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Giving meaning to intergenerational solidarity: immigrant mothers and children in the Netherlands

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Abstract

In this paper, we examined how relationships between mothers and adult children were understood and evaluated in the context of migration. Our data consisted of in-depths interviews with Surinamese and Antillean immigrants in the Netherlands. Results showed that the role of practical support in mother-child relationships differed across siblings and over time. Emotional ties were positively assessed by the amount of time spent together, but only mothers expressed concerns about the frequency of contact. They counterbalanced negative implications for the relationship, however, by considering the impact of individual opportunities and needs. Whereas opportunity restrictions of children were ascribed to circumstances, needs of parents were minimized by highlighting self-reliance, low-maintenance and gratefulness. Together, our findings elaborate previous insights about practical, emotional and distanced ties in migrant families and demonstrate how migrants can use Western and non-Western family norms in an integrative fashion to give meaning to family ties.

Key-words: Immigration/Migrant families, Intergenerational relations, Families in middle and later life, Qualitative research

Giving Meaning to Intergenerational Solidarity:

Immigrant Mothers and Children in the Netherlands

With the ageing populations of North-Western European countries, a great interest has emerged in intergenerational relationships and the solidarity between parents and their adult children. Meanwhile, immigrants are forming a growing share of the elderly. Many of them originate from non-Western societies, where kinship plays a pivotal role and families rely on each other for support. At the same time, their children grew up in a destination country where individual freedom and independence are highly valued. Research has addressed the question how migration, especially from a non-Western to a Western country, impacts family relations. On the one hand, findings indicate that traditional family values persist. Compared to natives, migrants continue to belief more strongly that adult children ought to take care of parents, for example (De Valk & Schans, 2008; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999). Studies on actual support, on the other hand, showed that migrants and natives are quite similar and thereby suggest that migrants are adapting their family behaviors (Schans & Komter, 2010; Schans & De Valk, 2011).

Although these works importantly advanced our knowledge about the general contours of migrant families, a more in-depth picture is still missing. The issue how migrants themselves view and evaluate intergenerational relationships still remains unaddressed. Taking into account the meanings that are attached to family behaviors is nonetheless essential for understanding family solidarity. Furthermore, the simultaneous findings that norms persist while behaviors change in the process of migration and settlement, implies that immigrant elderly may be encountering a reality that is at odds with their expectations. An intriguing question, therefore, is to what extent immigrant parents experience such conflicts in the relationship with children and if so, how they understand and explain these. Whereas tensions in the relationship between aging parents and adult children are a growing topic of interest concerning Western families (*e.g.* Peters, Hooker, & Zvonkovic, 2006; Pyke, 1999; Spitze & Gallant, 2004), such dynamics in migrant families have not yet been considered.

In this paper, the central questions are how mother-child relations become understood and evaluated by migrants and how migrant mothers manage potential mismatches between their expectations and the actual behaviors of children. The analyses comprised two parts. First, elaborating previous quantitative research, we looked more into detail about practical, emotional and distanced aspects of mother-child relationships. Second, we zoomed in on instances that revealed an incongruence between what mothers had expected or preferred and

how children actually behaved. The aim was to examine how mothers explained these situations and what the consequences of their explanations were for an evaluation of the relationship.

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with immigrants of Surinamese and Antillean descent in the Netherlands (De Valk, 2012). Surinamese and Antilleans are two of the largest non-Western immigrant groups in the Netherlands, most of whom arrived during the 1960s. While the first generation is getting older, their children have come of age. These origin groups are thus of exemplary relevance for studying intergenerational solidarity among migrant families. We focus specifically on mothers because of the central role that women are known to have as kin keepers (Gerstel & Gallagher, 2001) and our aim to build on preceding studies.

Theory and previous research

Practical, Emotional and Distanced Ties

The strong orientation towards the family in non-Western societies has received ample empirical support (*e.g.* Kagitçibasi, Ataca, & Diri, 2005; Phalet & Güngör, 2009; Trommsdorff & Nauck, 2005). In order to understand how migration affects family relations, distinguishing between practical and emotional ties has been shown to be helpful. According to theory, the conditions of less affluent, non-Western societies foster a mutual interdependence between parents and children in practical and emotional respect (Kagitçibasi, 1996). Migration to a Western society would reduce the need for practical solidarity, because these countries are more economically advanced and offer alternative forms of social security. At the same time, emotional ties among migrant families would retain their significance. The assumption that practical interdependence diminishes while affective ties remain strong has been empirically demonstrated by research on mother-child relations among non-Western immigrants in the Netherlands (Rooyackers, De Valk, & Merz, 2014). This study additionally showed that the direction of support matters. Whereas emotional support was always exchanged, practical support was variably given both ways (exchanged by mother and child), upward (child to mother) or downward (mother to child). Furthermore, there were also mothers and children who neither gave nor received support of either kind. These relationships were rare in general, but more common among migrants than native Dutch. Referring to the possible problematic consequences of migration, the authors concluded that this lack of support may reflect distanced, rather than (desired) independent ties.

The relevance of these studies notwithstanding, their findings raise some interesting issues that this type of research cannot (easily) address. Survey studies have commonly focused on the relationship between a parent and one particular child. However, practical support and tasks may be divided across siblings. The assumption that siblings share intergenerational responsibilities has been indirectly demonstrated by the finding that children from large families tend to maintain less frequent contact with their parents (*e.g.* Spitze & Logan, 1991; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). Research has not looked into such differentiations in detail, however, let alone for migrant families specifically. Furthermore, the emotional dimension of intergenerational ties is intrinsically related to subjective perspectives. Which behaviors count as emotional support, for example, depends on what people interpret or experience as such. What does it mean if parents and children regard their relationship as emotionally close? Similar questions can be asked about distanced ties, which in some way are the other side of the same coin. In the first part of our paper, we addressed these issues, aiming to give a comprehensive picture of mother-child relationships across siblings and how migrant mothers and children understand and concretize emotional and distanced ties.

