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## The ripple effect in family networks

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# 7

## Conclusion and Discussion

This thesis aimed to study families as a network in order to investigate why some families fare better than others after parental divorce in terms of relationship quality and family well-being. In particular, we aimed to study the consequences of parental divorce for the network of relationships within the nuclear family, i.e., parents and children, and between nuclear and extended family members, i.e., grandparents and aunts/uncles.

In line with MAFNA (chapter 1), multi-actor family network data were required for this thesis. The entire process of preparing the data collection, fielding a pilot study, getting access to Lifelines (Stolk et al., 2008), approaching parents and their family members, and implementing *Lifelines Family Ties* took 5 years. Therefore, we first explored parts of available family network data. Theoretically, we divided the system (or family network) into “smaller – empirically analysable – relational units”.

## 7.1 FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ARE INTERDEPENDENT

The first chapter of this thesis introduced MAFNA. The chapter theorized, based on Family Systems Theory (FST) (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974), that family relationships are interdependent, implying that the changes in one relationship do not only affect the family members in this specific relationship but may also affect other family relationships. The principles of FST are difficult to operationalize and therefore not often empirically tested (Whiteman et al., 2011). In chapters 2 and 3, the larger system was divided into “smaller – empirically analysable – relational units”: the unit of the family triad. Triads are considered to be smallest structure to study interdependent relationships. In chapter 4 we studied a larger part of the system and focused on interdependencies between dyads in three-generational two-lineal family network data.

Combining FST with the principles of balance theory (Cartwright & Harary, 1956; Heider, 1946, 1958), sibling-mother-sibling triads were studied using data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS, Dykstra et al., 2005) data in chapter 2. This study derived hypotheses representing enhancement, compensation, and loyalty conflicts in triadic configurations of two siblings and their parents. Hypotheses were tested for three relational dimensions: support exchange, contact, and conflict. Clear evidence was found for enhancement, meaning that strong intergenerational relationships are related to strong sibling relationships, especially in support exchange. Although intergenerational relationships with both parents (father-child and mother-child) are both important predictors for the sibling relationship, the relationship with mother turns out to be the most important predictor for sibling support exchange and contact. Some evidence was obtained for the effect of loyalty conflicts on sibling relationships, meaning that discrepant intergenerational relationships are related to weaker sibling relationships, but only for contact and not for support exchange and conflict.

In chapter 4 we analysed the Divorce in Flanders data (DiF, Mortelmans et al., 2011). Substitution of contact (see, for example, Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, & Vonkorff, 1997; Zettel & Rook, 2004) with the grandparental generation was investigated by studying the association between the child-paternal grandparental dyads and the child-maternal grandparental dyads, as well as between the parent-paternal grandparental dyads and the parent-maternal grandparental dyads. It was found that, as hypothesized, lower contact frequencies with family members on one side of the family are associated with higher contact frequencies with equivalent family members on the other side of the family. These results confirm interdependence between intergenerational and adult sibling relationships (like in chapter 2) and interdependence between multi-generational relationships (parent-grandparental dyads and child-grandparental dyads).

## 7.2 FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AFFECT WELL-BEING

Triads, as smaller empirically analysable units, also played an important role in chapter 3. This chapter analysed ambivalent triadic configurations in the Swiss STEPOUT data (Widmer et al., 2012) as the explanatory variables for well-being. To predict how mother's self-esteem depends on embeddedness in ambivalent triads, chapter 3 conceptualized three theoretical mechanisms: balance (Cartwright & Harary, 1956; Heider, 1946, 1958); diffusion of stress through relationships (Bowen, 1976); and divide and conquer (Coser, 1956). To measure the triadic embeddedness, inspired by the triad census of Holland and Leinhardt (1976), the ego-centered ambivalent triad census was introduced. These are the frequencies of 18 non-isomorphic triads in which dyads can be positive, negative, or ambivalent. The theoretical mechanisms were operationalized by linear combinations of the ambivalent triad census, as calculated for the focal person ('ego') in the network. An empirical application to 300 family networks, in which mothers were the focal actors who reported about emotional support and conflict in their family network, showed that being embedded in triads that exhibit balance and prevent diffusion of stress has a positive - although small - effect on mothers' social self-esteem.

