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Off the Beaten Track

Childlessness and Social Integration in Late Life

Pearl A. Dykstra
Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute
The Hague, the Netherlands

Aiming to uncover the socially integrating functions of parenthood, this study focused on differences in network size between older adults with and without children, using survey data from Amsterdam (n = 661) and Berlin (n = 516). Explicit attention was paid to diversity among the childless and to their biographical pasts. The pattern of results was similar for both countries. Those who never had children had smaller networks in old age than parents, a finding partially attributable to a more limited supply of kin. There was no evidence for a competing hypothesis, namely, that childlessness is a means for greater sociability. Contrary to expectations, those who had outlived their children were not more socially isolated than those who had never had children. Neither was there support for the expectation that parenthood-history differences would be greater among women than men. Last, the findings showed that parenthood contributes to social integration independently of marriage and employment.

Keywords: *social integration; childlessness; network size; marital history; older men and women*

The working definition of *social integration* in this article is that people are socially integrated and embedded when their lives are tied to the lives of others in personally meaningful ways. Such connections and interdependencies come from participating in a network of relationships (Crow 2004). These relationships in turn have their roots in different spheres of life: family, church, work, neighborhood, leisure, and so forth. Social

Author's Note: The findings reported in this article are from a cross-national comparative project on childless older adults. For additional information, see Dykstra and Hagestad (forthcoming). I thank Michael Wagner for carrying out the analyses of the Berlin Aging Study data. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Pearl A. Dykstra, Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, Postbox 11650, 2502 AR The Hague, the Netherlands; e-mail: dykstra@nidi.nl.

integration contributes to well-being in a number of ways (Berkman et al. 2000; Dykstra forthcoming; House, Umberson, and Landis 1988; Lubben and Gironda 2004). First, through members of a social network, one has access to different kinds of resources (Lin 2001; Putnam 2000). Second, network members can act as bridges to other social circles, facilitating communication with different groups and social strata (Portes 2000). Third, benefits may be derived from having others with whom one can develop shared ideas, a common interpretation of reality. Fourth, being embedded in a community may provide benefits in the sense of having a purpose in life that transcends the individual self (Furstenberg 2005). Fifth, benefits may come from what takes place in the interactions with others, such as the companionship that is offered, the feelings of acceptance that are conveyed, or the encouragement that is given to follow good health practices (Uchino 2004).

This article is about the social integration of older adults without children. As indicator of social integration, I used the size of one's network of personal relationships. I looked at differences in network size between older adults with and without children, using data from two Western European countries: the Netherlands and Germany.

Paradoxically, by focusing on the childless, one gains an understanding of the socially integrating functions parenthood serves. Some of these functions are rather self-evident. Parents often make new acquaintanceships through their children: in the neighborhood, through playmates, and via school. Adults with children are also more likely to invest in community improvement because it increases life chances for their children (Eggebeen and Uhlenberg 1985). Other socially integrating functions are less self-evident. Parents' lives are structured in ways that the lives of those without children are not. Parenthood is a relevant characteristic in the distribution of public resources, goods, and services: Parents receive financial and service benefits such as child support and tax relief. Parenthood is also a critical basis of social control. By law, parents must provide their children with the essentials of daily living, such as food, clothing, and shelter, but they also provide socialization for future adult lives. There are pressures to be models for children and to engage in healthy behavior. Parenthood is also part of a standard life script that guides individuals' expectations about what lies ahead in their own lives (Hagestad and Neugarten 1985; Heinz 1991; Neugarten and Datan 1973; Neugarten and Neugarten 1986). Becoming and being a parent not only forms part of the expectations for one's own life but also for those of others. Childless couples are often asked to explain themselves (Woollett 1991). People want to hear a rationale for

why they are living lives that are not in accordance with the standard script. Their lives run "off the beaten track," so to speak. The childless have had to compose their lives, to adopt a phrase from Bateson (1989).

The centrality of the parent-child bond throughout adult life (Hagestad 2000; Rossi and Rossi 1990) has influenced the research that has been done on childless older adults. The childless tend to be viewed in terms of what separates them from parents (Letherby 2002). As a result, there is an implicit homogenization of the childless, a tendency to bunch them together as one group.