Conflicting Norms and Behaviors

On the one hand, studies on family behaviors have showed that immigrants become more similar to natives over time and thereby suggest that migration causes a certain degree of shift in family relations. Research on family values, on the other hand, highlighted the continuance of norms among migrants and a persisting difference with natives. Even though family values level off to some extent over immigrant generations (Phalet & Güngör, 2009; Merz, Özeke-Kocabas, Oort & Schuengel, 2009), immigrants as well as their descendants remain stronger adherents of filial obligations than Western natives, for instance (Schans & De Valk, 2011). The diverging paces of changing values and behaviors has been specifically demonstrated by a study which showed that behavioral differences between native Dutch and immigrants disappeared among the second generation, whereas the gap in family values remained (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2008). As suggested by the authors, these findings indicate that the behaviors of migrants are more readily modified than their beliefs. Whereas conducts can be adjusted to the practical necessities of daily life, values that are acquired through socialization may be psychologically central constructs that resist change. However, although the assumption that migrants adapt their family behaviors while retaining normative beliefs may be practically true, it leaves the intriguing issue how migrant parents deal with the

implied discrepancy. In the second part of this paper, we examined the explanations that migrant mothers gave for such situations of (potential) conflict and the evaluative assessments that followed their explanations. Based on the theoretical argument that migration changes family relations by altering socioeconomic and cultural conditions, we expected that migrant mothers would refer to circumstances. In addition, we focused on normative beliefs about family relations. In migration literature, "non-Western" and "Western" family values are commonly identified by their respective emphasis on family obligations and individual independence. Migrants, however, may be influenced by both, as they were socialized into the norms of the origin country and at the same time encountered alternative practices and ways of thinking about family relations in the society where they settled. We thus attended to the possibility that mothers drew upon both these family notions to make sense out of their relationships with children.

Immigrant Groups of Study

Our study focuses on (descendants of) Surinamese and Antillean immigrants in the Netherlands. Today, the Dutch population numbers 17 million people, of whom nearly three percent are of Surinamese and Antillean origin (Statistics Netherlands, 2015). The share of elderly among these migrant groups is increasing. In 2015, there were 46.000 respectively 13.000 individuals of Surinamese and Antillean descent who were older than 60. Meanwhile, their offspring is growing in number as well. Close to half of the contemporary Surinamese and Antillean immigrant population in the Netherlands belongs to this so-called second generation.

Migration from the Caribbean area to the Netherlands has primarily been shaped by (post-)colonial ties. Particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, large flows of immigrants arrived in search of education or for joining family members in the Netherlands (Vermeulen & Phenninx, 2000). By virtue of originating from (ex)colonies, most Surinamese and Antilleans already had some command over the Dutch language before migrating. The Caribbean region differs from the Netherlands in terms of family organization. In Suriname and the Antilles, the typical family structure tends to be matrifocal. Unmarried partnership is not unusual and union dissolution rates are fairly high (Emery & Golson, 2013). This means that mothers take on a special position in the family. Quite a number of households are headed by single mothers, whereas fathers are less involved with the upbringing of children (Distelbrink, 2000). Similar patterns were found among Surinamese and Antillean immigrants in the Netherlands. There are about thrice as many female household heads

among Surinamese and Antilleans than among native Dutch, for instance (Van der Vliet, Ooijevaar, & Van der Bie, 2012). Likewise, separation occurs more frequently among these immigrants than native Dutch women (Rooyackers, Das, & De Valk, 2016).

Method

Data Collection and Participants

Data for the analysis came from the mini-panel *Lonely but not alone: measuring loneliness in migrant samples* (De Valk, 2012). This qualitative study supplemented the nationally representative, large scale *Netherlands Kinship Panel Study* (NKPS; Dykstra et al., 2004) on family ties in the Netherlands. Letters of invitations were sent out to people who had already participated in the NKPS wave 1 (2002-2004) and agreed to be re-contacted. Respondents had to be above 40 years of age and either born in Suriname or the Antilles or have at least one parent who was born there. All of them had been living in the Netherlands for at least 10 years. Of the 242 persons who were approached, 65 responded, including 44 persons who declined the invitation and 21 who agreed to participate. With the purpose of gaining information about loneliness, participants were asked about their relationships with the primary people who made up their social network. The interviews followed a semi-structured guideline and lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. They were held in Dutch and at the respondents' homes. In line with residential patterns among immigrants in the Netherlands (Van der Vliet et al., 2012), nearly all respondents lived in the 25 largest municipalities and most of them in the four main cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. Lastly, for the analyses, we excluded interviews with persons who were Dutch but had incidentally been born in Suriname or the Antilles and people with peculiar family circumstances. This yielded a total number of 14 useable interviews.

Analytical Procedure

We prepared the data by making relevant selections in stepwise manner. First, fragments were collected in which respondents talked about the relationship with their mother and/or children. These fragments were categorized according to the respondent's perspective as mother or child and divided between daughters and sons. Next, excerpts were ordered with respect to any references made to various types of given and received support. The fragments were analyzed in Dutch, but exemplary texts were translated to English for presentation in the paper. Names were anonymized and grammatical errors or informal language were retained in the translations.

Our analyses comprised two parts. The first part was descriptively oriented, with the aim to more closely examine the practical, emotional and distanced dimensions of mother-child relationships. In the second part of the analyses, our purpose was to analyze how mothers (discursively) dealt with diverging expectations and the actual behaviors of children, using a more fine-grained discursive analytical approach. Our method is lightly based on Potter and Wetherell's form of discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996), which attends to the rhetorical functions that explanations serve. The particular ways in which people describe situations, for example, can be used to circumvent potential accusations or construct a favorable (or unfavorable) image of oneself or others. In addition, we acknowledged that societal norms shape people's understanding of relationships. These value constellations provide social identities (such as mother or child) that render certain behaviors appropriate and hence have implications for how people are evaluated (Parker, 1992; Willig, 2008). The discourse of "family obligations" and "individual independence" are examples of such value constellations. We therefore examined whether and how mothers used these ideological notions of family relations to explain and evaluate instances that involved a tension between their expectations and reality.

