

Building on Strength and Breaking New Ground: Reflections on the Netherlands Kinship
Panel Study and the “The Ties That Bind” Research Programme

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For my remarks today I am going to address selectively the impressive output of the The Ties That Bind program and the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study following two themes: building on strength and breaking new ground. All research projects run the risk of reinventing the wheel by replicating what others have already done, on one hand, and the risk of ignoring the accomplishments of one's predecessors in an attempt to break with the past, on the other. "The Ties That Bind" program in particular and the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) in general have avoided both risks by maintaining a steady balance between respecting the value of previous research and improving upon it – building on strength – and by venturing into new territory – breaking new ground. The results benefit us all in improving our understanding of some well-worn topics and providing insights into previously under-explored areas. I begin by applauding the research leaders, team, and graduate students for their successful implementation of the study and analysis of the data. You have done extremely well as measured by both the number and quality of the publications, reports, books and theses stemming from this programme. The range of outlets used for publication is also noteworthy and means that this study is known worldwide.

Dr. Silverstein and I have been asked to put the work of your research programme into international context. As a preliminary observation, when compared with Canada, the Netherlands is a relatively small country with a relatively homogeneous population. Canada's population of 34 million spread over 10 million km² (if we include ice and snow) creates a different set of parameters from your population of 17 million spread over 42 thousand km². For example, when I consider your

distinction between family members who live an average of 24 versus 55 kilometers apart, I am struck by what a different sense of distance we have.

With respect to the theme of today's conference – Families in Flux – changes in family life are often viewed as problematic, as indicators of family decline, and as a major break from the past. Yet, from a long-range perspective, the changes that concern us today represent a transition to new family forms rather than a breakdown in family life. As researchers, our challenge is to assess what has changed and what those changes mean for the negotiation of family relationships across the life course. Judgments about whether changes are good or bad require careful consideration of the many vantage points of various family members and groups in society. Upsetting the status quo is typically threatening to those who have been its beneficiaries; it is not necessarily a bad thing for those who have not.

The topics that I will touch upon today – intergenerational ties between parents and children, foreign-born versus native-born families, marital status differences, sibling ties, and childlessness – represent aspects of continuity and change in family life. Our observations of change in particular family ties reflect their negotiation in the context of population aging, global trends, and shifting family structure. Changes in the form and duration of long-term unions, or being childfree rather than parents, may alter other relationships, including intergenerational and sibling ties. Shifting immigration patterns create shifts in the family lives of both the foreign and native-born as policy makers consider how best to respond to a changing social world.

Your body of research has met the challenge of studying both old and new family forms, of treating as an open question whether one family form is better than another, of considering how global change in migration patterns has had local effects in the Netherlands, and of expanding conceptual frameworks to include a more complex view of family relationships. Like all family researchers, those working on the various components of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, including the Ties That Bind programme, have had to grapple with how the inner workings of families connect to larger social processes and that is a major challenge indeed. When I address ongoing challenges that have yet to be met, I do so as a fellow traveler.

The theme of building on strength and breaking new ground can be applied to three significant pillars of knowledge creation and confirmation: concept development and theoretical frameworks; measurement and research methods; and contribution to knowledge through research findings regarding both established and new topics of study. Let me begin with research methods. Many call for longitudinal studies, the inclusion of multiple voices, and a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Few studies actually carry through on this call and even fewer do so with national data. Your research programme has built on strength by using well-established survey methods and concepts from the fields of aging and family and by including questions about family members outside the household. You have broken new ground by incorporating qualitative data in a national data set that allow for examining family processes, by including more than one voice that allows for a study of family life in relational terms, by oversampling those who are foreign-born, by collecting data on all children and siblings,

and by developing new measures that reflect conceptual development in the field, for example, those on family closeness and solidarity.

To date you have capitalized more on the quantitative than on the qualitative data, and on cross-sectional than on longitudinal data analysis. But, you have also made some important contributions to our understanding of family ties across the life course using qualitative data, longitudinal data analysis and multiple voices. For example, the issue of instrumental support is portrayed as a two-way street in comparisons of the greater willingness of children to provide support than of older parents to receive it (Dykstra & Fokkema, cited in Dykstra et al., 2007). There are more opportunities for further mining your data in the future, especially once a third wave of data is available.

You have noted a decline in response rates to more recent surveys. This has also been observed in Canada and the United States and may be a function of the effective cooptation of research techniques by marketing companies. The resulting bombardment of requests to buy something or take part in a survey, requests that seem always to occur by phone at dinnertime – in Canada at least – may threaten participation in research surveys. How can researchers distinguish themselves from such contacts? This is a shared challenge of the research community.

