

THE AVAILABILITY AND INTERGENERATIONAL STRUCTURE OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

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For many decades after Parsons (1943) launched his nuclear family theory, family research was preoccupied with the viability of the modern family. Theorists assumed that disintegration of the family was an unavoidable result of industrialization and urbanization. Mancini and Blieszner (1989) summarize the argument as follows: 'scientists such as Wirth, Park, and Burgess believed that the diversity of urban life necessarily weakened primary relationship cohesion and that the accompanying social and geographic mobility was not compatible with extended family relationships' (p. 278). Many studies focused on the question of whether members of different family generations were becoming estranged and isolated from one another, and more generally, whether families were disintegrating. Mancini and Blieszner comment; 'Unfortunately, research continues to pursue this line of work, even though the question has long been answered'. Research has repeatedly confirmed that older adults are not alienated from their families (Troll, Miller, & Atchley, 1979).

The present chapter examines family relationships in the Netherlands. It is organized as follows. First, we describe the general demographic and social changes which were evident in recent decades and that have had an impact on the multigenerational structure of families. Next, using data from the NESTOR-LSN survey we describe the generational structure of later-life families. In what follows, we look more closely at the availability of different types of family relationships (parents, siblings, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren), and analyse interaction patterns. Our analyses of the levels of interaction with siblings and children specifically consider the structure of the families in which these relationships are embedded.

Structural changes in family relationships

One of the major demographic changes during the 20th century has been the genesis of the multigenerational family as a statistically normative phenomenon. It is no longer uncommon that family members of three, four and five different generations are alive simultaneously. This development is of course linked with the increases in life expectancy since the beginning of this century. Estimates indicate that, of those born in the Netherlands in 1980, about 30% had a living great grandmother in 1991 (Langeveld, 1985); of those over the age of 60 in France, one third belonged to a four-generation family (Paillat, Attias-Donfut, Clement & Delbes, 1989).

If one takes parent-child relationships as the key-linkages or building blocks of the multigenerational family (Hagestad, 1984), then multi-generational families are built up of multiple 'overlapping' parent-child relationships. These overlapping relationships are the units constituting the typical intergenerational concern and commitment within the modern family.

The increasing proportions of multigenerational relationships are not the only structural change visible in late twentieth century families in industrialized societies. We would like to draw attention to three other characteristics of aging families.

Verticalization. Not only has the number of generations within families changed, but also the shape of the multigenerational family has become different. The original pyramidal structure, where few generations are alive at the same time and where the members of the younger generations outnumber those in the older generations, has become a vertical structure with several generations of similar sizes and a small top-generation.

The verticalization of the multigenerational family is the result of two recent changes. First, an *intra*-generational contraction has taken place in connection with the decreasing birth rate in the twentieth century. There is a contraction in the number of horizontal family links: fewer members per generation in a family. This trend is consistent across most western industrialized countries. The second change which led toward the verticalization of the family is the large *inter*-generational extension that has taken place as the result of decreasing mortality. There are more generations per family. Bengtson, Cutler, Mangen, and Marshall (1985) showed that in the early eighties in the United States, 38% of people aged 65 and over had families consisting of

three generations, and another 36% four generations. Starting with the youngest generation, Uhlenberg (1980) demonstrated, for the United States, that under 1900 mortality conditions, only one-fourth of the children would have all grandparents alive at birth; by 1976 it actually was almost two-thirds. The probability of three or four grandparents alive when the child was 15 years old increased from 0.17 to 0.55 (Watkins, Menken, & Bongaarts, 1987).

Verticalization is also evident in the interactions among family members. Interactions across generations have increased, while those within generations have decreased in frequency and intensity (Cicirelli, 1982; White & Riedmann, 1992), changes which are of course linked with the changing intergenerational structure. Knipscheer (1980) demonstrated that the intensity of intragenerational contact within families depends upon the availability of intergenerational family ties. Using data on the frequency of interaction, intimacy, and the exchange of instrumental support, he showed that older siblings (65+) in the Netherlands interact infrequently unless one of the siblings is childless.