According to Social Production Function (SPF) theory, individuals strive for optimization of two universal goals: physical and social well-being. Relationships in which multiple types of relational dimensions are transmitted are called multi-functional and are considered to be of high value for social well-being (Ormel et al., 1999). In chapter 6 we found that family members receiving multi-functional relationships, especially when received from one's own nuclear family, have a higher well-being, although the effect was small. We conclude about this link between family relationships and well-being that a) not just one type of tie received affects family members' well-being, but also the combination of several types, b) it matters from which family members these ties are received: ties received from nuclear family members

are especially important for well-being (chapter 6), and c) family members' well-being is also affected by relationships between their family members (chapter 3)

When turning back to the smaller analysable units, we can conclude that balanced structures are an important predictor for relationships (chapter 2) as well as for well-being (chapter 3). In additional analyses in these chapters we did not find differences between divorced and non-divorced families of the effect of balanced triads on relationships or well-being.

## **7.3 THE EFFECT OF PARENTAL DIVORCE**

The MAFNA approach in chapter 1 suggested that the impact of parental divorce would have a ripple effect on the family network. Based on FST we argued that relational tensions in the parental subsystem preceding the decision to get divorced are likely to continue affecting relationships after divorce. This means that chains of changing relationships and well-being affect not only the nuclear family but also members of the extended family; and these further changes in turn may have consequences for the nuclear family again.

In chapter 4 we investigated whether family networks of divorced families are more disjoint than the networks of non-divorced families. We tested the separated network hypothesis by comparing cross-lineage contact relationships across divorced and non-divorced families, i.e., between father and maternal grandparents and between mother and the paternal grandparents, as well as between child-paternal grandparent relationships with child-maternal grandparent relationships. We found that contact between the three generations in divorced families is lower than in non-divorced families, where the largest differences are found for cross-lineage contact, supporting the separated network hypothesis.

## **7.4 THE RIPPLE EFFECT**

Did we find proof of the ripple effect? The word 'effect' has a causal connotation, and without longitudinal data such a conclusion is impossible. However, we found that family networks of divorced families are more disjoint. Not only the relationships between the two divorced parents, but also the relationships parents have with other family members and even the relationships these other family members have with each other are different from the relationships in non-divorced families. Although a strict proof of the ripple effect based on the data in this dissertation is impossible given that they are not longitudinal, this result corresponds to what is expected based on the ripple effect, and supports our initial ideas.

How are these ripples related to family members' well-being? MAFNA theorized that the establishment or re-establishment of additional support ties between both sides of the family network (Figure 1.1: U-M) may compensate or substitute for the negative impact on well-being, offering new routes for exchange and maintaining family resilience. In chapter 4 we found an

indication for substitution of contact with grandparents, but we did not analyse in this chapter how these relational tendencies affect well-being. In addition, although contact is a prerequisite for support or affection, it was not investigated – yet – whether the substitution pattern holds for support or affection networks.

Based on MAFNA, we furthermore proposed that extended family members can be viewed as the knots in the nuclear family's safety net and therefore may contribute to family resilience in families that experience divorce (Black & Lobo, 2008; Hess & Camara, 1979). Chapter 6 showed that family members' well-being increased actually a bit more after parental divorce compared to family members' well-being in non-divorced families and that family members with more multi-functional ties scored higher on well-being, especially when these ties were received from one's own nuclear family. We did not find evidence that the number of multi-functional ties received was more important for family members' well-being for divorced families than for non-divorced families.

To summarize, we may conclude that family networks of divorced families are more disjoint than the family networks of non-divorced families, meaning that some family members are harder to reach. The findings regarding substitution of family ties (chapter 4) and multi-functional ties on well-being (chapter 6) are in line with the idea of the family as a safety net, but were not found to apply to divorced families in a stronger sense.

