



Selection versus Structure

Explaining family type differences in contact with close kin

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Abstract

This paper focuses on one aspect of family networks, namely the frequency of contact with close kin, for adults living in different family situations. Two mechanisms can explain differences in the contact frequency by family type. The first focuses on structural factors like the number and type of persons in the primary family network, availability of a second family network, and geographical proximity. The second is selection: people who are oriented to family rather than to friends may be selected into certain family types. Data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (N=8155) provide little support for the selection hypothesis but do support the structural hypothesis, with co-resident children and the availability of a second network being of key importance.

Selection versus structure: explaining family type differences in contact with close kin

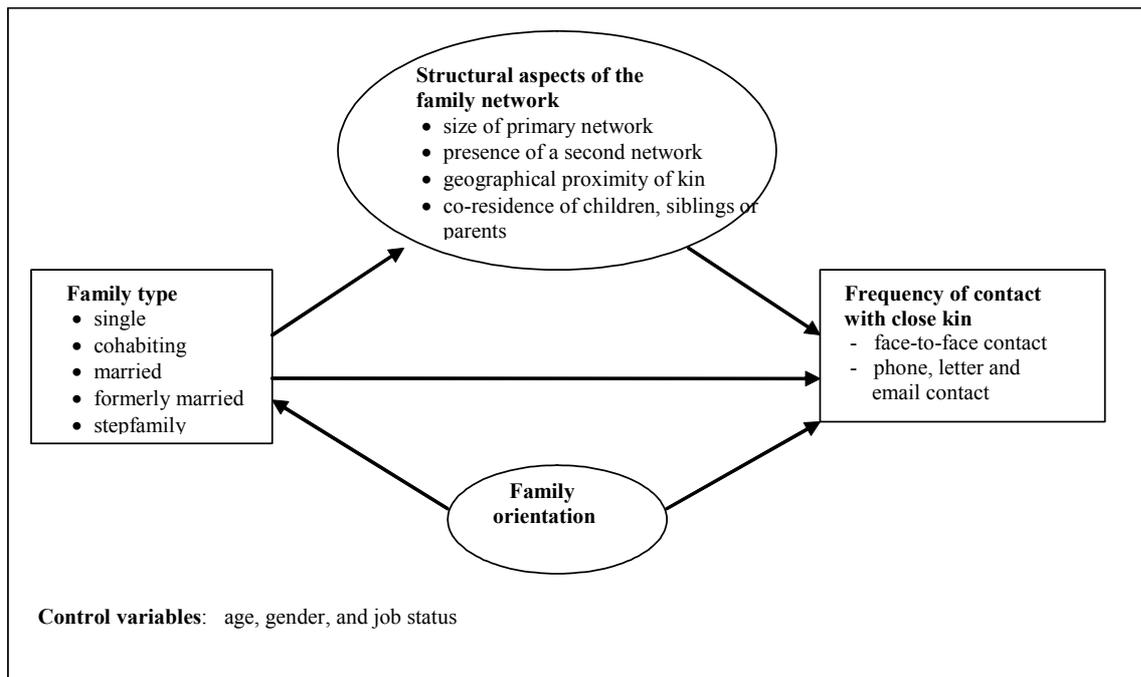
The 20th century, more especially its second half, saw profound changes in the family and living arrangements in Western societies. Characterized by the greater voluntarism in family formation, marriage and childbearing, the implications of these trends for the family have been reflected upon at length by many researchers (Bengston, 2001). The family decline hypothesis as postulated by Burgess (1916) and later elaborated by Parsons & Bales (1955) and Popenoe (1993) captured these trends by pointing at an increasing erosion of family life, family relations and family values, and formed the start of discussion pro and contra the survival of the family. The processes of change in the family in the last decennia were accompanied by a change in values and attitudes, resulting in a weakening of social prescriptions and a greater diversity in attitudes and values in general and in family matters in particular (see in particular: Lesthaeghe & Meekers, 1986; Lesthaeghe & Neidert, 2006, pp 1-4; Thornton, 1989; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). As a result, construction of family can increasingly be a matter of personal choice. Kin relationships can be expected, therefore, to be at least in part the result of a selective process based on personal attitudes, values and ideas concerning the family. However, although selection has become important in the way relationships with family members are filled in, the size and structure of the family network can also determine the relations between family members.