Economic independency between generations. Several studies have described the substantial changes in the dependency relationships between the generations within the family (e.g. Bengtson & Treas, 1980; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985; Knipscheer, 1986; De Regt, 1993). Parents' dependency on their children has diminished with the introduction of general pension systems, and the expansion of private pensions and social services. The customary principle that one must look after one's parents has lost much of its impact, although there are large differences between countries in this respect (Council of Europe, 1984; for the Netherlands see De Regt, 1993; for the United States see Callahan, 1985; Ruffin, 1984). Nevertheless, there is ample evidence of economic interdependence, as for example in studies reporting that parents continue to provide financial support to their adult children (e.g. down payment on a house, the first car). In recent decades, relationship quality has gained importance over financial and material obligations as the basis for intergenerational interactions (Hagestad, 1992; Knipscheer, 1990). The desire for intergenerational independence is reported in attitude surveys. For example, older adults' responses to questions pertaining to housing preferences and care arrangements in the 1994 Population Policy Acceptance Survey conducted in the Netherlands (Moors, Beets, & Van den Brekel, 1995) show a general unwillingness to become dependent upon adult children. Younger respondents, when asked about their

ideas about life in old age, also indicate a preference to continue living on their own and to be cared for by professionals when the need arises.

Living arrangements. When Lasslet (1965) published his famous study *The world we have lost*, his concern was primarily with the three generation household. He identified a nostalgia for the earlier three generation family in western European family ideology: all family members living under one roof, in one household; a picture of family integration and harmony. On the basis of detailed studies of the household situation in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Lasslett and his team of historical demographers concluded that the idealized family household was a myth (Wall, 1995). Children who married and started a family of their established their own households. Children who did not marry remained with their parents. Some did not marry until after the death of their parents. The nostalgia for the idealized three generation household is rather persistent, however. According to Laslett, this persistence indicates 'a world we have lost syndrome'. He calls it a syndrome because it keeps people under the spell of a family pattern, which in the western European world has always been more of an exception than a rule.

Industrialization and urbanization have changed the family, and in people's minds it has moved away from the earlier idealized pattern. Since the second World War the size of households has decreased rapidly (Kobrin, 1976; Wolf, 1990). This is attributed not only to the decline in fertility, but also to preferences on the part of adult children—married or not—and their elderly parents to live on their own (Burch & Matthews, 1987; Pampel, 1983). Particularly striking is the increase in the number, both relatively and absolutely, of older adults living alone. In 1960 in the Netherlands (Prins, 1990), nine per cent of males aged 65 and over, and 23% of women in that age category lived alone. In 1971 the figures had risen to 10 and 28%, and in 1987 they were 15 and 41%, for males and females respectively. According to recent estimates (De Beer, De Jong, & Visser, 1993), 22% of males and 44% of females aged 60 and over are living alone.

The previously described structural changes in the family have important implications for family life (Bumpass, 1990). Members of the youngest and the oldest generations may be 50 up to 80 years apart, most are not tied by common economic interests, and neither are they situated in the same local community. Daily interaction is no longer the dominant form of communication. However, in general, frequent contacts and interactions have been

maintained (Dooghe, 1970; Knipscheer, 1990; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). Most families are characterized by regular visiting patterns. There is much concern for and interest in each other's well-being. In case of need there appears to be a strong willingness to support each other. In conclusion, there is less involvement in each others daily life but a high degree of reciprocal concern. Though this general pattern of family life has been confirmed repeatedly in research in different countries, the level of interaction and reciprocity tends to vary considerably across families. Some families are more cohesive, others more individualistic. In addition, the composition of families has become more diverse because of divorce and/or remarriage of family members, because of a conscious decision not to marry or to remain childless (Riley, 1983).

Design of the study

Though the *general* trends influencing family structure are well-known, there is little information on their implications at the micro level. In this chapter we will explore the variability in the intergenerational composition of the Dutch family networks. Up to now information on the structure of Dutch family networks has been scarcely available (Langeveld, 1985) and based on estimates only. The NESTOR-LSN study is the first to produce basic, descriptive information on family composition in the Netherlands.

In this chapter, the respondents serve as the anchor-points of the family networks. As mentioned earlier, we will start with a description of the generational structure of late-life families, using information provided by the respondents about the availability of parents, siblings, children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. 'Parents' are the respondent's natural mother and father only. The availability of 'siblings', 'children', 'grandchildren' and 'great grandchildren' is not restricted to blood ties, but also includes adoptive and step relationships. The reason for focusing on a broader category of family relationships is that we are primarily interested in the availability of *potentially supportive* ties rather than fertility per se.

