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Mollenhorst, G.W.; Völker, B.; Schutjens, V.A.J.M.

NEIGHBOUR RELATIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS – A DECADE OF EVIDENCE

GERALD MOLLENHORST*, BEATE VÖLKER* & VERONIQUE SCHUTJENS**

*Interuniversity Center for Social Science Theory and Methodology, ICS, Department of Sociology, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. E-mails: g.w.mollenhorst@uu.nl; b.volker@uu.nl
**Urban and Regional Research Center Utrecht, Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. E-mail: v.schutjens@geo.uu.nl

ABSTRACT

In the current sociological and geographical literature, contrasting views exist on the role of the neighbourhood and neighbourhood relationships in the life of its residents in current societies. Some scholars believe that in our globalising world, local communities and the neighbourhood in general lost their significance, while others argue that the role of community and neighbourhood contacts is still important. These divergent opinions are mainly due to the absence of comparative empirical studies, which require longitudinal data on neighbourhood contacts. Based on unique and rich panel data on the role of neighbours in the personal networks of inhabitants of 161 Dutch neighbourhoods, we analyse whether neighbourhood contacts and their implications have changed over a 10 year period. We find that neighbourhood relationships have become more important in informal personal networks. This implies paying a visit and helping each other out with odd jobs, but at the same time contact frequency and trust declined in neighbour relationships. For elderly, highly educated residents, home-owners, non-movers and people with initially small local networks, the size of neighbour networks increased substantially, suggesting that at least for these groups, the 'community saved' perspective holds.

Key words: Personal networks, neighbour relationships, change, panel data analysis, the Netherlands

INTRODUCTION

The common view on the social consequences of rationalisation and individualisation is that nowadays people sacrifice relational quality for quantity and find themselves in various, only partially overlapping social circles. This perspective reflects the 'decline of community' thesis, one of the oldest catchphrases in social sciences. The thesis assumes that a long-term irreversible trend has occurred in which

densely connected social networks degenerate into sparsely connected ones (cf. Fischer 1982; Wellman 1999; Pescosolido & Rubin 2000). This alleged trend towards less connected networks also implies that the consequences of individualisation are detrimental to informal social capital (see Wirth 1938; Coleman 1990, 1993). The increased choice options on how to live, work, and with whom to socialise bring loss of social capital rather than various multifunctional relationships, and social estrangement

rather than cohesion. Instead of being a member of a community, people are 'bowling alone' (Putnam 2000).

This perspective on the decline of community in people's lives is strongly related to urban geographers' interests in changing relevance of neighbourhoods for its residents. For example, Bolt and Van Kempen (2009) discern three general perspectives on the role of neighbourhood relations: a limited or decreased role, a still important role, and a minor role. These views correspond with the community 'lost', 'saved' and 'liberated' perspective formulated by Wellman (1979). Advocates of the first view are Guest and Wierzbicki (1999), who found that the importance of neighbourhood social ties declined between 1974 and 1996 (see Wellman & Gulia 1999). Concerning the community saved perspective, Forrest and Kearns (2001) hold that especially under increasingly external influences such as globalisation, for many people locality – a safe, familiar living environment – is valued even higher than before. Finally, concerning the community liberated view, there is ample empirical evidence that neighbourhood effects on residents' lives do exist but are of minor importance compared to personal and household characteristics (Ellen & Turner 1997; Friedrichs *et al.* 2003).

Our contribution explores functions of and changes in a particular type of relationships, namely, those among neighbours. Neighbourhood relations are usually comparatively weak relations in a person's network; in the words of Henning and Lieberg (1996): 'unpretentious everyday contacts' (p. 6). Therefore, they might be a valid indicator for general changes in society: it is to be expected that rationalisation and individualisation affect weaker ties among neighbours even more than stronger ties, for example, among family members.

In the following we first discuss studies on neighbour relationships. Next, we describe our data and present our analyses on activities among neighbours in Dutch neighbourhoods and changes between 1999/2000 and 2007. In our exploration of neighbour relationships, we contribute to the existing literature which has been dominated by US scholars in US settings.

THE STUDY OF NEIGHBOUR RELATIONSHIPS

The neighbourhood is an example of a setting where no formal institutional (or other) rules structure people's contacts with others. People are free to interact, meet and 'mate'. However, it is impossible to avoid meeting ones neighbours. As a consequence, neighbours know many things about each other also without explicitly communicating them. Neighbours can make each other's lives pleasant or cause trouble – and there is almost nothing one can do about it.

