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Chapter 6. Conclusion and Discussion

Introduction

In this research, I have tried to assess how recent societal dynamics have shaped older adults' social functioning over the last decades. As other Western countries, the Netherlands has seen large scale societal changes over the last decades that are likely to have had a significant impact on the social functioning of older adults. In the first half of the twentieth century, people's lives were still firmly structured by traditional social communities like the church, neighborhood and the family. From the 1970's onwards, traditional social communities and norms and values lost in strength and both constraints and protection from these communities diminished (Allan, 2001). Instead, self-realization and choice of biography were emphasized, a process also termed 'individualization' (Beck, 1992). These societal developments coincided with an increasing emphasis on productive activities in old age (Martinson & Minkler, 2006). In this dissertation I choose four areas in older adults' social functioning that may be susceptible to these recent societal changes, namely older adults' stepparent-stepchild relationships, non-kin relationships, volunteering, and informal and formal care use of older adults. On the basis of the studies in these areas, I conclude that the social functioning of older adults has changed profoundly over the last decades. Older adults seem to have become considerably more active in different social relations and activities, among others when it comes to non-kin relationships and volunteering. Additionally, I found that there are significant changes in the individual characteristics and social environment that have affected social functioning of older adults over time. Later cohorts have considerably higher levels of education, lower religious involvement, and better cognitive health. Moreover, they live in a society that emphasizes productive activities and is more approving of non-traditional family behavior, which in turn affects their social functioning. In the following pages, the results of my four studies are summarized, followed by a discussion of the theoretical and methodological implications. The chapter ends with suggestions for further research.

Main findings

In Chapter 2, I have investigated to what extent Dutch stepparents' identification of stepchildren has changed between 1992 and 2009. The main finding is that the percentage of stepparents that identified at least one stepchild as an important and regular tie increased substantially from 63% of the stepparents in 1992 to 85% in 2009. This suggests that the boundaries of stepfamilies have become more permeable over time. The increased occurrence of stepfamilies and the trend towards more approving attitudes of non-traditional family behavior are likely to have played a role in this process. In addition, we found that the network membership of stepchildren is strongly dependent on whether the stepparent resides with the biological parent: in living-apart-together relationships, the stepparent was significantly less likely to report a stepchild as an important tie with whom regular contact was maintained. This suggests that co-residence of the stepparent with the biological parent is an important mark in stepfamily formation in which children of the

partner are increasingly being recognized as a stepchild that is considered important and with whom regular contact is maintained. Stepmothers were less likely to include stepchildren in their personal network than stepfathers. This is in line with former studies that have shown that the stepmother-stepchild is relatively problematic and that stepfathers tend to give relatively more attention to the children of their current partner.

In Chapter 3, age and cohort-related changes in the proportion non-kin in older adults' personal networks were examined. The guiding thesis was that recent societal changes had increased the salience of non-kin relationships. Therefore, patterns of age-related decline in non-kin relationships were expected to be less pronounced for later cohorts of older adults. The main finding is that age-related decline in the proportion of non-kin is absent for cohorts born after 1922 and present for cohorts born before or on 1922. This shows that the onset of age-related decline has at least been postponed until years later in the life course. This finding suggests that the socio-emotional selectivity theory that states that older adults tend to withdraw from more peripheral relations and focus on close kin only is becoming less appropriate to describe the situation of many older adults today. As exchange theory predicts that relationships that have an equal balance of support are maintained, these findings also suggest that older adults might be more capable of maintaining a balance in relationships until a higher age than before. This chapter also showed that age-related changes in personal network cannot be understood in isolation from the social context. The increased educational level and a decrease in church attendance could partially explain why age-related decline is absent for younger cohorts.

