Kinship networks and fertility decline in the Netherlands

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In this paper we aim to explore to what extent the changing composition of kinship networks during the latter half of the 19th and first decades of the 20th century adds in explaining the first wave of fertility decline.

The long 19th century has been characterized as a 'kinship-hot' society . Whereas kinship networks were dominated by vertical relations connecting relative strangers through patron-client relations in the 17th century and much of the 18th century, during the 19th century a process of "horizontalization" took place, meaning that lateral ties between families related by blood and affinity were strengthened. Lateral ties were increasingly instrumental under the changed conditions of a capitalizing and industrializing market economy where credit instead of property became of utmost importance. Bonds between related age-peers such as siblings, siblings-in-law, and cousins enabled families to piece plots of land together, consolidate property, gain access to credit, coordinate management skills, and secure succession to office. To what extent were the more closely-knit bonds between siblings and cousins during this period influential in processes of social learning and diffusion of information on family limitation?

In order to answer this question we will study on the individual level how individuals' social networks influenced their fertility behavior. We measure the social networks of individuals at the onset of childbearing by the set of witnesses that were present at the marriage of these individuals. Of these witnesses, we know the (family) relation to the couple, their place of residence, literacy, and occupation. To what extent were individuals with a social network consisting primarily of age peers (siblings, siblings-in-law and cousins) forerunners in the process of birth control? And what effects did geographically spread-out or occupationally heterogeneous networks in combination with family composition have an effect on e.g. age at first birth and completed fertility?

We test these hypotheses we use data on 30.000 individuals, born in the Netherlands between 1850 and 1922, whose full life courses were reconstructed from population registers in the framework of the Historical Sample of the Netherlands (HSN). The reproductive careers (age at first birth, age at stopping, birth intervals and completed fertility) of these individuals are analyzed in combination with information on their witnesses at marriage, as well as with other important determinants of fertility behavior.