

REFLECTIONS ON OLDER ADULTS' LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

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The focus of this volume was the description of the social relationships of older adults. The central question was: What do the current living arrangements and the social networks of older adults in the Netherlands look like? Living arrangements and social networks refer, on the one hand, to an individual's most concrete and direct embeddedness in a specific social environment, mostly composed of a number of persons with whom either ascribed or achieved relationships have been maintained over a particular period of time. In their turn, the formation of living arrangements and social networks are related to the macro social changes in a society. On the other hand, living arrangements and social networks of older adults are the outcome of a number of life course dynamics, as personality characteristics, individual capacities, opportunities, and the choices governing life. While we are fully aware of the importance of this macro context and these individual life contingencies, our focus was on the analysis of the micro context by itself. Only an in-depth study of the micro context of older adults will enable us to better understand the implications of the aging society of the next decades.

We adopted the notion of convoy, viewing each person as 'moving through the life cycle surrounded by a set of people to whom he or she is related by the giving or receiving of social support' (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), and modified it in order to more easily elaborate on its internal structure. Central to our survey was an inventory of older adults' personal relationships from several angles. The total set of these relationships was viewed as a multiplex system of interlocking structures, decomposed into several substructures and analysed from several perspectives. First of all, three consecutive layers were described: living arrangements, the family, and organisations such as the

church and voluntary associations. Secondly, we focused on the important relationships with a regular frequency of contact. An overview was provided of the size and composition of this network of important relationships. Next, the so-called proximate network was selected, analysing not only the size and composition of this substructure, but also the presence of support resources. The following step involved looking at the supportiveness of the 'top-twelve', those network members with whom contact was most frequent. The question of the extent to which the different elements of this multiplex system serve an integrating function and help older adults from feeling lonely, was addressed last.

It is impossible to make a complete overview here of all the detailed findings presented in previous chapters. This is not our intention either. This chapter will focus on a number of findings which perhaps are not unique to our study but are nevertheless interesting because they are contrary to popular stereotypes. Furthermore, we will try to follow a 'cross-analysis' approach over successive chapters and identify a set of general patterns according to age, gender, and living arrangements. Finally, some future directions will be explored and possible policy implications will be presented.

Beyond stereotypes

Social networks

Network size is a crucial indicator of older adults' opportunity structure (Fischer, 1982; Van der Poel, 1993). It provides information on their social embeddedness and on the availability of resources. Answers to the question of why older adults' networks differ in size are essential in gaining an understanding of differences in the extent to which valued goals are attained, and more generally, in understanding differences in well-being. This study has shown the wide variability among older adults in the number of individuals they nominate as network members, that is, those who are 'important' to them and with whom they are in touch regularly. The median network size was between 10 and 11. Fifteen respondents nominated no network members at all, and 87 nominated only one. Some respondents nominated a large number, with a maximum of 77. What does our study tell us about determinants of differences in network size? Interestingly *age per se* was found to be a *poor indicator* of network size. Notwithstanding that network size showed a near linear decline with age, age differences accounted

for only a fraction of the variability in network size. In other words, to differentiate in the older adult population, those with relatively small networks (i.e. those in relatively disadvantaged positions) from those with relatively large networks (i.e. those in relatively advantaged positions), it is not very helpful to look at age differences. Our study has shown that more is to be gained from an examination of life histories. Particularly relevant is whether or not older adults have ever married, and whether they have families of their own.

Loneliness

Public opinion considers loneliness to be one of the main problems of older people. Forty per cent of the population feels this is the case in the Netherlands (Teng, Schuyt, & Goede, 1994) and in the countries of the European Union (E.C., 1993). Among the older European population (60+), 44% named loneliness as the most important problem for elderly people, while only 12% said they themselves often felt lonely. From our study, it is evident that only a limited proportion of the elderly feel really or consistently lonely. While there is great variation in the intensity of loneliness, the majority are not lonely at all. More important, however, may be the outcome that loneliness appears not to be related to aging per se, but rather to circumstances which change with age, such as the absence of a partner, a limited network, and a limited number of frequent contacts, as well as a poor health rating. The most lonely are not necessarily the oldest persons, but those who have limited resources in terms of relationships and/or in terms of health. These older adults are represented rather equally over a range of age categories. Surprisingly too, these older adults are rather equally divided over men and women. This may imply that many women without a partner are able to compensate for the absence of that relationship by having a relatively large network and/or a high number of frequent contacts.

