

## NETWORK COMPOSITION

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This chapter focuses on the types of relationships which make up older adults' networks. Relationship *type* is the label people tend to use to identify others (Fischer, 1982). Examples are mother/father, brother/sister, friend, colleague and neighbour. In the present chapter, eight relationship types are distinguished, on the basis of four criteria (see *Figure 6.1*). The eight relationship types are: children, children-in-law, siblings, siblings-in-law, 'other' kin, friends, neighbours, and 'other' non-kin. Partner relationships are excluded.

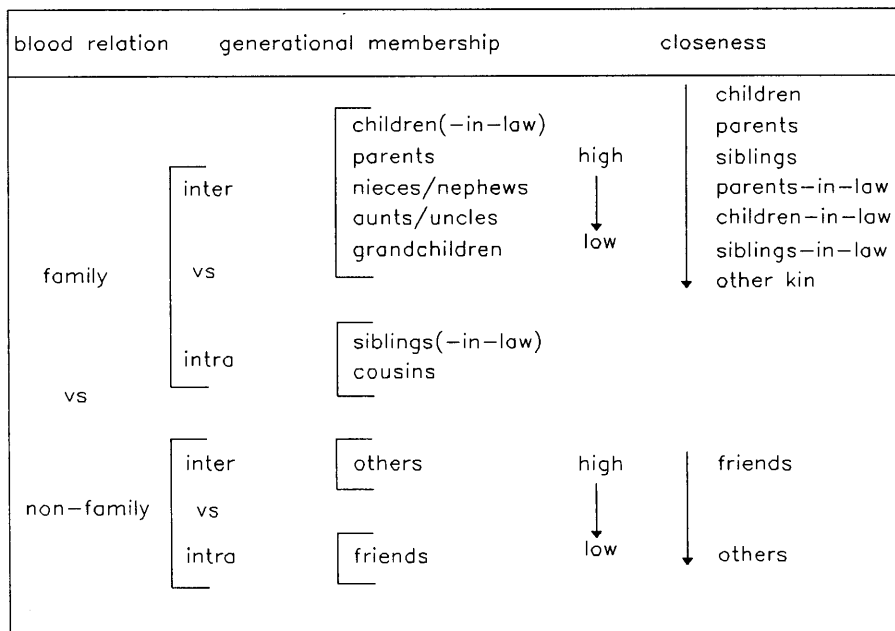


Figure 6.1. Criteria underlying the categorization of relationships

First the distinction is drawn between *kin* and *non-kin*, which is roughly a distinction between 'acquired' and 'voluntary' relationships. Kin relationships are characterized by concern and obligation, while compatibility and enjoyment are the basis of non-kin relationships. Note that these are general differences; there is considerable overlap between kin and non-kin in the functions they perform (Allan, 1979). Next, within these two categories, *intragenerational* relationships are distinguished from *intergenerational* relationships (e.g. siblings versus children, friends versus remaining non-kin). The third distinction is the level of *emotional closeness*. Among kin, the degree of consanguinity indicates differences in closeness (children closer than siblings; both closer than extended kin such as aunts and uncles, cousins, and nieces and nephews). Furthermore, blood relations are generally closer than in-laws. Among non-kin, friendship indicates closeness. Relationships assigned to the category of friends are closer than those in the remaining categories (e.g. neighbours, members of voluntary associations, and colleagues). The fourth distinction is *geographic proximity*, meaning that neighbours are considered separately.

Two indicators of network composition are commonly used. The first is a rather global, undifferentiated measure, namely the *proportion of kin* in the network. This characteristic representing the diversity of linkages in the network, which in turn is associated with the diversity of resources to which a person has access. Hammer (1983), for example, has argued that a high proportion of kin indicates access to a more bounded set of resources, implying greater difficulty in obtaining the social feedback necessary to normal behavioral functioning. In a similar vein, Marsden (1987) puts forward that networks primarily composed of kin indicate integration into a limited set of social circles (Marsden, 1987). Not surprisingly, empirical studies have reported a positive association between the proportion of kin in the network and loneliness (Dykstra, 1990a; Knipscheer, 1980; Thijssen, 1983). The more uniformly composed of kin a person's network is, the more lonely that person is likely to be.