Next, we will consider each generation separately. We will look at the number of surviving family members of a particular generation. With regard to siblings and adult children, we will also look at the levels of interaction, and residential proximity. More particularly, we are interested to know the

number of siblings and adult children with whom contact is relatively frequent, and the number who are living relatively nearby.

To determine the frequency of interaction, for each sibling and child still alive, the question was asked: 'How often are you in touch with him/her (either face-to-face, on the telephone or in writing)?'. Eight answer categories were used, with scores ranging '1' never, to '8' daily. Geographic proximity was measured in terms of travelling time. The respondent was asked, again for each sibling and child still alive, 'How much time does it take you to go and visit him/her (for the means by which you usually travel)?'. Travelling time was measured in minutes.

Not only will we provide descriptive information on the frequency of contact with siblings and with children, but we will also report the results of analyses of determinants of these interactions. We were interested to find out to what extent the frequency of contact among family members varies according to the intergenerational family structure in which the relationships are embedded. The following substantive considerations guided the analyses. The first is the notion of a *preferential hierarchy* within the family, with partner relationships being most preferred, followed by children, parents, and siblings (cf. Cantor, 1979). Frequent interaction with a particular type of relationship is assumed to be less likely if family relationships higher in the hierarchy are present. Thus for example, contact with children is assumed to be less frequent among older adults with a partner than among those who are single. Likewise, contact with siblings is assumed to be less frequent among elderly parents than among the childless.

A second notion focuses on the special functions of parents, and more particularly on parents as *linking pins* within the family. The assumption is that interactions among siblings in particular, are more frequent if parents are still alive. One reason is that the parental home often serves as the locale for family-related rituals, with parents (mothers) as organizers of the social gatherings. Another is that parents themselves may be the focus of contact among siblings: communications are guided by concern about parental welfare.

A third notion concerns *family size*, with the assumption of greater selectivity in large families, which in turn is reflected in lower levels of contact. On the one hand, those with a relatively large number of siblings or a relatively large number of children can 'afford' to be selective, and thus choose for lower

levels of interactions. On the other hand, limits on time and emotional energy may lead to less intensive contact in large families.

Analyses of variance were conducted to examine whether the frequency of contact with siblings was associated with (a) the existence of parents, (b) the number of surviving siblings, (c) the parental status of the anchor-person, (d) the partner status of the anchor-person, and (e) the partner status of the sibling. 'Partner status' refers to the presence or absence of a cohabitant. Furthermore, we examined whether the frequency of contact with children was associated with (a) the existence of the anchor-person's parents, (b) the number of surviving siblings, (c) the number of surviving children, (d) the parental status of the child, (e) the partner status of the anchor-person, and (f) the partner status of the child.

Both analyses controlled for geographic proximity and the anchor-persons' age because they are well-known determinants of the frequency of contact with network members. To avoid problems of interdependence among the data of siblings and children from the same family, one sibling and one child were selected at random. In other words, the analyses were performed on only one sibling or only one child per family. That way family level influences are not confounded with determinants at the dyadic level. Siblings and children who were members of the anchor person's household were excluded.

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.

Weights

The data presented in this chapter have been weighted to correct for selective non-response, with the exception of those used in the multivariate analyses. Descriptive data pertaining to the *entire sample* have been weighted in such a way that they are representative of the Dutch population of older adults of 55 years of age and over. These data are controlled for the over-representation of the oldest respondents and the over-representation of males. Descriptive data pertaining to different *age groups* have been controlled for the over-representation of males in the oldest age groups. Within each age category, the proportions of males and females have been made consistent with those at the national level.

Results

Generational family structure

Complete information on the generational structure of their families, that is on the existence of parents, children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, is available for 3780 respondents. How many one-, two-, three-, four-, and five-generation families are there? The findings are summarized in *Table 3.1*.

Older adults are members of *one-generation* families if their parents are no longer alive and if they have no offspring of their own: 11.9% are in this situation. Another 15.2% are members of *two-generation* families, further

Table 3.1. Generational family structure (n = 3780)

	number of generations									
	one	two		three			four			five
parents		*		*			*			*
anchor	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
children			*	*	*	-	*	*	-	*
grandchildren				*	*		*	*	*	*
great grandchildren							*	*		*
percentage	11.9	1.8	13.4	4.3	49.9	0.4	8.7	9.0	0.1	0.4

- anchor outlived his/her children

distinguished according to the 1.8% where the anchor-person is a member of the youngest generation (i.e. there is no offspring) and the 13.4% where he or she belongs to the oldest generation (i.e. the parents are no longer alive).