This particular paper focuses on the impact of selection versus structure on the differences in contact with close kin. More specifically, we examine the differences in contact frequency with close kin between individuals living in different family types and estimate the relative importance of selection and structure. Contact can be considered effectively a *sine qua non* for a personal relationship in general, and personal contact is particularly important for social support (Attias-Donfut, 2003; Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993).

Despite the importance of the family network in an individual's social capital and social support networks, as is found in recent research (Agneessens, De Lange, & Waeghe, 2003; Attias-Donfut, 2003; Bengston, 2001), little research has been carried out on the dynamics and diversity of the family network of individuals living in the various contemporary family types. Much research has until now been devoted to particular relationships, especially the parent/child relationship (e.g. Lye, 1996; Schwarz, Trommsdorff, Albert, & Mayer, 2005), the step-

parent/step-child relationship (e.g., Berg, 2004; Henderson & Taylor, 1999; MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002; White, 1994), and the sibling relationship. Less has been done at the level of the family network as such. Moreover, most studies of the differences in the family networks of individuals with different living arrangements have been restricted to the elderly (i.e., Knipscheer, De Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 1995; Pinquart, 2003). Furthermore, given their descriptive character or their focus on outcomes like loneliness rather than on the network itself, the dynamics of the family network have received little attention. In this paper, we try to extend existing knowledge of family networks in three ways. Firstly, it is broader in approach than many studies. It addresses the characteristics of relationships with close kin in general rather than those of just one sort of close kin relationship such as the parent-child relationship or the sibling relationship; it also studies the close kin networks of all adults rather than just of one or more particular subgroups such as the elderly. Secondly, it focuses on network characteristics and dynamics as outcome variables rather than as explanatory variables. Thirdly, it examines the impact of different family forms on family networks, to identify possible differences between the more traditional and the various new family forms.

The selection hypothesis originated primarily from family studies and family demography. Individuals develop attitudes and values concerning the family and these have an effect on the timing and the choices in the transitions to certain family types (cohabitating, marriage, divorce, etc.) (De Jong Gierveld & Liefbroer, 1998; Lesthaeghe & Moors, 1994; Lesthaeghe, 2002; Moors, 1996). These values will also have an impact on the relations that are maintained with family members living outside the household. For those who are oriented towards the family rather than towards friends, contact with family members is likely to be more intense than for those who oriented more to friends. Previous research has given indications that the connection between the family type people live in and their orientation towards family or friends is a result of selection (Moors, 1996). Married persons tend to have more traditional family attitudes and to be more family-orientated family than persons in other family types (Fischer, Sollie, Sorell, & Green, 1989; Moors, 1996). Divorce may also have an impact on ties with one's own family (Johnson, 1992; Terhell, Broese van Groenou, & Van Tilburg, 2004), and if people who are less oriented to family are more likely to divorce, divorcees will also be a select group.

