

# Just Like Family: Fictive Kin Relationships in the Netherlands

Marieke Voorpostel

FORS, c/o University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland.

**Objectives.** This study examined the extent to which older adults in the Netherlands include a nonrelative as part of their family (create fictive kin), and whether this process is similar in other age groups. It assessed the importance of absence of close family ties and the experience of divorce in the family network for the creation of fictive kin.

**Method.** Using data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, logistic regression models for the different age groups tested the importance of absence of primary family relationships and the experience of divorce in the family among three age groups (18–40, 41–60, 61–79,  $N = 6,571$ ).

**Results.** Prevalence of fictive kin relationships was higher in older age groups. Both the absence of close family relationships and the experience of divorce within the family were related to having fictive kin, although the latter was only found in the youngest age group. For older adults never having married, being widowed or divorced were important predictors of having fictive kin relationships.

**Discussion.** The study provides support for the idea that the creation of fictive kin is a form of substitution for absent family members and shows that older adults in the Netherlands are active agents in the construction of their family network.

**Key Words:** Diversity in aging—Family sociology—Family structure—Sociology.

THE most researched ties among older adults are those to family (Mac Rae, 1992), notably to adult children, grandchildren, siblings, and spouses (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). But who people consider to be part of their family usually goes further than these primary family ties and includes also more distant family ties (Johnson, 2000). Moreover, aging families are becoming more and more diverse (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2000; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). People's longer life spans, smaller families, and less stable marriages are producing generations of older adults with, on average, fewer "traditional" family ties and more "complex" family ties following from their own or their offspring's divorce (Allen, Roberto, & Blieszner, 2011; Johnson, 1999; Jordan-Marsh & Harden, 2005; Mac Rae, 1992; Mulder & Kalmijn, 2006). Also, "the family" is a complex, socially constructed, and ambiguous concept: How people define their families is subjective and varies between individuals (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). To address the variety and flexibility in what constitutes a family research into the individual interpretation of who actually belongs to "the family" is needed (Johnson, 2000).

One process that is at work in the individual interpretation of who belongs to the family is that of including non-kin relationships, such as with friends, neighbors, or care providers, as part of the family (Jordan-Marsh & Harden, 2005). In the literature, such ties have been described under various names, such as "fictive kin" (Mac Rae, 1992), "voluntary kin" (Braithwaite et al., 2010), "families of choice"

(Weston, 1991), or "nonconventional kin" (Nelson, 2013). These studies have in common that they describe close, meaningful, and supportive relationships among specific subpopulations, such as African Americans (Johnson, 1999), lesbian women and gay men (Oswald, 2002; Weston, 1991), and migrant groups (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000). Fictive kin ties are also thought to be common among older adults; expanding family boundaries by including nonkin as part of the family is a potential adaptive strategy for older adults to secure support (Mac Rae, 1992).

The creation of fictive kin often follows from an attributed deficit in the blood and legal family. Fictive kin relations then come into play to fill family-like roles and functions (Braithwaite et al., 2010). As the supportive role of specific family relationships is negotiated over the life course (Simons, 1983–1984) and as both the importance of various relationships as well as family constellations are dynamic and change over the life course (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Takahashi, 2004), there may well be important differences in the prevalence of fictive kin relationships in different age groups. Yet, because studies on fictive kin are almost exclusively based on indepth interviews with relatively small samples from specific subpopulations, knowledge on the prevalence of fictive kin ties in the general population is lacking (Nelson, 2013). This makes it impossible to draw conclusions on whether older adults are indeed more likely to employ such a strategy to enlarge their support networks and how absence of various relationships matters differently for different age groups.