The second indicator allows more detailed analyses. It is the *number* of persons of *each type* in the network. Relationship type generally says something about available support (Dykstra, 1990a, 1993). The different types of relationships composing the network provide an indication of the access to different forms and/or amounts of support (Wellman & Wortley, 1989). Differences in supportive functions tend to be linked with the structural properties of relationships (Litwak & Szelenyi, 1969). Tasks requiring

residential proximity, such as assistance during an emergency at home, can best be handled by neighbours. Family members can best perform tasks requiring extended commitment, such as care at home during a prolonged illness. For tasks assuming similarity in lifestyles, it is best to rely on friends. Following Litwak and Szelenyi, one can suggest that the extent to which different types of relationships differ along the dimensions of proximity, extended commitment and similarity in interests and values, indicates differences in the support they provide.

The purpose of this chapter is to supplement the analyses on network size which were described by Van Tilburg in Chapter 5. One of his findings is that the networks of older men and women are equally large. Though they may nominate roughly similar numbers of relationships, the question of whether men and women nominate similar types of relationships remains open. In other words, there may be gender differences in network composition. The general consensus in the literature is that 'there are well established sex differences in social relationships... Women tend to have ... more different types of relationships with different types of people, i.e. more multiplex relationships; to have more frequent contact with their network members; and to receive supports from multiple sources' (Antonucci, 1990, p. 212). These differences tend to be linked with differences between men and women in the opportunities to meet and interact with others, and differences in social skills and desires for social contact (Fischer & Oliner, 1983). This chapter starts with an analysis of *gender* differences in network composition. More particularly, the question is addressed whether differences in the types of relationships making up men's and women's networks can be interpreted in terms of differences in opportunities for social interaction.

In Chapter 5, Van Tilburg also showed differences in network size associated with older adults' living arrangements. On average, those living with a partner had the largest networks. Among those living alone, there were differences in network size associated with marital status: on average, the widowed had larger networks than either the never-married or the divorced. By virtue of their marital and family history, older adults vary in the types of ties available to them. Upon becoming involved in a partner relationship, people acquire in-laws, and interaction with others becomes more couple-companionate (Milardo, Johnson, & Huston, 1983). The partner gives access to a new circle of contacts. For many, marriage entails having a family of one's own, a family that expands with the marriage of one's children and the arrival of grandchildren. As the result of divorce or widowhood, people not only lose

a partner relationship, but they often also lose the relationships that were maintained by or shared with the partner (Broese van Groenou, 1991; Lopata, 1979; Stevens, 1989). By definition, the availability of kin restricts the diversity in network composition: those without kin will have networks which are uniformly composed of non-kin. The availability of kin is closely linked with one's marital and family history. This brings us to the second focus of this chapter: the examination of differences in network composition associated with marriage and parenthood. Whether or not people have married generally has consequences for the availability of in-laws and of children. Our primary concern however, is with the consequences of *parenthood*. We will be looking at differences between those with and those without children alive. The reason for doing so is that it is often suggested that the childless form a group at risk, for example, at risk of being without necessary supports. Our objective is to find out whether this claim finds empirical support.

A third finding reported by Van Tilburg is an inverse, near linear relationship between network size and age. The question that immediately presents itself is: what is the nature of this decline? Is there a gradual loss of relationships? Is the decline in number observed across all types of relationships, or are particular types of relationships less likely to survive than others? Is there a reshuffling of social ties whereby certain types of relationships become more and others become less prominent? These questions serve as the backdrop for the third focus of this chapter: the examination of *age* differences in network composition.