Next, is the issue of research topics. Your research has built on strength by adding to our understanding of relationships in well-established areas of study including parent-child relationships and married couples. For example, placing the parent-child relationship in the context of family networks reveals the impact of one relationship on another, such as the negative impact of a poor relationship between an individual's

parent and partner on contact with the parent (Bucx, Van Wel, Knijn & Hagendoorn cited in Dykstra, 2007). Your research has broken new ground by creating a comparative context that includes those who are single, cohabiting and married; the experience of childless persons as well as parents; and of foreign as well as native-born family members. There are numerous examples of how this aids our understanding of the relative merits of each situation and the impact of change. Relationships between parents and their adult children are affected by their child's civil status; parents whose adult children live with rather than marry a partner see less of their children (Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009). Regarding parental status, the pathway to childlessness is gendered, with higher education and career commitment making childlessness more likely among women but not men (Keizer, Dykstra & Jansen, 2008). As well, childless men and non-resident fathers are less satisfied with their family life than are co-resident fathers (Dykstra & Keiser, 2009). Gender also continues to shape the experience of being single; at midlife single men are less happy and have fewer resources than married ones ((Dykstra & Keiser, 2009). Finally, the foreign-born report stronger filial norms but not more support than native-born Dutch.

Your data and findings help dispel increasingly entrenched notions of family life. For example, as you have shown, bean pole families of 4 or more generations are not displacing 3-generation families as the norm in the Netherlands, nor are they in Canada or the United States (Matthews & Sun, 2006). As well, the notion of a sandwiched generation at mid-life does not apply to most people, as is also true in Canada (Rosenthal, Martin Matthews and Matthews, 1996). As for marital status, single people

provide more support to older parents than do married ones, not based on stronger commitment to filial obligation but because of the practical reality of not having obligations to a partner (Dykstra et al., 2006:152). Finally, divorce rates are lower than usually touted when looked at as the likelihood of divorcing over time (1 out of 5 in the Netherlands, 3 out of 10 in Canada, 2 out of 5 in the U.S.).

The long scope of the study, from early adulthood to old age, reveals significant variations by life stage. Dykstra and her colleagues observe a mid-life crisis in family ties in which middle-aged persons feel less satisfied and less accepted by family members and feel less obligation toward them (Dykstra et al., 2006:154). I would add to your call for more research on this group that particular attention be paid to the issue of parenting adolescents and young adults. Our focus on parental leave and child care, and on elder care, has left unexplored the unique responsibilities of raising adolescent and young adult children (Connidis, 2010; Kurz, 2002). Earlier studies of marital satisfaction indicate an association between lower marital satisfaction, and having adolescent children. Your findings also show the lack of fit between espoused norms of obligation and actual behaviour; despite subjective views, middle-aged adults tend to be active family members. Work in the Ties that Bind program on the linked lives of young adults and their parents breaks new ground in emphasizing the recently-emerged phases of young adulthood and early old age as central to the middle years of the parent-child relationship (Bucx).

Given my interest in childlessness and adult sibling ties, I am delighted to see the contributions of your research programme to both of these topics. As two

underexplored areas of study, I consider research in both of these areas groundbreaking. As well, your work has made novel contributions to both areas because you have a large national sample that allows you to establish baseline information, you have longitudinal data that allow you to look at the situation of childlessness over time and in response to changed conditions, and you have data about all siblings and more than one voice about sibling relationships (although including more siblings in the next round would be nice if possible). From your network analysis we have learned that adult children make decisions about supporting their parents in the context of their sibling network; if other siblings are available or have closer ties to their parents, less contact and support is forthcoming (Dykstra et al., 2007, citing Van Gaalen, 2007). We also see that poor relationships with parents prompt the negotiation of especially close ties with siblings (Voorpostel & Blieszner, cited in Dykstra et al., 2007). This applies to siblings following the divorce of parents in families where there were high levels of conflict. (Poortman & Voorpostel, 2009). These findings suggest the increasing significance of sibling ties in the wake of unhappy unions among their parents. At the same time, the increase in half-siblings that results from more multiple unions creates a new family dynamic among siblings up to the age of 16 in which half-siblings appear to show less mutual concern for each other than do full siblings, especially if the half-siblings do not live together (Pollet, 2007). The longer-term consequences of these adolescent sentiments have yet to be explored.

Your inclusion of a substantial subsample of foreign-born individuals is the basis for important comparative analyses of family relationships among the foreign and

native-born. This is a longstanding issue in Canada, a country of immigrants. Indeed, in multiple response Census data, only 32% of Canadians include the recently-added choice of Canadian as their ethnic origin. Compare this with the 16 million individuals in the Netherlands – 47% -- who have Dutch ancestry through both parents and the 25 million – 75% -- who have Dutch ancestry through at least one parent. Immigration is a more recent phenomenon in the Netherlands, prompted in substantial measure by EU membership and the movement of residents from former colonies. In Canada, the immigrant population is more varied than was true when emigration from Europe was the primary source of immigrants. In both of our countries, changing patterns of immigration mean meeting new challenges of more marked cultural and religious differences and of inequality based on race. But, in the Canadian context, we begin with a far more heterogeneous population than is true in the Netherlands, creating a stronger native ethnic majority in the Netherlands that may have unique consequences for relations between ethnic groups (Putnam, 2007).