In this study, a different approach was adopted. First, explicit attention was paid to diversity among the childless. Whereas most studies simply compare older adults with and without living children (e.g., Wu and Pollard 1998), I distinguished people who never had children from those who outlived all their children. Differences in marital history were also taken into account. More specifically, I looked at childlessness in and outside of marriage. Second, I did not start from a frozen image of the childless. Rather, their biographical pasts were analyzed, focusing on how the current circumstances of childless older adults are shaped by earlier experiences.

Research Questions

The first research question focused on differences in network size by parental status. Do the networks of older parents differ in size from those of older adults who never had children or who outlived their children? Given the differences in the availability of offspring (children and their in-laws, grandchildren), it was expected that older adults with living children would have larger networks than older adults without children. A second reason for expecting older parents to have larger networks than the childless is that, as described earlier, people often make new acquaintanceships on account of their offspring.

There are grounds, however, for a competing hypothesis, namely, that older parents have smaller networks than those who never had children. Childlessness allows open passage to experiences that are not as easily accessed by those with children, particularly mothers: careers, close friendships, creative pursuits, and travel (Houser, Berkman, and Beckman 1984). Apart from time constraints imposed by employment and caring responsibilities for family members, those who never had children had more free-available time at their disposal than parents, time to spend on

charitable work and servicing friendships. Under the assumption that late-life pursuits are strongly influenced by earlier patterns, one should continue to see such differences between those who never had children and parents in old age.

Losing a child is a statistically rare transition. Outliving one's children is an unanticipated transition, an untimely loss. Parents expect their children to live on after they themselves have passed away. Coping with the loss of a child tends to be a lonely, devastating, and extended process (Margolis, Kutscher, and Marcus 1988; Rubin 1993). It is not inconceivable that helping the bereaved come to terms with this experienced loss overextends the resources of the network. For that reason, the prediction was that older adults who outlived their children would have smaller networks than those who never had children.

It is often suggested that parenthood is more central to women's lives than to men's (Hird and Abshoff 2000; Letherby 2002; Veevers 1980). For that reason, I expected to find stronger parenthood-history differences among women than among men.

The second research question focused on the extent to which differences in network size by parental status are attributable to life-history characteristics that in turn are antecedents or consequences of having or not having children. First, associations with marital history were examined. Given the close link between marriage and childbearing, particularly in older birth cohorts, there is the problem of unraveling the effects of parenthood and marital history (Connidis and McMullin 1994; Koropeckyj-Cox 1998). By looking at childlessness in and outside of marriage, the two effects can be separated. My hypothesis was that parental status accounts for differences in older adults' network size over and above marital history. Although couple-companionate activities are an important basis for socializing, my argument is that they offer limited overlap with the social spheres one enters on account of parenthood.

Parenthood is also closely linked to occupational history, particularly for women (Gerson 1985; Hakim 2000). For the cohorts under investigation, the social context was not conducive to the employment of mothers (Arber and Ginn 1991; Pott-Buter 1993). The typical life course for women was to leave the labor force at marriage or when the first child was born. Women with career aspirations had few alternatives but to forgo marriage and/or childbearing. The workplace is a context for meeting and sustaining friendships. Among women, but not among men, I expect to find that parental status differences in network size are partially accounted for by differences in occupational history.

Sources of Data

The Dutch data came from NESTOR-LSN, a Dutch survey on the living arrangements and social networks of older adults. A total of 4,494 men and women were interviewed in 1992. The sample was stratified according to sex and year of birth, and about equal numbers of men and women in each five-year cohort from 1903 to 1937 were drawn from the population registers. Older adults in both private households and institutions were included in the sample (as was also the case in the Berlin Aging Study [BASE]). The overall response rate was 62% (32% declined participation, and 6% were too ill to be interviewed). During the face-to-face interviews, questions were posed on a wide variety of topics, including the availability of family members, network size, supportive exchanges, well-being, life histories, social background, and personality characteristics. To make the Dutch sample as comparable as possible with the German sample, only data from respondents aged 70 to 89 years at the time of the interview (birth cohorts 1903 to 1922) and residing in the city of Amsterdam were used ($n = 661$). More detailed information on data collection and nonresponse can be found in Broese van Groenou et al. (1995).

