

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

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Abstract

In the wake of both the 'first' and the 'second' demographic transitions, the 'family decline hypothesis' pointed to erosion of traditional family life, and more specifically of family relations and the family network. This paper focuses on one of the basic aspects of family networks, namely the frequency of contact with close kin. We compare adults living in classic family types (singles, married couples, widows and widowers) with those in newer family forms (such as cohabitants, single parents, divorcees, and members of step-families).

Two mechanisms can be proposed to explain differences by family type in the frequency of contact with close kin. The first is selection: individuals with more postmodern and postmaterialist attitudes in general, postmodern attitudes to the family in particular, and relatively strong orientation to friends rather than family, may be selected into certain family types. The second mechanism focuses on structural factors determining the size and accessibility of an individual's potential network, such as the number and type of close biological kin, presence/absence of a second family network (in-laws), and geographical proximity. Co-residence of close family is an additional structural characteristic that may affect frequency of contact with other family members.

Data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study are shown to exhibit differences in frequency of contact with close kin, with married and widowed individuals exhibiting the highest contact frequencies as predicted by the family decline hypothesis. Single parents and those in stepfamilies also score high, however, which is not predicted by the hypothesis, and single persons rather low. Estimates from structural equations modelling provide support for both selection and structure hypotheses and can explain most of the observed differences. Selection appears to work primarily through orientation to family rather than to friends. Among the structural variables, network size and co-residence of young children or a parent are of key importance.

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1. Introduction

The 20th century, more especially its second half, saw profound changes in family and living arrangements in Western societies. The family decline hypothesis as postulated very early by Burgess (1916) and later elaborated by Parsons & Bales (1955) and Popenoe (1993) among others, pointed not only to declining family size but also to an increasing erosion of traditional forms of family life. The implications of these changes for the family have been reflected upon at length by numerous researchers. On the one hand, we find studies on the diverse new family types, often focusing on the weakness and fragility of various contemporary family forms and living arrangements (for example, Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; Berg, 2004). On the other hand, opponents have countered the ‘erosion’ hypothesis by highlighting the importance of the broader family network (Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993; Busschots & Lauwers, 1994; Bengston, 2001; Knijn, 2004).

The processes of change in the family in the last few decennia have been accompanied by broader changes in values and attitudes that have resulted 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; Thornton, 1989; Thornton & Young-DeMarcà, 2001; Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 2006; Lesthaeghe & Neidert, 2006;). Family construction can increasingly be a matter of personal choice. Both the family type individuals live in and their relationships with kin 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, the size and structure of the family network can itself also determine the relations between family members.

Despite the continuing importance of the family network in an individual's social capital and social support networks (for example, Agneessens, De Lange, & Waeye, 2003; Attias-Donfut, 2003; Bengtson, 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 until now has been devoted to particular relationships, especially the parent/child relationship (Schwarz, Trommsdorff, Albert, & Mayer, 2005; e.g., Lye, 1996), the step-parent/step-child relationship (e.g., Berg, 2004; Henderson & Taylor, 1999; White, 1994; MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002), 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. .

Our approach is broader than that of many studies of family relationships. We address 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) and we study the close kin networks of all adults rather than just of one or more particular subgroups (such as the elderly). Secondly, we focus on network characteristics and dynamics as outcome variables rather than as explanatory variables. Thirdly, we examine the impact of different family forms on family networks, to identify possible differences between the more traditional and the various new family forms. In this paper 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.

2. Hypotheses

The correlates of the second demographic transition suggest that individuals who choose to live in the new family forms will have a weaker family life. Our first hypothesis is therefore that cohabitants, single parents, divorced singles and stepfamily members will have a lower frequency of contact with their close kin, than individuals living in classic family types like married or widowed persons and singles who have not yet started a longstanding relationship (H1).

The selection hypothesis, originating primarily from family studies and family demography, states that individuals develop attitudes and values concerning the family and that these have an effect on the timing and the choices in the transitions to certain family types (cohabitation, marriage, divorce, etc.) (De Jong Gierveld & Liefbroer, 1998; Lesthaeghe & Moors, 1994; Moors, 1996; Lesthaeghe, 2002).¹ These values will also have an impact on the relations that are maintained with family members living outside the household. Both attitudes relating specifically to the family (like attitudes towards classical family norms with respect to marriage, gender and generation relations, and attitudes regarding family support) and more general attitudes (like postmaterialism) may operate within the selection mechanism. Given the wide impact of these attitudes on different aspects of family life, not only direct effects but also indirect effects via attitudes relating specifically to social networks and relationships can be expected (H2). For those who are oriented towards the family rather than towards friends, for example, contact with family members is likely to be more intense than for those who are oriented more to friends (H3). Previous research has given indications that the connection

¹ The choice of a particular family type may in its turn reinforce pre-existing attitudes and values.