54.6% belong to *three-generation* families. Here the most frequently observed structure is the one with the anchor-person as the grandparent, and with surviving children and grandchildren: it applies to 49.9% of older adults. Only a small proportion (0.4%) are in a situation where they, as oldest members of their families, have outlived their children, but do have grandchildren. Another 4.3% are members of the middle generation of a three-generation family.

17.8% are members of *four-generation* families. In 9.0% of these families the anchor-person is the oldest member and each generation has at least one representative. Only a small proportion (0.1%) are in a situation where they, as oldest members of their families, have outlived their children, but do have grandchildren and great grandchildren. Another 8.7% are members of four-generation families, where not they, but their parents are the great grandparents.

Finally, 0.4% are members of *five-generation* families. In these families the anchor-person is the member of the second generation. Apart from the older adults' surviving parents, there are the older adults' children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

So far, entire families have been taken into consideration. In doing so, we have looked only at whether or not they include members of a particular generation. No attention has yet been paid to differences in the number of family relationships of a particular generation. In what follows, we will examine the generations separately, and broaden our focus to include siblings.

Parents

Given current mortality patterns and the age range of our sample, one expects a considerable number of respondents, particularly those in the youngest age groups, to still have one or two living parents. Data on the survivorship of parents is available for 3780 respondents. Of these, 13.2% have a surviving mother or father, and 1.7% still have two surviving parents. *Table 3.2* shows

Table 3.2. Availability of parents by age, in % (n = 3789)

	age of the respondents						
	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85-89
one	32.6	18.1	8.5	4.1	1.3	0.9	0.3
both	5.4	1.5	0.5	0.2	0.3	0.2	-

the differences by age. Not surprisingly, the likelihood that either parent is alive is greatest among the younger respondents. Of those in the 55-59 years of age category, approximately 33% have at least one parent alive, and more than five per cent still have two living parents. Among those in the oldest age categories (80-89), less than 1% have at least one parent alive.

Siblings

Several recent studies have confirmed earlier findings about the relatively low level of interaction between siblings. 'Most measures of sibling solidarity are negatively affected by having adult children or a living parent, suggesting that vertical ties occupy center stage in the lives of most adults' (White & Riedmann, 1992). What do the LSN-data show?

First, we look at the availability of brothers and sisters. For 4135 respondents we have information on the number of siblings they ever had and the number still surviving. There are large differences in the number of living siblings: 12.4% have no siblings, 20.4% have one, 17.0% have two, 14.8% have three, 10.4% have four, 7.1% have five, whereas 18.0% have six or more. Approximately one-fourth of those with no living siblings were only children; they never had brothers or sisters. The previous figures include natural as well as step and adoptive siblings. A large majority of 93.2% have natural brothers and sisters only, while 4.2% have no natural siblings but only step or adoptive brothers and sisters.

Additional information on the availability of siblings is presented in *Figure 3.1*. For each of seven age categories, it shows the proportion of respondents who have at least a particular number of siblings. This number varies from one to eight or more. Regardless of the number that is considered, the figure