The German data came from the BASE, which was a multidisciplinary investigation of old people aged 70 to over 100 years who lived in former West Berlin (birth cohorts 1890 to 1922). A total of 2,297 old persons were drawn from the city register. Of these, 83% had addresses that could be verified. These 1,908 old persons were asked to participate in the study. Of these, 32% refused outright to take part, and a further 2% could not take part for health or other reasons. In the end, 49% ($n = 928$) took part in the intake assessment. In the main study (1990 to 1993), a core sample of 516 individuals was closely examined in 14 sessions covering mental and physical health, psychological functioning, and social and economic situations. This core sample was stratified by age and sex, with 43 men and 43 women in each of the six age groups (70 to 74, 75 to 79, 80 to 84, 85 to 89, 90 to 94, and ≥95 years). The current analysis was based on data from the core sample. For more information, see Baltes and Mayer (1999).

Although I tried to make the two samples as comparable as possible, one distinct difference remains: the oldest old were not included in the Dutch sample. For reasons of sample size, the oldest old were retained in the German sample. Thus, the Dutch respondents were younger than the German respondents. The mean ages for women were 80.0 and 85.1 years, respectively. For men, the figures were 80.1 and 84.7 years. Note that these are age means for stratified samples. Insofar as life transitions are linked to

age (e.g., outliving one's children, widowhood), differences between the two samples will be apparent.

Measures

Network Size

In NESTOR-LSN, social network size was the total number of names listed as those with whom respondents were "in touch regularly" and who were "important" to them (see Van Tilburg 1995 for details on the network delineation procedure). The definitions of "regular contact" and "important" were left to the respondents. To be nominated, network members had to be at least 18 years old. In the BASE, social networks were assessed using a modified version of the network questionnaire developed by Kahn and Antonucci (1980). Respondents classified network partners according to the amount of emotional distance. A circle diagram was used: respondents placed persons to whom they felt related very closely into an inner circle, persons to whom they felt related closely into a second circle, and persons to whom they felt related less closely into a third circle. Network size was the number of persons to whom respondents felt emotionally close and who were named in one of the three circles of the network questionnaire (Wagner, Schütze, and Lang 1999).

Parenthood History

In NESTOR-LSN and the BASE, information was collected on the ages at which respondents had children and at which they experienced the death of children. Four parenthood histories were distinguished on the basis of these data. Older adults with living children were set apart from those without living children. Among those without living children, a distinction was drawn between those who had always been childless and those who had outlived all their children. Among those with living children, the distinction was drawn between those who never experienced the death of a child and those who had.

Marital History

NESTOR-LSN and the BASE had complete information on the year in which marital and nonmarital unions started and ended and on the type of union dissolution. Given the relatively low percentages of respondents who were cohabiting but unmarried at the time of the interview or who had ever

lived with partners without being married (Dykstra 2004; Wagner et al. 1999), no distinction between marital and nonmarital unions was made. The term *marriage* was used for both nonmarital and marital unions. Respondents were categorized in six mutually exclusive categories on the basis of current marital status and past marital history. Among the currently married, a distinction was drawn between men and women in first marriages and those in second or third marriages. The unmarrried were distinguished according to whether they had never married or were formerly married. The latter were further divided into three categories: single after divorce, single after widowhood, and single after the dissolution of two or more marriages.

Occupational History

Two features of occupational careers were considered. The first was labor force exit. The official retirement age in both countries is 65 years. However, because of generous early retirement and disability schemes, most employees exit the labor force between the ages of 55 and 62 years (Henkens and Tazelaar 1994; Kohli et al. 1991; Koller 2001). Therefore, three categories of respondents were distinguished: those who left the labor force at or before age 50 (including those who had never entered the labor force), those who exited between the ages of 50 and 55 years, and those who exited after the age of 55 years. In both countries, a large majority of women had left the labor force before the age of 30 years. The second occupational history feature was the degree of upward or downward mobility. Information was available on the first and last jobs held. The occupational prestige of both jobs was ascertained, using the occupational prestige scale developed by Sixma and Ultee (1983), with scores ranging from 13 to 87 for the Dutch data, and the occupational prestige scale developed by Wegener (1988), with scores ranging from 20 to 187 for the German data. Three categories of respondents were distinguished: those who experienced no upward occupational mobility at all, those who experienced lifetime upward mobility of less than 20 prestige points (the Netherlands and Germany), and those who experienced upward mobility of more than 20 points (the Netherlands and Germany).

