LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS AS INTERLOCKING MEDIATING STRUCTURES

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In this introductory chapter we describe the rationale for developing a research program on older adults' living arrangements and social networks. We provide arguments for the relevance and importance of work in this area, and provide indications of the kinds of insights we hope to obtain. The chapter ends with a brief overview of what to expect in the book.

Throughout the world, a trend toward population aging is visible. Though the quantitative features of changing age structures are widely known and generally undisputed (a higher proportion at the 'older' ages, however defined), the social implications are as yet little known, and often subject to considerable debate and speculation (Day, 1992). Economic concerns have dominated studies on population aging. Attention has focused on the question of how society can financially support an aging population. The picture painted for the future is one of fewer shoulders to bear greater loads.

Unfortunately, however, in focusing on the question of how society can financially support an aging population, the elderly are constituted as a cost factor, a burden on society (Warnes, 1993). That way, a biased perspective on the elderly is created and maintained, one which generally portrays the elderly as dependents. What is often neglected is that the elderly are not always on the receiving side (Arber & Ginn, 1990). For example, within families, substantial transfers take place from members of older to members of younger generations. Apart from providing financial support in the forms of donations, gifts and regular monetary contributions (Cheal, 1987; Aldous, 1987; de Regt, 1993), older parents are important sources of instrumental

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support (shopping, cleaning, home maintenance, childcare) and emotional support (advice, validation) for their children (Bengtson, Rosenthal & Burton, 1990; Morgan, 1982; Shanas, 1967). Furthermore, older adults are increasingly being recognized as a group with economic power of their own. Quite recently, they have been discovered as an important group of consumers, a target population for the design, fashion and make-up industry, for the tourist industry, and for manufacturers of health products.
In the social sciences, a shift in attention is becoming evident, a shift from viewing the elderly (exclusively) as a group in need of care to viewing the elderly as a group of independent actors. As the appearance of recent volumes attests, increasing attention is being given to the contributions which the elderly can make to society (Butler & Gleason, 1985; Morris & Bass, 1988), and to the conditions enabling older adults to (continue to) arrange and rearrange their own lives (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes, Kohli & Sames, 1989; Van den Heuvel, Illsley, Jamieson & Knipscheer, 1992; Riley & Riley, 1989a).

The perspective adopted in the NESTOR 'Living arrangements and social networks' research program (NESTOR-LSN) is also one which emphasizes the autonomy of older adults, that is, older adults' capability to manage on their own. An increasing number of studies have demonstrated the importance of control for well-being, that is, the extent to which older adults are able to make decisions regarding the choice of activity, method and manner of engagement, time, pace, and the like (Rowe & Kahn, 1987). However, contrary to many of the studies on the conditions governing older adults capability to manage on their own which have tended to emphasize individual characteristics such as the level of cognitive performance or health status, the program focuses on characteristics of the *social matrix* (Riley & Riley, 1989b) in which older adults are embedded. The focus is on the importance of the personal relationships older adults have with others for daily functioning, for coping with life events and for maintaining and improving well-being. These outcomes are often subsumed under the concepts 'resilience' and 'reserve capacity' (Staudinger, Marsiske & Baltes, in press). Resilience conveys the idea that individuals can avoid negative outcomes in the face of stressors or return to normal functioning after experiencing setbacks. Reserve capacity refers to an individual's potential for change, and more particularly his of her potential for growth.

The desire to move beyond an exclusive focus on individual characteristics is not the only reason for focusing on older adults' relationships in the

NESTOR-LSN program. Another consideration is that it is in personal relationships in particular that the impact of broader societal changes is reflected. The economic, demographic and cultural changes of recent decades have led to changes in the sets of relationships available to people and/or in the conditions organizing opportunities for social interaction. As yet, it is unclear what the implications are for individual older adults. We do not know how older adults presently are, and in the future will be dealing with the changes in the conditions governing personal relationships. Apart from macro-level influences, older adults' relationships are also subject to changes which are associated with the aging process itself. We feel therefore, that the implications of changes in personal relationships which are associated with societal changes must be considered *in conjunction with* life course changes in personal relationships. Both sources of change will be elaborated next.