In Chapter 4, I examined volunteering rates for Dutch 55 to 64 year olds in 1992 and 2002. In particular, it was studied whether changes in dispositional factors (religious involvement, age-related engagement norms and intergenerational transmission) could explain changes in volunteering between 1992 and 2002. We found that rates of volunteering among 55 to 64 years old in our Dutch sample increased from 37% in 1992 to 43% in 2002. This increase is partly explained by the higher educational levels of the 2002 cohort. Although we found that the 2002 cohort also had stronger engagement norms than the 1992, this did not translate in increased volunteering among the former. The tendency towards no church membership and non-practicing church memberships as found in our study, strongly suppressed the levels of volunteering among the 2002 cohort. Although the parental background and parental religious affiliation differed across the 1992 and 2002 cohort, these did not directly add to understanding of the cohort-differences, as its effects were via the educational level and religiosity of the 55-64 years olds itself.

In Chapter 5 I examined how societal determinants related to cultural norms, welfare state policies and demographic characteristics influenced older adults' use of informal and formal home care in Europe. In this study, I studied the effects of societal influences on care use, rather than the effects of societal change. We studied this question on the basis of a cross-sectional study of 11 European countries, and supplemented the variable 'country' by data from various sources on societal characteristics. In countries in which there are fewer home based services, less residential care, more informal care support and more women that work full-time, older adults above 65 years are more likely to receive informal care only. The odds of receiving a combination of formal and informal care are larger in countries that specify a legal obligation to care for parents. In line with expectations, receiving only formal care or a combination of formal and informal care is also higher in countries with stronger welfare state arrangements (i.e. home based services

and more generous pension schemes). We also found that in countries with a larger percentage of 65 years and older, functional limitations of older adults were less likely to be addressed by any type of care. This suggests that the aging of the population might result in larger unmet care needs.

Theoretical implications

In this dissertation, it has become clear that processes of modernization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have significantly shaped older adults social functioning. We found that overall, older adults have become more involved in a wide range of social relationships. According to my findings, changes in the social functioning of older adults seem to have taken place within a relatively short time frame, to be specific within a time span of 20 years. Traditional social structures like the family, church and neighborhood seem to have weakened since the 1970's and an emphasis on the individual construction of social ties has increased (Allan, 2001; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). Changes in the social structure also seem to challenge existing theories on age-related change in social functioning. In general, the trend found in this dissertation towards more non-kin relationships and volunteering cast considerable doubt on the disengagement paradigm. This paradigm held that the mutual withdrawal of society and older individuals was a natural and universal process due to the imminence of death (Cumming & Henry, 1961). In contrast to the idea of such a universal process, the current social structure seems to promote rather than discourage participation of older adults within the society, also at higher ages. This is particularly observable in Chapters 3 and 4 in which an absence in age-related decline in non-kin relationships as well as an increase in volunteering among the young old is found. Thus, even if disengagement has characterized the social functioning of older adults in earlier decades, it seems that there has been a shift away from this premise.

The findings in this dissertation also cast doubt on the applicability of socio-emotional selectivity theory to characterize age-related changes in social functioning. In its core, socio-emotional selectivity theory states that older adults will relinquish less close relationships as they age (Carstensen, 1992). The main mechanism that is specified within this theory is a shift from instrumental to emotional motivations during the life span from young adulthood onwards and particularly if one is close to death (Lang & Carstensen, 2002). In Chapter 3, we found that in later cohorts older adults do not experience any age-related decline in non-kin relationships even until the age of 85, whereas this decline was still strong for earlier cohorts. Increased levels of education, better cognitive functioning and declining church attendance provided the main explanation for the absence of decline. But even if we do not find any sign of age-related decline in non-kin relationships in later cohorts, socio-emotional selectivity could still take place within individuals from these cohorts, as a relative increase in emotional importance of non-kin ties would also result in less relinquishment of these ties in old age.