### *Gender differences in network composition*

Generally speaking, there are two explanations of differences in the networks of men and women (Dykstra, 1990b; Fischer & Oliker, 1983; Moore, 1990). One focuses on contrasting relational *dispositions*, which are the result of socialization practices: women are viewed as having better social skills, and a greater capacity for the realization of empathy and intimacy in their relationships. The other focuses on the dissimilar *structural* circumstances in which men and women typically find themselves: through paid employment men have access to a wider pool of social contacts, while childcare and homemaking constrain women's opportunities to form ties outside the family and the neighbourhood. Fischer and Oliker (1983) point out that although women may be generally more inclined to have more varied friendship and family networks, this difference in disposition only becomes evident in

circumstances where the opportunities for socializing are balanced for men and women. In their view, later life (the 'post-parental' years) offers such circumstances. In the Fischer and Oliner study, older women continued to make new friends while older men were less likely to develop new ties to replace lost ones.

Relational dispositions say something about the willingness to invest in relationships, sociable tendencies, and the need to share experiences and viewpoints with others. They are indications of how people generally relate to others. As such, their impact on the network is likely to be relatively generalized. They say little about the engagement in specific types of relationships, and for that reason are not immediately relevant to an explanation of gender differences in network composition. An examination of differences in structural circumstances forms a better starting point. Starting from the assumption that the *recruiting grounds* for relationships differ between men and women, one should find that different types of relationships tend to be represented in men's and women's networks. Men are likely to have a relatively high proportion of 'other' non-kin in their networks (i.e. ex-colleagues, fellow members of clubs and organizations), given their greater involvement in paid employment and voluntary associations (see e.g. Chapter 4). Women are likely to have relatively high proportions of kin and neighbours in their networks, given the presumed constraints of marriage and parenthood on women's opportunities to form ties outside the family and the neighbourhood. Implicit in this reasoning is that relationships in later life are the continuation of patterns established at earlier ages.

### *Parental status differences in network composition*

Research has consistently shown that children provide high levels of support to their elderly parents (Connidis, 1989; Shanas, 1979; Stoller & Earl, 1983; Wenger, 1984). It is often suggested that at advanced ages, the absence of children works as a disadvantage. This viewpoint is questionable because it disregards the availability of alternative sources of support. Those who have always been childless are likely to have followed strategies during the course of their lives aimed at securing the support to fit their needs: in their housing decisions (the kinds of facilities in the residence, the distance from services), by making financial provisions or by seeking substitutes in other relationships. Of interest in the present chapter is the extent to which there is evidence that the childless have found *compensation* (Cantor, 1979; Hess, 1972) through

increased involvement in other relationships. Do we find that the childless, in comparison to those with children alive, have higher proportions of siblings, 'other' kin, friends, neighbours and 'other' non-kin in their networks?

### *Age differences in network composition*

Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, one should of course be cautious about inferring changes that occur with increasing age. Age differences can only suggest differences that take place with advancing years. Nevertheless, a number of processes can be identified which are likely to result in a *reshuffling* of social ties. These processes point us in the direction of the kinds of differences in network composition we should be looking for. Here we are returning to the four criteria described earlier: kin versus non-kin, intra-versus intergenerational relationships, emotional closeness, and geographic proximity.

As people age, they increasingly become 'survivors', that is, they outlive age peers. The world they come to inhabit is a world of strangers (Dowd, 1986), a world consisting of people who have grown up in different time periods, with different outlooks on life. Do we find a decline in intragenerational ties such as those with friends and siblings across successive age categories? Moreover, is there any evidence of an increase in intergenerational contacts to compensate for such losses?