Results

Descriptive Overview

Tables 1a-b in the Appendix show the age, sex and family situations of respondents. There were ten women and four men in the sample. Given our focus on mothers, all men were automatically examined from their perspective as a son. Seven women discussed intergenerational relationships as a mother, whereas the other three spoke about their role as a daughter. There were equally many Antilleans and Surinamese among both men and women. All respondents affirmed to identify as such, with the exception of one woman who did not consider herself Surinamese, Antillean or Dutch. In line with what we know about the typical family patterns among these immigrant groups, there were quite some single and divorced women in our sample. Of the ten women, seven were younger than 60, of whom four were divorced, two were single and one was widowed. Whereas the two single women were childless, the others had between one and three (adult) children and some had grandchildren as well. Of the remaining three female respondents, aged between 65-80, two were divorced and the third had never been married. All of them had six to eight (adult) children and also grandchildren. Of the four men, two were between 40-50 years of age, each being married and having two relatively young children still living at home. The other two men were older

than 60, one being divorced with (grand)children and the other being married with one (adult) son.

In addition to background characteristics, Tables 1a-b include an overview of the kinds and directions of practical and emotional support that were mentioned by respondents, from the perspective of mothers (1a) and children (1b). Although the tables refer to the relationship that respondents most clearly discussed, additional information about relations with other children or their simultaneous role as parent and child were considered in the analyses as well.

Part I: Dimensions of Mother-Child Relationships

Practical support

As expected, we found quite some variation in practical support: whether or not it was given at all, in what kind, in which direction and with what frequency. Two forms of practical support flowed exclusively from mother to child: financial support and help with childcare. As far as we could tell from the interviews, no large amounts were given or received. Instead, financial support included periodic gifts or contributions in covering expenses for household products. Whereas those who mentioned financial help were sons, only daughters had received childcare. Childcare obviously depends on the presence of young (grand)children. Nevertheless, not all grandmothers assisted with childcare and among those who did, the frequency varied. Whereas one respondent babysat her grandchildren less than once a week, for instance, another (grand)mother provided childcare almost daily, including getting them from school and cooking dinner. Upward forms of practical support concerned various general matters and were provided by both sons and daughters. Children helped their mother, for example, with getting groceries, transportation or preparing meals. The frequencies again varied, with some respondents assisting their mother on occasion and others doing chores daily.

Another form of practical support that featured noticeably in the interviews was co-residence. The instances that respondents described were quite intensive, including longer periods, the hosting of more than one person and a recurrence over time. One son, for instance, had parents who lived off and on in Curacao. Whenever his parents were in the Netherlands for several months, he and his wife hosted them. When buying a new house, it was important for them to have enough space to offer his parents their own room.

Fragment 1 Son, 42, married 2 children	R: Well, when we bought this place, we assumed that we'd be having family members staying in the house for a long, very long time. My mother, or my parents, also have their own, pretty big room. Wife of R: His mother also lived here for three months in the past year. And the year before as well. R: Yeah, yeah, that is just my mother's room. Wife of R: We are expecting another little one, and then [daughter] moves to the attic, because well, that other room is his parents' (laughs).

Another respondent, a 49 year-old daughter, had lived with her mother for multiple years at the time of the interview. There was also a mother who shared her residence with her 35 year-old son. Another mother temporarily hosted her son of 34, her daughter of 33 as well as her granddaughter of 11, "due to circumstances". A few years ago, her son and granddaughter had also lived with her. Furthermore, multiple other respondents who were currently not receiving or providing co-residence, said to have done so at other moments. In our interviews, a shared co-residence between mothers and (adult) children was not treated as something out of the ordinary. This became clear, amongst others, from the way in which respondents talked about co-residence, mentioning it in passing as a descriptive feature of their current living situation. Furthermore, when asked about the help they gave or received, not all respondents who provided co-residence or who were hosted mentioned this as a forms of support. During such times of co-residence, however, other types of practical support appeared to be naturally provided, both downward and upward. The son of Fragment 1, for instance, said that his parents supported his family financially with household matters such as groceries. The 49 year-old daughter who co-resided with her mother, moreover, explained to do "all kinds of stuff", doing "whatever her mother needed or asked her to do".

Sometimes, co-residence with a particular child was the reason for other siblings not to assist their mother with practical matters, as this was considered taken care of. Yet, also in other situations, we found a noticeable variation in mother-child relations across siblings. These differences became especially clear in the dimension of upward practical support. In some families, one child took care of nearly everything. One 66 year-old son, for instance, said that his sister organized all practical and financial issues, whereas he visited his mother once a month. In other cases, practical support was somewhat more evenly distributed across siblings or involved contributions from extended family members. Also then, however, one child retained a central role. A son, for example, cared for his mom Mondays to Fridays (and

at times also in weekends), while his brother took over some weekends and a nephew managed financial arrangements.

The interviews also revealed that the division of practical support across siblings changed over time. In some cases, the amount of practical support a child had once provided suddenly decreased. One mother, for instance, talked about the relationship with her daughter with whom she had been most close of her six children. This abruptly changed when that daughter decided to migrate back to Suriname. At first, her youngest son "took over" that role:

Fragment 2 Mother, 80, divorced 6 children, 11 grandchildren	R: You see, before it was like, that daughter of mine who has moved back to Suriname, she used to live not too far off. So we always went for groceries together. And together, if she went somewhere: "do you want to come?" And if I was at some place: "where are you? Oh wait, I'll come as well". Because she also knew those people. And that's how it was. And so when she left, it was like he took over.

However, things got difficult when her son had a stroke recently. Her other children offered some help to fill the sudden gap, but not (yet) to the degree as her daughter and son did before:

Fragment 3	R: Look, because my son, he always helped me with everything. [..]. I miss him a lot. And it makes me really sad. I: Has it changed that much? R: Yes [..] What he's able to do, in what he's able to do. And you notice that about him. So when I go there, he always used to bring me home. So I went, and if I had to go home, he brought me home. But now I have to take the bus home.

Conversely, from the perspective of a daughter, one respondent explained that she had cut down on her caregiving activities because the responsibility of being the main organizer among siblings weighed on her. Having fulfilled these tasks from childhood on, she struggled to change the relationship with her parents and siblings.

Fragment 4 Mother (speaking as a daughter), 59, divorced 3 children, 3 grandchildren	R: My parents have eight children. And apart from my brother, everyone lives here. So once in a while you can, huh, delegate. Then you can divide it among each other. There was a time that it really, you know.. all revolved around me. Now it's still like that, but I've.. I've put aside that leadership role to some extent. I: Because you are the eldest child? R: No, I've got an older brother and sister, but from childhood on, it has grown to be like this. It has grown to be like this from childhood on. So.. well.. yeah, it keeps making things difficult.

