Summary

Research context

Why do we loose contact with some friends while the relations with others remain stable over time? Research shows that the frequency of contact within personal relations changes during our life course. Important changes take place especially when we enter another stage in life. Not everybody experiences the same changes and not all relations are equally instable. With the knowledge we currently have about how people gain and maintain personal relations, four explanatory models can be proposed. Relations have a symbolic and moral meaning. Differences in customs, traditions or context could account for differences in the stability of these relations. Second, family and friends form a network and the structure of this network influences the stability of every separate relation. People meet more often, keep informed and are motivated to stay. Third, differences in relations can also be explained by differences in the exchange that occurs. Goods or information can be exchanged but personal advice, respect, care or companionship as well. When both benefit from the exchange, the relation will be more stable over time. Fourth, the focus can be on opportunities and constraints. The frequency of contact will for example be influenced by time restriction and accessibility of friends and family members. With more alternative relations becoming available, the chance that certain relations will be neglected increases.

Unfortunately, none of these explanations are completely satisfactory. In some cases relations will be maintained despite the fact that exchange is not reciprocated. Furthermore, although other satisfactory explanations exist on why some relations are better maintained then others, no answer is provided on the question why certain close relations dissolve over time. The aim of our research was to develop and test general hypotheses that explain differences in stability and change of contact within personal relations over a longer period in time. The study was conducted over a period of four years and special attention was given the changes around three life-events being the birth of the first child, retirement and moving to an other town.

Research Questions

Two main theoretical perspectives exist that attempt an integration of the explanation mentioned above while adding important assumptions. Coming from a social psycholog background, Rusbult developed the investment model (1980a,b; 1983;1987). Expanding on ideas of Thibaut & Kelley's (1957) she suggests that the degree of stability of a relation depends on what it costs to maintain the relation and on the importance this relation has i comparison with alternative relations. To understand how important a relation is, the degree in which support was given and received in the past should also be considered. Rusbult uses the concept of investments to describe the things people have shared in the past. These investments heighten commitment and thereby stabilize the relation.

   The investment hypothesis has a lot in common with theories developed in sociology. These theories describe the network of relations as someone's social capital. This emphasises the fact that potential resources like information, support or influence are accessible through one's relations. The value of social capital is not stable over time and depends on context, support needed, time restrictions, and the willingness to help. To secure the value of one's social capital, investments in relations are needed. These assumptions bring us to our main research question: is it possible to explain stability and change in personal

relations by differences in the way people invest in these relations? Various hypotheses were developed to explain differences in stability in a general way. However, a more differentiated approach proved necessary. Three extra research questions were added.

First we felt that it was necessary to distinguish between different types of relations. The various investment considerations probably do not carry the same weight in every relation. Social capital theorists agree on how to value different relations. The available resources of the other person, the expected value of those resources in the future and the willingness of the person to be supportive have a role to play. Willingness to support depends on both investments made in the past as well as the expectation of the length of the shared future. No agreement however exists on what qualifies as an investment or how the length of the shared future is estimated. In our opinion, this lack of agreement might be a consequence of the fact that the various authors had different types of relations in mind. We suggested a divisions between in relations in which the value is based on resources outside of the relation itself and relations in which companionship and quality if the relation itself is of more importance. Furthermore we felt that relations can be divided in, on the one hand, relations in which characteristics of the person involved are important and, on the other hand, relations that can be shared with a lot of different people. Therefore three types of relations were postulated: instrumental relations, emotional relations and relations based on companionship. A fourth type, relations based on exchange of information, was not in the scope of our research.

Secondly, we assumed a difference between changes that taking place over a short time period and changes taking place in the long run. The amount of investments is import Relations in which a lot is invested will not readily dissolve when a change occurs Therefore we hypothesised that the investment model also offers a better explanation for changes in the long term then for changes in the short term. Probably, information on changes in the short term could also contribute to the explanation of changes over a longer period of time.

Our third question regarded the validity of the hypotheses over different life-events was our third concern: do the same principles apply in all these different situations? We assumed that changes that occur in everyday life and changes after life-events can both be explained in the same manner.

Research design

For the analyses, information was used on 282 subjects divided into four subsamples: 80 female subjects who gave birth to their first child during the research period, 92 subject who had recently moved house, 50 male subjects retiring from the labour market and random sample of 64 subjects.

Apart from the subjects of the random sample, the sub samples were interviewed thre times. The first two interviews took place with a year in between. This was done in the context of separate research project on the validity and reliability of instruments measuring social support. The third interview was done solely for our own research and took plac three years after the second interview. The first two interviews were conducted by researcher visiting the subject's home while the third interview was conducted by telephone. Subjects from the random sample served as a control group and were intervie wed twice with a period of three years in between. Before the test of the main set o hypotheses, we did some analyses on the influence of non response. Sub samples ha different demographic characteristics and this bias was also studied.