Macro-social trends governing living arrangements and networks

The most remarkable change in older adults' living arrangements has been the consistent rise in one-person households. Forecasts for the Netherlands indicate that this trend will continue in the future (De Beer, De Jong & Visser, 1993). Given that wives tend to outlive their husbands, the majority of the elderly living in one-person households are widows. The rise in the percentage of older adults living on their own has been linked with a number of demographic, economic, health and social factors (Beresford & Rivlin, 1966; Kobrin, 1976; Michael, Fuchs & Scott, 1980; Mutchler & Burr, 1991; Pampel, 1983). In the Netherlands, the reduction of the housing shortage has made it possible for more older adults to have independent households (Prins, 1990). The increase in longevity has increased the likelihood that at least one parent is alive after the last child has left the home. In addition, the introduction of a state pension, a pension which may or may not be supplemented by private funds, has reduced the financial necessity of co-residence. Finally, the rise in one-person households has been linked to changes in preferences (cf. Burch & Matthews, 1987). Many older adults, upon the loss of the partner, prefer to have a household of their own, choosing to be independent and self-reliant (Hess & Markson, 1980). This preference reflects changes in intergenerational relationships more generally. Hareven (1982) has described the emergence of increasing individualism in families: taken for granted obligations are being replaced by increasing voluntariness. For some, the preference for independence may also have been

shaped by early childhood experiences of the lack of privacy and the burden of caring for a co-residing grandparent.

Kin networks are undergoing extensive changes as the result of demographic developments. Altered fertility and mortality patterns are leading to shifts in the number of intragenerational versus intergenerational ties, and in the relative balance of young and old in the family (Hagestad, 1986). Current cohorts of older adults are more often members of four or five generation families than past cohorts were. So-called 'bottom-heavy' family structures, that is families with relatively many grandchildren and, at best, one grandparent, are becoming less prevalent, while so-called 'top-heavy' family structures, that is families with two grandparents and relatively few grandchildren, are becoming more prevalent. Furthermore, the increase in divorce and remarriage have made later life kin networks more complex (Riley, 1983). A wide range of family ties can exist: children through a first marriage, children through a second marriage, step-children, the second spouse of a child, the ex-spouse of a sibling, and so forth.

Economic developments in recent decades have had implications for ties both within and outside families (Hareven, 1987; Litwak, 1985). The organization of the labour force requires greater geographical and job mobility. Fewer people tend to spend their entire life in one location or in one occupation than was the case in the past. As a result, the fields from which relationships are recruited change, and there is a greater turnover in relationships. Residential and job changes lead to the disruption of existing relationships and the formation of new ones. An implication of these developments is that greater efforts must be expended in initiating and maintaining relationships. The increase in the standard of living together with the increase in leisure time have increased the possibilities for people to exercise choice in their relationships and to devote efforts to servicing them. People can be selective, interacting more with those who have compatible lifestyles, and avoiding disagreeable neighbours, co-workers, kinfolk and acquaintances (Wellman, 1992). The basis for engagement in relationships is said to be undergoing fundamental changes. The existence and availability of relationships can no longer be taken for granted, as was often the case in the past. Especially among the younger generations, relationships have changed in the sense that they require negotiations, adjustments and monitoring to be kept alive (De Swaan, 1982).

The impact of aging on living arrangements and networks

Living arrangements and social networks change over the life course. Configurations of kin and non-kin are formed and re-formed as individuals go through life. Their composition changes over time, as does their importance. Relationships serve different functions at different points in time. The function of parents differs at successive stages of the life course. Parents start as carers, educators and socializers. Next they become more like peers, while at advanced ages many occupy a more dependent position vis-à-vis their children. Likewise, the function of friends varies across the different social positions people occupy in the course of their lives: the amount and kind of interaction depends upon the competition from other spheres of life and the need fulfilment they provide (Hess, 1972).