Emotional ties

Whereas every respondent who mentioned practical support also emphasized emotional aspects of the mother-child bond, affective ties were also considered important if practical support was not part of the relationship. Mothers who expressed some disappointment in the practical assistance they received, for example, at other moments affirmed the close relationship they had with their children. Also from the perspectives of children, practical support was not treated as a necessary part of an emotionally close relationship. The respondent in the following fragment, for instance, called her mother the closest person in her life and at the same time explained that her sisters (who lived with their mother) rather than she herself provided practical help.

Fragment 5 Daughter, 60, single no children	I: And why do you mention your mother? R: Uhm, well, because I do really feel connected with her and how much contact I have with her, a lot over the phone, and sometimes one or two times, one time a week or two times a week I go see her.

This fragment is illustrative for the two main ways in which respondents discussed the emotional dimension of mother-child relations. In the excerpt, the respondent gives two reasons for naming her mother as the most important person in her life: feeling connected and having frequent contact. First, unlike practical help, emotional support was linked to a general, subjective evaluation of the relationship. Words that respondents used included "emotional connection", "close bond" or "strong ties". These phrasings are meaningful about the relationship itself and automatically imply a sense of reciprocity. Second, emotional ties were concretized, most markedly by the frequency and means of contact. Mothers and

children clarified their close relationship by stating how much time they spent together. One daughter, again in response to the question why she had called her mother (whose residence she shared) the most important person in her life, laughed and said: “My mom? I just drag her everywhere!”. Another daughter, responding to the statement that children living nearby should visit their parents at least weekly, affirmed her agreeance and added: “If my mother would have lived nearby, I’d be at her place every day”. Similarly, a son revealed the importance of affective ties when he said to visit his mother multiple days a week because they enjoyed each other’s presence. Furthermore, apart from directly mentioning contact, some mothers and children listed concrete behaviors to illustrate their close ties. Most of these, however, were again related to spending time together: watching movies, going out for dinner or making day trips.

Next to discussing contact in a general sense as meaningful about the relationship (i.e. indicative of a close bond), respondents made the initiation of contact into a specific act of affection. Many mothers highlighted how their children called them, presenting this as evidence of their care. Other respondents stressed the reciprocal nature of contact, explicitly stating how they called their children and their children called them:

Fragment 6 Mother, 80, divorced 6 children, 11 grandchildren	R: Not a day goes by or I call my daughter who lives in [place]. Or she calls. And if she ever calls in the morning and she can’t reach me, then she’ll call again in the afternoon. She’ll say: “where were you?”

As Fragment 6 illustrates, the initiation of contact was made relevant in combination with the frequency of contact. The respondent affirms the close relationship with her daughter by pointing out their mutual wish for daily contact and her daughter’s efforts in accomplishing this. The ways in which contact frequencies were qualified, however, varied substantially across respondents. Whereas some labelled weekly phone contact as “frequent” and portrayed this as indicative of a close mother-child bond, others interpreted comparatively irregular contact (less than monthly) as “often” and expressed contentment with the relationship as such.

Distanced ties

Conversely but similarly, the frequency of contact could be used to warrant more negative views of the relationship, indicating an emotional distance. Again, the absolute number of

phone calls or visits that were rendered “insufficient” varied across respondents. What some qualified as “frequent” was by others described as “infrequent”. There was an apparent difference between mothers and children with respect to these more negative evaluations of relationships, however. Only mothers expressed a dissatisfaction with the regularity of contact. In addition, they distinguished between means of contact (i.e. phone calls or visits) and attached a different meaning to each. For some mothers, frequent phone calls could compensate for infrequent visits:

Fragment 7	I: And [son]? How often do you see him?
Mother, 80, divorced	R: Well, he works in shifts, you see? He does also call, he calls frequently.
6 children, 11 grandchildren	

In this fragment, the respondent does not directly answer the interviewer’s question about how often she sees her son, but starts by explaining why her son is not able to come and continues by saying he calls frequently. The implication is that the respondent does not feel she sees her son much, but that his phone calls compensate for this to some extent. For other respondents, face-to-face contact was a necessary, essential element of a close relationship, regardless of whether children called regularly. The mother of the following fragment, for instance, had two children whom called daily and five other children with whom she spoke over the phone once or twice a week. Still, in her view, these phone calls were unable to compensate the lack of visits, let alone be considered as evidence for a good relationship. Instead, all throughout the interview, she kept emphasizing that her children not visited (enough). The following fragment is just one example:

Fragment 8	R: We do talk on the phone nearly every day.
Mother, 74, divorced	I: And with the other children?
6 children. 8 grandchildren	R: The other children as well, sometimes one, two times a week. Only calling. Not seeing, calling. [Daughter] calls every day.
	I: But you talk to your other children about once or twice a week over the phone?
	R: Yes, [other daughter], she calls as well, when she is at work, she calls every day. She also visits very rarely.

Similarly, another mother who earlier in the interview affirmed the frequent phone calls she had with her children, remained disappointed that they did not stop by or invited her more often. For her, these things indicated an actual "close bond", as she saw her sister having with her children:

Fragment 9 Mother, 59, divorced 3 children, 3 grandchildren	R: You see, my sister has a very close bond with her children and she really often goes out with her children. Look, her children are now about 20, 21 or 22 or something, and.. then her oldest daughter calls, then that daughter calls like "mom, are we meeting or shall we go out for lunch?" So uhm.. well yes still, they still go out really often.

In contrast to mothers, for whom contact seemed to be a crucial matter, none of the children in our interviews mentioned contact frequency as a problematic issue in itself. Children who expressed a more negative view of the relationship discussed more concrete difficulties that had led them to deliberately seek distance. The respondent from Fragment 4, for instance, withdrew herself from her parents because of the pressure of being the main caregiver among siblings.