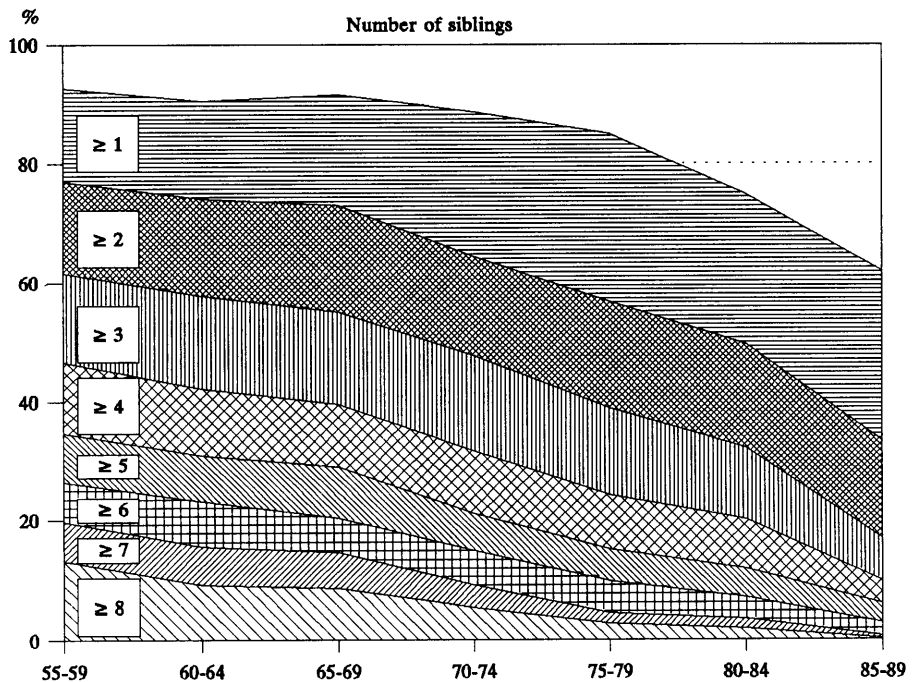


Figure 3.1. Availability of siblings by age ($n = 4135$)

shows a near linear decline in the availability of siblings with increasing age. The youngest respondents are least likely to have a relatively small number of siblings and most likely to have a relatively large number of siblings. The situation for the oldest respondents is the opposite: they are most likely to have relatively few siblings and least likely to have relatively many siblings.

Next, we look at the level of interaction. Of those with living siblings and for whom data on the frequency of interaction is available ($n = 3323$), a considerable number are not in touch frequently with any of their siblings: 61.4% have contact on a less than weekly basis, and 27.6% have no contact with any of their siblings monthly or more often. In contrast stand the respondents who have intensive contacts with a relatively large number of siblings: 3.5% have four or more siblings with whom they interact weekly or more often, and 14.2% have four or more siblings with whom they interact monthly or more often. What information do we have on the geographic dispersion of siblings? Of those with living siblings and for whom relevant data are available ($n = 3243$), 33.0% have none within a 30-minute travelling

distance, 24.1% have one, 14.5% have two, 9.5% have three, while 18.9% have four or more siblings living at that distance. Included in these figures are the number of respondents sharing a household with one or more siblings (1.0% of all older adults).

To what extent do we see differences in the frequency of interaction with siblings that are associated with the intergenerational structure of the families in which these relationships are embedded? The results of an ANOVA based on the data from 3147 respondents indicate that such differences exist (see *Table 3.3*). Controlling for geographic proximity and the age of the anchor-person, the data show that contact with siblings is more frequent if (a) there are few surviving siblings in the family, (b) the older adult is childless, and

Table 3.3. Frequency of interaction (1 = never to 8 = daily) with siblings in association with the generational composition of the family (multiple classification analysis)

	<i>n</i>	deviation ^a	β
parents alive			.02
no	2786	-.01	
yes	361	.08	
# siblings			.11**
1-2	1463	.17	
3-4	885	.00	
≥ 5	799	-.31	
children alive			.05*
no	420	.19	
yes	2727	-.03	
partner status anchor			.07**
single	1123	.16	
cohabiting	2024	-.09	
partner status sibling			.08**
single	950	.23	
cohabiting	2197	-.10	

^a deviation from the grand mean (3.99) adjusted for the covariates and the other independent variables
 $R^2 = 6.5\%$

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

(c) if either the older adult or the sibling is living without a partner. Whether or not parents are alive makes no difference. Generally speaking, the likelihood that contacts with siblings are activated depends on the availability of other family ties. The fewer the alternatives, the greater the likelihood of frequent interaction.

Children

Information on the number of ever-born children and the number still surviving is available for 4196 respondents. More than 85% have one or more living children. There is a large variation in the number of children; 10.7% have only one living child, while 27.2% have two, 19.0% have three, 12.1% have four, 7.5% have five, and 9.1% have six or more living children. Most parents (96.0%) have natural children only; 2.5% have either step and adoptive children together with natural offspring, and 1.5% have only step or adoptive children. The category of those without any children consists of respondents who have always been childless (13.4%) and a small minority of 0.9% who no longer have surviving children.