The exchange method (McCallister & Fischer, 1978) was used to gather information about the network of personal relations. Using a structured twenty-one item questionnaire on support given and received we established the names of the persons with whom the subject had a personal relation. This method was used both in the first and in the second interview. In the third interview subjects were asked to state whether they were still in contact wit the persons mentioned in the first and in the second interview. In the case relations had dis- solved, we inquired about the reasons why. In addition questions were asked regardin frequency of contact and other characteristics of the relations in all three interviews. These additional questions were only asked for the twenty to thirty most important relations of a subject.

Multidimensional scaling techniques were used to divide instrumental relations, emotiona relations and relations based on companionship. Because relations qualified on more the one of the exchange questions, some multiplexity occurred in our way of classifying the relations. Overlap between companionship and emotional support was more frequent the overlap between instrumental and emotional support.

Translation of the different theoretical concepts in operational terms was complicated b the fact that for the most part we used data that were already collected. Appreciation swa used as an indication for the benefits of the relation. Travel distance was used as an indication of costs. The length of the relation was used to measure former investments The expected future value of the relation was measured by the social position of the othe person involved on the one hand and the amount of homogeneity in the relation on the other hand. The length of the shared future was measured by the importance the other placed i the relation as well as by the formal type ofhe relation (family member, friend, colleague etc.). The number of alternative relations was measured by the size of the potential network of relatives and other formal relations. Behavioral constraints were measured by restric tions in time, money, physical mobility and personal skills.

The data set has a so-called 'nested' structure: for each subject the set of informatio contains on the upper level information on individual characteristics and on a lower leve two to thirty sub sets of information about each ofhe different relations. For the analyses

a random coefficient model was used specially developed for these kinds of multilevel data (Raudenbusch & Bryk, 1986; Bosker & Snijders, 1991; Snijders & Bosker, 1994).

Results

At the first interview subjects named a mean of 21 relationships. A year afterwards, the same amount of names were mentioned but a lot had changed. In the relationship mentioned in the first interview frequency of contact had decreased with 50%. After four years in one on every four relationships contact was lost.

For changes in the long term, over 40% of the variance is explained by the direct costs and benefits, the amount of former investments, changes in the expected future value of these investments and the certainty of a shared future. These aspects were important in all three types of relations.

Greater appreciation makes subjects tend to visit their friends and family members more often. Decrease of appreciation resulted in a decrease in the frequency of contact. However, when people have known each other for a long time, these consequences were less marked. This is due to the former investments in the sense of shared time. Investments made by not reciprocated support did not have this stabilizing effect but led to a decrease in contact.

Subjects assuming that the relation will still be there in the future, tend to have frequent contact with friends and family members. Another finding however was that shared friends do not stabilize the relation. Even relations strongly embedded in the network carry a risk of dissolvement over time.

Various other considerations played a role in the decision to invest or disinvest. A decrease in the expected future value due to a loss of homogeneity, resulted in a decrease in the frequency of contact. An increase of homogeneity led to an increase in contact frequency. The interest the other person places in the relationship is important as well. Subjects with resources obtained by education and employment were in the long term more able to maintain their relations.

The influence of other characteristics of the subjects on a decrease in contact were not significant. No support was found for the influence of personality and social skills on stability and change. Time restrictions, financial restrictions or limitations in physical mobility all had no distinct influence on changes in the frequency of contact. Our hypothesis that a larger number of alternative relations leads to a loss of contact in other relations proved wrong.

Although the general model showed to give a satisfactory explanation for changes in the long term, it was shown that a more differentiated approach was useful to explain changes in the short term. This proved particulary true for gaining insight in differences in investment decisions at a certain moment in time. Which considerations are important in the various types of relations? As predicted we found differences where it concerns costs. In emotional relations, frequency of contact is less influenced by travel distance. Former investments do play a major role in these relations. The need for reciprocity in emotional relations was a finding we had not predicted. In instrumental relations we found on the other hand that these relations are more stable when subjects received support without returning the favour!

One of our hypotheses was that a high social status of the other person has a positive influence on the decision to invest in instrumental relations. The homogeneity of the

relation was assumed to positively influence investments in emotional relations and relations based on companionship. Latter hypothesis proved right. But, contrary to the first hypothesis, instrumental relations with people of lower social status proved relatively stable. Strangely enough, the appreciation of the itself was more important in instrumental relations then in emotional relations or in relations between companions. When the exchange can not directly be reciprocated as in most instrumental relations, the interest the other has in the relationship becomes very important. The more there is a risk that the people will loose contact in the future, the greater the need to invest in the relation. More certainty regarding the shared future, as is the case with family members, required less investments.