Aging tends to be associated with relationship losses. Usually parents are the first to be lost, followed by same-age associates such as a partner, siblings and friends. The oldest old may experience the loss of children. Relationship losses, and particularly the loss of a partner, have an immediate impact on living arrangements, kin and non-kin networks. The impact of other age-related changes is more indirect. As people enter late life, they generally are in a position to exercise greater choice in their relationships. Freed from the obligations of employment and the responsibility for children at home, they tend to have greater opportunities to organize and structure their social lives. Increasing age may also bring changes in relationship needs (Lehr, 1980), for example as the result of increasing impairment. Older adults may become more dependent on others, lacking the ability to fulfil certain tasks themselves. The existing balance in their relationships may be disrupted, introducing strain and discomfort. Furthermore, a deterioration of health may impose restrictions upon older adults' abilities to engage in interaction with others. Hearing and memory problems can limit conversational exchanges. Reduced physical mobility can limit the participation in shared activities. However, declines in social contact with increasing age may also be self-imposed. Psychological theories of the developmental tasks of old age (Havighurst, 1948; Neugarten, 1977) point to a progressive turning inward with aging. In late life, greater attention is given to the evaluation of one's past and dealing with death and dying. Affiliation and companionship may need to be counterbalanced with solitude and privacy (Staudinger, Marsiske & Baltes, in press).

Consequences for older adults' well-being

The previously described macro-social developments refer to broad, general changes in conditions governing primary relationships. As said, it is unclear what the implications are for individual older adults. One may argue, on the one hand, that the macro-social changes operate to put the elderly at *risk*. For example, the increasing number of older adults who are living on their own presumably implies an increasing number of older adults in vulnerable positions, vulnerable because they must turn to others outside their household for the fulfilment of their support needs. Moreover, the increasing complexity of kin relationships and the greater turnover in non-kin relationships presumably set older adults at a disadvantage because they, in comparison with younger adults, have less experience initiating and ending partner and other romantic relationships. Contemporary older adults were socialized to view marriage as the normal, optimal and enduring framework for an adult life. They grew up in periods when the kin and non-kin relationships people had were relatively stable. One may argue, on the other hand, that the macro-social changes have created *greater opportunities* for the elderly. Thus one can argue that the rise in the number of one-person households allows more and more older adults privacy and independence. Furthermore one can argue that the increasing complexity of kin relationships and the greater turnover in non-kin relationships provide the elderly with greater freedom to choose the people they do and the people they do not want as close associates.

Just as it is unclear what the implications are of macro-social changes for the well-being of individual older adults, the consequences of changes associated with aging are not well understood either. Thus one may argue, on the one hand, that older adults are confronted with *increasing difficulties* in finding fulfilment of their needs for well-being. As described earlier, with increasing age, people are more likely to experience relationship losses, less likely to be self-sufficient and independent, and more likely to experience restrictions in interacting with others. One may argue, on the other hand, that as people age, they are provided with *new options*. Retirement tends to bring an increase in free-available time, time which can be spent on the servicing of relationships. The loss of the partner, though it is one of the most traumatic experiences a person is likely to endure, can provide the impetus for engaging in new social activities and developing contacts of one's own.

Conceptual framework

The *dynamic*, changing character of living arrangements and networks is captured in Kahn and Antonucci's (1980) convoy model of social support. In their view, 'each person can be thought of 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' (p. 269). The term convoy refers to this set of people, and is of course, what we have been referring to as living arrangements and social networks. The composition of the convoy changes over the life course: some relationships are added, others are dropped. Likewise, the kinds and amounts of support given to and received from convoy members vary across the life course.

An adaptation of Kahn and Antonucci's convoy model serves as a heuristic framework in our research program (see *Figure 1.1*). We are not using it as an explanatory model, but rather as a framework guiding the selection and organization of research questions. What makes the convoy model attractive is that it emphasizes interactions. For example, a person's requirements for social support at any given time are jointly determined by properties of the situation (e.g. performance demand, resources) and of the person (e.g.