Neighbourhood relationships are considered important because of their indirect, but positive effect on the quality of the local environment, namely, social and physical order, as neighbourhood contacts stimulate local participation. From his research on deprived neighbourhoods in the Netherlands, Lelieveldt (2004) concluded that contact among neighbours is one of the strongest predictors of residents' ability to deal with local social and physical disorder, and that these contacts stimulate informal local participation. Bolland and McCallum (2002) argue that residents with a social network within the neighbourhood discuss community issues relatively often, which also enhances formal and informal participation. Finally, people with a large local network have more information on participation opportunities than residents with few neighbourhood ties (Lelieveldt 2004). According to Permentier (2009) these participation effects of neighbour networks are enhanced when the neighbourhood social ties are trustful.

Conclusive statements concerning the character and effect of neighbourhood relationships are still lacking, as the popularity of studying neighbour relationships resulted in a wide variation in research designs, definitions, and methods used (see Marsden 1990). Some studies compare two neighbourhoods, while others focus on a particular street. Data collection instruments range from participation and observation to qualitative interviews to standardised questions in large surveys. Even the definition of 'neighbour' differs among empirical studies; some scholars left it up to the respondent to decide whom to call a neighbour. There is also considerable variation in the size of study

areas considered neighbourhoods. Despite these differences, some basic conclusions can be drawn on the general 'nature' of neighbour relationships.

With regard to their quantity, neighbourhood relations fulfil an important role in personal networks. Neighbours constitute seven to 19 per cent of a person's personal network (Fischer 1982; Wellman *et al.* 1988; Van der Poel 1993). The proportion of neighbours in the 'core' network of strong ties is smaller, about seven to nine per cent (Fischer 1982; Burt 1984; Marsden 1987).

Concerning the quality of neighbourhood relationships, studies show that the typical neighbour relationship is weak (Fischer 1982; Campbell & Lee 1992; Van der Poel 1993). There are, however, relevant differences between social groups. Lee and Campbell (1999), for example, showed that Blacks have more intensive neighbour relations than whites. Dunn (1998) and Bolt *et al.* (2009) emphasise the existence of strong social networks in ethnic communities.

The content of neighbour relationships relates to diverse kinds of practical help; personal, private matters however are rarely discussed. Fischer (1982) showed that neighbours typically take care of their neighbour's house during the latter's vacation, exchange small items and help each other out with odd jobs (see also Thomése 1998). Often the relationships are multiplex, in the sense that more than one kind of link exists: for instance both instrumental support and friendly advice on practical matters.

Studies related to trends in neighbourhood relationships are rare, mainly due to a lack of appropriate longitudinal data. Guest and Wierzbicki's study (1999) is an exception. They analysed two decades of the US General Social Survey and found a trend towards both less neighbouring and more resident participating in a growing number of extra-neighbourhood activities. However, they also revealed that neighbours remain important to parents, elderly, unemployed or low educated residents, probably because these groups in general depend more on local relationships. This is due to the fact that many daily social activities of these residential groups take part within the neighbourhood. For the elderly this

can be of course strongly related to length of residence, as living in a neighbourhood for a long time also means being longer and stronger 'exposed' to potential neighbourhood contacts.

Apart from the few researches mentioned above, little is known about relations among neighbours, in particular in the Netherlands, which is remarkable given the high population density and high degree of urbanisation of the country. Therefore, as mentioned, this study focuses on the Dutch case in (changing) neighbour relationships.

DATA AND MEASUREMENTS

Panel data from the Survey of the Social Networks of the Dutch (SSND) – The data on neighbour relationships were gathered in the first two waves of a large panel study, the Survey of the Social Networks of the Dutch (SSND1 1999/2000; Völker & Flap 2002 and SSND2 2007; Völker *et al.* 2007). This dataset contains representative information on personal networks and neighbourhood communities in the Netherlands. In 1999, at the start of this survey, 40 of the approximate 500 Dutch municipalities were sampled representing the different Dutch provinces and regions, while taking into account differences in the number of inhabitants per municipality (see Figure 1). Subsequently, in each municipality four neighbourhoods were randomly sampled.[1] A neighbourhood was defined by a post code of five positions.[2] Such an area includes 230 addresses on average and corresponds to the route of a postman, namely, this area is usually without great physical barriers. In each neighbourhood we randomly sampled 25 addresses for an interview of one household member (aged 18–65). In 1999/2000, the total dataset consisted of 1,007 individual respondents in 161 neighbourhoods. In 2007, we contacted the respondents of the 1999/2000 panel wave for a second interview. Over 70 per cent of those whom we were able to contact, agreed to participate for a second time, even when they had moved to another neighbourhood. This resulted in 604 individuals for whom we have information on personal relationships at two points in time. This group of 604 persons differs somewhat