Analyses

The analyses were based on unweighted data. The descriptive data are reports not of (estimates of) population data but of sample characteristics.

Hierarchical regressions were performed: The effects of parenthood history were examined first, marital-history variables entered the equations second, followed in the third and final step by occupational-history variables. Given the gender specificity of social expectations about the occurrence and sequencing of life transitions, the analyses were conducted separately for men and women. Moreover, the analyses controlled for age. To better interpret age effects, age was centered around the mean. Tests for interactions between marital history and parenthood history were performed in all models. None were significant, however.

Results

Both men and women in the NESTOR-LSN Amsterdam sample nominated close to 11 network members on average. In the BASE, men listed about 10 network members, whereas women nominated about 9.

Before considering differences in network size between older adults with and without children, I provide descriptive information on the respondents' life histories. As Table 1 shows, lifetime childlessness was rather high among older adults in West Berlin: 23% of the men and 30% of the women never had children. Lower percentages were found in the Amsterdam sample: 13% and 22% for men and women. Three reasons can be suggested for the higher rates of lifetime childlessness in the German data. The first is the presence of the oldest old in the Berlin sample. The oldest respondents had the highest childlessness rates, which in turn is linked to having experienced World War I and the Depression (Wagner et al. 1999). Both events reduced opportunities to marry, to remarry, or to have children. The second reason concerns peculiarities of the West Berlin older population, more specifically, the relatively high proportion of widows and divorcées (Maas, Borchelt, and Mayer 1999). The third reason pertains to cross-national differences in lifetime childlessness: Childlessness rates in cohorts born before 1925 have been higher in Germany than in the Netherlands (reflecting lower marriage rates in Germany). In both cities, the proportion of childless women was above the national average and likely reflected selective migration patterns, with never-married individuals moving into the city and families moving away. Both cities show higher rates of lifetime childlessness for women than for men. Women more often remained unmarried than men and were less likely to remarry after widowhood or divorce (Dorbritz and Schwarz 1996; Hagestad forthcoming). The West Berlin sample also had a higher proportion of men and women who

Table 1
Descriptive Information on the Dutch and German Respondents' Life Histories and Late-Life Outcomes (percentages and means unweighted)

	The Netherlands		Germany	
Variable	Men (n = 355)	Women (n = 306)	Men (n = 258)	Women (n = 258)
Parenthood history (%)				
All children alive	71	62	59	48
Never had children	13	22	23	30
Lost children, not all	14	13	15	15
No surviving children	1	3	3	7
Marital history (%)				
In first marriage	55	23	31	4
In second or third marriage	13	3	21	2
Never married	3	7	3	12
Single, after divorce	2	5	3	9
Single, after widowhood	21	52	33	57
Single, after several dissolved marriages	6	11	9	15
Occupational history, exit (%)				
Age 50 and before	6	61	3	57
Between age 50 and age 55	4	7	2	7
After age 55	90	32	93	36
Occupational history, mobility (%)				
No change	40	66	25	57
Small upward change	41	29	44	35
Large upward change	19	5	31	8

had outlived their children. This difference is probably attributable to their higher average age. In the German sample, 3% of the men and 7% of the women lost all their children. The figures for the Dutch sample were 1% and 3% for men and women, respectively.

The distribution of respondents over the marital history categories differed between the two samples. This difference is attributable to the representation of those aged 90 years and older in the BASE. In both samples, the majority of men were married. The NESTOR-LSN sample had a higher proportion of married women than the BASE sample (26% vs. 6%). Both samples had lower proportions of never-married men than never-married women. Among the formerly married, the proportion of those widowed was much higher than that of those divorced and separated. The German sample

had relatively more widows and widowers. Finally, 6% of Dutch men, 9% of German men, 11% of Dutch women, and 15% of German women were unmarried at the time of the interview but had been married at least twice in the past.