## 7.5 COMPENSATION VERSUS SUBSTITUTION

The terms substitution and compensation were alternately used throughout the thesis. For example, chapter 2 hypothesized that if a weak intergenerational tie goes together with a strong sibling tie, this effect could be interpreted as compensation. By contrast, in chapter 4 we interpreted a similar mechanism, in which a weak tie between child and paternal grandparents goes together with a strong tie between child and maternal grandparents, and which was expressed in the analysis as a negative covariance, as substitution.

According to Zettel and Rook (2004), substitution concerns the replacement of one tie with another tie, whereas compensation refers to the extent to which these replaced relationships fulfil the same functions or social needs. Our interpretation of this difference between substitution and compensation is that substitution implies a replacement of one family tie with another – preferably equivalent – family tie (chapter 4), whereas compensation implies a replacement of the family tie with “something” that fulfils the *same* or *another* social need producing well-being. An example of compensating the same social need (affection) is the so-called period of blossoming after divorce by investing in one's friendships (Terhell, Van Broese Groenou, & Van Tilburg, 2004). An example of compensating a lack of affection by *other* social needs is buying a fancy car (fulfilling the need of status) or aiming for a promotion at work (fulfilling the need of behavioural confirmation) rather than fulfilling the social need of affection,

in order to optimize social well-being<sup>12</sup>. Thus, one could argue that substitution would have been a better term for detecting patterns of interdependence in family relationships (chapter 2).

## 7.6 DEFINING FAMILY WELL-BEING

The term family well-being played a central role throughout this thesis. In MAFNA (chapter 1), the concept of a sharing group (SG) was applied to the context of the family in order to identify its common goal: the preservation of family well-being. Although it was mentioned that, at least theoretically, family well-being is more than the sum of all family members' individual well-being, well-being was empirically analysed (chapter 3 and 6) as an individual outcome. It would be an interesting next step to further develop an operationalisation or measure to analyse family well-being empirically.

The joint production of family well-being requires keeping the relationships active and, if necessary, activating the functioning of the family as a safety net. This approach may be used to explain why, if parental divorce or other life course adversities occur, family well-being can still be preserved. In addition to the notion that well-being will be highest if relationships *are* fulfilling multiple needs, in line with Lindenberg (1996), we argue that well-being may be highest if relationships *have the potential to* fulfil multiple needs. This would also require a change in operationalisation of family ties: the knowledge that you may turn to these family members for specific ties when needed. Such an operationalisation is in line with a social capital approach (Flap & Völker, 2004).

## 7.7 (FUTURE) DATA COLLECTION

Due to the recent availability of *Lifelines Family Ties* data, some of our research questions have been left unanswered. These are questions about causality which require longitudinal data (chapter 4), or testing balance theory in not only one (the sibling-mother-sibling) but multiple triads (chapter 2), or affecting the well-being of not one (mother) but all involved family members (chapter 3). In addition, many more research questions can be investigated with *Lifelines Family Ties* data. For example, information from parents was obtained about their perceptions about positive and negative relationships in the family network. Furthermore, information from respondents on both giving and receiving in relationships is available, which may answer questions about (a lack of) internal balance in family relationships.

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12 Please note that the authors of SPF theory use both terms 'substitution' and 'compensation' to refer to what we define as 'compensation' (Ormel et al., 1997; Steverink & Lindenberg, 2006). In addition, if blossoming is observed but would not result in the preservation of well-being, Zettel & Rook (2004) would call this phenomena substitution, but not compensation.

When preparing the data collection of *Lifelines Family Ties* we also planned to start collecting data prospectively among families who recently started to cohabitate. Lifelines provided us with the sample of participants including partners and their parents. Because of the time-consuming data collection among divorced and non-divorced families it was not possible to invite newly established families during the PhD project. Inviting these participants at a later stage would be an excellent opportunity to start a prospective study on family relationships along the life-course.



