

Family support in postmodern society: made-to-measure?

Considerable attention has been paid to changes in the family context in the last decades. With the decline in formal marriages, rising divorces, the postponement of childbearing and the increase of complex family structures, the survival of the family has been questioned. Mostly the processes within the co-resident nuclear family were focussed upon. However, not only the nuclear family has changed, the family network, here seen as relatives living outside the household, has changed to.

Already in the beginning of the 20th century, attention was paid to the assumed breakdown of the family network. The family decline thesis, originated by Burgess (1916) and worked out by Parsons (1955; 1959) and Popenoe (1988; 2006), focused on the decreasing functions of the family network. Embedded in modernisation theory, the significance of the family network was seen as decreasing because the nuclear family was the system best suited to the modern society. The importance of the family network and of relatives outside the household was largely ignored, however, just until studies of intergenerational support and network studies made clear that the relationships within the family network are still very important (Bengston, 2001; Busschots & Lauwers, 1994; Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993; Knijn, 2004).

Family support was traditionally unconditional and based primarily on the degree of the relationship. However, within the ideas of postmodern theory (Giddens, 1992; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) the unconditionality of family relations is questioned. With greater individualism in general and greater voluntarism within personal relationships in particular, relations with significant others, including kin are increasingly made-to-measure with the needs and demands of the individual in his 'do-it-yourself biography' (Beck, 1992). The second demographic transition made clear that individuals with more postmodern and postmaterialistic ideas will be more likely to live in alternative or new family types (Lesthaeghe & van de Kaa, 1986; Lesthaeghe & Moors, 2002). In this paper we want to test whether relationships with family members differ between individuals in postmodern family types and individuals in classic family types. More specifically we will test whether the exchange of support within the family network of individuals in postmodern (second demographic transition) nuclear families is less unconditional and more specific than that of individuals in classic nuclear families.

Data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (N=8155) (Dykstra et al., 2004) are used to get more insights in the exchanges of social support between the different close kin. We pay attention to instrumental support (household support, support with odd jobs), financial support, and emotional support (advice and interest) given to and received within the specific relations with parents, adult siblings and adult children. Twelve mutually exclusive family types are distinguished based on choices concerning marriage and/or partner forming and dissolution and having children present in the household. We have five traditional family types based on marriage - married individuals without children in the household, married individuals with children in the household, widowed singles, classic single parents (widows and widowers with a child in the household) and individuals living in classic stepfamilies (stepfamilies formed following widowhood of one of both partners). We also distinguish five new family types - divorced singles, 'new' single parents (divorced or never married persons with a child in the household), cohabitants with children in the household, cohabitants without children in the household, and members of 'new' stepfamilies (stepfamilies formed after a divorce of one or both partners). For completeness we include two categories for primary singles (defined as never married nor in a relationship that lasted longer than three years, and not cohabitating at the time of the interview), namely young primary (under 30) and older primary (above 30) singles.

In a first step we use descriptive analyses to focus on the question who gives what to who. If no differences are found in the support exchanged between close kin based on family type, we can assume that family support is still unconditional or that other factors, rather than postmodernistic orientation affect the exchange of support. If differences are found in how close kin are activated in the social network and for which kinds of support, however, we can assume that support is not only based on a classic norm of family obligations.

If support exchanged between close kin is no longer unconditional, it is interesting to investigate which factors have an influence on it. In a second step, therefore, we add some structural features of the family (size of the family network, alternative family network), or characteristics of the respondent (resources and needs) that provide information on various needs and opportunities that may influence the amount of support exchanged. When individuals with more postmodern ideas are more likely to adapt their family network to their

own life course and situation, we can assume that these factors will have a larger effect on the support exchanged for individuals in new family networks than in classic ones.

First results show no clear overall differences between individuals in classic and new family types when we look at the support from parents. This seems to indicate that parents give support to their children, irrespective of the child's family situation. Differences in support from and to siblings and adult children between individuals in new and classic family types are found however. Important to notice as well is that the first results show no compensation effects, those who get less support from one relative do not, in general, receive more support from other close kin.

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