Social participation

A number of interesting findings concern the levels of social participation of older adults. For active membership of organizations and volunteer work, the participation rates decreased with age. Restrictive circumstances did not provide an adequate explanation of the age decline. That is why references were made to Carstensen's (1991) socio-emotional selectivity theory, which

suggests that older adults choose directions for later life which best suit their needs and capacities, as do younger people earlier in life. This selectivity may be connected with a somewhat contrasting finding, namely the absence of a decline with age in religious involvement. This finding undeniably reflects cohort changes in religious involvement in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, it is also consistent with notions that spiritual support becomes more important at advanced ages, when possibilities to communicate may easily deteriorate. Moreover, the data indicate that the church is an important avenue of social participation, for women in particular. One should keep in mind that the social functions of the church do not apply to church services alone, but open opportunities for other forms of participation.

The childless

Of special interest is the situation of childless elderly, not only because of the stereotype that these elderly are at a disadvantage, but also because children have long been considered an investment for late life. Even nowadays, it is said that older parents build up a bank account in the relationship with their children (Antonucci & Jackson, 1989). In other words, childless elderly are assumed to lack an important resource to fall back on in case of need. The issue of childlessness is of special importance because the proportion of childless elderly is expected to increase in the next decades. In our sample, almost 15% had no children (the large majority never had children). There are indications that these elderly are well able to cope with this absence of children. For example, the analysis of the proximate network reveals that childless elderly have more siblings, friends, and other non-kin in their proximate network than parents. More generally, the childless appear to have an extensive reservoir of relationships outside the immediate family.

The never-married

The cohorts represented in our sample grew up in a period of high nuptiality (Beets, 1993; Van Poppel, 1992). Some of the older adults in our sample will have made a deliberate decision not to marry, others will have had no opportunity. This background makes the systematic contrast between never-married men and never-married women in our sample remarkable. The never-married women in comparison with other women were the least restricted by a lack of resources, while the never-married men were the most restricted

among the men. Never-married men had the smallest social networks (mean size 7.8) in comparison with all other partner status categories, while never-married women barely differed from divorced women (mean size 12.1 and 10.6, respectively). Social participation of never-married men was low in comparison to married men, while the social participation of the never-married women (and of the widows) was significantly higher than for married and divorced women. Presumably, these findings reflect differential selection into marriage (Bernard, 1973). Those who remain unmarried tend to be 'high-resource' females who fare relatively well in life, and 'low-resource' males who are less successful in life.

Family life

For decades, modernisation of society has been considered a threat to family life. The impact of industrialisation on kinship systems, with its geographical and social mobility, could hardly be overestimated. Social scientists and popular information systems have created a stereotype of the modern broken family in an age of individualism, materialism, and egocentrism. Our data indicate that this stereotype does not apply to the Dutch family system. Older parents are not isolated from their siblings and their children. On average, about 75% of older adults have monthly contact with at least one of their siblings and about 15% have interactions with four of them. Two thirds of older adults have at least one of their siblings living within a travelling distance of less than 30 minutes. As expected, interaction with children is more frequent and a higher proportion of children live nearby than do siblings. More than 90% of the parents have weekly contact with at least one of the children, and over 50% have three or more children with whom they interact monthly or more often. More than 85% of the parents have at least one of the children living within a travelling distance of less than 30 minutes. Although these figures partially diminish common stereotypes about modern family life, other figures seem to be more consistent with them. In the context of delineating the social network, the older adults were asked to name those children (and their partners) with whom they interacted regularly and who were important to them. About one quarter of the children were not selected in the social network, while in a next question more than 60% of the siblings were not nominated as network members. The finding that available family members were not selected as network members possibly reflects estrangement and lack of concern for each other's welfare. In that sense, the data can be interpreted as consistent with actual stereotypes. However, it seems to

correspond more closely with the notion of voluntariness as a new element in the formation of kinship relations (Finch, 1989; Hess & Waring, 1978). Nowadays, kinship relationships are much less governed by strict obligations; they are subject to negotiations and exercise of choice. Clearly, despite frequent interaction among relatives, family relationships must compete with the other relationships which are important to older adults.