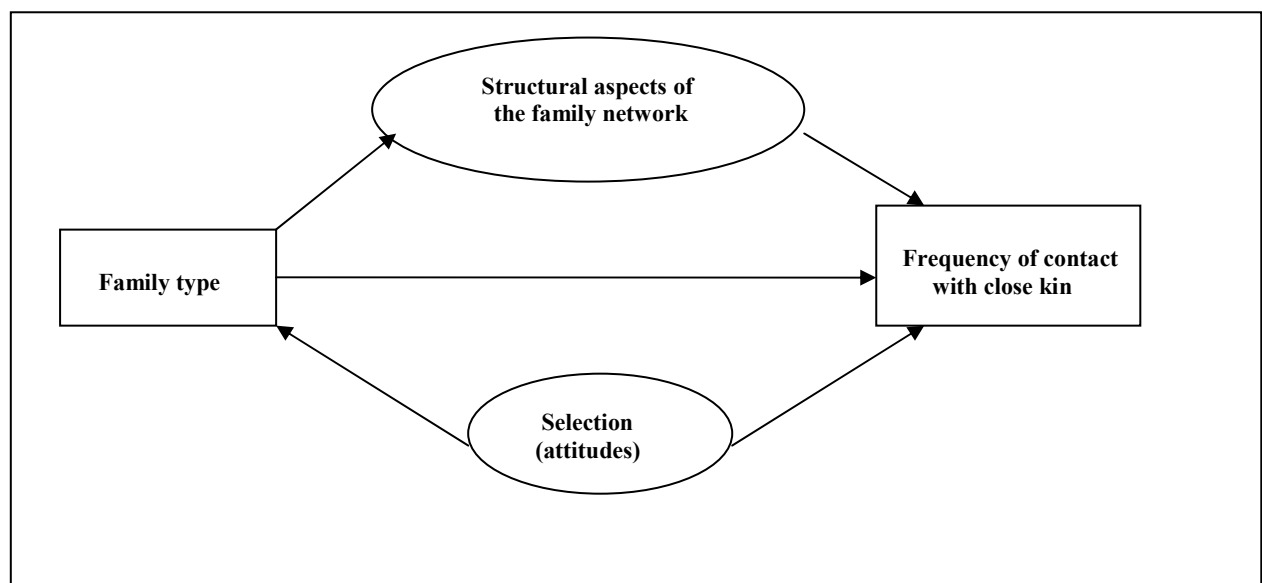
between the family type people live in and their family attitudes, as well as their orientation towards family or friends is a result of selection (Moors, 1996). Married and widowed persons tend to have more traditional family attitudes and to be more family-orientated than persons in other family types (Moors, 1996; Fischer, Sollie, Sorell, & Green, 1989). 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.

Network studies and social capital theory tend to focus more on the effects of network size and structure. A central idea 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 may increase in total but have to be spread more thinly (H4). Following the same reasoning, the existence of a second network (for example of in-laws) could result in less contact with one's own (biological) family among married or cohabitating persons (H5). 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 more frequent when the distance between the two persons is relatively small (H6). Finally, having young 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 (H7). Hogan et al. (1993) found results that support the idea that children, 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 (H8). The same reasoning can be followed for siblings living in the household of the respondent (H9).

This brief review makes clear that selection as well as structure can account for differences, but the two mechanisms are not necessarily in line with each other. To test the relative importance of each we need to estimate a structural equation path model (figure 1) as outlined in the following section.

Figure 1: Theoretical model



3. Methods

3.1 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 under-representation of the youngest age groups (for both men and women) and of the oldest (only for women); people with children at home are slightly over-represented, while single women living alone and young adults living with their parents are under-represented (Dykstra et al., 2004).