This study aims to shed light on the prevalence and associations of fictive kin relationships among different age groups in the Netherlands. Fictive kin relationships have been studied almost exclusively in the United States, and little is known about the extent to which fictive kin is a prominent feature of European families. It remains to be seen whether, in a country with an extensive welfare state such as the Netherlands, creating fictive kin is a commonly used strategy. There may be less need to assign a nonfamily tie, the status of kin with all the obligations that are associated with it when the state provides more support. The main research question of the study is: “To what extent do family network characteristics explain the prevalence of fictive kin relationships and are these associations the same for different age groups?” Distinguishing between three age groups (18–40, 41–60, 61–79), this study explores (a) whether the absence of horizontal family ties (to partners and siblings) and vertical ones (to parents and children) is associated with the creation of fictive kin and (b) whether the presence of “ambiguous” family relationships, such as family ties that were lost through divorce and for which there is no normative relational language (Allen et al., 2011), makes the creation of fictive kin more likely among Dutch adults.

## BACKGROUND

Fictive kin relationships are important relationships that tend to develop from relationships of long duration and typically involve frequent contact, geographical and subjective closeness, and support. Use of kinship terms for nonkin usually develops slowly over an extended period of time (Barker & King, 2001; Piercy, 2000; Schmeekle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006) and can be assigned to various ties such as those to formal and informal caregivers or close friends (Voorpostel, 2012). What distinguishes these ties from, for example, “ordinary” friends is that the label of “friend” no longer suffices to cover the content of the relationship (Ballweg, 1969; Barker, 2002; Mac Rae, 1992; Rubinstein, Alexander, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1991; Voorpostel, 2012), as these ties perform family-like functions or fill family-like roles (Braithwaite et al., 2010).

Families or kin groups form an—if not the most—influential relationship network. This often densely connected social network tends to come with extensive mutual obligations and responsibilities, which makes it a major source of social capital (Jordan-Marsh & Harden, 2005). To redefine a nonkin relationship as kin is a way to embed a nonkin tie in a relationship or network characterized by responsibilities and obligations (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994). It serves the purpose of reinforcing voluntary commitments, securing social support, and signaling the perceived closeness to the outside world (Allen et al., 2011; Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Jordan-Marsh & Harden, 2005).

## *Fictive Kin as Substitute*

Not all close nonkin ties are transformed into fictive kin and not every individual is equally likely to designate close others as part of the family. To understand under what conditions people are more likely to create fictive kin relationships, the functional specificity of relationships model (Simons, 1983–1984) is insightful. This model, developed to model social support networks of older adults, posits that relationships are negotiated over time and circumstances and that hence the supportive role of specific relationships varies according to how specific ties have developed over time (Connidis & Davies, 1990). For example, in the absence of certain primary family relationships, a nonfamily relationship may develop into a family-like relationship. Indeed, fictive kin ties are found to be more common when primary family ties such as adult children or a partner are lacking, lost, or unavailable (Mac Rae, 1992; White-Means, 1993).

The importance of various relationships changes over the life course (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Takahashi, 2004). For young adults, parents are prominent ties, with whom they have frequent interaction and from whom they receive much support (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992; Hank, 2007; Kalmijn & Saraceno, 2008). For older adults, who often exchange support with their adult children, absence of children may play a larger role in the creation of fictive kin ties. In fact, among older adults in the United States, the most common type of fictive kin tie is a vertical one, resembling the parent–child relationship (Johnson, 1999; Piercy, 2000). Older adults who are childless or who do not have any children living in the vicinity more often develop fictive kin relationships (Johnson, 1999; Mac Rae, 1992; Rubinstein et al., 1991). For the younger and older age group, the absence of vertical ties is expected to be related to the mentioning of fictive kin ties, as the absence of these vertical ties can leave them especially strapped for resources and assistance when in need. Persons in the middle age group are less dependent on support from either parents or children; thus, those relationships may be less critical in their absence.