Figure 1: Model estimated

Network studies and social capital theory tend to focus more on the effects of network size and structure. A central idea here is that people have a certain need for contact, but have limited time and resources to devote to this. When their networks enlarge, individuals will have to maintain contact with more persons; because of limited time and/or resources, contacts have to be spread more thinly. Following the same reasoning, the existence of a second network, for example of in-laws, could result in lower contact with one's own (biological) family among married or cohabitating persons. A second pronounced structural determinant of contact frequency can also be found in network studies: distance. In social support research we find confirmation that geographical proximity facilitates contact (Attias-Donfut, 2003; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Hogan et al. (1993), for example, found that contact that is motivated by personal exchange is larger when the distance between the two is relatively small. Finally, having children in the household can also have important effects on contact with kin, though whether the effects are positive or rather negative is still a subject of discussion. Hogan et al. (1993) found results that support the idea that, especially young children, bring the family together: a preschool age child, for example, leads to intensified contact as a result of a greater need for support with child care. On the other hand, however, having children limits the time and energy that can be invested in other family contacts: Moore (1990) found that children led to a smaller effective network, with fewer kin ties. Having other relatives living in the household (parents or siblings) is also expected to have an impact on the family relations. Because parents are

among the most important close kin (Agneessens et al., 2003; Attias-Donfut, 2003), it is plausible that other family members will have more contact when a parent is living in. The same reasoning can be followed for siblings living in the household of the respondent.

Methods

DATA AND PROCEDURE.

The 'Netherlands Kinship Panel Study' (NKPS) (Dykstra et al., 2004) contains rich information permitting analysis of family networks, including testing of both the selection and the structure hypotheses. The NKPS collected information between 2002 and 2004 on the family history, family structure and family relations of a random sample of adults living in private households in the Netherlands. Information was obtained for a main sample of 8,155 persons aged 18 to 79 via a CAPI-survey and a supplementary written self-completion survey. Compared to the total population of the Netherlands, there is a slight overrepresentation of women because of differences in response rates, a slight underrepresentation of the youngest age groups (for both men and women) and of the oldest (only for women); people with children at home are slightly overrepresented, while single women living alone and young adults living with their parents are

underrepresented (Dykstra et al., 2004). The differences between the groups and the relative impact of selection versus structural factors are analyzed with structural equation path modeling for which we use LISREL. Next, a multigroup analysis is used to shed further light on the differences in the impact of the selection and the structural paths. The basic model estimated is shown in figure 1.

VARIABLES

Frequency of contact with close kin. In this analysis we use a rather restricted definition of close kin: the respondent's own (biological) parents, adult children and siblings. This definition was chosen firstly because of methodological reasons, like the possibility to compare these specific kin for adults in all family types, secondly because of the knowledge that one's biological family, especially parents, children and siblings, rather than one's in-laws or further kin tend to be seen as the key relatives with whom to have contact and to exchange support (Agneessens et al., 2003; Terhell et al., 2004; Wellman & Wortley, 1989). These last considerations are also reflected in the design of the NKPS, which collected quite detailed data on parents, children, and siblings, and only more limited data on other relatives.

Contact itself can take many forms. Here, we focus primarily on face-to-face contact as this is the most important in the context of social support (Rossi et al., 1990). For each close kin member not living in the household the respondent had to give information about the frequency of contact in the past year, using the following seven categories: 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times*, 4 = *at least once a month*, 5 = *at least once a week*, 6 = *a few times a week*, 7 = *daily*.

Family Type. Five family types are distinguished based largely on the individual's decisions concerning marriage and/or partner forming (children are included separately in the model as structural variables): singles (never married), cohabitants, married individuals, the formerly married (ever married, but currently divorced or widowed), and stepfamily members.

Family orientation. Family orientation is measured using a scale based on five items contrasting family members with friends (*e.g. I have problems I can discuss them with members of my family rather than with friends*). The items were if necessary recoded from 1 = *totally oriented towards family* to 5 = *totally oriented towards friends*. This scale has strong internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.805$).

Structural variables. In total six structural variables are included in the model. The size of the family network is simply the number of living parents, children and siblings not co-residing with

the respondent. The availability of a second network is a dummy variable (0 = *not known or alive*, 1 = *one or both parents in law known*) based on whether the respondent knows his/her partner's parents. The geographical proximity of close kin is operationalized as the number of close kin living within 10 km of the respondent. The three variables for co-residence of close kin are all dummies based on the presence (= 1) or absence (= 0) of one or more kin of the type concerned (children, parents or siblings) living in the respondent's household.