With advancing age, people are also increasingly likely to experience declines in functional capacities, making it difficult to engage in mutually rewarding social interactions. The continuation of voluntary relationships such as those with friends and acquaintances depends more heavily upon reciprocal exchanges than does that of acquired relationships such as those with family members (Allan, 1989). Presumably, voluntary relationships are more vulnerable to dissolution as the members of the dyad become elderly than are acquired relationships. Do we find, with increasing age, a decrease in the number of more voluntary ties and an increase in the number of kin? People who are emotionally closest to one another are likely to engage in the greatest efforts to maintain their relationship under increasing restrictions, such as those that often come with advancing age (Jerrome, 1990). Do we find, with increasing age, that the closest relationships are the least likely to be dissolved? Finally, at older ages, the location of social interactions is likely

to become different: fewer activities outdoors and in other people's homes, and more in the older adults' residences. With the declining physical mobility that tends to accompany old age, it becomes more and more essential to have social ties in the immediate vicinity (Adams, 1985-1986; Litwak, 1989). Is there evidence in our data that neighbours become increasingly important?

## **Design of the study**

### *Respondents*

In 1992, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 4494 respondents. They constituted a stratified random sample of men and women born in the years 1903 to 1937. The random sample was taken from the registers of 11 municipalities: the city of Amsterdam and two rural communities in the west, one city and two rural communities in the south, and one city and four rural communities in the east of the Netherlands. The response was 61.7 per cent. The data were collected by 88 interviewers.

The average age of the respondents was 72.8. Most were living in their own homes: 1298 (28.9%) were not married and lived alone, 2582 (57.5%) lived with a partner, and 206 (4.6%) lived in another kind of multi-person household. Finally, 351 (7.8%) lived in an institution of some sort, such as a nursing home, a home for the aged, psychiatric hospital, or shelter for the homeless.

The present analyses are based on network data from 4059 respondents; 591 have no children, and 3468 have at least one surviving child. The large majority (92.5%) of those without living children have always been childless. The analyses explicitly consider the differential availability of offspring. Where relevant, they are performed separately for older adults with and those without children alive. Furthermore, the analyses control for the possibly contaminating influences of partner status. Partner status refers to the presence or absence of a cohabitant (either married or unmarried).

### *Relationship type*

The network delineation procedure which was adopted in the NESTOR-LSN survey was described in Chapter 5. Briefly, the procedure was the following. For each of seven domains (household members, children and their partners,

other family members, neighbours, work- and school-related contacts, members of organizations, and 'others', e.g. friends and acquaintances), the respondents were requested to provide the names of those who were 'important' to them and with whom contact was 'regular'. Note that friends were identified as members of a 'residual' category. Relationships entered that category *only if* they had not been nominated in the preceding categories of household members, children and their partners, other family members, neighbours, work- and school-related contacts, and members of organizations. In our view this is a correct procedure to follow, given the wide variability in people's definitions of friendship (Adams, 1989; Blieszner & Adams, 1992). Nevertheless, one should be aware that relationships with friendship qualities can also be present in preceding categories.

For the purposes of the present analyses, the 29 relationship types described in Chapter 5 were reduced to eight: children, children-in-law, siblings, siblings-in-law, 'other' kin, friends, neighbours and 'other' non-kin. The number of eight was more or less arbitrary. Apart from the substantive criteria of kin versus non-kin, intra- versus intergenerational relationships, emotional closeness and geographic proximity, relationships were grouped together on the basis of simple numbers. If relatively few relationships of a particular type were nominated, they were subsumed under a larger category. Parents are an example; their number was too small to warrant the use of a separate category. They were assigned to the category 'other' kin. Partner relationships were excluded from the analyses, to ensure comparability in network size between those with and those without a partner.

In what follows, the adopted eight-type categorization is elaborated, and where relevant, substantiated with information from the 'top-twelve' relationships. The 'top-twelve' were the twelve (or fewer if fewer had been nominated) network members with whom contact was most frequent, and it was for this selection that questions about supportive exchanges and questions about relationship duration were asked.

*Kin versus non-kin.* As described earlier, the distinction between kin and non-kin is roughly a distinction between 'acquired' and 'voluntary' relationships. Of course, colleagues and neighbours are also achieved relationships. Most of the colleagues nominated by the respondents were *former* colleagues, and thus it is more appropriate to view them as voluntary relationships. Neighbours are considered separately, given the importance of geographic proximity in old age.