For the middle age group, lack of horizontal “peer-like” ties, such as to a partner or a sibling, may be crucial in one’s support system. Studies among older adults have shown that unavailability of a spouse is related to the likelihood of developing fictive kin relationships (Johnson, 1999; Mac Rae, 1992; White-Means, 1993). Sibling relationships, finally, are important for emotional and instrumental support throughout the life course (Voorpostel, Van der Lippe, Dykstra, & Flap, 2007). As the longest lasting relationship, the sibling tie is the basis for a lifetime of shared memories and siblings tend to get closer in later life when other family obligations diminish (Connidis, 2001). Hence, especially among the middle and older age groups, absence of a sibling may provide an opportunity to create a fictive kin tie. Indeed, among older adults, fictive siblings are quite common (Allen et al., 2011).

The first hypothesis is the following:

H1: The absence of primary family ties (partners, parents, children, or siblings) is associated with a higher likelihood of mentioning fictive kin for all age groups, with the absence of vertical ties being especially important for young adults and older adults and the absence of horizontal ties among middle-aged and older adults.

#### *Fictive Kin Resulting From Complex Family Structures*

Assigning the label of family to a nonfamily relationship may also follow from increasing complexity of family structures. With increasing divorce rates, remarriage has become more common among all age groups (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000), which has led to more people experiencing structural changes in families, through family ties breaking up following divorce and through the creation of stepfamily ties following remarriage. This has led to people experiencing more diverse family structures and more variability regarding who to include as part of the family.

As relationships within a family network are linked, divorce of one family member has an impact on others in the family. For example, the divorce of children or siblings leads to the loss of children-in-law and brothers- and sisters-in-law. Whereas such ties may continue to be important, there is a lack of normative relational language to describe these former in-law ties (Allen et al., 2011).

There is great diversity in whether to retain these former kin as part of the family or to include newly acquired stepfamily ties (such as, e.g., a stepgrandchild). Research on adult children's perceptions of stepparents showed that adult children vary greatly in their perceptions regarding whether a current or former stepparent is seen as part of the family (Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006), a process which may work in a similar way for other stepfamily ties and former in-laws.

In sum, postdivorce families may have a higher likelihood of containing relationships that lack a clear label and definition. These relationships may receive the label of "family-like" relationships. From this, the following hypothesis follows:

H2: Individuals who experienced parental divorce, divorce of their offspring or siblings, or their own divorce, are more likely to mention fictive kin relationships.

#### *Other Influences*

Several other known influences on the creation of fictive kin should be taken into account. Women are more likely to include fictive kin in their family networks than are men (Ballweg, 1969; Chatters et al., 1994; Johnson, 1999) and also receive the label more often than men (Ballweg, 1969; Ibsen & Klobus, 1972). This may be related to the centrality of women in family life, and their role as "kin keeper" as well as the fact that women tend to attribute more value to having close personal relationships (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003; Rosenthal, 1985). Also, socioeconomic status is

important, although research so far has produced conflicting findings regarding the direction of the association. Persons with a lower socioeconomic status may have fewer possibilities to purchase support and hence have a stronger dependency on informal support networks, which may increase the likelihood of creating fictive kin. However, a certain amount of social and economic resources are needed to participate in exchange in social networks (Offer, 2012; Stack, 1974) and to be able to create and maintain fictive kin (Chatters et al., 1994). Moreover, research has repeatedly shown that divorce is more prevalent among lower socioeconomic strata (Jalovaara, 2001). If people have high expectations from family in terms of support, turning a nonkin tie into a fictive kin tie may come with more perceived benefits as they become embedded in a network of mutual obligations. Also, family obligations are related to the structure of the family network and the experience of divorce (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Simpson, 1994). For this reason, normative expectations from family may be important. Finally, the disability level of the care recipient was found to be related to the fundamental role of nonimmediate family members in care activities and the creation of fictive kin (Mac Rae, 1992; White-Means, 1993).