Part II: Managing Expectations and Reality

Our second interest was how mothers discursively dealt with (implicitly acknowledged) disappointments in the relationship. Overall, we barely found any clear and direct complaints from mothers about their children. Yet, as Fragments 8 and 9 above show, many mothers nonetheless seemed to experience some friction between what they would have liked and the actual situation being as it was. Even though mothers seemed to manage quite well to find the help they needed, the ways in which they explained to draw on their social network or hire paid services, revealed their (initially) different expectations or preferences in the matter:

Fragment 10 Mother, 80, divorced 6 children, 11 grandchildren	R: Then all the children were still at home, you know, everyone lending a hand. Now I'm here by myself, you see, so my neighbors, if I need them and I ask, look I have to do a meter reading and I can't do it, well then I ask one of my neighbors and then he comes and reads it for me.

Fragment 11 Mother, 65, single 7 children, >2 grandchildren	I: Does it ever happen that in terms of the help that you expect from people, that they disappoint you in that? R: If I can be really honest, my son.. [..]. I have a lamp down there, it needs to be hang up, but well.. Otherwise I have to pay someone, you know. I paid someone to hang up that one.

Opportunities

In general, respondents made sense out of these situations by placing them in the context of opportunities and needs. Whereas needs were mostly treated as an issue of parents, opportunities were primarily considered as shaping the behaviors of children. There were two interpretative versions of "opportunities" in the interviews. First, opportunities were understood as the possibilities that circumstances permitted. In this interpretation, situational restrictions of children were "objectified", i.e. treated as real hindrances to engage in more frequent contact.

Fragment 12 Mother, 59, divorced 3 children, 3 grandchildren	R: The distance is too long. [..]. You want to, you know, you want to. In your head, in your thoughts, you're still 18. But your body says stop stop stop. I: And does he come often this way? R: No, he has no means of transportation, so then it becomes difficult.
Fragment 13 Mother, 74, divorced 6 children. 8 grandchildren	R: Well, they all have their jobs. And homework, all of them have children, doing groceries. They don't have time, that's why they only call.

The factual in which the respondent of Fragment 12 describes the problems of geographical distance, health issues of her own and difficulties with transport, for instance, presents the infrequent contact between her and her son as a logical result of circumstances. Similarly, the mother in Fragment 13 lists the competing tasks and obligations that children face, leading up to her self-evident conclusion that time-constraints are "why children only call".

Sometimes, the situational circumstances that would cause children to spend less time with parents were seen as typical for Dutch society:

Fragment 14 Mother, 74, divorced 6 children. 8 grandchildren	R: Here, you are on your own, but in Suriname they often come close. They live close, and then they do come every day or they live together with their children. Yes, but not here. Here it's impossible.
Fragment 15 Mother, 80, divorced 6 children, 11 grandchildren	R: I've got Surinamese children and I've got Dutch children. You see, those three who are here, well, they are just… like [daughter], she will just say to me: "Mama, I can't do it, coming to you every time. It's too far off, I've got my job, I've got my husband." She also has a child.

In Fragment 14, the respondent suggests that whereas the situation in Suriname allows for close contact, the Netherlands makes this impossible. Relationships between mother and children are thus portrayed as a consequence of the organization of Dutch society. In Fragment 15, a mother more specifically treats the cultural context of the Netherlands as "circumstances" that shape the relationships with her children. By distinguishing between her "Surinamese" and "Dutch" children and subsequently giving an example of how her Dutch daughter behaves, she classifies the argument of time-restrictions as typically Dutch. Her daughter would be characteristic for a Dutch child because of "just saying" to her mother: "I can't do it, coming to you every time".

Second, opportunities were interpreted as the result of personal choice and preference. Time-restrictions, for instance, were also recognized as a matter of prioritization and choice of how to spend your time. The respondent of Fragment 12, for example, continued by saying:

Fragment 16	And well, yeah, let's be honest, he also has his own life there.

With this expression, the respondent proposes that the contact between her and her son also reflects his preference. By depicting their relationship in contrast to an investment in "his own life", she suggests that mother-child relationships fall outside the sphere of children's personal life and the degree of involvement in each has to be negotiated. Later, she makes a similar remark with respect to her daughter:

Fragment 17	I: And what are the activities that you do with your daughter, in the Netherlands? What do you do together? R: O very little (laughs), very little. Because look, she also has her own group of friends. Let's be honest.

Her daughter "also having her group of friends" is mentioned as the reason for them undertaking few activities together. Their relationship thus becomes understood as something additional to her daughter's own social network, indicating that maintaining both involves a compromise.

Discussing opportunities as the inevitable outcome of circumstances or as the result of personal priorities had different evaluative implications. Obviously, if the behaviors of children are shaped by external causes, they cannot be held accountable. In Fragment 15 above, for example, the respondent's explanation invites an evaluation of the cultural worldview of the Netherlands, rather than of her daughter's motives. By considering opportunities as a matter of choice, in contrast, contact frequency became meaningful about children's engagement in the relationship. In the interviews, mothers varyingly employed both these two meanings of opportunities, often using the "situational" interpretation to preempt or dissolve the negative implications of the "personal choice" version. The next excerpt gives an illustration.

Fragment 18 Mother, 80, divorced 6 children, 11 grandchildren	R: Sometimes you think, oh she [daughter] is a little indifferent, but at the same time you notice, if she doesn't hear me, she'll call. "Yes, I didn't call, but I was so busy with this and that." I say: "Yes, I understand, my dear".

In Fragment 18, the respondent starts by maintaining the possibility that her daughter's behavior would be indicative of (lacking) engagement in the relationship, showing her "indifference". She then counters this idea, however, by accepting her daughter's explanation that time-restrictions prevented her from calling ("being busy") and concludes with an expression of understanding. The next fragments offer an example of a father talking on behalf of himself and his wife:

Fragment 19 & 20 Son (speaking as a father), 63, married, 1 child	R: Uhm.. we are like.. Both my wife and I.. uhm.. the parental home remains his home, but his house is not our house. So, he can always come whenever he wants, we won't easily drop by spontaneously at his place. And uhm.. so well, we see him.. whenever it suits him. I: If I understand you correctly, you have, I mean you and your wife, you are more eager to see him, than.. vice versa so the speak? R: Uhm, yes yes. I: And are you unhappy about that or think that's a pity or.. R: No no no. Because I understand his circumstances [..]. Yes, just busy.