The question that is important to answer is to what extent non-kin relationships are becoming more emotionally salient and whether these ties will be able to provide the same support to older people as family ties. The idea of increasing emotional importance of non-kin would be in line with the idea that voluntary relationships are more important to constitute social identity nowadays and that family relationships have become less durable

and more subject to own choices (Allan, 2001). This situation brings forward the question of whether boundaries between family and friends are blurring (Allan, 2001). Some authors have stated reservations against this idea, arguing that family relationships operate by different mechanisms of solidarity and commitment than friendships, with the former being less monitored on reciprocal exchange and equality, as well as more likely to give intensive long term (financial) support (Allan, 2008; Pahl & Pevalin, 2005). Given that research has often confirmed this view, a possible risk could be that a large preponderance of non-kin in networks as seems to be the trend observed in Chapter 3 could result in networks are broader but have less strength, for example with regard to long-term and intensive care giving.

Notwithstanding the overall positive conclusion concerning the improved social functioning of older adults, it is important to look at whether there are emerging risk categories of older adults that cannot benefit from recent societal developments. When it comes to the social functioning of older adults, the impact of educational level and cognitive health on different aspects of social functioning as found in Chapters 3 and 4 suggests that those with a lower level of (material and cognitive) resources and skills might be particularly at risk of not being able to benefit from the opportunities that the current social structure provides. The findings in this dissertation resonate with other studies that have suggested that those with low material resources and cognitive skills might be particularly disadvantaged in a society that is undergoing rapid change, an increasing importance of information technology and faces welfare state retrenchment (Dannefer, 2003; Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Phillipson, 2007). The idea of magnifying differences between have and have-nots in current societal conditions can be understood from the perspective of exchange theory. It is likely that those with less resources and skills might be less capable of maintaining balanced relationships, something that is particularly important in non-kin relationships, but now possibly also in kin relationships as these have become less durable. Another possible disadvantage faced by older adults with lower cognitive resources can be the rise of the internet and other information and communication technologies. Although these technologies allow older adults to maintain contact with more distant network members more easily than before (Wang & Wellman, 2010), these seem to offer less to those with cognitive impairments than physical impairments as the former might have difficulties in understanding and working with these new and rapidly changing technologies. In other words, current societal developments like an increased preponderance of non-kin in networks that are more dependent on reciprocity, as well as increased importance of information technology in communication that require more cognitive skills could render some older adults with low resources and skills vulnerable in terms of social functioning.

Methodological implications

A methodological issue throughout this research has been the difficulty to measure societal changes and their effects on the social participation of older adults. Although sociologists and developmental gerontologists have long acknowledged that the development of individuals is an outcome of individuals interacting with their social context, the measurement of societal changes is less straightforward (Baltes, 1968; Coleman, 1986; Palmore, 1978; Schaie, 1965). It is assumed that the response of an individual is the

function of the age of the person (age-effects), the cohort to which the individual belong (cohort-effects) as well as the time at which the measurement occurs (period-effects). In this research, several different designs to study the effects of societal changes on the social functioning of older adults were employed, which all have its own advantages and disadvantages when it comes to the distinction between age, period and cohort effects. Schaie (1965) discussed several conventional and at that time less conventional types of designs in relation to the age, period and cohort issue. Of the designs that he proposed, he considered the cohort-sequential design the most appropriate to distinguish between these effects if one was interested in the generalization of constructs of interest over different cohorts. The cohort-sequential method allows researchers to study the same individuals from multiple cohorts over a longer time span at comparable ages. Such an approach results in considerable data requirements. In Chapter 3, we employed such a cohort-sequential design in which multiple birth cohorts are followed over time in order to distinguish between age and cohort-related developments. An issue faced in that study was that the age ranges of the different cohorts did not completely overlap and from a methodological point of view accurate comparisons can only be made among overlapping age ranges. However, if one is able to have at least partially overlapping age-ranges one can at least make an adequate tentative conclusion about changes between cohorts and periods.