## METHOD

### *Data*

Large-scale representative surveys usually do not ask about fictive kin ties, making it difficult to research these relationships from a quantitative angle. An exception to this is the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) (Dykstra et al., 2005). These data were collected between 2002 and 2004 among a representative sample of the Dutch population (not living in institutions) aged 18–79 ( $N = 8,161$ ) by means of a face-to-face interview (computer-assisted personal interviewing [CAPI]) plus an additional paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The response rate for the individual interview was 45%, which is comparable with other surveys in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2005). Compared with the general population, men were underrepresented in the sample, especially among the younger age groups, whereas among women the youngest and oldest age groups were underrepresented. Also, the sample contained relatively many women with children living at home. The sample reflects the population quite closely where level of urbanization and region is concerned. All analyses are weighted using a combination of a design weight (correcting for size of the household to take into account that a random sample of households was taken rather than a random sample of individuals) and a poststratification weight incorporating household type, gender, age, region, and urbanization.

I selected respondents who completed both the individual interview and the self-completion questionnaire, yielding a sample size of  $N = 6,571$  after weighting (before weighting

$N = 6,594$ ). In comparison with the group that only participated in the CAPI, this subsample was slightly older and less educated but resembled the total sample in marital status and quality of family relationships.

Rather than estimating a single model including interaction terms for the different age categories with the independent variables—which would require the inclusion of many interaction terms, complicating the interpretation—the models were estimated per age group separately. Three age groups were created: up to 40 years old ( $n = 2,943$ ), 41–60 years old ( $n = 2,457$ ), and more than 60 ( $n = 1,171$ ). The choice for these cutoff points for the age groups was both theoretically as well as empirically informed. Empirically, these age categories created group sizes large enough for analysis. Theoretically, they represent different phases in the life course: adults in early phases of the life course who are starting careers and families (18–40), persons in middle adulthood raising children and having children leave the parental home (41–60), and older adults who are going through retirement, make the transition to grandparenthood, and face age-related declines in physical health. Of course, there is some variation in the timing of events and to a certain extent the exact cutoff point for these three phases in the life course remains arbitrary. Sensitivity analyses indicated, however, that results were stable when using different cutoff points.

#### *Dependent Variable*

The paper-and-pencil questionnaire included the following question: “Who do you consider to be part of ‘your family’?” Alternatives included: partner, children, parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, grandparents, grandchildren, uncles and aunts, cousins, other relatives, parents-in-law, siblings-in-law, others-in-law, and, finally, “others (a friend, neighbor, etc.)” Response categories were *yes*, *no*, or *do not have any*. Inclusion of “others” as part of the family is the focus of this analysis and is constructed as a dichotomous variable (*yes* vs. *no* or *do not have any*). There were 114 respondents who answered that they did not have any “others.”

There is quite some diversity possible in the kind of relations people include under “others,” just as there is a great diversity in fictive kin relationships. Unfortunately, the data did not contain any information on the fictive kin relationship, so we cannot with certainty assess the content or the nature of these ties.

Older persons were most likely to have fictive kin (35%). Among the younger and the middle group, this was 16% and 23%, respectively (Table 1).

#### *Independent and Control Variables*

Partner status of the respondent was measured in the categories never married, cohabiting, married, divorced, and widowed. Availability of children and siblings was measured with two variables (one for children and one for siblings)

in three categories: no living children/siblings, at least one child/sibling lives within a range of 30 km, and children/siblings live further away. A dummy was constructed reflecting whether any of the parents of the respondent was still alive. Three dummy variables measured experience of divorce in the family: one for divorce of the parents, one for divorce of a sibling, and one for divorce of a child. Finally, the analysis included a dummy indicating whether the respondent had children with a previous partner.