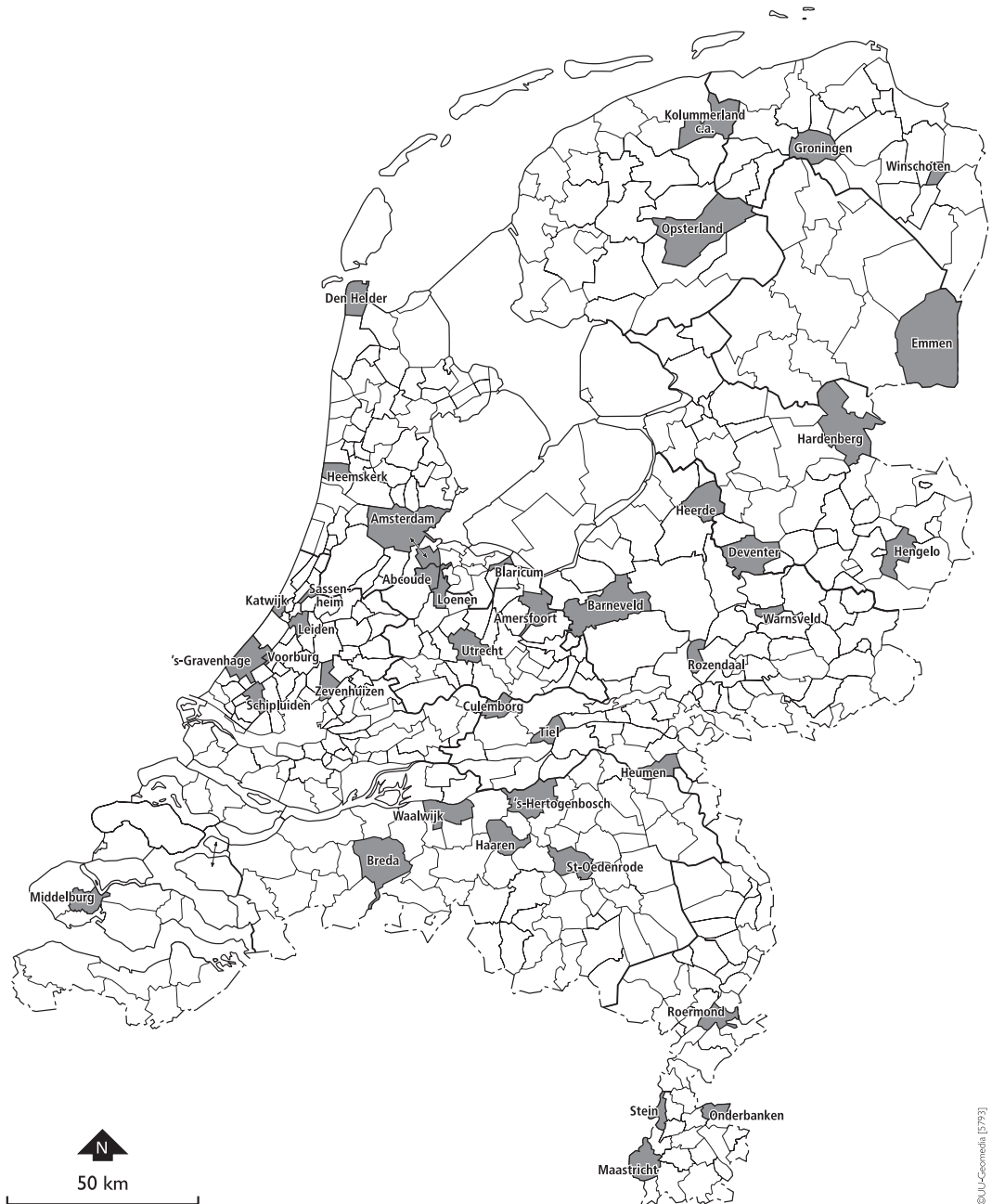Figure 1. *Municipalities included in the SSND Survey of Social Networks of the Dutch.*

from the national average (see Mollenhorst 2009 for details) with regard to socio-demographic characteristics, for which we control in our analyses when possible.