In Chapter 4, a time-lag study was conducted, in which samples of the same age, but at different times and from different cohorts are employed (Schaie, 1965). In the study, I compared volunteering rates in two groups of 55-64 year olds in 1992 and 2002. With this design the influence of a changing social context can be assessed, but it is problematic when it comes to distinguishing between period and cohort-effects. In other words, it remains somewhat unclear to what extent changes in volunteering are due to cohort differences or period differences or most likely, be the result of both. In this case however, the specific research interest and data limitations determined the choice for this design as the best possible alternative. As we were interested predominantly in this specific age group due to earlier found differences between these cohorts with the main question to what extent dispositional variables could account for this change, we were not able to include more waves of data in order to establish a cohort-sequential design. Despite this, using a time-lag design allowed for the distinction between age-related changes at the one hand and the two other types of change, period and cohort-related change at the other hand. A variation on this design was employed in Chapter 2 in which I studied the inclusion of stepparents in the personal network. In this study, a longitudinal study with information on the stepparent-stepchild relationship was used in order to create a time lag design by filtering out possible age effects. It seemed that the inclusion of age, relationship duration and a random part that models the similarity between person-year observations from the same individuals was successful to filter out these age effects. An advantage in this study however, was that it was clear from a theoretical point of view that we were mostly looking at period-effects due to increased tolerance and 'normalization' of non-traditional family behavior. This was less the case in both Chapter 3 on non-kin relationships and Chapter 4 on volunteering, making choices concerning an adequate design more difficult.

In Chapter 5, I studied the impact of social context on social relationships by looking at different countries in a cross-sectional design, rather than by applying any longitudinal or cohort-sequential design. In this chapter, the attempt was not to make any statements on social changes, but rather by comparing several countries, determine how different

cultural and societal factors affect the care use of older adults. As Tesch-Römer and Von Kondratowitz (2006) rightly pointed out, comparative aging research has been a flourishing field for several years and many initiatives in terms of large data collections have started, but large gains can be made by much needed theoretical cultivation of the field, which should include theorizing about differences between countries, societies and cultures. In this chapter, I went beyond the use of welfare state classifications and looking at countries as a whole. I included several social determinants, related to cultural norms, welfare state policies and demographic characteristics on the national level. I chose to include these determinants instead of countries or welfare state regimes in order to gain more understanding on which specific cultural and social aspects are important for the observed country-differences in informal and formal care use. The results showed that the inclusion of societal determinants instead of welfare state regimes yielded more insight in which characteristics are imperative. For example, informal and formal care as well as the availability of home care services in countries that are often assumed to belong to the same type of welfare state were not always similar. Also, it turned out that home care services were more important for both formal and informal care than for example informal care support. A major limitation that I encountered in this attempt was the scarcity of indicators measuring social policies and cultural norms at the local, regional and national levels. Although several attempts have been done to collect information on national and local characteristics in a more centralized way, further expansion of those databases seems necessary in order to be better able to track the effects of social changes on the social functioning of older adults.

Related, I want to comment more generally on the importance of the use of theory and theoretical development in research on the effects of societal changes on social functioning. Even in current times, despite substantial efforts to establish cohort-sequential studies on older adults social functioning, studies that have a sufficient time span to follow different birth cohorts across their old age remain rare. Examples of long-running data collections in this respect include the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam, conducted in the Netherlands (LASA; Huisman et al., 2011), as well as the Health and Retirement Study (HRS; Servais, 2010), conducted in the United States, both with a time span of twenty years (since 1992). In the European context, the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement (SHARE; Börsch-Supan & Jürges, 2005), European Social Survey (ESS; Jowell & the Central Coordinating Team, 2005) as well as the Gender and Generation Survey (UNECE Information Unit, 2008) hold such promise for the future. Despite the increasing availability of cohort-sequential databases, in order to study the effects of societal change on social functioning, theoretical specification of underlying mechanisms and theoretical development is of primary significance. Without proper theoretical specification of the mechanisms that are lying behind the observed changes in social functioning (and other types of functioning), the study of period and cohort-effects remains devoid of content and hinders understanding about what are in fact the driving mechanisms behind the observed changes. Thus, although subsequent waves of these datasets will increase possibilities to better test arguments about the effects of social change on older adults' social functioning, we should still start by looking closely at the social phenomena at interest to determine which of the developments are most interesting to study from a theoretical point of view.