*Intra- versus intergenerational.* Relationships defined as intragenerational were: siblings, siblings-in-law and friends. Intergenerational relationships were: children, children-in-law, 'other' kin, 'neighbours', and 'other' non-kin. Inspection of the non-kin relationships among the 'top-twelve' revealed that 69% of the relationships with friends were age-homogeneous, meaning that there was no more than a ten year age difference between the members of the dyad. Of the non-kin relationships other than friends, 51% were age-homogeneous. For siblings, the proportion was 72%.

*Emotional supportiveness.* As described earlier, among kin relationships, children were assumed to be closer than siblings, and blood ties were assumed to be closer than in-laws. Among non-kin relationships, friends were assumed to be closer than both neighbours and 'other' kin. Findings on supportive exchanges substantiated these a priori distinctions. 'Top-twelve' relationships in order of decreasing mean emotional support received were: children, friends, siblings, siblings-in-law, children-in-law, 'other' kin, 'other' non-kin, and neighbours. For mean emotional support given, the relationships in order of decreasing supportiveness were: children, friends, children-in-law, siblings, siblings-in-law, 'other' non-kin, 'other' kin, and 'neighbours'.

*Geographic proximity.* Household members were not included in the category of neighbours. If a household member happened to be a sibling, for example, s/he was assigned to that category. Network members living in the neighbourhood, who were nominated in the domains of children, other family members, work- and school-related contacts, members of organizations, or 'others', were not assigned to the category of neighbours either. Analyses of the 'top-twelve' relationships (household members excluded) indicated that 19% of kin and 27% of non-kin (other than those nominated as neighbours) lived in the neighbourhood. Living in the neighbourhood was defined as living within a five-minute travelling distance.

### *Comparability of networks*

Despite the common criterion of 'regular' contact, there is considerable variability among network members in the frequency of contact. To ensure a higher degree of comparability across networks, the analysis was restricted to relationships with a minimum contact frequency, namely at least monthly contact. There is a .92 correlation between the original measure of network size and the one corrected for relationships with a minimum of monthly

contact (see Van Tilburg in Chapter 5). As mentioned earlier, partner relationships were also excluded from the analyses, as a means to ensure comparability in network size between those with and those without a partner. The analyses in this chapter are based on the 42,580 network members (of 4059 respondents) who remained after excluding the relationships with less than monthly contact and the partner relationships.

## Results

### *Gender differences*

First, gender differences in network composition are considered. A bivariate comparison reveals that men's and women's networks do not differ in terms of the proportions of kin; they are 62.7% and 63.0%, respectively ( $t_{(4057)} = -.4$ ). A multivariate analysis controlling for partner status and parental status differences also shows no gender differences ( $F_{(4049,1)} = .6$ ): 63.0% for men and 63.1% for women. To what extent are gender differences observed in the numbers of relationships of a particular type in the networks? The findings from multivariate analyses controlling for differences in partner status and parental status are presented in *Table 6.1*. Men nominate as many children as do women, and as many children-in-law. Men nominate fewer siblings, a similar number of siblings-in-law, and fewer 'other' kin. Finally, men nominate fewer friends, but a similar number of neighbours, and of 'other' non-kin.

### *Parental status differences*

Next, differences in the networks of those with and those without children are described (controlling for partner status and gender differences). Not surprisingly, the childless have lower proportions of kin in their networks than do those with children alive ( $F_{(4049,1)} = 423.7, p < .001$ ). The proportions are 42.3% and 67.1%, respectively.

