

Table A5 Distribution of respondents according to their demographic and social sandwich status, Wave 6 of SHARE – *only respondents aged between 50 and 65 years*

	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Nordic			
Not demographically sandwiched	60.06	60.06	60.06
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	10.36	15.44	18.50
Help to parents, only	7.85	4.90	2.29
Sandwiched	8.25	11.69	14.89
Help to none	13.48	7.91	4.26
Total ($N=3113$)	100	100	100
Continental			
Not demographically sandwiched	63.10	63.10	63.10
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	9.81	13.90	17.54
Help to parents, only	7.80	5.21	2.70
Sandwiched	4.36	7.68	11.88
Help to none	14.93	10.10	4.79
Total (10,094)	100	100	100
Southern			
Not demographically sandwiched	67.55	67.55	67.55
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	6.47	9.56	17.30
Help to parents, only	4.81	3.93	2.05
Sandwiched	1.43	2.60	8.17
Help to none	19.75	16.36	4.94
Total ($N=8203$)	100	100	100
Eastern			
Not demographically sandwiched	65.91	65.91	65.91
Demographically sandwiched			
Help to children, only	10.62	13.99	17.86
Help to parents, only	2.39	1.42	1.71
Sandwiched	3.43	5.35	9.81
Help to none	17.65	13.33	4.71
Total ($N=8541$)	100	100	100

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 6 data, weighted results, $N=29,951$

Table A6 Ten most frequent sequences including a sandwiched episode, by regime, *only female respondents*

Ten most common sequences	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Nordic			
I	S-Nd	S-Nd	S-Nd
II	S	S	S
III	Nd-S	Nd-S	C-S
IV	C-S	C-S	Nd-S
V	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd	S-C
VI	S-C	S-C	Nd-S-Nd
VII	P-S	S-C-Nd	S-C-Nd
VIII	S-P	C-S-Nd	C-S-Nd
IX	S-C-Nd	P-S	P-S
X	Nn-S	S-P	S-Nd-S
Percentage of respondents included in 10 most common sequences	65.19	69.19	73.37
Continental			
I	S-Nd	S-Nd	S-Nd
II	Nd-S	Nd-S	Nd-S
III	S	S	S
IV	C-S	S-C	S-C
V	S-C	C-S	C-S
VI	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd
VII	P-S	P-S	S-P
VIII	Nd-S-C	S-P	S-C-Nd
IX	S-P	Nn-S	Nd-C-S
X	Nn-S	Nd-S-C	Nd-S-C
Percentage of respondents included in 10 most common sequences	67.90	69.13	76.25

Table A6 (continued)

Ten most common sequences	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Southern			
I	S-Nd	S-Nd	S-Nd
II	Nd-S	Nd-S	Nd-S
III	S-C	S	S
IV	C-S	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd
V	Nd-S-Nd	S-C	C-S
VI	S	C-S	S-C
VII	S-Nn	Nn-S	Nd-S-C
VIII	P-S	S-Nn	Nd-C-S
IX	Nn-S	S-P	S-C-Nd
X	S-P	Nd-S-C	C-S-Nd
Percentage of respondents included in 10 most common sequences	61.34	63.23	76.92
Eastern			
I	S-Nd	S-Nd	Nd-S
II	Nd-S	Nd-S	S-Nd
III	C-S	C-S	C-S
IV	Nd-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd	S
V	S	S	S-C
VI	C-S-Nd	C-S-Nd	Nd-S-Nd
VII	Nn-S	S-C	C-S-Nd
VIII	S-C	P-S	S-Nd-S
IX	P-S	Nd-C-S	Nd-C-S
X	C-Nd-S	S-Nd-S	C-Nd-S

Table A6 (continued)

Ten most common sequences	Social support	Social and/or economic support	Social, economic support and/or co-residence
Percentage of respondents included in 10 most common sequences	72.34	74.10	86.40

Source: Own calculations on SHARE wave 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 data, weighted results. Note: [Nd] not demographically sandwiched; [C] help to children, only; [P] help to parents, only; [S] Sandwiched; [Nn] help to none

Appendix 2

Information about social and economic support provided/received was collected in SHARE using the following questions (as from the generic English questionnaire):

Social support received

Now please think of the last twelve months. Has any family member from outside the household, any friend or neighbor given you or your husband/wife/partner any kind of help listed on card 28?

[the card lists the following types of help: 1. Personal care, e.g., dressing, bathing or showering, eating, getting in or out of bed, using toilet; 2. Practical household help, e.g., with home repairs, gardening, transportation, shopping, household chores; 3. Help with paperwork, such as filling out forms, settling financial or legal matters].

Which family member from outside the household, friend or neighbor has helped you or your husband/wife/partner most often in the last twelve months? [repeated up to a maximum of 3 times].

Social support given

Now I would like to ask about the help you gave to others. In the last twelve months, have you personally given any kind of help listed on card 28 to a family member from outside the household, a friend or neighbor?

[the card lists the following types of help: 1. Personal care, e.g., dressing, bathing or showering, eating, getting in or out of bed, using toilet; 2. Practical household help, e.g., with home repairs, gardening, transportation, shopping, household chores; 3. Help with paperwork, such as filling out forms, settling financial or legal matters].

Which family member from outside the household, friend or neighbor you helped most often in the last twelve months? [repeated up to a maximum of 3 times].

Economic support received

Please think of the last twelve months. Not counting any shared housing or shared food, have you or your husband/wife/partner received any financial or material gift from anyone inside or outside this household amounting to 250 euro (in your local currency) or more?

Who has given you or your husband/wife/partner a gift or assistance in the past twelve months? Please name the person that has given or helped you most.

[repeated up to a maximum of 3 times].

Economic support given

Please think of the last twelve months. Not counting any shared housing or shared food, have you or your husband/wife/partner given any financial or material gift or support to any person inside or outside this household amounting to 250 euro (in your local currency) or more?

To whom did you or your husband/wife/partner provide such financial assistance or gift in the past twelve months? Please name the person that has given or helped you most.

[repeated up to a maximum of 3 times].

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