Finally, I want to point to the issue of selective attrition in longitudinal studies. Subject attrition refers to the loss of respondents for different causes over the course of a longitudinal study. In the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (LASA) 52% of respondents

were lost due to death over seventeen years. Although attrition with regard to mortality is generally not considered a threat, subject attrition could result in a change in the composition of the sample that is non-random at each subsequent measurement. If attrition other than mortality is non-random with respect to study variables, this would yield biased estimates in the analyses that were performed. This would imply that over time, frail older adults and probably also those with low levels of social functioning are more likely to drop out of the study. An elaborate study of attrition within the general LASA framework showed that subject attrition other than mortality is small, however, in a number of cases respondents do not provide data on all variables included in the study. Lack of data is mostly the result of refusal, inability due to frailty and, for few cases, failure to contact the respondent due to residential relocation (Huisman et al., 2011). In addition, respondents that are older, have cognitive impairment and have poor self-rated health are more likely to become ineligible. Refusal was found to be less likely among respondents that have a higher level of education and live alone. As the subject of selective attrition could be problematic particularly in Chapter 3, in which several birth cohorts are followed longitudinally, we investigated whether there was non-random attrition with respect to our independent and dependent variables. In addition, we aimed to decrease bias by analyzing also respondents that only have valid data on one observation. The analyses of selective attrition indicated that those respondents for whom no longitudinal data was available had a larger proportion of kin in their personal networks and were older. There were no differences with regard to functional limitations and cognitive functioning. Consequently, I can conclude that there is no reason to assume that selective attrition can explain a large part of the absence of age-related decline in non-kin relationships over time in later cohorts as observed in Chapter 3.

Suggestions for further research

On the basis of this study, several new questions and theoretical and methodological issues have come up that can be answered in follow up studies. Below, four studies are outlined that are derivative of the findings in this dissertation.

In Chapter 2 we found that over time stepparents are more likely to name at least one stepchild as an important and regular tie in 2009 than in 1992. It is an open question whether these stepchildren will also be more likely to provide emotional and instrumental support to their stepparents when they become frail (Ryan et al., 2012; Silverstein & Giarusso, 2010; Sweeney, 2010). Although former studies have found that older parents in stepfamilies are less likely to receive money from children, are more likely than those in biological families to be institutionalized, and are less likely to co-reside with one of their children (Pezzin & Steinberg Schone, 1999; Pezzin, Pollak & Steinberg Schone, 2008), these studies have not assessed changes in support exchange and context over time. Current societal developments like a normalization of non traditional families (including stepfamilies) and increasing tolerance of these family forms render it likely that support exchange has changed over the last decades. Next to these changes in stepfamilies, biological families have also undergone substantial changes over the last decades that include the question whether or not biological families have de-institutionalized (Cherlin, 2004). The de-institutionalization hypothesis suggests that norms and values of conduct in biological families have become less strong. Such de-institutionalization would result in

more variation in contact and support exchange within biological families. At the same time, a cohort-study in the Netherlands has shown that intergenerational contact and support exchange in biological families is increasing (Van der Pas, Van Tilburg & Knipscheer, 2007). This would fit in with the idea of social selection that in a time of relatively high divorce rates, biological families increasingly consist of families that are relatively cohesive. Clearly, the recent changes in both biological and stepfamilies make it important to determine how these families function in terms of support exchange, both nowadays and in the recent history. Given the increased numbers of older adults that live in stepfamilies at some point during their life, subsequent studies could consider the mean levels and variation in the total amount of support that older parents receive in stepfamilies, when compared to biological families. Such a study would give more information on the support giving potential of stepfamilies, also in comparison to contemporary biological families.