On average, the childless have smaller networks than those with at least one child alive ( $F_{(4049,1)} = 113.4, p < .001$ ). The means are 8.0 and 10.9, respectively. Of interest is to what extent the size difference is attributable to the availability of offspring. When the relationships with children and their partners are excluded as network members, no differences in network size

*Table 6.1. Mean number of different types of relationships nominated by men and women as network members (means controlled for partner and parental status differences)*

	Men	Women	$F_{(4049,1)}$
children	2.2	2.3	1.0
children-in-law	1.3	1.4	.8
siblings	.7	1.0	51.5*
siblings-in-law	.9	1.0	2.9
'other' kin	.8	1.1	26.1*
friends	.8	1.2	37.9*
neighbours	1.5	1.6	.6
'other' non-kin	1.6	1.5	2.6

\*  $p < .001$ .

remain between the childless and those with living children: the means are 7.1 and 7.3 for the two groups ( $F_{(4049,1)} = 0.9$ ,  $p > .05$ ). In other words, if one bases network size on the number of relationships other than those with children and children-in-law, the networks of the childless and those with children are approximately equally large.

A closer look at the types of relationships composing the networks reveals the following. On average, the childless nominated a larger number of siblings ( $F_{(4049,1)} = 11.4$ ,  $p < .01$ ), a smaller number of siblings-in-law ( $F_{(4049,1)} = 490.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and a larger number of 'other' kin ( $F_{(4049,1)} = 27.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than did those with children. Furthermore, the childless nominated approximately equally large numbers of friends ( $F_{(4049,1)} = 4.2$ ,  $p > .01$ ), neighbours ( $F_{(4049,1)} = 1.5$ ,  $p > .10$ ), and 'other' non-kin ( $F_{(4049,1)} = 3.1$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

### *Age differences*

First we look at age differences in the proportion of kin in the network. Multivariate analyses controlling for gender and partner status differences show a linear increase with age in the proportion of kin in the network for those with children ( $F_{(3455,6)} = 2.7$ ,  $p > .01$ ), and no age differences for the

childless ( $F_{(580,6)} = 0.6, p > .10$ ). Among elderly parents, the proportions increase from 60% for the 55-59 year olds to 70% for the 85-89 year olds. Among the childless, the proportions show no deviations from 42%.

Next, age differences in the numbers of different types of relationships composing the networks of the childless and those of older adults with at least one child alive are examined. Again the findings are controlled for gender and partner status differences. The results are shown in *Figure 6.2*. Among elderly parents, the number of children remains relatively stable across the groups distinguished according to increasing age ( $F_{(3455,6)} = 2.7, p > .01$ ). Age differences in the number of children-in-law in the networks of elderly parents are significant, but they do not follow a linear pattern ( $F_{(3455,6)} = 7.8, p < .001$ ); the youngest and the oldest nominate the smallest number of those relationships. Across the distinguished age categories, one sees a reduction in the number of siblings ( $F_{(3455,6)} = 22.8, p < .001$  for those with children, and  $F_{(580,6)} = 5.5, p < .001$  for the childless), and a reduction in the number of siblings-in-law ( $F_{(3455,6)} = 24.3, p < .001$  for those with children, and  $F_{(580,6)} = 3.2, p < .01$  for the childless). A decline with age is not observed for the number of 'other' kin. Rather, among those with children there is a curvilinear association with age ( $F_{(3455,6)} = 7.1, p < .001$ ). The youngest and the oldest nominate the largest numbers of 'other' kin. No differences with age are observed for the number of 'other' kin among the childless ( $F_{(580,6)} = 1.6, p > .10$ ).

The following age differences are found for the numbers of non-kin relationships in the networks. Among both those with children and those without, the number of friends shows a decline across successive age categories ( $F_{(3455,6)} = 13.6, p < .01$  for those with children, and  $F_{(580,6)} = 3.4, p < .01$  for the childless). Whereas among those with children the number of neighbours decreases with age ( $F_{(3455,6)} = 3.4, p < .01$ ), it remains relatively stable among the childless ( $F_{(580,6)} = 1.9, p > .05$ ). Finally, for both those with children and those without, there is a linear decrease with age in the number of 'other' non-kin in the network ( $F_{(3461,6)} = 23.0, p < .001$  and  $F_{(580,6)} = 7.8, p < .001$ , respectively).