Personal network delineation – In both waves of the SSND, personal networks of the respondents were delineated through 13 'name-generating' questions. Five questions generate

the names of those with whom people have an informal, voluntary relationship:[3] (1) If you have a problem at work, who do you ask for advice? (2) Are there people who come to you for advice when they have problems at work? (3) If you are doing a job at home and need someone to help, for example, to carry furniture, or to hold a ladder. Who do you ask for help? (4) Many people visit others in their leisure time. Who do you visit? (5) Life is not only about going out and having fun. Everybody needs someone to discuss important things with sometimes. With whom have you discussed important personal matters during the past six months? At each of these questions, respondents could name network members they had already mentioned in response to previous questions, plus add a maximum of five new names. Additional questions (the 'name-interpreters') focused on the relationship between the respondent and the network member. For example, on the question 'How are you connected to this person?' respondents could name a maximum of three types of 15 relationships (ranging from 'partner' to 'colleague' to 'neighbour' to 'acquaintance'). This allows us to determine the share of neighbours in people's personal networks. Additional questions addressed the frequency of contact, the duration of the relationship, the extent to which one likes the other, and the extent to which one trusts the other.[4]

Analyses – In our empirical analyses the first three tables provide descriptive information on informal personal relationships, and the share and content of neighbour relationships in 1999/2000 and 2007. Using t-tests, we show whether the figures significantly changed in this period. In Table 4 we use OLS regression models to examine the effects of personal and household characteristics on changes in the number of neighbours in informal personal networks. We look at the effects of age, sex, level of education, having a paid job, marital status, home-ownership, number of children in the household, and length of residence in the neighbourhood (i.e. living less than seven years in the house; see Campbell & Lee 1990; Henning & Lieberg 1996; Ellen & Turner 1997; Guest & Wierzbicki 1999). We look at age effects, because the use of a longitudinal data

set might disguise a cohort effect, in the sense that changes in personal relationships in seven years time may not be caused by a changing role of the neighbourhood, but in reality simply reflect changing needs along the life course of people and their families (Forrest & Kearns 2001, p. 2129).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that on average, in both 1999/2000 and 2007 the Dutch reported having a little more than eight persons with whom they discuss job-related problems, important personal matters, who they ask for help with odd jobs in or around the house, and/or who they pay a visit from time to time. More specifically, we see that about half of these personal contacts are visited (3.95 in 1999/2000 and 4.45 in 2007), while the lowest number are named for help with odd jobs. Note, however, that the number and percentage of contacts who are asked for help with odd jobs increased significantly in this period, as did the figures for visiting, whereas the number of people to discuss job-related problems with decreased over these years. Moreover, the bottom part of Table 1 shows that the frequency of contact with these informal network members decreased significantly – from about three times to about two times a week – as did the extent to which residents liked and trusted these network members.

Next, Table 2 depicts the average share of neighbourhood relationships in these informal personal networks in 1999/2000 and 2007. Neighbourhood relationships have become more important: whereas the average number of neighbours in informal personal networks was 0.83 in 1999/2000, seven years later respondents mentioned 1.26 neighbours. And since the average number of informal network members remained stable (see Table 1), the percentage neighbours in informal networks increased significantly from 10 to 15 per cent on average. This increase took place not only in the number of relationships with next-door neighbours, but even more with other neighbours.

Table 3 on the type or function of neighbour relationships shows that hardly anyone dis-

Table 1. *Number and contents of informal personal relationships in 1999/2000 and 2007 (averages).*[a]

	1999/2000		2007		Difference	
Network size	8.27	(3.40)	8.36	(4.03)	0.09	
Number of persons for:[b]						
Job-related advice	2.56	(2.18)	1.94	(2.22)	−0.62	***
Help with odd jobs	1.71	(1.29)	2.33	(1.41)	0.61	***
Visiting	3.95	(2.02)	4.45	(2.60)	0.49	***
Discussion	2.32	(1.81)	2.45	(2.21)	0.13	
Percentage of persons for:[b]						
Job-related advice	0.28	(0.20)	0.20	(0.20)	−0.07	***
Help with odd jobs	0.22	(0.17)	0.29	(0.17)	0.07	***
Visiting	0.49	(0.23)	0.53	(0.23)	0.04	**
Discussion	0.28	(0.21)	0.29	(0.21)	0.00	
Frequency of contact (per year)	149.48	(81.42)	95.12	(69.45)	−54.36	***
Relationship duration (years)	17.68	(8.56)	18.15	(9.48)	0.47	
Liking each other	4.33	(0.56)	4.15	(0.79)	−0.18	***
Level of trust	4.45	(0.58)	4.09	(0.78)	−0.35	***

Source: Völker & Flap 2002; Völker *et al.* 2007.
[a] Standard deviation between brackets.
[b] Note that one person can fulfil multiple network functions.

