



Changes in personal relationships: How social contexts affect the emergence and discontinuation of relationships



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ABSTRACT

Although the average number of confidants and practical helpers in Dutch networks only slightly changes over seven years, we found considerable changes among these relationships over these years. To explain the stability of existing relationships as well as the emergence of new ones, we paid attention to meeting opportunities in specific social contexts, such as the work place, family, sports clubs, voluntary associations, and the neighborhood.

Notably, we found that a lack of meeting opportunities is an important reason why many personal relationships are discontinued, and that a path-dependent use of social contexts makes new relationships more likely to emerge in a specific context if existing network members are already met in that context. Finally, it is proposed that care should be taken when interpreting changes in personal networks if one relies on information about networks that are delineated using only one name generating question.

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1. Introduction

From previous research, we know that personal relationships and networks are far from static: within a couple of years, the composition of people's network of close associates changes considerably (e.g., Shulman, 1975; Wellman et al., 1997; Degenne and Lebeaux, 2005; McPherson et al., 2006). In this contribution, we show that two waves of a rich panel dataset on personal relationships of the Dutch confirm this insight. Although the average number of confidants is remarkably stable over seven years (2.31 in 2000 and 2.41 in 2007) and the average number of persons who provide practical help somewhat increases (1.70 in 2000 and 2.29 in 2007), there are many changes among these relationships between both waves of the survey: many confidants and practical helpers move in or out of the personal networks. Little is known, however, about the causes for these changes. Therefore, we examine why some relationships disappeared as well as in which social contexts new relationships emerge. This implies that we specifically focus on the relationship, which is an improvement upon previous studies on changes in personal networks that mainly focused on changes on the aggregate level of the networks (cf. Feld et al., 2007). To explain the emergence and (dis-)continuation of personal relationships, specific attention is paid to meeting opportunities, measured

by the social contexts in which network members are met (such as the work place, family, sports clubs, voluntary associations, and the neighborhood).

Furthermore, we address the question to what extent contacts that seem to have disappeared from the network, because they were, for example, no longer mentioned as confidants, are really out of sight or that only their relational function had changed. To this end, we compare two waves of panel data on an important part of peoples' networks, namely those with whom they discuss important personal matters and/or whom they ask for help with odd jobs in or around the house. In addition, our dataset contains information about the larger networks of associates with whom people have more superficial relationships, as well as information about whether the respondents are still in touch with those network members whom they mentioned in the first wave, but not again in the second wave of the survey. This information creates the unique opportunity to disentangle whether network members, who were not mentioned again as confidant or practical helper in the second wave, indeed disappeared from a person's network or that only the content of their relationship has changed.

In sum, this paper improves upon earlier studies, (a) by analyzing network changes on the relationship level instead of on the aggregate level of the network, thereby looking at the discontinuation of relationships as well as the emergence of new relationships, (b) by determining whether relationships that seem to have disappeared are really gone, and (c) by testing to what extent meeting opportunities, as measured by the social contexts in which network members are met, explain why some relationships disappeared and

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why new relationships emerged in specific social contexts. Theory and propositions with respect to these explanations are described in the next section.

2. Explaining network changes

Changes in personal relationships mostly occur through changes in the social contexts one enters (cf. [Feld and Carter, 1998](#)). Previous research revealed that, before all, social contexts that a person enters during daily life, such as the work place, the family, sports clubs, voluntary associations, and the neighborhood, affect the composition and structure of personal networks. Social contexts provide meeting opportunities and through that the pool of potential associates. Consequently, the social composition of the context(s) one draws associates from is reflected by the composition of one's personal network (cf. [Fischer, 1982](#); [Fischer et al., 1977](#); [Marsden, 1990](#); [Mollenhorst et al., 2008a,b](#)). In the next two subsections, we successively discuss how the social contexts in which network members are met may affect relationship (dis-) continuation and the emergence of new relationships.

2.1. Social contexts and relationship discontinuation

Research by [Mollenhorst et al. \(2008a\)](#) not only showed that the social composition of the context(s) one draws associates from is reflected in the composition of one's personal network, but also supported [Feld's](#) arguments ([Feld, 1981, 1982](#)) that specific characteristics of these social contexts affect what kind of people are present in one's networks. Forced interactions within a context, as well as the amount of time spent in a context, both enlarge the chance that network members are drawn from that social context ([Mollenhorst et al., 2008a](#)). In this study, we propose that a lack of forced interactions and a small amount of time spent in a context both enlarge the likelihood that network relationships are discontinued.