Control variables. Age, gender, and job status are also included in the analyses as control variables. Age is measured here in single years, job status is entered as an 8-point scale based on the categories of job status recoded with scores ranging from 0 for those not active in the labor-force to 7 for those in the professions and technical workers.

Results

The five different family types are entered in the model using four dummy variables, with married persons as reference category. Table 1 gives the effects that are significant at the 0.05 level (all such effects in this particular analysis actually have $p < 0.001$). With RSMEA = 0.0099 and $\chi^2 = 216.490$ for 39 degrees of freedom, we can conclude that the model fits well.

Differences in contact frequency are confirmed in table 1, with all family types scoring lower on contact frequency than married couples. Looking at the standardized results and at the total effects (detailed results not given) we see that singles score the lowest (total effect of $\beta = -0.149$, $p < 0.001$), followed by the formerly married (total effect of $\beta = -0.058$, $p < 0.001$). Cohabiting individuals and individuals living in stepfamilies score higher than the singles and formerly married but still slightly lower than the married individuals.

Table 1 shows significant results for the structural mechanism, but only limited significant results for the selection mechanism. Orientation towards family rather than friends does have a direct positive effect on the frequency of contact with close kin; as expected, people who feel more strongly about their family also have more contact with them (Table 1, part 1). But to make the selection mechanism work, family orientation must also be associated with family type. The effect of orientation on family type is, however, significant only for singles. For the other family types no significant effects were found, leading to the conclusion that the selection mechanism contributes to the differences in contact frequency only for singles.

SELECTION VERSUS STRUCTURE

Table 1: Structure versus selection in contact frequency. Significant (p < .05) standardized and unstandardized results of the path model (N=8155), estimated effects of family orientation and of family type

Independent Variables		Frequency of contact	Single ^a	Formerly married ^a	Cohabiting ^a	Dependent variables					
						Stepfamily ^a	Network size	2nd Network	Geographica l proximity	Child in household	Parent in household
Family orientation	B	0.288 ***	-0.007 ***						0.049 ***		
	β	0.104	-0.069						0.086		
Family type^a											
- Single	B	-1.335 ***				-1.083 ***	-0.634 ***	-0.636 ***	-0.684 ***	0.099 ***	0.074 ***
	β	-0.052				-0.143	-0.500	-0.120	-0.550	0.246	0.201
- Formerly married	B	-1.186 ***				0.366 ***	-0.373 ***		-0.198 ***		
	β	-0.043				0.045	-0.275		-0.149		
- Cohabiting	B	-1.051 ***				-0.766 ***		-0.405 ***	-0.198 ***	-0.032 ***	-0.026 ***
	β	-0.030				-0.074		-0.056	-0.289	-0.058	-0.051
- Stepfamily	B	-1.606 ***				0.712 ***			-0.085 ***		
	β	-0.037				0.056			0.041		
Structural variables											
- Network size	B	2.464 ***									
	β	0.718									
- Second network	B										
	β										
-Geographical proximity	B	1.399 ***									
	β	0.286									
Coresident kin:											
- Child in the household	B	-1.385 ***				-0.470 ***					
	β	-0,067				-0,077					
- Parent in the household	B	-2.760 ***				-1.733 ***					
	β	-0.043				-0.092					
- Sibling in household	B										
	β										
Control variables											