The differences between the groups and the relative impact of selection versus structural factors are estimated with structural equation path modeling using LISREL

3.2 Variable definitions

A summary of the variables used is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the variables

Concept	Variable description
1. <i>Frequency of contact</i>	Aggregate of scores for frequency of contact in the last year (7-point scale) summed over parents, adult children and siblings.
2. <i>Family Type</i>	Eight dummy variables (Reference category = Married with children): Singles, Married without children, Widowed, Single parent, Divorced, Cohabiting without children, Cohabiting with children, Stepfamily
3. <i>Potential selection effects: (attitudes and values)</i> - Family/friends orientation - Attitudes to classic family norms - Attitudes to family support - Materialism/postmaterialism	Orientation on friends rather than on family (score on a scale from 5 to 60 based on 12 items) Attitudes supportive of classic family life and family norms (score on a scale from 5 to 60 based on 12 items) Attitudes supportive of family provision of social support (score on a scale from 5 to 60 based on 12 items) Two dummy variables (reference category = Mixed preferences): Materialist, Postmaterialist
4. <i>Potential structural effects:</i>	

<p><i>(network structure)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Network size - Geographical proximity - Second network 	<p>Number of close kin</p> <p>Number of close kin within 10 kilometers</p> <p>Dummy variable: presence/absence of a second familial network (in-laws)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young child in household - - Parent in household - Sibling in household 	<p>Dummy variable: presence/absence of child(ren) under 10 in the household</p> <p>Dummy variable: presence/absence of parent in the household</p> <p>Dummy variable: presence/absence of sibling in the household</p>
<p>5. <i>Control variables</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age - Sex - Educational attainment 	<p>Age of the respondent at time of the interview, in single eyars</p> <p>Dummy variable (Male=0; Female=1)</p> <p>Scale of educational attainment (ten categories)</p>

Frequency of contact with close kin. We define close kin here as the respondent's own (biological) parents, adult children and siblings. This relatively restricted definition was chosen both for methodological reasons, particularly the need to compare specific kin for adults in different family types, and because biological family, especially parents, children and siblings, rather than in-laws or more distant 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). This last consideration is 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 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 weak, 6 = a few times a week, 7 = daily. For adult family members living in the household of the respondent, we simply assumed daily contact. The sum of these scores over all close kin is taken here as an indicator of overall contact.

Family Type. Nine family types are used, distinguishing between individuals living in the more classic family types, those in de newer family forms, and those who have not yet started

a longstanding relationship. The distinction concentrates on the de facto situation and is based on choices concerning marriage and/or partner forming and having children present in the household. The family types are: singles (never married or in a relationship that lasted longer than three years, not cohabitating at the moment of the interview), married individuals without children in the household, married individuals with children in the household, widowed singles, divorced singles, single parents (widowed, divorced or never married with child in the household), cohabitants with children in the household, cohabitants without children in the household, and stepfamily members.

Table 2 shows the mean scores on contact frequency for individuals living in the different family types. Two of the three relatively classical family types - widowed individuals and married persons without children in the household - score the highest while cohabitants, together with singles, score the lowest. Members of stepfamilies, single parents, and divorced or separated singles all have intermediate scores, but so to do married individuals with children.

Table 2. Mean scores on frequency of contact for individuals living in the different family types

Family type	Mean	N	S.D.
Single	11.78	1165	8.21
Married without resident children	20.70	1907	11.13
Married with resident children	16.49	2272	9.56
Widowed single	21.24	490	12.49
Single parent	15.77	393	9.76
Divorced single	16.98	827	10.38
Cohabiting without resident children	15.11	602	7.43
Cohabiting with resident children	15.08	244	8.00
Stepfamily	16.65	223	9.53

Selection variables. Four variables available in NKPS were identified as valuable for this analysis: attitudes to family support, attitudes with respect to classic family norms, postmaterialism/materialism, and orientation to friends rather than family. A 60-point scale based on twelve items (“you should be able to count on your family”, “children should look after their sick parents”,.....), each with five response categories (completely agree/agree/don’t know/disagree/completely disagree), was used to estimate an individual’s *attitude to family support*. Low scores indicate a weak attitude to family support, high scores a strong attitude. The scale has strong internal reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.875$). A 60-point scale on *attitude to classic family norms* was built in a similar way on 12 items like “a man and a woman may cohabitate without marrying”, “a woman should stop working when she has a child” that focus on new family trends and gender equalities in contemporary family life. This scale too has strong internal reliable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.844$). The *postmaterialism/materialism* measurement is based on the classic items used by Inglehart (Abramson & Inglehart, 1998). Two dummy variables were created, one for respondents who rank the two postmaterialistic items “political participation” and “freedom of speech” highest, and one for respondents who preferred the two materialistic items “law and order” and “fighting rising prices”. Respondents who indicated a mixed preference form the reference category. The fourth variable, *family orientation*, is measured using a scale based on five items contrasting family members with friends (“if I have problems, I can discuss them with members of my family rather than with friends”, “I have more confidence in the members of my family than in my friends”, “If I would need help, I would call on my friends rather than on members of my family”, “I can rely more on my friends than on members of my family”, “I prefer to have friends come to visit than members of the family”). Individual items were coded from 1 to 5, yielding a scale running from 5 (very strongly oriented towards friends) to 25 (very strongly oriented towards family). This scale too has strong internal reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha =$