Your research findings indicate that members of ethnic minorities have stronger norms of family obligation (Arends-Toth and Van de Vijver) and more contact with family members; that adult children of ethnic minorities have more contact with their parents than do Dutch adult children (Dykstra et al., 2006); but that there is not more support forthcoming from migrants than from Dutch family members to one another (Arends-Toth & Van de Vijver; Dykstra et al, 2007 citing Schans, 2007). As well, significantly different values regarding gender role beliefs between migrants and the

Dutch are not reflected in behavior; patterns of sharing household tasks and child-care responsibilities are similar in the two groups and are still gendered (van de Vijver, 2007).

Regarding concepts and theoretical frameworks, at the time that the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study was conceived, the solidarity model had a firm grip on the study of families. In the North American context, this has largely meant the application of the solidarity model at the level of intra-familial relationships in which various dimensions of family life – geographic proximity, contact, support, emotional attachment, agreement on norms and values – are viewed as different forms of solidarity. There is still evidence of this version of solidarity in work using the NKPS data. But, there is also evidence of excellent evolution over time and of the implicit treatment of solidarity as a linking concept between the world of family relations and the larger society in which family solidarity is associated with social cohesion.

There has also been a break from traditional use of the solidarity model in treating the various dimensions of family life – geographic proximity, contact, instrumental support, strength of family ties, views of family obligations – as concepts and phenomena in their own right rather than as aspects of solidarity. For example, studies on geographic proximity and contact frequency provide more insights by focusing on these as important concepts in the dynamics of family life. Various analyses using the NKPS data show that living nearby, regular contact, and norms supporting family obligation are not associated with the closeness and quality of family ties (Dykstra et al., 2006). This opens up questions about the unique processes that contribute to proximity, contact, obligation, support, closeness and quality of family ties

and to ask new questions about how they relate to one another. The lack of fit between norms of obligation and helping behaviour creates ambivalence for two groups: those who feel obliged but cannot help, and those who do not feel obliged but do help. These could be focal points for studying how relationships are negotiated over time and when need for support changes.

Another way in which the NKPS studies have broken new ground in the application of the solidarity concept is to view it as one of three types of family relations that include relationships characterized by conflict and by ambivalence (van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006; van Gaalen). This approach is more attuned to the multi-faceted realities of family life. If embedded more directly in a life course perspective, this approach could be taken further in explorations of variations in relationships over time regarding the extent to which they are characterized by solidarity, conflict or ambivalence. Identifying factors related to both continuity and change in the nature of relationships over time would contribute to our understanding of the processes and dynamics of family life and the ongoing negotiation of relationships. Do certain transitions herald a likely shift from solidarity toward conflict or conflict toward solidarity or either toward ambivalence? Under what conditions can such transitions be negotiated in the direction of mutually-supportive relationships?

As you may know, I view relationships as inherently ambivalent and that is one reason that they are under constant negotiation (Connidis & McMullin, 2002a, 2002b). But, it is not necessary to agree with this view in order to agree that relationships are characterized by both continuity and change and that key life transitions involve

renegotiating our relationships with others. More serious consideration of how both psychological and sociological ambivalence can be incorporated into your analyses of family life may contribute to future analyses of your data. The concept of ambivalence encourages a focus on the dynamics of negotiating family relationships rather than on the more descriptive determination of whether family relationships are characterized by solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence at a particular point in time.

Your studies of siblings, enhanced by the availability of multi-actor data, show that norms of family obligation, particularly filial obligation, are transferred from one generation to the next (De Vries, Kalmijn & Liefbroer, 2009). As well, intergenerational transmission processes appear to be similar for migrant and Dutch subjects (De Valk & Liefbroer, 2007). Yet, the lack of fit between norms of obligation and actual behaviour underscores the intervention of factors other than solidarity in determining which siblings provide support to older family members. Your findings about geographic proximity, socioeconomic status, and instrumental support provide reasons for why some siblings help and others do not. When coupled with your observations of somewhat less contact between siblings who have different levels of education (Kalmijn, 2006), your findings suggest another avenue for research: the potential impact of inequality (socioeconomic differences) within sibling groups on parental support that can be linked to Sarah Matthews (2002) qualitative research in the United States and my qualitative case study in Canada (Connidis, 2007).