SELECTION VERSUS STRUCTURE

Independent Variables		Dependent variables										
		Frequency of contact	Single ^a	Formerly married ^a	Cohabiting ^a	Stepfamily ^a	Network size	2nd Network	Geographical proximity	Child in household	Parent in household	Sibling in household
- Age	B	-0.086 ***	-0.009 ***	0.008 ***	-0.006 ***	0.001 ***	0.052 ***	-0.017 ***	0.013 ***	-0.014 ***	-0.002 ***	-0.002 ***
	β	-0.127	-0.347	0.341	-0.296	0.062	0.262	-0.513	0.095	-0.441	-0.202	-0.172
- Gender ^b	B	0.699 ***	-0.057 ***	0.085 ***				-0.049 ***		0.058 ***		
	β	0.034	-0.071	0.114				-0.490		0.059		
- Job ^c	B		-0.009 ***		-0.008 ***				0.094 ***	0.009 ***		
	β		-0.049		-0.060				0.095	0.040		

Note: RSMEA = 0.0099, $\chi^2 = 216.490$, $df = 39$, Squared R = 0.766. The covariances between the error terms of the variables in the basic model were set free at the diagonal, and further fixed. A few exceptions were made: between the dummy variables, between children, parents and siblings in the household, and between children in the household and availability of the second network, the covariances were set free.

^aReference category is married individuals. ^bReference category is male. ^cJobstatus is measured in 7 job categories (scores 1-7) and a category for non actives (score=0)

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

SELECTION VERSUS STRUCTURE

Table 2 Structure versus selection, interaction with family types: unstandardized(B) results, multigroup analysis.

	Fixed analysis			Multigroup analysis		
	All groups	Single <i>N</i> =1572	Formerly married <i>N</i> =1327	Cohabiting <i>N</i> =731	Married <i>N</i> =4035	Stepfamily <i>N</i> =481
Family orientation						
Orientation -> Frequency of contact	0.275 ***	0.285 ***	0.285 ***	0.285 ***	0.274 ***	0.285 ***
Orientation -> Proximity	0.048 ***	0.036 ***	0.036 ***	0.060 ***	0.060 ***	0.036 ***
Structural variables						
Network -> Frequency of contact	2.491 ***	2.591 ***	2.177 ***	2.591 ***	2.591 ***	2.177 ***
Proximity-> Frequency of contact	1.375 ***	1.364 ***	1.364 ***	1.364 ***	1.364 ***	1.364 ***
Child in household -> Frequency of contact	-0.869 ***	-1.430 ***	-1.430 ***		-1.430 ***	-1.430 ***
Child in household-> Network	-0.138	-0.347 ***	-0.347 ***		-0.347 ***	-0.347 ***
Parent in household-> Frequency of contact	-3.438 ***	-3.669 ***				
Parent in household -> Network	-2.176 ***	-2.267 ***				
Control variables						
Age -> Frequency of contact	-0.070 ***	-0.093 ***	-0.093 ***	-0.093 ***	-0.093 ***	-0.093 ***
Age -> Network	0.062 ***	0.031 ***	0.031 ***	0.027 ***	0.065 ***	0.031 ***
Age -> 2 nd Network	-0.022 ***	-0.008 ***	-0.005 ***	-0.011 ***	-0.025 ***	-0.025 ***
Age -> Proximity	0.009 ***	0.008 ***	0.008 ***	0.008 ***	0.008 ***	0,008 ***
Age -> Child in household	-0.019 ***		-0.016 ***	0.010 ***	-0.023 ***	-0.021 ***
Age -> Parent in household	0.000	0.000 *		0.000 *	0.000 *	
Age -> Sibling in household	0.000 **	0.000 **		0.000 **	0.000 **	
Gender -> Frequency of contact	0.741 ***	0.364 *	0.364 *	0.364 *	0.997 ***	
Gender -> 2 nd Network	-0.072 ***	0.047 *	-0.082 ***	-0.082 ***	-0.082 ***	-0.082 ***
Gender -> Child in household	0.033 ***	0.097 ***	0.097 ***	0.097 ***		
Job status -> 2 nd Network	0.007 **					
Job status -> Proximity	0.095 ***	0.092 ***	0.092 ***	0.092 ***	0.092 ***	0.092 ***

Note: RSMEA fixed = 0.308; $\chi^2 = 1659.891$; df = 206. RSMEA multigroup = 0,0572; $\chi^2 = 660,580$; df = 203.