0.805). . The first three variables may be expected to have both a direct selection effect and an indirect effect via the variable family orientation.

Structural variables: six structural variables are included in the model. The *size of the family network* is simply the number of living parents, adult children and siblings of the respondent. The *availability of a second network* is a dummy variable based on whether the respondent knows his/her partner's parents (0= not known, not alive or no partner, 1= one or both parents known). 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. Only young children under the age of ten are included here, on the assumption that older children do not require full adult supervision (child care).

Control variables. *Age, sex, and educational attainment* are also included in the analyses as control variables since all have been shown to be related to family type, network structure and family attitudes. Age is measured here in single years. Educational attainment is entered as an 10-point scale based on the highest completed educational level with scores ranging from 0 for those who did not finish primary education to 9 for those with advanced academic degrees.

4. Results

Table 3 shows the main results of the structural equation model: for simplicity, we give only those effects that are significant at the 0.05 level. With RSMEA = 0.0164 and $\chi^2 = 424.335$ for 107 degrees of freedom, we can conclude that the model fits well.

The raw differences in contact frequency reported in Table 2 are confirmed by the total effects of the different family types on contact frequency, estimated here controlling for the

other variables in the model. Singles, divorced singles and cohabitants have significantly less contact than married individuals with children in their household. Singles score the lowest (total effect, unstandardized B-coefficients = -2.775, $p < 0,001$), followed by cohabitants without children (total effect = -2.041, $p < 0,001$) and with children (total effect = -2.535, $p < 0,001$). Divorced singles (total effect = -0.777, $p < 0,05$) score higher than the preceding family types, but still lower than married individuals with children, although the differences are smaller. The total effects for married individuals without children, widowed singles, single parents and stepfamily members are not significant. We should perhaps also note here the estimated direct effects of family type on contact with close kin; these represent any remaining effects that are not covered by our structural and selection variables (table 3a). Being a married individual without children in the household can be seen to have a direct positive effect on frequency of contact, while the positions of single parent or stepfamily member have significantly negative direct effect.

Table 3 shows significant results for both the structural mechanism and the selection mechanism, although not all the hypotheses are fully supported. Orientation towards family rather than friends does have a direct positive effect on the frequency of contact with close kin (H3): as expected, people who feel more strongly about their family also have more contact with them (Table 3, part a). To speak of a selection mechanism work, family orientation must also be associated with family type. With significant negative results for singles, single parents and divorced singles, family orientation gives a first explanation for the lower family contact of individuals living in these family types. For cohabitants without children and stepfamilies family orientation does not have a significant effect however.

Neither of our two variables regarding attitudes to family support and to classic family norms, nor the postmaterialism/materialism dummies shows a direct effect on contact frequency. The attitudes on support are, however, positively related with being single, a single

parent, or a divorced single, which is in line with the second hypothesis, and also show an indirect effect on contact frequency via the family orientation. The dummy variable postmaterialism also has an indirect negative effect, via family orientation. Attitudes with respect to classic family norms have neither a significant direct nor indirect effect on frequency of contact, although they have a negative effect on the probability of being a single parent, divorced single or cohabitant. These results make us conclude that the selection effect exist for at least some family types, and that it works primarily via the family versus friend orientation. Selection effects provide a first explanation for the lower contact frequency of singles, single parents and divorced singles.