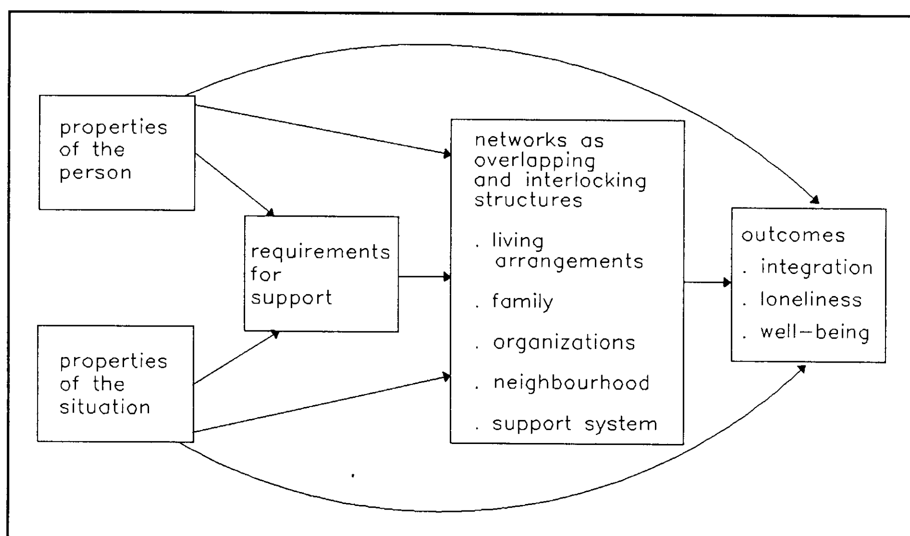

Figure 1.1. Determinants and outcomes of networks conceived as overlapping and interlocking structures (adapted from Kahn and Antonucci, 1980)

abilities, experience, personality). At any given time, the structure of the convoy and the support it provides, are jointly determined by personal and situational characteristics. Another attractive aspect lies in the centrality of the element of time. Personal characteristics and situational characteristics are not stable, but are subject to changes occurring over time. To fit our purposes, we modified the model in two ways. The first change is the omission of Kahn and Antonucci's concept 'adequacy of support'. We left it out because it is implied by definition in outcome variables such as subjective well-being. The second modification is a specification of the convoy structure. To emphasize the social embeddedness of living arrangements and social networks, we decomposed the convoy structure in a number of layers. We specified a set of interlocking social structures: partner relationships and the living arrangements of which they are part, and networks and the families, neighbourhoods, organizations and larger institutions in which they are nested. Though Kahn and Antonucci did not implement the notion of layers in their convoy model, their suggestions to make an inventory of the convoy composition based on a set of concentric circles demonstrate that the notion is familiar to them.

In what follows, we elaborate this notion of layers or interlocking social structures. We feel it is an important conceptual tool. It emphasizes the *social embeddedness* of phenomena and offers a means to relate older adults' well-being and behaviour to their living arrangements and social networks, and in turn, to *connect* the latter to larger social structures and processes. The notion of layers serves as the organizing principle of this volume. Beginning with the smallest, most private social unit, namely the living arrangement, successive chapters deal with social domains that extend further and further into the wider community.

Interlocking social structures

The study of interlocking social structures brings us to a central question of the social sciences, namely that of cohesion within society (Ultee, Arts & Flap, 1992). Cohesion concerns the interconnections among members of society, and the extent to which individuals are embedded in one or more groups which serve specific functions. These groups are viewed as 'mediating structures' (Nauta & Schuyt, 1985) which provide linkages between individuals and groups of individuals within the society. The *integration* of

individuals in society follows from the adherence to the norms of the mediating structures in which they participate.