In mean frequency of contact is lowest in relations based on companionship. In these relations the direct costs and benefits are relatively more important then in other relations. However, to explain differences in frequency of contact in companionship relations we need information on the opportunities and constraints of the subject. These correlations were non significant when tested in our overall analysis. By taking differences in types of relations into account, the picture became more clear. In relations based on companionship, frequency of contact was not only influenced by financial restrictions but also by characteristics of someone's personality and social skills and by one's physical mobility.

In our research a distinction was made between changes in short term and changes in the long term. This distinction was based on the hypothesis that only after a longer period of time the real changes would only become clear. This hypothesis could not be verified changes in the short term were nor less intense nor harder to explain then changes in the long term. The question was raised whether the content of changes in the short term differed from changes in the long term. This was the case for some aspects of our model. Former investments do have a stabilizing effect role on the changes that take place over longer period but have a destabilizing effect on the short term. When people have known each other for years, no harm is caused by neglect of this relation for a short while Changes in the short term and changes in the long term are equally influenced by changes in expectation of the future value of the relation. Because subjects people anticipate the relation to change, they loose touch rather quickly. Changes in costs and benefits of the relations have no major effect on the frequency of contact in the short term but will only show in the long term.

The four different sub samples with subjects experiencing different life-events, allowed us to examine whether our general model was applicable to all these situations. This seemed to be the case. The frequency of contact changed in the same way in the control group as in the other sub samples.

Changes following the three life-events showed differences only in the short term. Moving home caused the most significant changes in relations. Following the move, there was a immediate effect on 50% of all the relations and this effect increased with time. With moving there came a sudden emphasis on reciprocity: in relations with persons that were given support which was not returned, contact soon decreased. The stability of relations based on companionship after a move was surprising, considering the effect of the change in distance especially for these relations in which someone's presence is vital.

Male subjects that retired experienced almost the same amount of changes in relations as people who move, the differences being that fewer relations were affected. The investment model gave a good explanation as to why these men lost contact with some of their friends and colleagues. These changes were similar to the changes in the control group in most

aspects. Expectations over the shared future changed with retirement and homogeneity in daily activities was lost. This had a direct negative effect on contacts with fellow workers. Contrary to our hypothesis, the frequency of contact significantly decreased also in emotional relations. Consequences of retirement were relatively small when people still had a lot of activities outside the house and when they were relatively mobile. But, strangely enough, a lot of spare time did not lead to more frequent contact nor did a shortage of alternative relations intensify old relations.

The birth of a child had no major impact on relations in the short term but only showed after a few years. Small changes that took place a year afterwards are due to an increasing need of instrumental support. Therefor relations intensified with people who were able to provide this support. The persons involved are most likely to be in the same circumstances as the female subjects themselves. In comparison with the other sub samples the mothers were not always able to adapt there investments when it concerned emotional relations. A decrease of appreciation would not always lead to a decrease in contact nor would an increase in appreciation lead to a closer relation.

Discussion

Two important findings were discussed. First our finding that some hypotheses that appear essential for social capital theory were are not verified by us. Particularly, there was a lack of evidence was found for the idea that people invest in relations with others with more resources. It was suggested that our research design was not suitable to test this hypothesis because we focused on relatively close personal relations whereas in social capital theory the focus is on more marginal relations in the network (coworkers, acquaintances). Secondly the specific characteristics of the three types of support relations. Contrary to our expectations, relations based on companionship appeared to be extremely stable over time. The fact that people have shared activities probably has a stabilizing effect in itself.

A number of critical remarks were made concerning the research design and our method of analysis. First, the complex structure with four very different sub-samples was problematic. Secondly the lack of information on the investments in new relations made our analyses incomplete. Thirdly, a strong focus was put on the perspective of the subject although the decisions of the other person in the relation are also important. A fourth problem was the choice of operational terms for the different theoretical concepts. With these remarks in mind, recommendations are made for further research.

Finally we feel that a more elaborate theoretical discussion on the different questions that remain open after this research is essential. There is, for example, evidence for an interaction between the different aspects of the investment model (e.g. the certainty of the shared future and the need to invest in that relation). The different aspects of the investment model also carry a different weight for different subjects. There is a need for a theoretical foundation and further research on these random effects. It was suggested that more information on the structural aspects of the network could provide extra insight in the different choices people make. Both stability and change in personal relations is important, but finding a balance is crucial in our nowadays so turbulent times.