The respondent first explains that he and his wife leave the amount of contact with their son up to his convenience, respecting his wishes. He thereby shows an acknowledgment of his son's freedom to decide on what he wants in the relationship with his parents. When asked about any possible negative inferences of the matter (considering that he and his wife have stronger preferences for contact), the respondent negates this by pointing out his son's situation. "Just being busy" is presented as a fact of life and understandable restraining factor. The implication is that his son's wishes are dictated by circumstances and hence not indicative of how much he would like to see his parents. Thus, whereas their relationship becomes explained as the result of personal preferences, it is evaluated on the basis of situational restrictions.

Needs

In addition to the opportunities of children, mothers resolved potential conflicts between their preferences and reality by taking a critical view on the concept of parent's "needs". First, they downplayed or denied the urgency of their own desires, emphasizing that what they wanted from their children (although perhaps preferable) was not actually necessary. Second, rather than objective circumstances, mothers talked about needs as reflecting personal character, showing how undemanding, appreciative and independent they were as a parent. Fragments 21 and 22 are just two illustrations of the many occurrences in the interviews:

Fragment 21 Mother, 57, divorced 2 children, 1 grandchild	R: I'm a person who's always content. If today they would say: "mom, you only get 10 dollars", then I'm also happy. So the speak, I mean. But well, I'm a very content woman.

Fragment 22 Mother, 80, divorced 6 children, 11 grandchildren	I: And, because you say: "I've accepted that, they have their own life", but would you like the situation to be different? R: No, no, no. I: So you don't think, it's not that you expect them to consider a little bit more.. R: No, I accept what I have to. I'm also very independent. Everything I get, I'm grateful for. No, I'm very independent in that way.

In these fragments, acquiescing to the situation is presented as demonstrating favorable personality traits, like being "easily content", "low-maintenance" and "grateful". In nearly all instances in the interviews, such positive self-descriptions arose just after respondents had qualified the contact with their children as "infrequent" or had mentioned something their children did not do (*i.e.* providing much support or visiting often). This suggests that the arguments served as a disclaimer for any potential negative inferences about their children's behaviors. The last excerpt, for instance, followed closely upon Fragment 15 above, in which the respondent mentioned her daughter who was "too busy to come to see her all the time". In Fragment 22, she implicitly concedes that the situation is not how she would have ideally wanted it to be. Otherwise, there would be no need for "acceptance". Moreover, the understanding that the respondent had expressed earlier that her children are free to live their own life, potentially contains the negative inference that her daughter does not choose to invest in the relationship with her mother. However, the respondent dissolves this tension by (positively) presenting herself as an independent and grateful person who does not demand much. The implication is that there is no conflict, because she does not need her daughter to come over. Furthermore, the evaluative focus has switched from the motives of her daughter to (the positive aspects of) her own personality. What becomes important is not what her children, but what she herself does.

A particularly prominent aspect of the positive self-image that mothers created was that of independence. Either respondents described themselves as "self-reliant" and not needing the assistance of others or they emphasized how well they managed in organizing alternative solutions (rather than discussing the availability of other sources of support). The importance of being independent was strengthened by setting it up in contrast to "reliance". A number of mothers mentioned their fear or disinclination to be a burden to their children:

Fragment 23 Mother, 59, divorced 3 children, 3 grandchildren	R: That was last year, out of nowhere I got this pain attack. I didn't know what caused it and everything, it was very sudden and then the doctor did come, but normally I do not bother my children.. No. I: And do you have other people around you who can help you? R: You are so independent, really, that you don't bother anyone. [..]. Yeah, it really is like, uhm.. don't bother anyone, come on, you take care of your own.
Fragment 24 Mother, 80, divorced 6 children, 11 grandchildren	R: I'm always saying, if the time comes, I'll go to a nursing home. I'm not going to burden my children. As long as I can stay here, I want to stay.

In Fragment 23, a mother explains her hesitation to ask help as a sign of her self-reliance. Her independence becomes meaningful by being set in opposition to "bothering people". The suggestion is that asking help means bothering people. Moreover, more strongly than not needing help, the respondent indirectly claims she does not want help. Asking help thus becomes portrayed as a choice and her decision not to make an appeal on her children highlights her own autonomy in the matter. Similarly, the mother of Fragment 24 equates the reliance of parents on children to "being a burden". In her refusal to be such a burden, she reveals her own preference ("As long as I'm able to stay here, I want to stay"). Consequently, the issue is not whether her children offer co-residence, but whether she wants that or not.

General norms and concrete situations

Interpreting infrequent contact as the result of children's personal choice also invites negative assessments in terms of being normatively deviating. Many respondents at some point in the interview stressed the importance of family support and filial obligations, often portrayed as exemplifying the Surinamese and Antillean culture in contrast to the Dutch. Yet, there were no direct allegations that children were not complying with family norms. Instead, respondents seemed to deal with normative expectations in more or less the same way as they did with unmet desires, namely by understanding family norms in the context of concrete individual opportunities and needs. The next respondent, a son, explained this in an illuminating way when asked his opinion about the idea that children should help their parents:

Fragment 25 Son, 46, married 2 children	R: You know, why do they keep saying "have to", that "have to, have to have, to" in that question? [..]. You cannot force it, right? It would be nice.. [..]. You know, I'm like, yeah sure, if the relationship is as such, do it. But there is no obligation to it [..]. Or perhaps I read those questions… Perhaps I should say "agree, agree and agree". Because you do have to help each other, also financially. If you can. So, assuming that you can. [..]. It's normal to me. You see, if for instance they would say: "Is it normal for you that children take care of their parents who are ill", then I think yes. Is it normal for you that aging parents move in with their children. Yes. [..]. But what is not normal, is that "have-to"-aspect, that's something we don't do.

Here, family norms are interpreted as an awareness that family members should help each other, if possible. The respondent distinguishes between a "should", meaning a normative obligation to follow no matter what and a "should" referring to what is normatively desired under the right circumstances. The examples he gives for these "right conditions" are having an appropriate parent-child relationship and the resources to help. Presented as such, whether or not the absence of support is normatively deviant depends on the situation.

As the next fragment illustrates, we found a similar approach among mothers:

Fragment 26 Mother, 80, divorced 6 children, 11 grandchildren	R: Well, I don't think it's necessary at all [children taking care of parents who are ill]. If they want to, they can. But it shouldn't be a "have to", because everyone has their own life.