Interlocking social structures are also central to the ecological paradigm put forward by Stephens and Hobfoll (1990) for understanding late life family functioning. They borrowed the ecological analogy from biology. An ecosystem is a web of related organisms, plants and animals that exist together in a particular climate and geography. A change in any part of the system will, in turn, reverberate throughout the ecosystem. Stephens and Hobfoll argue that adoption of an ecological perspective sensitizes researchers to the *interdependencies* among domains and levels of analysis. They use societal policy vis-à-vis care at home of frail older adults as an illustration of such interdependencies. The policies will affect the division of tasks within the family, performance at work, the organization of nursing homes, and how the society views older adults. Eventually, these changes will come full circle to affect policies concerning home-based care. Thus, to understand the complexities that late-life families experience, attention needs to be paid not only to factors within a particular level of analysis (e.g. the interactions between the family and the institutions that house, treat and fund services for older adults) but also to different levels of analysis (e.g. family history, cultural expectations).

As described earlier, we focus on the micro-level of older adults' living arrangements and social networks. Though the term 'micro' perhaps suggests otherwise, the micro-level of living arrangements and social networks is in itself a *multiplex system* of partly overlapping groups of personal relationships, which each have their own social climate, cultural tradition and history. In this volume we will devote attention to several parts of this multiplex system. The emphasis will be on *description*. The central question guiding the chapters is: What do the living arrangements and social networks of older adults in the Netherlands look like? Sex and age differences will be considered in each chapter. The *explanation* of these and other differences will be considered in greater depth in future publications. There we will be looking at the ways in which living arrangements and social networks reflect biographical, historical and cultural changes, and in turn, have social implications of their own.

Organization of the book

Older adults' *living arrangements* are described in Chapter 3. Living arrangements pertain to forms of residence (in private home or institution)

and to household composition. They form the innermost layer of social structures surrounding the individual. Of course, for those living alone, this layer consists of themselves. Living arrangements strongly determine the opportunities and needs for engaging in social interaction. For that reason, differences according to living arrangement will be considered in subsequent chapters, along with age and sex differences.

The *family* is the second layer surrounding older adults. It is well-known that inter- and intragenerational family relationships play a key role in integrating people in society. Chapter 3 not only describes the availability of family relationships, but also shows to what extent they are alive and significant.

Organizations such as the church and voluntary associations form the outermost social level considered in this book. Chapter 4 on social participation explores older adults' involvement in these *organizations* by looking at membership and volunteer work.

Social network relationships partly overlap with family relationships, but they also include relationships with neighbours, friends and contacts through work and organizations. Though the different types of relationships generally serve different functions (Cantor, 1979; Dykstra, 1990, Knipscheer, 1980; Peters & Kaiser, 1985; Rosow, 1967), they are considered together in the next four chapters. More specifically, Chapter 5 describes the procedure by which the *social network* was delineated. It also considers differences in network size. The different domains of living arrangements, the family and organizations from which network members can be recruited, are central to the delineation procedure. Chapter 6 examines differences in the kinds of *relationships* in the social network. Chapter 7 considers a specific portion of the network, namely the so-called *proximate* network, and its support potential. The proximate network consists of those living within a fifteen-minute travelling distance, and is of course a way of looking at yet another social layer, namely the neighbourhood or community in which the older adult lives. Chapter 8 focuses on a different selection of relationships: the 'top-twelve' in which contact is most frequent. The chapter examines the actual *supportive exchanges* in those relationships.

After having analysed the layers of older adults' social worlds in relative isolation of one another, the last chapter treats them comprehensively. It examines what has remained implicit in preceding chapters, namely that the relationships in which older adults participate, serve a socially integrating

function. Poor social integration can result in *loneliness*. Chapter 9 analyses the extent to which living arrangements and social networks help older adults from feeling lonely.

As a backdrop for the substantive chapters, the Appendix describes the organization and outcome of the fieldwork. A survey was conducted among over 4000 men and women between the ages of 55 and 89. The Appendix provides details on the method of data collection, and discusses the representativeness of the respondent sample.

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