Figure 3.2 shows the differences in the number of surviving children for respondents in the different age categories. The youngest (i.e. those under the age of 65) are least likely to have relatively large families consisting of three or more surviving children. Here we see evidence (Verhoef, 1989) of the relatively marked decline in the Netherlands in the average number of births per woman for the birth cohorts 1925-1945, from 2.8 to 2.0 (for postwar cohorts a further decline to approximately 1.7 is expected). The oldest respondents are most likely to be without any children, primarily because rates of childlessness are highest among the oldest cohorts (which in turn is linked with lower proportions ever marrying, Liefbroer & De Jong Gierveld, 1995), and to a lesser extent due to outsurvival.

How intensive is parent-child contact? For 3504 parents we have information on the frequency of contact with their offspring. Only a small number seem to be socially isolated from their offspring: 1.4% are not in touch monthly or more often and 8.0% are not in touch weekly or more often with any of their adult children. As *Table 3.4* shows, the respondents are generally well embedded in family life: over 50% have three or more children with whom they interact monthly or more often, and over 40% have three or more children with whom they interact at least weekly.

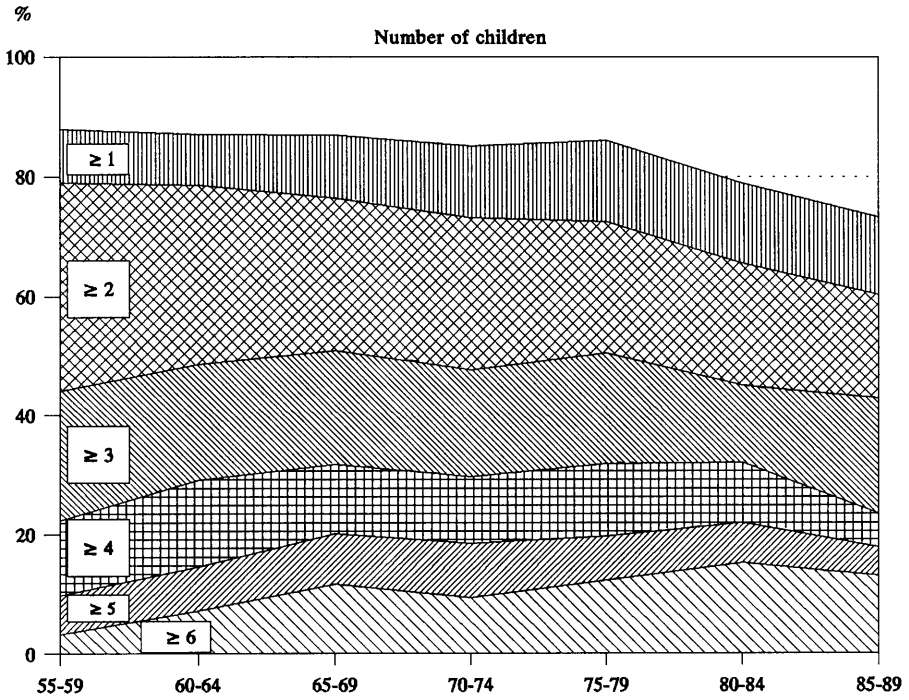


Figure 3.2. Availability of children by age ($n = 4196$)

Table 3.4. Availability of children with whom interaction takes place regularly, in % ($n = 3504$)

	monthly or more often	weekly or more often
# children		
0	1.4	8.0
1	14.4	20.2
2	31.0	31.5
3	22.2	19.2
≥ 4	31.0	21.1

The data also indicate that relatively few older adults are geographically isolated from their offspring. Of those with living children and for whom data on the frequency of interaction is available ($n = 3422$), 14.1% do not have any child living within a 30-minute travelling distance, 24.5% have one, 27.3% have two, 15.6% have three, while 18.5% have four children or more living at that distance.

To what extent is the frequency of interaction with children associated with the availability of family members? At the bivariate level, significant differences in the frequency of contact with children and the generational composition of the family are found. Bivariate analyses show that contact with children is more frequent if one or both of the anchor person's parents are still alive, if the anchor has fewer siblings, if the children have fewer siblings, if the children are parents themselves, if the anchor-person is living with a partner, and if the child is living without a partner. However, all differences but the one for family size, are no longer significant once introduced in a multivariate analysis (see *Table 3.5* for details). ANOVA-results ($n = 2871$) indicate that (apart from geographic proximity and the anchor person's age) family size is the only significant predictor of the frequency of contact with children. The more siblings the child has, the less frequent the contact between the child and the parent (anchor-person) tends to be. This finding suggests that parents and children in small families create special bonds with a high level of social connectedness.