Table 1 shows clear resemblances between the two samples regarding men's and women's occupational histories. The large majority of male respondents left the labor force after the age of 55 years. Among women, a majority left the labor force at age 55 or before. Many women in the cohorts under investigation stopped working for pay at marriage or when their first children were born (Liefbroer and Dykstra 2000; Müller 1983) and never entered the labor force again. In the Dutch sample, none experienced downward mobility. In the German sample, 22% experienced downward moves. It is unclear how to account for this finding. Respondents who experienced downward moves were categorized as experiencing no mobility. The same was done for those who never entered the labor force. Whereas the majority of men were upwardly mobile during their careers, this was not true for women. However, most upwardly mobile respondents gained only little prestige during their careers. Only 19% of Dutch men, 31% of German men, 5% of Dutch women, and 8% of German women gained considerable prestige during the courses of their occupational careers.

Differences in network size by parenthood and marital and occupational histories, controlled for age, are presented in Table 2 (Dutch sample) and Table 3 (German sample). Unstandardized regression parameters are shown. For each of the life-history variables, these estimates show the difference in network size between the reference category and the category of interest. For example, in Table 2, a score of –3.46 for Dutch men who never had children means that, all things being equal, they had well over three network members fewer than Dutch fathers who never lost children by death.

Not surprisingly, network size was inversely associated with age. This pattern was found in both the NESTOR-LSN and the BASE data and among both men and women. Given that the age differences in network size continued to exist after controlling for parenthood and marital and occupational histories, age might indicate deaths of network members and health status, which is positively associated with network size. The young old tend to have better health, and those in better health tend to have relatively large social networks (Broese van Groenou et al. 1995; Wagner and Wolf 2001).

As the respective tables show, older adults who never had children tended to have smaller networks than older adults who became parents and never experienced the death of children. This pattern held for both men and women in both samples. The outsurvival of children did not seem to have implications for the size of men's networks, but it did for women's networks.

Table 2
Unstandardized Regression Coefficients, Selected Models Network Size, Dutch Respondents

	Men (n = 355)			Women (n = 306)		
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	10.50**	11.92**	11.39**	11.28**	13.36**	12.75**
Current age[a]	–0.29**	–0.24**	–0.27**	–0.19**	–0.13**	–0.14**
Parenthood history						
(vs. all children alive)						
Never had children	–3.46**	–1.59	–1.51	–2.35**	–2.86*	–2.76*
Lost children, not all[b]				–0.38	–0.20	–0.17
No surviving children[b]	–0.86	–0.55	–0.44	–2.58*	–2.56*	–2.56*
Marital history						
(vs. in first marriage)						
In second or third marriage		–3.18*	–3.16*		–4.51*	–5.12*
Never married		–2.74*	–2.89*		–0.58	–0.78*
Single, after divorce		–5.85**	–5.25**		–4.05*	–3.76**
Single, after widowhood		–3.40**	–3.54*		–2.77*	–2.54*
Single, after several dissolved marriages		–3.03*	–3.35*		–2.48*	–2.49**
Occupational history, exit						
(vs. after age 55)						
Between age 50 and age 55			–1.49			–0.58
Age 50 and before			–3.29*			–1.84*
Occupational history, mobility						
(vs. no change[c])						
Small upward change			0.98			–0.32
Large upward change			1.89			1.09
Adjusted R^2	.05	.08	.09	.03	.07	.08

a. Defined as deviation from the mean age.
b. Among men, these categories were taken together.
c. Includes respondents who never had paid jobs.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Women who had outlived all their children generally had smaller networks than mothers who never lost children by death. One should note, however, that the difference did not reach levels of significance in the German data. Furthermore, because of small numbers in the NESTOR-LSN analyses, men who had outlived their children were grouped together with those who lost one or more of their children. Both the Dutch and the German data show that the networks of mothers who had lost one or more but not all of their children did not differ in size from those of mothers who had not experienced the loss of children. German men who lost one or more but not all

