# Romantic relationship formation, maintenance and changes in personal networks

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## ABSTRACT

According to the social withdrawal hypothesis, a personal network becomes smaller when a person starts dating, cohabitates and marries. This phenomenon is widely established in the literature. However, these studies were usually done with cross-sectional data. As a consequence, it is still unclear whether or how personal networks actually change after the formation of a romantic relationship (i.e. dating), after starting cohabitation and after getting married. It is also unclear how long and to what extent social withdrawal continues. To overcome these shortcomings, we examine how the size and composition of personal networks change after relationship formation. We use two waves of the PAIRFAM dataset (2008 and 2011), which include information about 6640 Germans who were between 16 and 39 years of age at the time of the second interview in 2008. Results from fixed effects regression models underscore that the association between romantic relationships and changes in personal networks is more dynamic than previous studies suggested. For example, after the formation of a romantic relationship people show a decrease in non-kin contacts, while an increase in non-kin contacts is observed after two years of dating, as well as after two years of cohabitation. These network changes suggest that people adapt their social networks to the demands and constraints of each phase of a romantic relationship. Because the decline in network size after dating is not stable, there is no need to be afraid that those who have a romantic partner remain isolated from other relationships.

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How do personal networks change after dating, marriage and cohabitation? One of the hypotheses is that lovers are so "wrapped up" that they withdraw from social life and get a smaller network (Slater, 1963, p. 349). This is formulated in the withdrawal hypothesis (e.g. Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Kalmijn, 2003; Slater, 1963).

Previous studies have largely supported the withdrawal hypothesis. They either found that personal networks became smaller after dating (e.g. Johnson & Leslie, 1982; Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000) or that people with a romantic partner have fewer non-family ties compared to people without a partner (e.g. Kalmijn, 2003, 2012; Marsden, 1987; Moore, 1990). Nevertheless, a number of questions remain unanswered. First, the question remains to what extent social withdrawal continues after the initial months of dating. We know that networks tend to become smaller within the first year, but it is likely that the withdrawal tendency diminishes over time (Johnson & Leslie, 1982). In addition, the size of the personal network may even recover after some period of dating, among others because people get to know the

personal contacts of their partner (Kalmijn, 2003). Second, as the effects of dating and marriage are not yet disentangled, it is unclear whether social withdrawal after the formation of a romantic relationship continues when people get married or start to cohabitate. In addition, network studies that included marital status often combined cohabiting and being married, so that their effects cannot be disentangled either. Third, previous research predominantly focused on rather general aspects of the personal network, such as the size and the composition of the personal network in terms of family and non-family network members (e.g. Kalmijn, 2012; McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Brashears, 2006). Hence, the question how other compositional characteristics of networks vary with romantic relationships is still not answered. For instance, does the formation of a romantic relationship affect the number of opposite-sex friends in the network? Fourth, since nearly all previous studies are based on cross-sectional data (see Kalmijn, 2012 for a notable exception), it is unknown whether couples actually withdraw from social life or whether people with a smaller network find a partner sooner.

To answer these questions, we employ a large scale panel dataset and examine how the size and composition (in terms of age, gender and kin versus non-kin) of personal networks change after the formation of romantic relationships and how these networks develop as romantic relationships continue. Scientifically and socially, this is important because social contacts can deliver intimacy, joy and support, are crucial for people's social–psychological and economic well-being, and can provide a connection to the outside world (Granovetter, 1973; Coleman, 1988; House, Landis & Umberson 1988).

## 1. Theory and hypotheses

### 1.1. Changes in the size of the personal network through social withdrawal

The hypothesis that people develop a smaller personal network after the formation of a romantic relationship found considerable support in the literature (e.g. Johnson & Leslie, 1982; Kalmijn, 2003, 2012; Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Song, 2012). Slater (1963), who was the first to call this phenomenon 'social withdrawal', explains this change by arguing that people have a limited amount of 'energy.' The idea of 'energy' may be understood as the time and resources, and the cognitive, physical and emotional capacity necessary to start and maintain social relationships (for similar notions, see Johnson & Leslie, 1982; Saramäki et al., 2014). According to Slater, when people start dating they are so 'wrapped up in each other' that hardly any energy is left for other things (Slater, 1963, p. 349), leading to a reduction in other social interactions. But it might not only be the case that people are wrapped up in their new relationships, also, their network members might (strongly) disapprove of the new partner (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). Likewise, according to balance theory (Heider, 1958), people will choose to become less close with friends who find it difficult to get along with their partner (see Granovetter, 1973, for the application of

balance theory to social networks). Especially at the start of a relationship, close contacts may disapprove of the new situation, because less time and energy is devoted to them. The intimate bond between two close friends can thus develop into a less intimate friendship or even acquaintanceship when one of them starts dating (Johnson & Leslie, 1982). These two processes, withdrawal by the newly dating individual from the social network as well as withdrawal by close network members from the individual, might even reinforce each other and result in a smaller personal network.

However, it is doubtful that social withdrawal persists. Research shows that already within the first year of a romantic relationship the great passion, euphoria, increase in heart rate and obsessive thinking about a partner disappears (Aron et al., 2005; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). As a result, time and energy may be released and used to reinforce the relationship with (previous) personal contacts. In addition, people may develop new social relationships after this initial phase of romantic love. For example, they may establish friendships with people who match their new status of having a partner and who support their relationship. Also, the social contacts of the romantic partner may present an attractive option to become close with. They probably share some of the interests or characteristics of the partner, and they may be met in various social contexts that are entered together with the romantic partner. In addition, the social contacts of the partner may become accustomed to the romantic relationship and see that it is serious, which increases their intention to become friends. This process can take up to a couple of years, if it even ends at all (Kalmijn, 2003; Parks, Stan & Eggert, 1983; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). Therefore, contrary to a continuing decrease in network size, after the initial period of 'immature love', the personal network may even grow for a while. No turning point has been indicated in research so far, but we propose that this turning point may be around two years. Research shows that the time and energy a romantic partner consumes already declines within the first year, for instance because of a decrease in excessive thinking about the partner (e.g. Aron et al., 2005). However, it can take years before the acceptance of family and friends for the romantic relationship stabilizes (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000), and it probably takes more than a year before one becomes close enough with the partner's family and friends to consider them personal contacts, if that happens at all. Based on these insights and considerations, we propose that the turning point from a decline to an increase in network size is around two years.

The final steps in developing a mature relationship are often marriage or cohabitation. In the 1960s, Slater (1963) expected that social withdrawal would end after marriage. Marriage would signal that a relationship was steady, allowing the two individuals to broaden their view again to the outside world. Accordingly, the couple was supposed and pressured by societal norms, to enhance bonds with the wider social world. However, since the 1960s, marriage has lost much of its lustre, symbolized in the low number of marriages and high divorce rates (Cherlin, 2010). Contemporary marriage is more likely to symbolize that the partners have actually chosen for each other and are