Table 2. *Number and share of neighbourhood relationships in informal personal networks in 1999/2000 and 2007 (averages).*[a]

	1999/2000		2007		Difference	
Total number of neighbours	0.83	(1.21)	1.26	(1.37)	0.42	***
Number of next-door neighbours	0.58	(0.92)	0.74	(0.92)	0.15	***
Number of other neighbours	0.25	(0.71)	0.51	(0.94)	0.26	***
Percentage of neighbours in the network	0.10	(0.16)	0.15	(0.18)	0.04	***
Percentage of next-door neighbours	0.07	(0.12)	0.09	(0.13)	0.01	**
Percentage of other neighbours	0.03	(0.09)	0.06	(0.12)	0.02	***

Source: Völker & Flap 2002; Völker *et al.* 2007.
** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.
[a] Standard deviation between brackets.

cusses either job-related or personal matters with a neighbour. Instead, the neighbours are paid a visit from time to time and/or are asked for help with odd jobs in or around the house. Moreover, these two network functions have become significantly more important over time. In line with the total informal personal network, frequency of contact and the level of trust declined. In contrast to other informal personal relationships, duration of neighbourhood relationships increased with 3.57 years.

Finally, we examined the extent to which personal and household characteristics relate to the increased number of neighbours in informal personal networks. Table 4 presents results of OLS regression models on the change in the number of neighbourhood relations in informal personal networks. First, the strong and negative effect of the initial local network size shows that the more neighbours one already had in one's personal networks in 1999/2000, the less likely is an increase in number of neighbourhood contacts. Second, the positive coefficient for age indicates that over their life course, people are more focused on the neighbourhood when looking for infor-

Table 3. *Number and contents of neighbourhood relationships in informal personal networks in 1999/2000 and 2007 (averages).*[a]

	1999/2000		2007		Difference	
Number of persons for:[b]						
Job-related advice	0.01	(0.18)	0.01	(0.10)	−0.00	
Help with odd jobs	0.49	(0.88)	0.84	(1.07)	0.34	***
Visiting	0.41	(0.87)	0.78	(1.19)	0.37	***
Discussion	0.10	(0.41)	0.14	(0.48)	0.04	
Percentage of persons for:[b]						
Job-related advice	0.01	(0.11)	0.01	(0.08)	−0.00	
Help with odd jobs	0.60	(0.44)	0.67	(0.40)	0.06	*
Visiting	0.45	(0.45)	0.57	(0.45)	0.11	***
Discussion	0.12	(0.29)	0.09	(0.24)	−0.02	
Frequency of contact (per year)	141.46	(139.81)	104.59	(120.96)	−37.59	***
Relationship duration (years)	11.19	(9.13)	14.97	(10.77)	3.57	***
Liking each other	3.93	(0.94)	3.89	(0.63)	−0.04	
Level of trust	4.12	(1.00)	3.84	(0.63)	−0.29	***

Source: Völker & Flap 2002; Völker *et al.* 2007.
* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.
[a] Standard deviation between brackets.
[b] Note that one person can fulfill multiple network functions.