The structural variables (Table 3, part b) yield more significant results. First of all, the size or range of the network (H4) is, as expected, of major importance in the frequency of contact with close kin. Having more family members results in a higher score on the overall frequency of contact with kin: one additional person in the network produces an extra score of 2.373 ($p < 0.001$) 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.² The coefficient of 2.373 implies that for each additional person in the network there is more frequent contact in total, but less contact per person. The observed direct effect of network size on contact frequency has to be combined with differences in network size by family type to provide solid confirmation of the structural mechanism. Table 3 (part b) show that most of the family types have significant smaller networks than married persons with children. The only exceptions are single parents (no significant difference) and stepfamily members (who have a slightly larger network). Singles have the smallest

² We can see this easily if we compare for example the 10th and the 90th percentiles. These correspond with scores of 6 and 32 respectively on overall contact frequency, i.e. they differ by 26. The same percentiles differ by only 7 on network size. The coefficient of 2.373 applied to a difference of 7 in network size is only 16.611, which is considerably less than the observed 25.

Table 3(a): Structure versus selection in contact frequency. Significant ($p < .05$) standardized and unstandardized results of the path model (N=8155), estimated effects of selection variables and of family type.

Indepent Variables		Dependent Variables															
		Frequency of contact	Family orientation	Single	Married without childre	Widowed single	Single parent	Divorced single	Cohabiting with child	Cohabiting without cl	Stepfamily	Network size	2nd Network	Geographical proximity	Young child in househ	Parent in household	Sibling in Household
Selection	B	-0.327 ***		0.004 ***	-0.004 **	-0.002 **	0.003 ***	0.008 ***	-0.001 *								
Family Orientation	β	-0.117		0.046	-0.031	-0.034	0.045	0.091	-0.030								
Attitudes Support	B		-0.087 ***	0.004 ***			0.001 ***	0.002 ***									
	β		-0.170	0.071			0.043	0.049									
Attitudes Family	B						-0.001 *	-0.003 ***	-0.002 ***	-0.002 ***							
	β						-0.033	-0.057	-0.070	-0.058							
Postmaterialism	B						0.020 *	0.032 *									
	β						-0.052 ***										
Materialism	B						-0.035	0.030									
	β																
Family Type	B																
Single	β																
Married without children	B	1.179 ***															
	β	0.049															
Widowed single	B																
	β																
Single parent	B	-0.069 *															
	β	-0.015															
Divorced single	B																
	β																
Cohabiting with children	B																
	β																
Cohabiting without children	B	-1.448 ***															
	β	-0.023															
Stepfamily	B																
	β																

Table 3(b): Structure versus selection in contact frequency. Significant (p<.05) standardized and unstandardized results of the path model (N=8155), estimated effects of structural variables and control variables.

Independent Variables		Dependent Variables																		
Structural Variables		Frequency of contact	Family orientation			Single	Married without children	Widowed single	Single parent	Divorced single	Cohabiting with children	Cohabiting without children	Stepfamily	Network size	2nd Network	Geographical proximity	Young child in household	Parent in household	Sibling in Household	
Network size	B	2.374 ***														0.266 ***				
	β	0.691														0.386				
Second Network	B	-0.555 ***																		
	β	-0.027																		
Geographical Proximity	B	1.505 ***																		
	β	0.302																		
Coresident kin	B	-4.769 ***																		
Young child in the household	β	-0.195																		
Parent in the household	B	5.471 ***																		
	β	0.089																		
Sibling in the household	B																			
	β																			
Control Variables	B	-0.072 ***	-0.024 ***		-0.008 **	0.012 ***	0.005 ***	0.000 **	0.002 ***	-0.001 ***	-0.003 ***	0.000 ***	0.046 ***	-0.014 ***		-0.008 ***	-0.003 ***	-0.002 ***		
Age	β	-0.104	-0.099		-0.318	0.411	0.351	-0.030	0.122	-0.091	-0.180	-0.040	0.227	-0.412		-0.284	-0.261	-0.224		
Sex	B	0.627 ***			-0.056 ***	-0.055 ***	0.043 ***	0.047 ***												
	β	0.030			-0.079	-0.064	0.093	0.109												
Education	B	0.201 ***	0.046 ***		-0.007 ***	-0.003 *	-0.007 ***	-0.003 *	-0.007 ***	0.006 ***	0.056	-0.003 ***	-0.146 ***	0.014 ***		0.007 ***	-0.006 ***	-0.006 ***		
	β	0.046	0.029		-0.075	-0.075	-0.031	-0.031	-0.031				-0.144	0.063		0.036	-0.090	-0.095		
Squared Multiple Correlations for Structural Equations=		0.719																		
RSMEA= 0.0169		90% CI RSMEA = (0.0148; 0.0190)		X ² = 424,335, df(107)																

Note: 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.