Variability in social relationships and underlying mechanisms

This section will identify a number of general patterns that have emerged from the detailed analyses in the previous chapters. The focus is on differences in the social networks of older adults in relation to age, gender, and living arrangements. Additionally, however, we want to suggest and integrate some notions which may help to explain these differences. As we have seen, a very small minority (2.5%) mentioned nobody or only one person when asked for those people with whom one had regular contact and who were important, while more than 20% mentioned 20 or more. This large differentiation in the size of the social network is partly related to age, gender, and marital status, but more importantly to individual life course issues, to specific characteristics of the network itself, and to other contextual contingencies.

Age

Firstly, we will look at patterns based on age differences. Because we only have cross-sectional data, it is impossible to talk of aging effects. Nevertheless, our data, covering a span of 35 years, suggest some interesting findings which may indicate two age-related processes. One finding pertains to the decrease in network size with age. The older people are, the fewer important and regular contacts they have. In itself this result is not remarkable. The question is: What is the reason for this decrease? Firstly, it appears to be the outcome of a *process of loss*. The older people become, the more likely they are to lose parents, partners, siblings, friends, neighbours, and 'other' non-kin. Clearly, most of these losses concern age peers, which may be lost because of death. To replace them would claim an increasing amount of energy. This is the case not only because more and more age peers are lost, but also because fewer and fewer age peers are available. The older people become, the more they become 'survivors'. With long-standing relationships falling away, and increasing proportions of social

contacts who are members of a younger generation, older adults are increasingly likely to feel they inhabit a 'world of strangers' (Dowd, 1986).

Secondly, however, relationships may end because of a *process of selective withdrawal*, sometimes initiated by one of the relationship partners, sometimes mutually supported. Especially older women may experience a loss of attractiveness and gradually retreat from interactions (Matthews, 1979). The decrease in 'other' non-kin relationships may indicate—for one reason or another—a decision to reduce participation in organisations. Active membership in voluntary associations or active participation in volunteer work requires a minimum of resources. People may withdraw from participation in organisations because of declining functional capacities. The oldest may miss age mates among the members. However, selection does not only occur among achieved relationships. In the long run, people seem to focus more exclusively on their favourite family relationships. Our data indicated that about 25% of the children are not included in the network of regular and important relationships and about 60% of the siblings. Some family relationships may lose their significance, be it because of geographical distance, disparity in interests, or conflicts. The net outcome of the loss of relationships and of selective withdrawal from relationships is a decrease in network size.

Our analyses also indicate that the age-related processes of loss and selective withdrawal are evident in a general decrease in the intensity of supportive exchanges. In the case of relationship losses, the decrease in the size of the network directly results in a decrease in the intensity of support at the network level, emotional as well as instrumental support. This is because total support is a function of both the number of relationships in the network and their supportiveness. For example, when highly supportive relationships such as those with parents or siblings are lost through death, and replaced by non-kin relationships with a weaker support base, the net outcome in terms of total support may be lower than before. Selective withdrawal may also have consequences for the exchange of support within relationships. Withdrawal does not necessarily concern the termination of relationships, but may involve the discontinuance of supportive functions. People may become unable to perform demanding *instrumental* support-giving activities when they experience declining functional capacities, while at the same time the instrumental support received increases precisely because of increased needs. Gradually, exchanges of instrumental support which were reciprocal become increasingly unbalanced. As to the exchange of *emotional* support, the story is somewhat different. Our data showed a steady decline with age in the

giving and receiving of emotional support, both at the network level and the relationship level. The decline at the network level is related—at least partly—to the decline in network size due to the loss of relationships. The decline at the relationship level may indicate a retreat from involvement in personal relationships. However, it may also be a cohort effect. It is quite likely that the expression of personal experiences and innermost thoughts is foreign to the relationships of the oldest respondents. Their relationships should, therefore, not be considered to be of a lesser quality, but rather of a different content. As was suggested in the introductory chapter, when people become older ‘affiliation and companionship may need to be counterbalanced by solitude and privacy’ (p. 4). As such, the decline in the giving *and* receiving of emotional support may indicate a direct aging effect. Functional decline and/or health problems may also play a role. At advanced ages, problems of daily life are likely to receive priority over psychological involvement in other people’s lives and expressiveness in relationships.