In Chapter 3, it was shown that age-related decline in non-kin relationships in older adults personal network is absent until age 85 for birth cohorts after 1922. As outlined in the theoretical discussion, this results in a question on whether socio-emotional selectivity and exchange theory can still be invoked to explain age-related changes in personal network composition. The increase in the prevalence of non-kin in the personal networks of older adults in later cohorts hints at its greater significance in recent times. It has been argued by several authors that friendship has become more important over the last decades as a result of more individual freedom in choosing personal relationships, less structuring of life phases and the emphasis on individuality and voluntariness as important cultural values (Allan, 2001; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). At the same time, relationships with kin are changing as well, as these relationships are becoming more voluntary and durable as well. Consequently, it has been suggested that because of these dual development, the distinction between family and friends is blurring. Others have nuanced this view and have stated that these two remain clearly distinct categories that are guided by different mechanisms (Allan, 2008; Pahl & Pevalin, 2005). One way to study the question of a possibly increasing significance of non-kin relationships more in-depth would be to determine how the emotional and instrumental support giving of kin and non-kin to older adults have changed over the last decades. Such a study that compares the support received by older adults from kin and non-kin relationships over time could be performed on the LASA database that allows disentangling of age and cohort effects over twenty years.

Another interesting line of inquiry could be the use of informal and formal care in response to rapidly changing societal norms and availability of care services. In Chapter 5, the availability of home care services and cultural norms concerning caregiving were the most imperative societal factors influencing both informal and formal care use. In the nearby future, in the Netherlands, large scale reforms targeted at decreasing formal care and accompanying budget cuts could have considerable effects on the use of formal and informal care by older adults (De Boer, Broese van Groenou & Timmermans, 2009). Due to changes in this availability of care services, it could be that future cohorts will follow other care trajectories than those that were found in an earlier study within the framework of the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (Geerlings et al., 2005), when home care and other formal care services were more readily available. An important question is whether the projected decline in formal care will be sufficiently matched by an increase in informal care. Factors like rising divorce rates, declining fertility and the increasing labor market participation of women make this an area of considerable uncertainty (Uhlenberg & Cheuk,

2009). At the same time, the analyses in Chapter 5 showed that formal care is indeed given to those most in need. The emphasis on informal care might thus be more suitable to individuals with less intensive and short-term care needs than those with intensive long-term care needs. In a study addressing these issues, instead looking cross-national changes in the care trajectories (informal and formal care use) for older adults in a cross-sectional manner, it would be interesting to study how care trajectories of older adults from various birth cohorts have shifted and will continue to shift in response to changes in the cultural, social (including public policy) and economic context.

Finally, it would be interesting to study how specific categories of older adults have changed with regard to social functioning over the last decades. In old age, differences in social functioning between older adults are often the result of lifelong processes of intra-cohort differentiation (Dannefer, 1987). Over time, there seems to be a tendency for accumulation of advantages as well as disadvantages over the life course (Dannefer, 2003). With the use of cohort-sequential designs, it becomes possible to track age-related changes in social functioning for older adults with different characteristics (Schaie, 1965). This would allow for more understanding on how societal changes have impacted on processes of intra-cohort differentiation in social functioning for different birth cohorts. It might be especially fruitful, also from a social policy perspective, to focus on older adults that can be considered as at risk of not receiving adequate support in old age in current societies, like those with lower socio-economic status, those that have many physical and cognitive health problems and have few close social relationships. As outlined in the theoretical implications, these groups might be particularly disadvantaged in terms of social functioning due to fewer opportunities to maintain reciprocal relationships and possible difficulties in handling information technologies. By studying cohort differences in age-related changes in the instrumental and emotional support received by older adults with various characteristics in different birth cohorts, a better understanding about how recent societal changes have impacted on these categories of older adults can be reached. Such a study could for example study age-related changes in social support that is received by older adults from different socio-economic status categories in different cohorts.

In short, the results of the four studies included in this dissertation showed that societal changes over the last decades have significantly shaped and altered social functioning of older adults. In general, contemporary older adults seem to partake in a wider range of ties and activities than before, also at a relatively advanced age. Future research could show how these societal changes are affecting the social functioning of cohorts coming to age over the next decades and whether this overall positive trend continues into the next decades.

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