Table 3
Unstandardized Regression Coefficients, Selected Models Network Size, German Respondents

	Men (n = 355)			Women (n = 306)		
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	10.23**	10.98**	10.44**	9.94**	13.99**	15.31**
Current age[a]	–0.24**	–0.23**	–0.23**	–0.25**	–0.23**	–0.22**
Parenthood history (vs. all children alive)						
Never had children	–2.64**	–2.11*	–2.20*	–2.21**	–1.97	–2.02*
Lost children, not all	3.42**	3.84**	3.76**	1.28	1.40	1.50
No surviving children	–0.76	–0.70	–0.77	–1.84	–1.93	–1.90
Marital history (vs. in first marriage)						
In second or third marriage		–0.53	–0.47		–0.80	–0.36
Never married		–3.16	–2.99		–4.23	–4.79*
Single, after divorce		–7.92**	–7.96**		–7.06**	–7.51**
Single, after widowhood		–1.60	–1.60		–4.27*	–4.43*
Single, after several dissolved marriages		–2.00	–1.87		–3.46	–3.65**
Occupational history, exit (vs. after age 55)						
Between age 50 and age 55			–0.21			–0.47
Age 50 and before			–2.92			–1.63**
Occupational history, mobility (vs. no change[b])						
Small upward change			0.52			–1.33
Large upward change			1.37			0.50
Adjusted R^2	.13	.17	.17	.15	.18	.18

a. Defined as deviation from the mean age.
b. Includes respondents who never had paid jobs.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

of their children tended to have larger networks than fathers who never lost children by death. The pattern among their Dutch counterparts was different: There was no difference in network size associated with the loss of (all) children.

With the introduction in model 2 of marital-history variables, the differences in network size between the lifetime childless and the control group of parents became insignificant among Dutch men and German women. The introduction of marital-history variables also led to a drop in the magnitude of the coefficient for lifetime childlessness among German men, but

the coefficient remained significant. These findings suggest that differences in network size between those who never had children and those who did become parents are at least in part attributable to marital-history differences. The introduction of marital-history variables did not appreciably change any of the other parenthood-history coefficients.

In the Dutch sample, those in first marriages had larger networks than any of the other marital history groups, with one exception: The networks of never-married women did not differ in size from those of women in first marriages. The pattern of results was quite similar in the German sample, but fewer coefficients attained levels of significance. Among German men, the small-sized networks of divorced men stood out. Among men and women in the German sample, no differences in network size were observed between those in first marriages and the remarried.

Occupational-history variables were introduced in model 3. The coefficients for parenthood history remained virtually unchanged. In other words, insofar as parenthood differences in network size existed, they were not attributable to differences in occupational history. The introduction of the occupational-history variables did lead to a change in the magnitude of the coefficient for lifetime childlessness among German women: it became significant (as it was in model 1). The age at which people left the labor force was associated with differences in network size. Those who left the labor force early, that is, at or before the age of 50 years, had relatively small networks. One should note, however, that the coefficient for early exit did not reach levels of significance among German men. Occupational mobility was not associated with differences in network size.

Taken together, the life-history variables and age accounted for between 8% and 9% of the variance in the Dutch data and between 17% and 18% in the German data. It is unclear why the proportion of variance explained in the German data was about twice as high as in the Dutch data.

Conclusion

People who remain childless are a numerical minority, and their lives do not follow prescribed paths. Conceivably, being off the beaten track of parenthood can have specific advantages in social life: more opportunities for servicing ties, given greater free-available time and the absence of family responsibilities. It can also have specific disadvantages. On one hand, there is the view that lifetime childlessness is a means for greater sociability. On the other hand, there is the view that lifetime childlessness is a restriction on

social interaction. What do the findings suggest about the social integration of childless older adults?

The results show that those who never had children had smaller networks in old age. The findings across samples and across genders were remarkably consistent. Older adults who never had children, whether residing in Amsterdam or Berlin, whether male or female, nominated fewer persons as network members on average than did aging parents.