Gender

In addition to age-related processes, this volume has also highlighted differences between men and women. Remarkable is that, in general, we identified a limited number of gender differences. This suggests that age-related changes in social relationships ultimately work out more similarly for men and women than is often suggested. Of course, the ‘ultimate’ similarities can mask different underlying processes: do the circumstances of men and women show similar changes, or do men and women adapt differently to experienced changes? We found no differences between men and women in the frequency of contact with kin and no differences in network size. Among both men and women the levels of supportive exchanges decreased with age. However, men invested somewhat more in instrumental support, while women invested more in emotional support. These similarities between men and women are the more remarkable given the differences between men and women in living arrangements and available resources. Significantly more women than men live alone and in general (with an exception of the never-married) women have lower incomes, levels of educational attainment, and poorer health ratings. Our findings show that on average, women are more lonely than men. However, taking into account the restrictions for women—especially the higher proportion of them living alone and having health problems—the difference in loneliness between men and women no longer exist.

Living arrangements

Further differentiation is demonstrated by taking living arrangements into consideration. In general, those living with a partner have higher rates of social participation, a larger social network, a larger proximate support network, more intensive supportive exchanges, and lower levels of loneliness. The presence of the partner is clearly an advantage. Nevertheless, a number of contextual differentiations are of interest. For instance, the frequency of interaction with siblings is not only dependent on size of the family to which the siblings belong, but also on the availability of offspring of their own, and on the partner status of either of the siblings involved in the relationship. This demonstrates that the functioning of relationships in a multiplex system of overlapping groups depends both on individual characteristics of the persons involved and on contextual circumstances such as family structure.

The importance of having a partner does not mean that living alone in itself has negative implications for the network. For example, elderly persons who live alone have relatively more neighbours and friends in their proximate support network in comparison with others. This suggests that those who have a stronger need for proximate relationships (not having a partner) are well able to organize substitutes. Moreover, it is essential to take into consideration the reasons for living alone or the events leading to it. Among those living alone, large differences in social network characteristics emerge according to marital history. For example, those who live alone as a result of widowhood have a larger social network and more intensive supportive exchanges than those who are divorced or have never been married. It seems as if widowhood is a network mobilising event, while divorce works out in an opposite direction. In addition, to a certain extent, the widowed have a complete network at their disposal, while in case of a divorce social networks mostly split up (Broese van Groenou, 1990). The relative advantage of the widowed also partly relates to numbers. Given a preference among the widowed to socialize among 'peers', the larger availability of people in similar circumstances offers them more opportunities for involvement in mutual networks. The mobilisation of network support seems easier for the widowed because they can more legitimately depend on others, while divorcees seem more inclined to demonstrate their independence. Our findings support this notion. Compared with others, widows and widowers have many non-reciprocal relationships, in most of which they were receiving large amounts of instrumental support.

Evaluation

A central aim of the NESTOR 'Living arrangements and social networks of older adults' research programme was to fill the lacuna in simple descriptive information on older adults' households, families, social activities, personal ties with others, health and general well-being. In the Netherlands such information is not available from censuses. A strong sensitivity to privacy issues is the main reason why no census has been held since 1971. Such information is not available from the large scale surveys organized by the Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics either, mainly because they are surveys of the general population. The numbers of older adults in their samples are too small for comparative analyses within that group, and the institutionalized are rarely incorporated in their sampling frames.

However, basic description was not the only aim of our research programme. Additionally, our aim was to gain an understanding of the variability in older adults' living arrangements and social networks, and consequently, to explain why some men and women fare well in old age and others are less successful. For that reason more detailed information was gathered on life histories: information on the parental home, participation in the labour force, marriage(s), births, household composition over the years, and so forth. It was also the reason for inquiring in greater depth into the characteristics of network relationships: duration, frequency of contact, geographic proximity, partner status, and supportive exchanges.

The descriptive analyses in the successive chapters have taught us something about the utility of different social-structural characteristics in making meaningful distinctions within the older adult population. In other words, our study enables us to say something about the kinds of differentiations that should be made when describing the living arrangements and social networks of older adults. One of the lessons we have learned is that age differences per se offer only limited insight. Though most of the chapters reported significant age differences, they accounted for only small proportions of the variance: substantial differences existed among the older adults *within* each of the distinguished age categories. Our study also shows that it is not necessarily meaningful to look at general gender differences. Rather, gender should be considered *in association with* other characteristics, notably marital status and parental status. For example, consistent across chapters were findings indicating more favorable circumstances for never-married women than for their male counterparts. The general picture that emerges from the

successive chapters in this volume is that, after taking into consideration age, gender and living arrangement differences, considerable variation within the distinguished categories of older adults remains. Here lies the challenge for future research. Using the more detailed information on life histories and the characteristics of network relationships, we hope to arrive at a better understanding of the diversity in aging.

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