Reference category family types is married individuals with children, reference category for sex is male.

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

networks, followed by married individuals without children in the household and divorced singles. Cohabitants and widowed singles have only slightly smaller family networks than the reference category. The combination of these effects results in a first structural explanation for the differences in contact frequency.

Our second structural variable, the availability of a second network (H5) also yields significant results in the model, with a very logical result for singles or and cohabitants with children in the household. Close inspection of the results reveals a few not so expected results, however. Being married without children has a significant and large negative effect on the availability of a second network. The same is true for widowed singles. Although we have a control for age general, this last effect may originate in the very strong concentration of widows and widowers in the oldest age groups with the associated higher chance that parents-in-law are deceased.

The third structural variable, geographical proximity (H6), exhibits a strong effect on contact frequency, but differentiates only cohabitants with children from married individuals with children. This is a surprising result given the large support for the effect of geographical proximity in previous research (Attias-Donfut, 2003; Rossi et al., 1990).

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 young child present in the household has a large negative effect on contact with close kin ($B = -4.796$; $\beta = -0.195$, $p < 0.001$) (H7). 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. Looking at the total effect of the structural path of having a young child in the household, we see that it can partly account for the lower contact frequency of cohabitants with children, given the fact that these persons have a greater chance of having a young child in the household. For single parents and stepfamily members, it works in the

other direction, given the fact that children in these household are mostly of older age. Parents living in the household are of great importance for the frequency of contact with close kin (H8). Given the fact that the score on contact frequency was augmented with 7 (daily contact) for adults living in the household, the positive score of 5.471 is logical, but it also means that contact frequency with other family members is lower. Having a parent living in the household augments the total frequency of contact especially for those family types that occur later in the life course. We find positive effects for singles, married individuals without children, widowed and divorced singles. Having a sibling living in the household, gives no effects on the contact frequency, and can therefore not account for the differences in contact. Our last (ninth) hypothesis is, therefore, rejected.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Our analysis of the NKPS data reveals considerable differences in contact with close kin 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 and single parents do not differ significantly from those in a standard marriage with children in the household. Singles and, to a lesser extent, cohabiting individuals (both with and without children) and divorced singles stand out from the rest with lower frequency of contact. For the singles, who have not (yet) entered in a longstanding or cohabitating relationship, their markedly lower contact frequency can be traced both to weaker orientation to family and to having fewer close kin living relatively close by. We can say that differences in the contact frequency between family types that stem from selection of persons with particular values into particular family types are often at least partly offset by compensating differences in the structure of the close kin network.

Although the differences between the individuals in the ‘new’ or ‘contemporary’ family types and those in the more classic forms can be explained by selection as well as structure, structural characteristics of the family network appear to be more important in determining contact frequency than selection based on family orientation and other (family) attitudes. 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 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. Young children in the household attend to less contact with other close kin. Although there exist a need for childcare for young children, parents have less time to invest in their other close kin relationships. We find that the availability of a second network (the kin network of a partner) does significantly reduce contact frequency with one’s own close kin, again constraints of time and resources may be responsible. Although the importance of proximity can be brought back to these constraints, its importance for contact frequency was more limited than expected and was important only for cohabitants with children of. Other unexpected results are found for the effect of living as a single parent or within a stepfamily on the frequency of contact. Although these two family types can be clearly categorized as ‘new’ family forms, both show no significant difference with the classic married-with-children family type. Direct negative effects on contact frequency are found for both types, but the total effects are not significant. Again we presumably have offsetting effects.

Before closing, some restrictions of this study should be mentioned. Firstly, the NKPS dataset has some 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 of the theoretical concepts used were not easy to operationalize. This was particularly the case for the selection mechanism, where we tried to combine different pieces of potentially relevant information. Family orientation was used as an intermediary variable in the model, given its high relevance 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, so three additional variables were also included. Attitudes to classic family norms and to family support were selected as theoretically relevant potential determinants of both choice of family type and contact with kin, but neither variable showed a strong relationship with both family type and frequency of contact. Neither did our variables for postmaterialism/materialism based. It is not clear to what extent this reflects an underlying reality and to what extent it reflects limitations of our operationalizations. In addition, we should note that the selection effect can also work in the other direction. Attitudes and values concerning the family can 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 (Moors, 1996; Lesthaeghe, 2002). 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 data from the second wave of the NKPS, planned for 2006, become available.

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