Given that the lifetime childless had smaller networks than parents, the question immediately presents itself as to whether the differences in network size are not simply the difference between having children and their in-laws and grandchildren as network members and not having them as network members. Dykstra (1995), using NESTOR-LSN data, and Lang (1994, 2004), using BASE data, showed that there is some truth to this supposition. Focusing on the representation in the network of six different types of relationships (siblings, siblings-in-law, other kin, friends, neighbors, and other nonkin), Dykstra demonstrated that for all types of relationships, with the exception of siblings-in-law, childless older adults had similar or higher levels of involvement compared with parents. However, the greater involvement in relationships such as those with siblings or friends did not match the representation of children (and children-in-law and grandchildren) in the networks of older parents. Lang's analyses indicated no differences between the childless and parents regarding the number of nonkin relationships in the social network. Childless older adults were more likely than parents to include extended kin in their networks. The greater activation of extended kin did not, however, match the numbers of close kin (children and their in-laws and grandchildren) in the networks of older parents.

To a certain extent, the smaller networks of the lifetime childless are attributable to more limited pools of kin. There is no evidence, however, that childlessness has been a means for greater sociability. Those who never had children do not have extensive friendship networks or particularly intensive engagements with extended family members. The networks of the childless might be specifically vulnerable in late life. As has been established repeatedly (Campbell, Connidis, and Davies 1999; Connidis and Davies 1990; Kendig et al. 1988), they are more likely than parents to have network ties with age peers (friends, colleagues, cousins) and for that reason are more likely to lose network members with increasing age. Previous losses of age peers might also account for the smaller networks of the lifetime childless, particularly among the oldest. Taking the findings together, my conclusion is that the lifetime childless are at a greater risk for social

isolation in late life than parents. This conclusion is in line with earlier empirical work (Choi 1994; Mugford and Kendig 1986).

Relatively unique to this study is that diversity among the childless was considered: those who never had children and those who had outlived their children. My expectation that the latter would be more socially isolated was not supported by the data. Among men, in both the Dutch and the German samples, the outsurvival of children did not have a negative impact on network size. Whereas the networks of men who had outlived their children were about the same size as those of fathers who never lost children by death, the networks of men who never had children were smaller than those of the control group of fathers. Among women in both samples, no differences in network size were observed between those who had never had children and those who had outlived their children. Both groups had smaller networks than mothers who never experienced the loss of children.

Under the assumption that the loss of a child by death might result in disruptions in the social network, a distinction was made in the analyses between parents who had never lost children by death and those who had experienced such a loss but still had surviving children. The results provided no indications that the latter were more socially isolated. In the Dutch sample, the networks of the two groups did not differ in size, whereas in the German sample, parents who had experienced the loss of one or more but not all of their children had relatively large social networks.

In both samples, and contrary to what I had expected, the pattern of results was quite similar for men and women. There was little support for the expectation that differences between the childless and parents would be greater among women than among men. Gender differences were found only for the impact of outliving children. Whereas women who had lost all their children by death had relatively small networks, this was not so among their male counterparts. The numbers of older adults who had outlived their children were relatively small, so caution is advised in drawing conclusions.

Ever since Durkheim, the family has been viewed as an avenue toward social integration. The family encompasses several roles, including those of spouse and parent. The socially integrative function of marriage has been substantiated time and time again in research. Whether parenthood serves a socially integrating function independently of marriage has remained an open question. The measures of marital history and parenthood history used in the present study made it possible to disentangle the effects of marriage and parenthood. The results showed differences in network size by parenthood history, controlled for differences in marital history. Older adults with surviving children had larger networks than those without children, and this finding

was only partially attributable to their marital histories. In other words, parenthood serves a socially integrating function independently of marriage.

People's parenthood careers are linked not only with marriage but also with employment, and this is particularly so for women. I examined whether parenthood-history differences in network size were attributable to differences in occupational history. This was not found to be the case. This result further supports the notion that parenthood contributes to social integration in a unique way.

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Pearl A. Dykstra, PhD, is a senior researcher at the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute and has a chair in family demography at the University of Utrecht. Her publications focus on late-life families, aging and the life course, family demography, social networks, and loneliness. At present, she is the director of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, a multiactor, multimethod panel study on family solidarity in the Netherlands. In 2004, she was elected a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.