This respondent implicitly reveals that providing co-residence is in principle the favorable thing to do, but a matter of individual choice in terms of reality. In her final comment "because everyone has their own life", general norms are made dependent on personal preferences. She thereby deconstructs general family norms into the concrete interests that these involve on the individual level. Consequently, rather than being about normative compliance, intergenerational solidarity becomes about managing two diverging individual interests: that of the parent and child. This way, the hierarchy of needs that is implicated in family obligations (*e.g.* adult children should take care of ageing parents) is substituted by a juxtaposition of individual needs. Relationships hence become portrayed as requiring a compromise, a process of give and take. In such a process, it is not immediately clear what conduct is right or wrong, because the gain of the one is the loss of the other.

Discussion

This paper offered a comprehensive insight into mother-child solidarity among Surinamese and Antillean families in the Netherlands, being the first to examine how these relationships are understood and evaluated by migrant mothers and adult children themselves. In the first part of our analyses of in-depth interviews, we took a closer look at practical, emotional and distanced ties. The results, firstly, showed that a full picture of intergenerational solidarity requires an attention for differences across siblings and over time. In our interviews, particularly upward practical support was unequally distributed, coming down to mainly one daughter or son. Previous research has indirectly examined the assumption that siblings share intergenerational responsibilities, but not how these become distributed (*e.g.* Spitze & Logan, 1991; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). Considering the broader dynamics in parent-child relationships, however, is essential for fully understanding the situation of aging parents and their children. As our analyses indicated, the contributions of siblings can decrease over time, for instance because of return migration, illness or the burden of being the principle caregiver. Such a gap was not always filled by siblings and mothers struggled to find a solution. The unequal distribution across siblings thus implies a potential vulnerability of both parent and child.

Variations across siblings in the practical dimension of mother-child relationships were also shaped by co-residence. Such co-residence, apart from being a form of practical help in itself, appeared to naturally facilitate other support exchanges. Among our respondents, it was not extraordinary for mothers and (adult) children to live together, even for extended and recurring periods of time. The commonness of co-residence in our study may be characteristic for migrant families, who originate from countries where the value of living independently is less proclaimed as in Western societies. This supposition matches other research which showed that young-adults of non-Western immigrant descent more often return to the parental home than native Dutch (Kleinepier, Berrington, & Stoeldraijer, 2016). In addition, co-residence may have been more likely in our study because of the many single mothers among our respondents, as is typical for Caribbean (migrant) families (Thomas, 2012). Until now, research on parent-child relations have usually excluded those who live in the same household. Our results indicate, however, that especially for migrant families, taking co-residence into account is essential to avoid partial information that is highly dependent on the timing of data gathering.

Compared to practical ties, emotional aspects of the relationship were less clearly differentiated across siblings. Most mothers and children experienced an emotional bond,

regardless of whether practical help was provided. These affective ties were primarily given meaning by the amount of time spent together. In the literature, the issue how to operationalize affective ties has led to quite some extensive measurements, including feelings of closeness, getting along and the quality of communication (*e.g.* Lendon et al. 2014) or how much parents and children trust, understand, respect, feel affection towards each other and feel the other is fair (Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009). Interestingly, our respondents used none of such elaborate explanations. Instead of qualifying, they quantified emotional ties, referring to the number of phone calls and visits. The interpretations of absolute frequencies varied considerably across respondents, however, highlighting the subjective nature of this emotional dimension.

In a similar but converse way, inadequacies in contact frequency were interpreted as an indication of distanced ties. There was an important difference between the perspectives of mothers and children in this respect, however. For children, distanced ties had to do with concrete problems in the relationship from which they had deliberately moved away. Only mothers (indirectly) expressed discontent with the frequency, means or initiation of contact and sometimes unavailability of their children for practical matters. In the second part of the paper, we examined such indications of disappointments and how mothers explained these. In general, mother-child relations were approached as a matter of coordinating individual opportunities and needs. Some explanations triggered more negative views on the relationship, whereas others counterbalanced these. On the one hand, interpreting opportunities as a reflection of personal choice and priorities risked to culminate in a negative evaluation of children's behaviors and their engagement. On the other hand, by viewing opportunities the result of real restrictions and factual circumstances, mothers shifted the evaluative focus away from the relationship to the situation itself. Whereas opportunities of children were mainly approached from this "objective" interpretation, needs were mostly applied to the perspective of parents and treated as a subjective matter. By highlighting their own independence and preference, i.e. not needing and not wanting the care of their children, mothers offset any possible negative inferences about the relationship. Meanwhile, the evaluative focus had switched to their personal character, allowing mothers to construe a positive self-image as independent, low-maintenance and grateful.

The more critical perspective of mothers in our interviews opposes the generally accepted idea that older parents are more positive about the relationship than children. In theories such as the Intergenerational Stake Hypothesis, it has been argued that parents overstate positive aspects because they have a greater stake in a stable continuation of the

relationship (Silverstein & Schaie, 2014). However, an overall positive evaluation need not mean that parents experience no friction at all. As our analyses showed, the discontent of mothers in the interviews was usually accompanied by an affirmation of emotional closeness and thus indicated ambivalent rather than negative attitudes. The reason why we found negative (as well as positive) perceptions among older parents may be the qualitative design of our study. Perhaps because parents have a greater stake in maintaining a positive view of the relationship, for them especially, the chance to elaborate and explain their complicated views may be crucial.

Our interviews were specifically targeted at mothers and children of immigrant descent. The important, although complicated question, therefore, is to what extent our results are typical for migrant families. The simultaneous dissatisfaction as well as understanding that migrant mothers expressed about the relationships with their children, comes quite close to the ambivalence found among older parents in the US (Peters et al., 2006). Two differences can be noted, however. Whereas the Euro-American elderly struggled with their desire for more contact while encouraging their children's independence, the migrant mothers in our interviews showed less active appreciation of their children's freedom of choice. Although it has been proposed that migrant parents would come to appreciate the autonomy and independence of children as necessary skills to succeed in a Western society (Kagitçibasi, 2005), it seemed that our respondents respected more than positively endorsed these values. An additional challenge that migrant mothers faced, moreover, was to reconcile their children's behaviors with normative beliefs about family obligations. This was achieved by contextualizing family norms in the concrete situation of themselves and their children in the Netherlands. Family support was presented as the ideal behavior if necessary and if possible for both parties.