The structural variables (Table 1, part 2) yield more significant results. First of all, the size or range of the network is, as expected, of primary importance in the frequency of contact with close kin. Having more family members outside the household results in a higher score on the overall frequency of contact of with non co-resident kin: one additional person in the network produces an extra score of 2.464 ($p < 0.001$) on the overall frequency scale. This does not mean, however, that a larger network is associated with more frequent contacts per kin member: the opposite is true. We can see this easily if we compare for example the 10th and the 90th percentiles. These correspond with scores of 5 and 30 respectively on overall contact frequency, i.e. they differ by 25. The same percentiles differ by only 7 on network size. The coefficient of 2.464 applied to a difference of 7 in network size is only 17.248, which is considerably less than the observed 25. In other words, the coefficient of 2.464 implies that for each additional person in the network there is more frequent contact in total, but less contact per person. The direct effect of network size is important to notice, but it has to be combined with differences in network size by family type to provide solid confirmation of the structural mechanism. Table 1 shows that the formerly married and individuals living in stepfamilies have significantly larger networks than married persons, while cohabitating persons and singles have smaller networks. The combination of effects gives a first explanation for the differences in contact frequency.

Our second structural variable, the presence of a second network, does not yield significant results in the model, although the differences between the married, the cohabitating and persons living in stepfamilies on the one hand and singles and the formerly married on the other are very logical when we look at the differences in the presence of the second family network. Although singles and the formerly married have less contact with parents in law, this does not seem to account for the existing differences in contact with close kin.

The third structural variable, geographical proximity, exhibits a strong effect on contact frequency, which is in line with previous research (Attias-Donfut, 2003; Rossi et al., 1990). We can note that the effect of geographical proximity can also account for a large part of the differences in contact frequency by family type since both singles and cohabitating individuals have significantly fewer close kin living within 10 km than individuals in the other family types.

The estimated effects of having family members living in the household can be brought back to constraints imposed by limited time and resources. Having a child present in the household has a slight negative effect on contact with non-resident close kin. This is in line with Moore (1990) who said that having children intensifies the

interaction within the household and therefore leaves less time for maintaining relations with close kin outside the household. Parents living in the household are of great importance for the frequency of contact with close kin living outside the household. Their presence lowers the contact variable with 2.760 points. This decrease does not, however, mean that contacts with close kin in general are reduced, for it is largely the mechanical effect of transferring the parent to the household. To get a better view of the effect of the transfer of the parent, we carried out a second analysis (detailed results not shown), in which contact frequency was redefined to include adult close kin living in the household. The assumption made was that adult household members have daily contact with each other. Estimating the same basic model with this alternative definition yielded a value of 5.931 for the effect of presence of a parent in the household. This supports the idea that a parent is of great importance in the network and that the transfer of parents into the household has a slightly positive effect on contact with close kin. Finally, we note that the presence of siblings living in the household gives no significant results, indicating that, compared with children and parents, co-resident siblings are not very important for the frequency of contact with other close kin.

To test the structural hypothesis for the relationship between family type and contact frequency we have to combine the effects of these final structural features on contact with the relationship between the five family types and the presence of close kin in the household. Looking at presence or absence of children in the house, we see that the chance of having a child living in the household is smaller for all family situations than for married persons, with singles scoring lowest. Having a parent in the household is more common when one is single, compared to married, and less common when one is cohabiting. Similar results are found for siblings living in the household. These paths form another part of the puzzle in explaining the differences. Finally, the total effects (detailed results not given) of family type on contact frequency yield some extra insights on the effect of the structural variables. For singles it is the smaller range of their network and the geographical distance of their family members that largely account for their lower contact frequency, while the absence of children slightly counters these negative effects. For cohabitating individuals, the same general picture holds, although here the counteracting effect of the absence of children is bolstered by the absence of parents in the household.