## Conclusion

The chapter started with an analysis of gender differences in network composition. If one looks only at the overall proportions of kin in the

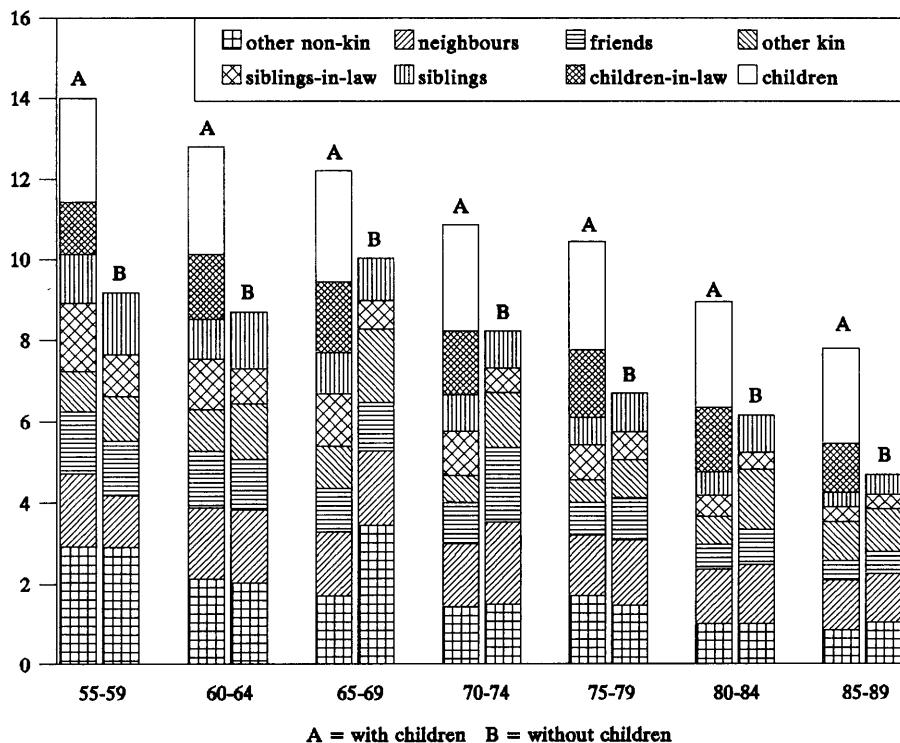


Figure 6.2. Types of relationships composing the networks of older adults with and without children alive

networks of men and women, no differences are found. However, a closer look at the types of relationships represented in their networks does reveal dissimilarities: women nominate larger numbers of siblings, ‘other’ kin and friends.

The findings provide only partial support for a structural perspective on gender differences in networks. That siblings and ‘other’ kin are more prominent in women’s networks than in men’s, is consistent with the notion that women are more focused on kin as the result of their activities associated with marriage and parenthood. It is also additional evidence for women’s function as ‘kin-keepers’ (Wellman, 1985). Contrary to expectations, women do not have higher proportions of neighbours in their networks. A greater involvement in neighbourhood ties was expected, given that women’s activities tend to be more home-bound than men’s. Also contrary to expectations is the

finding that men's networks do not show a relatively high number of 'other' non-kin. In other words, their networks provide no evidence for gender-related differences in areas of recruitment of relationships. Men's greater involvement in paid employment and in voluntary associations is not reflected in a higher number of contacts with 'other' non-kin.

In this chapter, a structural perspective was used to point at differences in recruiting grounds for relationships. Another way of using a structural perspective is to draw attention to the availability of peers (Blau, 1961; Moore, 1990; Van der Poel, 1993). This can help understand the finding that women have relatively more friends in their networks. Friendships tend to be homogeneous in terms of the age and sex of the relationship partners (Blieszner & Adams, 1989). In old age, men are at a structural disadvantage in terms of their opportunities for friendship. They outnumber women in the older population, and for that reason, have a smaller pool of contacts eligible for friendship. In other words, our finding of a lower number of friends in men's networks may be attributable to the under-representation of men in the older population. However, the gender difference can also be explained from a dispositional perspective. Presumably, the higher number of friends among women reflects their greater sociability.