A related question is to what degree the interviews reflect acculturation among migrant mothers and children. Acculturation, the process by which people change their beliefs in accordance to the new value systems they encounter (Berry, 1997), has often been presented as an either-or choice between elements of the origin and destination country. Similarly, research on family values has implicitly assumed that there is a tradeoff between normative beliefs, equating a greater endorsement of "family obligations" to a lesser adherence to "individual independence". However, as our analyses showed, such beliefs need not be unilinearly related. Mothers gave meaning to relationships with children by integrating different normative ways of thinking about family behaviors, acknowledging the importance of support obligations and recognizing the individual freedom of choice of their children as

well as their own. Our findings thereby offer an interesting insight into the complicated nature of value adjustment, suggesting that acculturation is not so much about shedding and replacing certain beliefs, as rather the process of integrating "old" beliefs in a "new" context. Of course, we do not know how family ties would have become understood if respondents had not migrated. It might be that Caribbean societies have changed over time and that our interviews rather reflect these developments. The centrality of family in Caribbean societies is nevertheless well documented (*e.g.* Chamberlain, 2003). Moreover, one respondent compared her own situation in the Netherlands to that of her sister in Suriname and described the daily mother-child interactions there that she envied.

There are also some clear limitations to our study. Unfortunately, the generalizability of our findings is hampered by the small sample size, even for qualitative work. In addition, we did not interview mothers and children in the same family and thus have no direct information about how their views compare. Our sample may be selective, moreover, in terms of comprising migrants who are relatively well accommodated to the Netherlands. Compared to other large non-Western migrant groups in the Netherlands, such as the Turks and Moroccans, Surinamese and Antilleans are more similar to native Dutch in terms of education, labor market position and language competence (Van der Vliet, Ooijevaar, & Wobma, 2014). Data on other origin groups would yield important additional information in this regard. Furthermore, most of the mothers in our interviews were quite mobile and capable of organizing support. Parents with more serious health hindrances, however, may find it more difficult to empathize with their children's choices. Future research could consider this aspect and take into account the help of children vis-à-vis that of the wider social network or received from professional care services. Another interesting future direction would be to deepen out the diverging perspectives of mothers and children. The different intergenerational investments of migrant parents and children across the life-span may be fruitfully explored from an attachment perspective (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bradley & Cafferty, 2010). This theory describes how affective, long-lasting interpersonal relationships emerge from an in-born inclination to seek safety from trusted figures. Whereas adult children increasingly turn to peers, aging parents become more orientated towards their children. This tendency may be particularly strong among migrant parents, given the additional challenges that migrant elderly face and the possible remoteness of trusted figures abroad.

Family relations are increasingly becoming a domain of interest for migration studies. In this paper, we made an integrating contribution by taking previous quantitative works as a

starting point for analyzing in-depth interviews. Our results thereby highlight important points of attention for future survey studies, such as considering parent-child relationships across siblings over time and including co-residing parents and children. Furthermore, going beyond a simple assessment of relationship quality, our findings revealed the complicated ways by which relationships become understood and evaluated by migrant mothers. Their assessments were based on a mix of considerations, blending general norms with concrete circumstances and weighing the perspective of their children and themselves as a parent. These complex evaluations underscore the need for a greater attention for ambivalence in relationships also, or perhaps especially, among migrant families. The changing sociohistorical circumstances and shifting roles and obligations over the life-course are challenges that affect intergenerational relationships in general. Migrant parents, however, additionally have to negotiate between the norms of the origin country and society in which they live and their children were brought up. As our study demonstrated, devoting more attention to the multifaceted experiences of migrant parents and children can enhance our understanding of the different and similar dynamics that shape intergenerational relationships among migrant and native families.

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Appendix

Table 1a. *Overview of Support Exchanges from Perspective of Mother (One Mother-Child Relationship Per Respondent shown)*

Respondent characteristics		
(Mother)	**Gives to daughter**	**Receives from daughter**
60, widowed, 2 children	Childcare + emotional	Emotional
65, single, 7 children, >2 grandchildren	Childcare + emotional	Emotional
57, divorced, 2 children, 1 grandchild	Co-residence	
59, divorced, 3 children, 3 grandchildren		
74, divorced, 6 children. 8 grandchildren		
	Gives to son	**Receives from son**
80, divorced, 6 children, 11 grandchildren	Emotional	Practical + emotional
55, divorced, 1 child	Financial + emotional	Emotional

Table 1b. *Overview of Support Exchanges from Perspective of Child*

Respondent characteristics		
(Daughter)	**Gives to mother**	**Receives from mother**
49, divorced, 3 children	Practical + emotional	Co-residence + emotional
60, single, no children	Emotional	Emotional
58, single, no children	Emotional (+?)	Emotional (+?)
(Son)	**Gives to mother**	**Receives from mother**
42, married, 2 children	Co-residence emotional	Financial + emotional
63, married, 1 child	Practical + emotional	Financial + emotional
66, divorced, 3 children, 4 grandchildren	Emotional	Emotional (?)
46, married, 2 children		

Note. Question marks indicate that we considered the information insufficient to assess other types of help.

In this paper, we examined how relationships between mothers and adult children were understood and evaluated in the context of migration. Our data consisted of in-depths interviews with Surinamese and Antillean immigrants in the Netherlands. Results showed that the role of practical support in mother-child relationships differed across siblings and over time. Emotional ties were positively assessed by the amount of time spent together, but only mothers expressed concerns about the frequency of contact. They counterbalanced negative implications for the relationship, however, by considering the impact of individual opportunities and needs. Whereas opportunity restrictions of children were ascribed to circumstances, needs of parents were minimized by highlighting self-reliance, low-maintenance and gratefulness. Together, our findings elaborate previous insights about practical, emotional and distanced ties in migrant families and demonstrate how migrants can use Western and non-Western family norms in an integrative fashion to give meaning to family ties.

The Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) is an institute for the scientific study of population. NIDI research aims to contribute to the description, analysis and explanation of demographic trends in the past, present and future, both on a national and an international scale. The determants and social consequences of these trends are also studied.

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