The analysis controlled for gender (1 = *female*) and age measured in years. Level of education was measured with 10 categories (1–10, 1 = *incomplete elementary level* to 10 = *postgraduate education*). Although this measure is categorical, it was included in the model as a continuous measure to keep the number of predictors in the model low. Additional analyses including a square term for education and including all categories separately indicated that the relationship was linear and inclusion of level of education as interval variable did not affect the results. Suffering from a long-term illness or handicap was included as a dummy variable (1 = *yes*). Normative family obligations were measured with four items, all on a 5-point scale with a higher score reflecting higher levels of normative obligations: “One should always be able to count on family,” “Family members should be ready to support one another, even if they don’t like each other,” “If one is troubled, family should be there to provide support,” and “Family members must help each other, in good times and bad.” The items were combined in a single scale by taking the mean score, with a reliability of  $\alpha = .85$ . There were some missing values on the family obligations scale. For 29 respondents, all items were missing. For this group, missing values were imputed using single imputation (Acock, 2005). Estimating the models without the imputed values did not change the results. Table 1 presents all descriptive statistics for the complete sample and the three age groups separately.

#### *Analysis Plan*

Logistic regression models based on weighted data were estimated for each age group separately (18–40, 41–60, 61–79). To address the effect that weighting has on the standard errors, the Complex Samples procedure in SPSS was used. None of the adults in the youngest age group had children who experienced divorce, so this variable was dropped in this age group. Significant differences between coefficients in the different age groups were assessed using Chow tests.

## **RESULTS**

Table 2 presents the results of the logistic regression models. The first hypothesis stated that absence of primary family ties would be associated with a higher likelihood of mentioning fictive kin ties with the absence of vertical ties being especially important for young adults and older adults



Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Complete Sample ( $N = 6,571$ ) and the Three Age Groups (18–40, 41–60, 61–79) Separately

	Range	All ( $N = 6,570$ )		Age 18–40 ( $n = 2,943$ )		Age 41–60 ( $n = 2,457$ )		Age 61–79 ( $n = 1,171$ )	
		<i>M</i> / <i>%</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> / <i>%</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> / <i>%</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> / <i>%</i>	<i>SD</i>
Percentages									
Fictive kin	0/1	22	—	16	—	23	—	35	—
Never married	0/1	21	—	38	—	8	—	5	—
Cohabiting	0/1	12	—	21	—	7	—	2	—
Married	0/1	57	—	40	—	75	—	66	—
Divorced	0/1	5	—	2	—	8	—	8	—
Widowed	0/1	5	—	.2	—	3	—	20	—
Childless	0/1	35	—	60	—	17	—	12	—
Children within 30 km	0/1	60	—	39	—	77	—	76	—
Children further than 30 km	0/1	5	—	0	—	6	—	13	—
Siblingless	0/1	6	—	5	—	6	—	12	—
Siblings within 30 km	0/1	65	—	69	—	64	—	55	—
Siblings further than 30 km	0/1	29	—	26	—	30	—	33	—
No parents alive	0/1	31	—	3	—	35	—	92	—
Parents ever divorced	0/1	10	—	16	—	7	—	5	—
Children from previous relationship	0/1	13	—	4	—	16	—	31	—
Child divorced	0/1	2	—	—	—	1	—	7	—
Sibling divorced	0/1	8	—	4	—	12	—	8	—
Female	0/1	51	—	54	—	49	—	46	—
Illness or handicap	0/1	28	—	19	—	32	—	44	—
Means									
Age	18–79	44	15.75	30	6.56	50	5.71	69	5.29
Education	1–10	6.03	2.25	6.43	1.97	5.97	2.31	5.15	2.52
Normative expectations	1–5	3.73	0.74	3.77	0.71	3.62	0.75	3.84	0.74

Note. Data are weighted using sample weights based on size of household, household type, age, gender, region, and urbanization.

Table 2. Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting the Mentioning of Fictive Kin, for the Complete Sample ( $N = 6,571$ ) and by Age Groups 18–40 ( $n = 2,943$ ), 41–60 ( $n = 2,457$ ), and 61–79 ( $n = 1,171$ )