Grandchildren and great grandchildren

Information on the existence of grandchildren and great grandchildren is available for 4137 respondents. 68.8% have at least one grandchild, and 10.4% have at least one great grandchild. Not surprisingly, the likelihood of being a (great) grandparent is strongly linked with age. As *Figure 3.3* shows, the proportions of grandparents increase steadily with each successive age category, but drop among the 80 and over category. That drop is linked with the relatively high rate of childlessness in the particular cohorts. Between 20 and 25% of women born in the period 1905-1915 remained childless (Liefbroer & Gierveld, 1995). *Figure 3.3* also shows a steady increase in the proportions of great grandparents with increasing age. Of course, the older one is, the greater the likelihood of having grandchildren who are in or past their childbearing years.

Table 3.5. Frequency of interaction (1 = never to 8 = daily) with children in association with the generational composition of the family (multiple classification analysis)

	<i>n</i>	deviation ^a	β
parents alive			.01
no	2574	.00	
yes	361	-.04	
# siblings anchor			.03
1-2	1306	.05	
3-4	834	.00	
≥ 5	731	-.06	
# siblings child			.15*
1	1205	.25	
2-3	1041	-.07	
≥ 4	625	-.37	
grandchildren			.03
no	818	-.07	
yes	2035	.03	
partner status anchor			.00
single	971	-.01	
cohabiting	1900	.00	
partner status child			.03
single	419	.12	
cohabiting	2452	-.02	

^a deviation from the grand mean (6.12) adjusted for the covariates and the other independent variables
 $R^2 = 12.1\%$

* $p < .001$.

While information on the frequency of interaction and residential proximity is available for each surviving sibling and child, this is not the case for grandchildren and great grandchildren. Information on interactions with grandchildren was obtained for a subsample of the respondents only ($n = 936$). Detailed descriptions of the importance of grandparenthood will be considered in future publications.

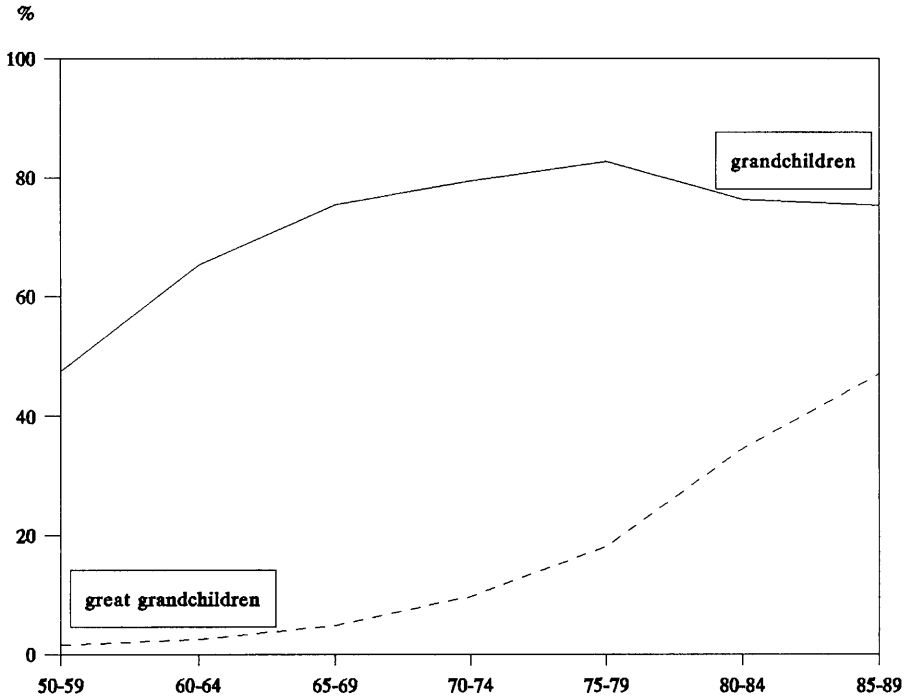


Figure 3.3. Presence of grandchildren and great grandchildren by age ($n = 4137$)

Conclusion

Our data indicate that Dutch older adults are most likely to be members of three-generation families, and more precisely to belong to the oldest generation: that of the grandparents, with each generation represented by at least one surviving member. Almost half of the older adults are in that situation. Five-generation families are relatively rare; our data indicate that less than one per cent of older adults in the 55-89 age category in the Netherlands belong to such a family. It is not unlikely that a higher proportion of five-generation families would have been found if those aged 90 and over had also been members of the NESTOR-LSN sample.

