Longitudinal analyses of the effects of age, marriage, and parenthood on social contacts and support☆

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A B S T R A C T

Using large-scale panel data, this paper examines how social contacts change across the life course. Fixed-effects regression models are used to ascertain within-person changes over a 12-year period. The models show that marriage does not affect weaker ties whereas it does change the nature of the stronger ties that people have: friendships become less important and more. Parenthood entails a shift toward more local ties: there are negative effects on friendships and acquaintances but these are compensated by positive effects on neighbors. Divorce and widowhood have positive effects on contact and support, but the effects are more pronounced for widowhood, especially for women. Age effects suggest a decline in the size of most subnetworks combined with increased support from relatives but not from friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. The findings are discussed in light of a theoretical framework which distinguishes the roles of needs, opportunities, and alternatives.

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1. Introduction

How do life course transitions such as getting married, having children, and losing a spouse affect social contacts? And what is the role of getting older in this process? Several fields in the social sciences have addressed this question in the past. First, there are social gerontologists who have examined this issue. Early gerontological studies pointed to the problem of disengagement, the idea that social isolation would increase as people grow older, resulting in smaller networks and increasing feelings of loneliness (Cumming, Dean, Newell, & McCaffrey, 1960; Cumming & Henry, 1961; Hochschild, 1975). Later studies introduced the notion of socioemotional selectivity, which refers to the tendency of people to invest more selectively

in fewer social contacts as they grow older (Arjouch, Blandon, & Antonucci, 2005; Carstensen, 1992; Lang, Stauding, & Carstensen, 1998; Lansford, Sherman, & Antonucci, 1998). Life course changes in social contact have also been addressed in the social psychology of close relationships. Studies in this field have largely been motivated by the notion of 'dyadic withdrawal,' which is the tendency of people to disengage from their network as they enter into a partner relationship (Johnson & Leslie, 1982; Kim & Stiff, 1991; Milardo, 1982; Milardo & Allan, 2000; Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). Third, there are sociological studies which have examined life course effects. In these studies, life course variables are typically part of a broader set of social and structural network determinants which are examined simultaneously (Burt, 1991; Marsden, 1987; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Moore, 1990).

Although studies in all three fields reveal strong effects of age and marital status on social contacts, virtually all studies have been cross-sectional in nature. Hence, what we know about life course effects is largely based on cross-sectional comparisons of marital status categories or age categories (Burt, 1991; Cornwell, Laumann, & Schumm,

2008; Hurlbert & Acock, 1990; Kalmijn, 2003; McDonald & Mair, 2010). One possible disadvantage of a cross-sectional approach is that comparisons of age categories are biased by cohort effects. For example, if more recent cohorts are less integrated socially—something about which there is considerable debate (Fischer, 2009; McPherson et al., 2006)—this could suppress a negative age effect on the size of networks. Another disadvantage lies in selection effects. If well-integrated persons are more likely to marry, this could suppress a negative effect of marriage on the size of networks. Biases may operate as well for parenthood and divorce. Although the strength of such biases may not be all that serious, it is nevertheless important to replicate previous studies with analyses of panel data.

The lack of longitudinal analyses is largely the result of the absence of good panel data that contain repeated measures of social networks or social contacts. Most nationally representative panel data in the United States and in Europe are oriented toward economic, demographic, or health issues. As a result, we know much more about life course effects on employment, income, and health, than about life course effects on social networks. The lack of dynamic network analyses has not gone unnoticed. Since the late 1990s, there has been an increasing number of studies of networks which are truly longitudinal in nature (Suitor, Wellman, & Morgan, 1997). While these analyses are original and innovative in their design, they tend to focus more on the degree of stability and turnover of dyads and networks over time, than on the influence of specific life course transitions (Martin & Yeung, 2006; Morgan, Neal, & Carder, 1996; Wellman, Yuk-lin Wong, Tindall, & Nazer, 1997). There are a few longitudinal analyses of life course effects on social networks but these were either based on small and select samples (Bost, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 2002; Terhell, Broese van Groenou, & Van Tilburg, 2004; Van Duijn, Van Busschbach, & Snijders, 1999) or on qualitative methods (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Jerrome & Wenger, 1999). An important exception is the study by Shaw et al. in which older adults were followed over a 10-year period. Using individual growth curve models, Shaw et al. show that contacts with friends decline with age whereas contacts with relatives are stable (Shaw, Krause, Liang, & Bennett, 2007). Practical support from the network increases with age, but not emotional support. Although this study is an important methodological step forward, it only addresses age changes (and not life course transitions) and it focuses on a limited age range (65+).

In the present paper, we analyze the link between life course transitions and social contacts using a large nationally representative sample of individuals who were followed annually over a 12-year period, i.e., the Swiss Household Panel (FORS, 2009). We focus on four demographic life course transitions: the entry into marriage or cohabitation, the entry into parenthood (including the aging of the children), the experience of separation, and the death of a spouse. Other aspects of the life course, such as leaving the labor market, becoming unemployed, and retirement, are also included since these will have consequences for social contacts as well and are correlated with the demographic transitions and with age (Cornwell et al., 2008; Lancee & Radl, 2012). Social contacts are measured for four role relationships (relatives, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances) and a distinction is made between the size of networks, the frequency of contact, and the support received from others. Our paper does not include aspects of community involvement, such as participating in voluntary organizations, political participation, doing paid work, and attending church, as other recent papers have done (Cornwell et al., 2008; Donnelly & Hinterlong, 2010; Voorpostel & Coffé, 2012). Note, however, that in so far as such forms of involvement lead to weak ties, they are likely to be included in the measure of acquaintances used here.

The data are analyzed with fixed-effects regression models which (implicitly) measure *within-person* changes in contact in response to changes in family status. Implicitly, these models control for stable (observed and unobserved) characteristics which may affect networks. We control explicitly for observed changes in other life domains which could affect social networks (changes in employment, income, and health) and which could also be related to changes in family status. We also consider if and to what extent effects differ between men and women as this is an important distinction in previous network studies (Moore, 1990; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). In contrast to many earlier studies which focused on select age groups, such as the elderly or young adolescents, we focus on the entire age range, i.e., from 18 to 96.

2. Earlier research and hypotheses

Social gerontologists found that networks become smaller as people age while support from the network increases, in line with socioemotional selectivity theory (Arjouch et al., 2005; Carstensen, 1992; Lang et al., 1998; Lansford et al., 1998). The amount of contact that people have with non-kin declines with age all through the age continuum whereas the amount of contact with kin begins to decline after age 50 (for women) and 60 (for men) (Cornwell, 2011). Gerontologists also found evidence for activity theory, i.e., the notion that older persons, in order to maintain a certain level of self-esteem and well-being, actively shape their networks after experiencing certain life course transitions (Havighurst, 1961; Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Williams, 1992). An example of such an effect is that widowed respondents have *more* frequent interactions with their network and more close ties than married respondents (Cornwell et al., 2008).

Social psychologists have focused on the link between marriage on the one hand, and relationships with friends and acquaintances on the other hand (Milardo & Duck, 2000). Evidence suggests that after getting a steady relationship and after marrying, people spend less time with the friends they had when they were single, a phenomenon called 'dyadic withdrawal' (Johnson & Leslie, 1982; Kim & Stiff, 1991; Milardo, 1982; Milardo & Allan, 2000; Parks et al., 1983). Marriage also leads to meeting new friends through the partner's network, but these are generally less close. The overall effect of marriage on the intimate network therefore appears negative, despite the fact that the partner's friends gradually become accepted during the course of marriage (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000).