	All			Age 18–40			Age 41–60			Age 61–79		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Exp( <i>B</i> )	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Exp( <i>B</i> )	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Exp( <i>B</i> )	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Exp( <i>B</i> )
Never married <sup>a</sup>	.206	0.132	1.229	.014	0.187	1.014	.436*	0.207	1.547	.761*	0.328	2.141
Cohabiting	.101	0.129	1.106	-.141	0.185	.868	.347	0.213	1.414	.735	0.462	2.085
Divorced <sup>a</sup>	.712***	0.149	2.037	.517	0.313	1.677	.857***	0.210	2.355	.929**	0.309	2.532
Widowed <sup>a</sup>	.380*	0.160	1.463	.739	0.910	2.095	.422	0.289	1.525	.579*	0.264	1.785
Childless <sup>b</sup>	.281*	0.111	1.324	.591**	0.181	1.807	.144	0.176	1.155	.200	0.268	1.221
Children > 30 km away <sup>b</sup>	-.032	0.147	.968	.286	0.778	1.331	.081	0.209	1.084	-.265	0.216	.767
No siblings <sup>c</sup>	.340*	0.133	1.405	.431	0.260	1.539	.303	0.222	1.354	.223	0.218	1.249
Siblings > 30 km away <sup>c</sup>	-.037	0.076	.964	-.168	0.141	.845	.152	0.113	1.164	-.130	0.150	.878
No parents alive	.204*	0.093	1.226	.559*	0.265	1.748	.122	0.113	1.129	-.190	0.245	.827
Parents divorced	.322**	0.111	1.379	.456**	0.152	1.578	.333	0.177	1.395	-.347	0.290	.707
Children from previous relationship	.129	0.130	1.138	.457	0.265	1.579	-.120	0.194	.887	-.347	0.290	.707
Child divorced	.096	0.252	1.101	—	—	—	.456	0.588	1.578	-.026	0.248	.974
Sibling divorced	.210	0.113	1.233	.536*	0.230	1.710	.226	0.149	1.253	-.275	0.223	.760
Female	.393***	0.070	1.482	.453**	0.133	1.573	.350**	0.105	1.420	.412**	0.138	1.510
Age	—	—	—	.016	0.012	1.016	.020*	0.010	1.021	-.003	0.014	.997
Education	-.138***	0.015	.871	-.139***	0.031	.871	-.153***	0.023	.858	-.122***	0.027	.886
Illness or handicap	.133	0.071	1.142	.015	0.143	1.015	.213*	0.107	1.238	.049	0.132	1.050
Normative expectations	.280***	0.049	1.323	.250*	0.101	1.283	.212**	0.069	1.236	.477***	0.096	1.611
Age 18–40	-.522***	0.090	.594	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Age 61–79	.255*	0.101	1.291	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Constant	-1.997***	0.232	.136	-2.998***	0.686	.050	-2.708***	0.593	.067	-1.887*	0.979	.151
Nagelkerke $R^2$	.121	—	—	.071	—	—	.095	—	—	.150	—	—

Notes. <sup>a</sup>Reference group is married.

<sup>b</sup>Reference group is at least one child within 30-km range.

<sup>c</sup>Reference group is at least one sibling within 30-km range.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

and the absence of horizontal ties among middle-aged and older adults. The model based on the complete sample shows that compared with married individuals, divorced and widowed persons are more likely to mention fictive kin. Also, being childless, without siblings and without parents is positively associated with having fictive kin.

The analyses for the age groups separately show that these associations vary depending on age. Whereas the absence of a partner is not relevant among the youngest age group (although the coefficient for being divorced just falls short of reaching significance and is not significantly different from the coefficients in the other two age groups), in both the middle and the oldest group those who never had a partner as well as those who had lost a partner through divorce mentioned a fictive kin tie more often than their married counterparts. The difference was largest for the divorced group: they were 2.4 times as likely (41–60 years old) and 2.5 times as likely (61 and older) as married persons to mention a fictive kin relationship. The widowed group in the 61–79 age group was more likely to mention a fictive kin relationship as well, although the coefficient was not significantly different from those in the middle and youngest age group. As expected, among the youngest age group, the absence of parents was positively associated with the development of fictive kin relationships. These results are in line with the expectation that the absence of vertical ties is related to the creation of fictive kin among the youngest group, whereas the absence of a partner shows a stronger association with mentioning fictive kin in the middle and oldest age group. For the absence of children among the oldest group, the expectation was, however, not confirmed. In fact, results show that in the youngest group, the absence of children was associated with the presence of fictive kin. Having no siblings was no longer significantly related to mentioning fictive kin in the models for the age groups separately, although the coefficient came close to significance for the 18- to 40-year-old group.