The second part of the analyses focused on differences between the childless and older adults with at least one living child. Little evidence was found for the notion that the childless constitute a group at risk. For all types of relationships, with the exception of siblings-in-law, they have similar or higher levels of social involvement. The smaller number of siblings-in-law in their networks probably reflects the fact that fewer of these relationships exist. A large proportion of the childless have never married, and for that reason have fewer in-laws. The findings indicate that relatively many alternative sources of support are available to the childless. They also suggest that in the course of their lives, the childless have had the opportunities and the motivation to find substitutes. Nevertheless, the findings also show the childless fail to achieve 'full' compensation, which would be the case if their networks were the same size as those of parents. If one excludes children and children-in-law from the measure of network size, the networks of the childless and those with children are approximately equally large. The present analysis shows there is no compensation in the total *number* of network members. At present we do not yet know whether the network members perform different functions. Other studies have indicated that the friends,

neighbours, and family members of the childless may be particularly supportive (Jerrome, 1990; Johnson & Catalano, 1981).

Age differences formed the third focus of this chapter. Age differences in network composition are the outcomes of several different processes. For that reason, there is no straightforward interpretation for the previously described results. Nevertheless, a number of general patterns can be identified in the data. In doing so, we will return to the four criteria described above: kin versus non-kin, intra- versus intergenerational relationships, emotional closeness and geographic proximity.

First, among the childless there are no indications that with increasing age, the proportion of kin in the network increases. However, among elderly parents, the data show that with increasing age, their networks become more uniformly composed of kin. A better understanding of these age-related changes can be obtained by looking at the types of relationships in their networks. While decreases are found for siblings and siblings-in-law, and the number of 'other' kin shows little variation, the mean number of children remains relatively stable. The number of children-in-law shows a curvilinear association with age: the youngest and the oldest parents nominated the smallest numbers. This finding may reflect differential availability with age of children-in-law. The youngest may be least likely to have these relationships because fewer of their children have reached an age where they are involved in partner relationships. The oldest may likely have few of these relationships due to outsurvival.

Given the general decline in network size, the relative importance of children increases: they occupy a larger proportion of the total number of ties. In other words, among elderly parents there does not appear to be an increase in the proportion of kin generally, but rather an increase in the importance of children in particular. We do not know what the meaning of this greater importance of children is. Is it brought forth by choice or necessity? As yet this remains an open question, one which cannot be answered without looking at the actual exchanges taking place in parent-child relationships.

Second, it is obvious that the decline in network size is largely attributable to the loss of intragenerational relationships: friends, siblings and siblings-in-law. In other words, the decline in network size with increasing age is, at least in part, attributable to the loss of age peers. Again we do not know what exactly accounts for this loss. Have the respondents outlived their age peers?

Or is there a process of (mutual) withdrawal, for example because interaction is socially uncomfortable or physically too difficult to realize?

Third, at this level of generality, there is no indication that the closest types of relationships are most likely to survive. We do not see a sharper decline for siblings-in-law compared to siblings. Neither do we see a decline in children-in-law compared to children. Among those with children we see a stronger decline for 'other' non-kin than for friends, but that pattern is not observed among the childless.

Fourth, an interesting difference according to parental status emerges with regard to the presence of neighbours in the network. Among those with children, their number decreases with advancing age, but it remains stable among the childless. Given the loss of other types of relationships, the relative importance of neighbours increases in the networks of the childless. Not only is there a decrease in the number of friends in their networks, but there is also a reduction in 'other' non-kin, presumably as the result of decreasing involvement in voluntary organizations and community life. Clearly, neighbourhood contacts serve a special function for this group of older adults. With advancing years they appear to become more strongly dependent upon contacts in the immediate vicinity.

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