mal personal relationships. Third, neither one's sex, nor the composition of one's household affects changes in the number of neighbourhood relationships. Fourth, we see that especially higher educated people witness an increasing number of neighbours in informal personal networks. And finally, home-owners increased the number of neighbourhood relationships to a larger extent than renters, while having recently moved into a new house relates to a decrease in the number of neighbourhood relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions from our exploration of change in neighbour relationships are threefold. We first conclude that in the Netherlands, the locale has not lost relevance to its residents. We therefore found the 'community saved' perspective in sociology supported for this particular type of relationship. A second finding is that neighbour networks became more superficial as contact frequency and trust declined. Dutch neighbour relationships in 2007 are more about holding a ladder than discussing important personal matters. The third conclusion concerns the association between personal characteristics of inhabitants and the increase in neighbourhood contacts over time. People with only few initial neighbourhood contacts have invested in local networks more than others. Especially elderly, non-movers and home-owners are also increasingly oriented on their neighbours in their voluntary personal networks. This is in line with empirical evidence on the importance of neighbourhood stability (in terms of the absence of residential mobility) for social cohesion and participation. Our finding that this increased neighbourhood orientation is absent among people who moved house suggests that many of them 'hang on' to their old contacts. This difference in neighbour orientation might be of use to policy-makers active in urban restructuring; not the newcomers are builders of strong local ties, but the elderly, non-movers and home-owners. In addition, highly educated people have increased their contacts with neighbours more than low-educated residents, and this effect holds even when the number of children (which stimulate local contacts among parents) and home-ownership are controlled for. This may be due to a cognitive aspect (reflecting knowing more neighbours), but can also be caused by increasingly meeting neighbours with similar back-

Table 4. *OLS regression models on changes between 1999/2000 and 2007 in the number of neighbourhood relationships in informal personal networks.*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Network size in 1999/2000			−0.755	***	−0.775	***	−0.785	***
Age[a]					0.026	***	0.020	**
Sex (0 = male, 1 = female)					0.168		0.166	
Marital status								
Single, divorced, widowed					ref.		ref.	
Married or cohabiting					−0.026		−0.151	
Presence of children in household								
No					ref.		ref.	
Only in 2000					0.115		0.058	
Only in 2007					0.361		0.334	
In 2000 and in 2007					0.188		0.115	
Level of education[b]					0.097	***	0.089	***
Having a paid job					−0.103		−0.133	
Home-ownership (0 = renter, 1 = owner)							0.338	*
New dwelling[c]							−0.322	*
Constant	0.422	***	1.057	***	0.988	***	0.965	***
Adj. R^2	0.000		0.317		0.347		0.357	
Number of respondents	587		587		586		583	

Source: Völker & Flap 2002; Völker *et al.* 2007.
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001
[a] Variable is centred on the mean.
[b] Measured on an eight-point scale, with categories '1 – primary education', '2 – lower vocational education', '3 – lower general secondary education', '4 – higher general secondary education', '5 – pre-university education', '6 – intermediate vocational training', '7 – higher vocational training', and '8 – university'
[c] This indicates that respondent moved into their current home during the past seven years.

grounds that become acquaintances or even friends. The latter option may be linked to segregation tendencies at a higher spatial level, which calls for further and thorough empirical investigation.

Finally, our study has revealed the importance of investigating different national contexts of neighbouring. While for the US, Guest and Wierzbicki (1999) found a decreasing importance of neighbour relationships, in Dutch neighbourhoods quite the opposite seems to have taken place. Also our finding that in the Netherlands highly educated residents tend to increase their neighbour network, contradicts the results for the US. This raises the question whether population density, social network structure and local orientation of neighbourhood residents – which all affect meeting opportunities – or individual need and social motivation for neighbouring, genuinely differ between the US and the Netherlands. We await comparative studies on this issue, both conceptual and empirical, in order to grasp contingency issues in the relevance of and the change in neighbour relations.

Notes

1. Sometimes five, if too few addresses were available.
2. The post code system in the Netherlands consists of four numbers and two letters for every address. The more identical positions in a post code, the closer the addresses are located (e.g., 3512EW is closer to 3512EX than to 3584CS). Each six-position post code has 20 addresses on average. We chose to define a neighbourhood by the addresses within a post code area of four numbers plus one letter (e.g., 3512E).
3. Note that in the analyses we combined the first two name-generating questions regarding 'asking for advice with job-related problems' and 'giving

advice with job-related problems' into one category 'job-related advice'.

4. Frequency of contact was measured by asking 'How often do you usually have contact with person x?', with answer categories 'every day', 'every week', 'every month', 'every three months', 'once or a few times a year', and 'even less frequently'. Duration of the relationship is measured by asking for the number of years they have already known each other. Liking each other is measured by asking 'Could you indicate, on a five-point-scale, to what extent you like person x?', with answer categories 'not', 'not much', 'somewhat', 'much', and 'very much'. Trust is measured by asking 'Could you indicate, on a five-point scale, to what extent you trust person x?', where 5 means that you trust this person very much, while 1 means that you do not trust this person.

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