The second expectation was that in families that experienced divorce, the prevalence of fictive kin ties would be higher. Having divorced parents was indeed related to mentioning fictive kin in the model combining all age groups. In the models for the separate age groups, there was only support for this expectation among the youngest age group. For the 18- to 40-year-old group, those whose parents or whose siblings were ever divorced were indeed more likely to mention fictive kin relationships. For both divorced parents and divorced siblings were the coefficients only significantly different from the oldest age group, but not from the middle age group. Having children from a previous relationship just failed to reach significance.

In line with previous findings, women were more likely to have fictive kin than men. A strong negative relationship with educational level emerged: Having fictive kin relationships was much more likely among the lower educated persons in all age groups. The coefficient for having

a long-term illness or disability was only significantly positive in the middle age group, but the coefficient did not differ significantly from the other age groups. Finally, norms regarding family obligations were related to fictive kin for all age groups: People who feel more strongly that family should be there to provide support were more likely to define nonkin relationships as part of their family. This coefficient was significantly higher in the oldest age groups compared with the other two groups.

Model fit was best for the oldest group with a Nagelkerke  $R^2$  of .15. Explanatory power was lowest for the youngest group (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .07$ ).

## DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine the prevalence of fictive kin relationships in the Netherlands and to assess to what extent existence of such ties is related to the absence of primary family ties and complex family structures of older adults as well as younger age groups. Whereas previous research focused on specific subpopulations (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Johnson, 1999), this study uses a representative sample of the Dutch population, demonstrating the prevalence of fictive kin among all age groups in the Netherlands, but with older adults being by far the most likely to include fictive kin in their networks. This shows that also in a country with an elaborate welfare state such as the Netherlands, fictive kin relationships are a relatively common feature of people's family network. As previous research indicates that fictive kin ties tend to be emotionally close bonds (Barker, 2002; Braithwaite et al., 2010; Mac Rae, 1992), the extent to which the state provides for its citizens may not be a key determinant in the prevalence of such ties.

This study demonstrates that not only specific subpopulations create fictive kin relationships but older adults in general—at least in the Netherlands—make use of this strategy. This may be explained by the fact that, as people age, their social networks become smaller and the potential duration of personal relationships increases. This is in line with socioemotional selectivity theory, which states that with increasing age older adults place more importance on close personal relationships at the expense of network size (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). The increasing likelihood of upgrading distant kin to primary kin and to convert nonkin to kin resulting from increasing investments in close relationships fits well in this view of increased centrality of emotionally close, meaningful, and supportive relationships (Jordan-Marsh & Harden, 2005).

The findings support the idea that absence of family members facilitates the creation of fictive kin: Fictive kin seem to form a substitution for absent actual kin (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Johnson, 1999; Mac Rae, 1992; White-Means, 1993). Among people of different ages, absence of different family ties is associated with mentioning fictive kin, with vertical ties being especially important in younger

age, when parents usually provide much support (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992), and absence of a partner being central for having of fictive kin in middle and late adulthood, when also horizontal “peer-like” ties may be crucial in one’s support system.

Although many studies on fictive kin among older adults in specific subpopulations suggest that the most common tie is a vertical one resembling a parent–child relationship (Johnson, 1999; Piercy, 2000), the current study among a representative sample of Dutch adults indicates otherwise. In line with Johnson (1999), Mac Rae (1992), and White-Means (1993), especially the absence of a partner was found to be related to having fictive kin relationships in later adulthood, irrespective of whether one never had a partner or lost a partner through death or divorce. Possibly, the family networks of these older adults are smaller, as ties with in-laws never developed or may have been cut, and the majority of the never married older adults never had any children. Especially, persons who had experienced divorce were more likely to mention fictive kin relationships, which can be explained by previous findings indicating that divorce strains remaining relationships and financial resources more than widowhood (Milardo, 1987; Uhlenberg, Cooney, & Boyd, 1990).