To gain more insight into how the mechanisms work for the different family types and into the interaction effects for the different groups, we also estimated a multigroup path model, with the same basic model. The significant results ($p < 0.05$) are given in Table 2. First, the selection

variable, family orientation, and its effect on frequency of contact is considered for the various family types. No differences are found, except for married persons, for whom the effect of family versus friend orientation is slightly lower. In contrast, important results are found for the structural variables, which confirm the earlier findings. Looking at the effect of range of the network of close kin living outside the household, we can observe that for the formerly married and for respondents in stepfamilies, the effect is a little bit lower. No interaction effect exists, however, for geographical proximity. Neither does the effect of the presence or absence of children and parents in the household differ greatly between the family types. The presence of children in the household has no effect on contact frequency for cohabitating persons, but is negative and constant over the other family types. Finally, the effect of a parent in the household is only of importance for the singles. The effect disappears for all the other family types, although it was important in the basic model.

Conclusion and discussion

Our analysis of the NKPS data reveals considerable differences by family type, with individuals living in a standard marriage having a higher contact frequency on average than those living in other family types. However, the differences are more limited than one might have expected. Those living in step-families differ only slightly from those in a standard marriage. Only singles and, to a lesser extent, cohabiting individuals and the formerly married stand out from the rest with lower frequent of contact. For the singles their markedly lower contact frequency can be traced both to weaker orientation to family and to having fewer close kin living relatively close by.

Structural characteristics of the family network appear to be more important in determining contact frequency than is selection based on family orientation. The larger the number of close kin, the greater the overall contact frequency, but the thinner the contact tends to be spread over the various kin members, in line with the notion of constraints on the time and resources devoted to kin. Co-residence with one or more of the respondent's parents or adult children produces particularly interesting and complex situations, tending to lead to higher contact frequency overall, but often to lower contact frequency with other non-resident kin. Again constraints of time and resources may be responsible. The importance of proximity can also be brought back to these constraints. We find, however, that the availability of a second network (the kin network of a partner) does not significantly reduce contact frequency with one's own close kin. Time and resources constraints appear to be less important here,

confirming the predominant role of the biological family network.

Some restrictions of this study should, however, be mentioned. Firstly, the NKPS dataset has a few limitations. The response rate was only 45%, which is a normal rate for surveys in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2004), but still rather low. Information on the non-respondents is very limited, but it cannot be ruled out that persons for whom family is less important are underrepresented. Furthermore, although the NKPS is one of the most extensive surveys on family life and family relations, practical constraints meant that even here only part of the family network could be studied in detail and choices as to which relations would be studied in detail had to be made.

We should also note that some theoretical concepts were not easy to operationalize. This was particularly the case for the selection mechanism, where the only relevant variable we could construct for family orientation (orientation towards family rather than friends) from the attitude data in the NKPS is rather limited. Orientation towards family rather than friends is indeed highly relevant when we take into account hypotheses that social capital and networks may be becoming more oriented towards friends than family. However, it does not capture other aspects of family values. In addition, the selection effect can also work in the other direction. Family attitudes have a selection effect on familial transitions, but the family situation of an individual can also have an impact on his/her family attitudes and values (Lesthaeghe, 2002; Moors, 1996). This has not been taken explicitly into account in our model since to do so would really require longitudinal data.

Finally, this particular paper has studied only the frequency of contact and is limited to cross-sectional data. We have not addressed the content of kin contact nor have we explicitly addressed the possible impact of transitions to other family types over the life course. The first of these can, however, be studied with the NKPS and will be the topic of a separate paper. The second requires longitudinal data. A longitudinal analysis of data from the Panel Study of Belgian Households (PSBH) is also planned, but this will be limited by the smaller sample and by the limited range of relevant variables in the PSBH. More systematic longitudinal analysis should become possible when the second wave of the NKPS, planned for 2006, becomes available.

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