The findings on the geographic dispersion of family members can be said to be typically Dutch. The Netherlands is a small, densely populated country,

and the Dutch are geographically not very mobile. Relatively unique to the Netherlands is therefore that the majority of older adults live near their family members. Close to 40% of those with living siblings have one or two siblings living within a 30-minute travelling distance, while 85% of those with surviving offspring have at least one child living within that distance. One can perhaps characterize the circumstances in the Netherlands as being conducive to high levels of family interaction.

Multigenerational families have become more prevalent in recent decades as the result of increasing longevity. More and more members of the oldest generations are surviving to advanced ages. Fertility patterns also affect family structures: births are the advent of a new generation, and their timing influences the likelihood that members of multiple generations are alive simultaneously. Timing determines how far apart successive generations are in terms of age, and thus the likelihood of co-survival. Recent estimates for the Netherlands indicate that the impact of decreased fertility on the likelihood of becoming a grandparent will be visible only in the extended future (Prins, 1994). Of those born in the 1930's 84% are expected to have at least one grandchild, a figure which is consistent with that for older cohorts. However, 25% of the 1965-birthcohort are estimated to never have any grandchildren if the fertility pattern of their children is similar to their own.

One of the outcomes of the increases in longevity is that family members are spending more and more years *together*. As yet, the implications of co-longevity are unclear. What is the significance for the quality of intergenerational ties? In what ways are intergenerational commitments shaped by sharing a large number of years together? Some (e.g. Arling, 1976) emphasize the intergenerational differences in perspectives and interests which are linked with having grown up in different time periods and occupying different positions in the life course. Others (e.g. Bengtson *et al.*, 1985) emphasize the intrafamilial similarities across generations as regards social values and attitudes. Do these differences and similarities lose significance as the members of successive generations age or do they become more poignant? Knipscheer and Bevers (1985) have drawn attention to the strategies of members of the oldest generation in nurturing reciprocal concerns as long as possible so as to postpone the unavoidable asymmetry in later years.

Our data allow only an indirect assessment of the ways in which intergenerational commitments may have grown, evolved and been confirmed over the years, namely by means of an analysis of current frequency of

interaction. First, our results show that keeping in touch is the norm among parents and their adult children. Only a small number of older adults do not interact with one or more of their children at least monthly. Once again, the results of empirical studies confirm that older adults are not alienated from their families. Secondly, there are clear differences in the frequency of inter- and intragenerational interaction. Older adults have substantially higher levels of interaction with their children than with their siblings. To a certain extent, this finding is attributable to differences in geographic proximity: children are more likely to be household members and to be living nearby than are siblings. Nevertheless, we feel more is involved. In our view the relatively high levels of parent-child interaction say something about the quality of those relationships. They underscore the special nature of the parent-child bond, a shared concern about each other's progress and well-being.

The data on the levels of interaction with siblings support the idea of a preferential hierarchy of relationships. Contacts with siblings are more likely to be activated in the absence of presumably 'more preferred' relationships such as those with a partner and children. The childless and those who are single interact most frequently with siblings. We did not find evidence for the linking pin function of parents. In other words, contrary to expectations, the frequency of contact with siblings did not vary between those with and those without surviving parents. Finally, strong differences according to family size were found: the frequency of contact is inversely related to the number of surviving siblings.

It is often suggested that large and extensive families serve a socially embracing function for their members. Our data, however, highlight the cohesive functions of smaller families. Members of smaller families seem most likely to keep in touch with one another. This is not only evident in interactions among siblings (as described above) but also in interactions with children. In fact, the size of the family of procreation was the only significant determinant of the levels of interaction with children. These findings provide a different perspective on often heard laments about declining family sizes: for example, the notion that aging parents risk having insufficient sources of support. There tends to be a one-sided emphasis on the vulnerability of the situation of children from small families and on the burdens they face. Lacking a wider circle of brothers and sisters, there are few options to share supportive tasks. Elsewhere we have shown that the support children provide to older parents is inversely related to family size (Dykstra & Knipscheer, 1993). Children with few siblings seem particularly committed to remain in

close contact with their parents and to help them when the need arises. One should be careful to base predictions about the future situation of older adults on demographic data alone.

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