Your findings about the impact of available resources on family ties help sort out which facets of family life are a function of opportunity based on having resources and

which are prompted by the need for support based on not having resources. When compared with those with fewer resources, as measured by income and education, those with more live farther away from their parents (Michielin & Mulder, 2007), have lower overall contact levels (re education, Kalmijn, 2006), provide less instrumental support to family members, and feel less obliged to help one another. But, those with more resources also see their family members more often for special occasions and they view their families as more cohesive and satisfying than those with less income and education (Dykstra et al., 2006:151). These disconnects among different facets of family life are one reason for caution in drawing conclusions about family solidarity in one group compared with another, as you do in your self-evaluation report when you suggest “a possible lack of intergenerational solidarity is found primarily among the better educated” (Dykstra et al., 2007:6). It depends upon the dimensions of family life being examined and whether they are linked to a clearly stated conception of solidarity. The somewhat romantic view of close family ties among those with fewer resources gives way to a sense of being drawn together of necessity. The fact that views of obligation are conditioned by the quality of ties indicates the significance of individual feelings for shaping family ties, although actual behaviour appears to be less aligned with such feelings.

Regarding gender, although women provide more support, this is not a function of feeling more obliged to help and their support is not affected by labour force participation (Dykstra et al., 2006: 149-150). Regarding ethnicity, migrants have stronger filial norms but do not offer more care to family members (Dykstra et al., 2007:7). These

findings point to avenues for more direct analyses of how the structured social relations of class, gender and ethnicity at the macro level are played out at the institutional level of families and the micro level of family relationships.

Dykstra and her colleagues (2006:11) note that family relationships are key determinants of social cohesion and that they are bound up with social inequality across and within households. Regarding the link of intrafamilial solidarity to social cohesion, there is more work to be done. As a sociologist, I am convinced of the value of taking a multi-level approach to understanding aging and family ties in which an interactive model links the macro-level forces of globalization, the economy, politics, social change and structured social relations (age, class, gender, race and ethnicity); to meso-level social institutions or social domains, including the family; and to the micro level of individual lives and relationships (Connidis, 2010). The interest of analyses using NKPS data in linking family solidarity at the micro level to social cohesion at the macro level is a worthy attempt at integrating the micro and macro levels of analysis. Unclear, however, are the mechanisms that link observations about family life to social cohesion.

Sociological ambivalence suggests links between the micro level of family relationships to the macro level of structured social relations and to the meso level of how we organize family life. Variations in how we do family life based on gender, class, race and ethnicity are structured sources of ambivalence that are worked out in our relationships with family members. Such variations also have an impact on social cohesion. The link of family solidarity to social cohesion cannot be assumed. As your results in the Netherlands show, along several dimensions, some immigrant groups have

the highest levels of solidarity. Yet, migrant families, especially second-generation family members, must negotiate the ambivalence of contradictory local (Dutch) and familial expectations of family obligation (Arends-Toth & Van de Vijver; Schan, 2007 cited in Dykstra et al., 2007) and of commitment to a family-oriented culture that is threatened by migrating in the first place (Arends-Toth & Van De Vijver, cited in Dykstra et al., 2007). This ambivalence appears to be resolved in part by adjusting expressed values so that they are in accord with Dutch society while maintaining similar ethnic patterns of behaviour between generations in the sharing of household and child-care responsibilities (Van De Vijver, 2007).

In the case of social policy, there is the potential for contradiction or ambivalence in a simultaneous call for social cohesion and respect for diversity. At the same time that many lament the changing ways of family life in Western society, there is the competing view that many of these changes represent progress, such as freeing individuals from unhealthy relationships through divorce, and greater inclusion in families through same-sex marriage. If this means less solidarity as conventionally measured at the intrafamilial level, does that signal the need to return to more traditional family forms in order to ensure social cohesion at the macro level?

Just as we must be cautious in interpreting changes in family life as decline, we must be cautious about assuming that social cohesion is necessarily a worthy goal. Much depends upon how it is attained. Is social cohesion based on a traditional family life that supports the oppression of women to be admired? Are family relationships that threaten social cohesion in a society that rests on inequality to be regarded as

problematic? We must balance the focus on intrafamilial components of solidarity with macro issues of inequality in order to avoid a status quo orientation. As measured by solidarity within families, families that are strong but based on different ideals of equality, e.g., regarding gender, may threaten social cohesion. We must go beyond assuming a self-evident link between what happens within families and the implications of family life for society. In my view, an open discussion about the potential contradiction of social cohesion and diversity makes it more likely that we will negotiate arrangements that respect diversity as an important part of a cohesive society.

We all struggle with the challenge of linking family relationships to the larger forces of social cohesion, social inequality, and global forces that operate across national boundaries but have variable consequences within them. The approaches and findings from the various projects and programmes using the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study data are playing a valuable role in helping us meet this challenge. Let me end where I began: Congratulations on a most impressive research initiative.

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