Whether primary family relationships live geographically close did not play a role for the inclusion of nonkin relationships in the family in any age group. As geographical proximity is important for the provision of practical support (Eriksen & Gerstel, 2002), this suggests that unavailability of practical support does not necessarily lie at the basis of fictive kin relationships. Alternatively, distances in the Netherlands may not be large enough to play a significant role.

The relation between complex family structures following divorce and fictive kin relationships was only found among younger adults, who were more likely to develop fictive kin if they experienced parental divorce or the divorce of a sibling. Only for this age group is there, hence, suggestive evidence for the idea of maintaining ex-kin or ex-in-law relationships for which there is no normative relational language as part of the family in the form of fictive kin relationships (Allen et al., 2011). In the case of parental support, an alternative explanation is that young adults receive less support from divorced parents (White, 1992) and may look to nonkin for additional support.

Persons who have stronger normative expectations from family are more likely to have fictive kin relationships. A mechanism that could be at work here is that the benefits of labeling someone as kin are larger, if the expectations of what a kin relationship should provide are greater. Embedding these ties in a network characterized by obligations may function as a way to increase social capital (Barker, 2002; Jordan-Marsh & Harden, 2005).

Although one of the few large-scale data sets allowing to study fictive kin among a representative sample, the NKPS

did not contain information on the content of these fictive kin relationships. So it remained unclear for this study what it implies to label someone as part of the family. Perhaps some groups use this label more easily than others, whereas the content of such relationships may not be that different. Also, the data did not contain information on the kind of relationships that were mentioned as fictive kin. This is unfortunate, as such information would help to understand the place of fictive kin in a person’s social network.

Yet, previous research suggests that the label of “being like family” is not given easily: Usually relationships are characterized by geographical and emotional closeness, frequent contact, and a longer shared history (Ballweg, 1969; Barker & King, 2001; Karner, 1998; Mac Rae, 1992; Rubinstein et al., 1991) and as such the relationships that were the focus of this study most likely are important ties in the lives of older adults in the Netherlands. Future research should explore the content and stability of fictive kin relationships among older adults in the Netherlands, as well as assess the extent to which fictive kin designation is mutual, to assess the importance of these ties in older adults’ social networks, and to get a better picture of the exchange processes in such relationships. This will help to better understand the importance of such ties for older adults’ health and well-being.

Another limitation is that the data do not allow a distinction between age and cohort effects. With events such as divorce becoming increasingly more socially acceptable and common, there may be increasing opportunities for the creation of fictive kin, but as the impact divorce has on other family relationships is decreasing (Glaser, Tomassini, & Stuchbury, 2008), there may also be a dampening effect. Also, normative obligations change over the life course as well as over cohorts (Gans & Silverstein, 2006), which in turn may influence the designation of close relationships as part of the family. Future research should explore whether over time, the factors related to the creation of fictive kin will decrease in strength.

In conclusion, this study provides a first exploratory examination of the prevalence of fictive kin in the general population in the Netherlands, and how the inclusion of nonkin ties in the family is related to a person’s family network. In times in which families are increasingly diverse and dynamic (Allen et al., 2000; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010), how people define who belongs to the family goes beyond blood and legal ties for many people—especially among older adults. When studying older adults’ support from family, it is important to include these different definitions of kinship.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence should be addressed to Marieke Voorpostel, PhD, FORS, c/o University of Lausanne, Géopolis, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland. E-mail: [marieke.voorpostel@fors.unil.ch](mailto:marieke.voorpostel@fors.unil.ch).

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