First, when there are no forced interactions within a context, relationships are more likely to be discontinued. For example, at work, interactions are often institutionally organized, according to a division of labor and task specialization, which makes relationship maintenance easier. In the family context there are often (and sometimes strong) expectations as to whom one needs to interact with intensively, which also makes relationship stability more likely in this context. In neighborhoods, such enforced interactions are generally lacking; people do not need to interact intensively with their neighbors at all costs. This lack of enforced interactions makes discontinuation more likely for relationships that are drawn from the neighborhood.

Second, frequent interactions are an important condition for relationship continuation. Therefore, if people do not spend much of their time in a specific social context, the relationships they draw from that context are more likely to be discontinued. From this perspective, the work place is expected to have a strong effect on relationship continuation, because many people spend a great share of their time at work. In general, much less time is, for example, spent in public going-out places, such that relationships with associates who are met there are more likely to decay.

In addition to these two context characteristics, a third condition may also affect relationship (dis-)continuation: the possibility to leave a context. Social contexts vary with regard to the ease with which one can enter or leave that context. If a context can be left very easily, it is more likely that relationships in that context are unstable. For a person who is a member of some club or association, she/he can relatively easily decide to leave that context by striking her/his name off the membership list. When people do not like the group of people among whom they work or among whom

they reside, it is already more difficult to change that context by leaving it; changing jobs or moving house generally is a more radical decision than resigning club membership. However, it needs no explanation that leaving the family context is probably the most radical and therefore most unlikely solution if the people in that context do not please a person.

2.2. Social contexts and the emergence of new personal relationships

As people lose some of their network members, they might find new associates to replace the network member lost. But even if no network member is lost, people can find new associates to enlarge their network. The contexts in which new relationships emerge, we argue, depend on the contexts in which people regularly find themselves during daily life.

In line with previous arguments and findings by [Verbrugge \(1979\)](#), [Mollenhorst et al. \(2008a\)](#) showed that there is a repetitive or path-dependent use of social contexts to meet personal network members. This means that the likelihood to draw a second, third, and subsequent network member from a specific social context depends on the context from which one has drawn one's first network member. From this perspective, we may expect that new relationships are more likely to emerge in contexts in which one meets existing network members. This is more easy, and less cumbersome than to find new associates in a new social context.

Another possibility is that people prefer doing specific activities with specific types of people and/or in specific social contexts. For example, one might like to discuss personal issues with one's partner and close friends, to discuss career-related issues at work with colleagues, and to ask someone from the neighborhood for help with a small job at home, rather irrespective of who this specific friend, colleague, or neighbor is. In other words, activities are linked to specific social contexts, not to specific persons, because people from specific contexts can help to solve specific problems (cf. [Flap and Volker, 2013:244](#)). This implies that if one loses a network member from a specific context, she/he will try to find a new network member again in the same context.

Finally, previous research, which we will briefly summarize in the next section, proposed that important life events, such as getting married, finding a job, or moving to another place to live, bring about changes in personal relationships. As mentioned before, we argue that relationship changes mostly occur through changes in the social contexts one enters (cf. [Feld and Carter, 1998](#)). As a result of important life events, people spend less time in some contexts, while they will enter social contexts they did not enter before. For example, the birth of their children brings people into new contexts such as day-care centers, primary schools, etc., while it may also decrease the time they spend, e.g., at public going-out places, such as pubs and cinemas. A job change, especially if a person goes to work for another company, takes a person out of the former work context into a new one. And moving house generally brings people to a new residential context. Changing the contexts one enters affects meeting opportunities and consequently the stability of one's personal relationships. Moreover, as people enter a new social context they probably start personal relationships with others in that context. In sum, from this perspective, we may expect that new relationships are more likely to emerge in a new social context after the occurrence of an important life event.

2.3. Important life events and network changes

Previous studies on changes in personal relationships and networks over time, proposed that important life events bring about the loss of associates and the emergence of new relationship. First, a number of researchers compared the networks of people

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