Dormant Parent-Child Relationships in Swiss Older Adults' Family Networks

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Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence, sociological predictors and some relational consequences of having dormant parent-child relationships. It extends current research on parent-child relationships by adopting a personal network approach. While most studies focus on either the parent or the child, it includes structural characteristics of both. It investigates how dormant parent-child relationships influence the cohesion in parent's family network. The results show that developing dormant ties with children relate for parents with sociodemographic predictors, such as gender, level of education income and household structures. Dormant ties with children also relate with some socio-demographic characteristics of children, such as the fact they live abroad or their position in the sibship. In terms of consequences, having a dormant tie with a child makes one's network of significant family members less dense, both for support and conflict. Results are discussed in the light of several processes linking resources and constraints in the family.

Introduction

In many Western societies, a growing emphasis on individual freedom over economic security has made social relationships increasingly voluntary and elective rather than grounded in mutual economic dependence (Inglehart, 1971). This shift is most evident in the domain of romantic partnership, as reflected by increased divorce rates since the 1970s, but its implications for other familial ties are less well understood. The parent-child relationship is the first and often most long-lasting relationship in people's lives, but research has only recently begun to consider how conditions of greater individual autonomy may have reshaped the parent-child tie. While older adults are known to actively generate and manage their social and family networks (Carstensen 1992; Widmer and Girardin 2016), the position of children and whether they play a meaningful role within these networks has gone largely uncontested. Given the growing reliance on family support in the context of diminishing welfare state responsibilities, it is increasingly important to examine the position of children within older adult's family networks (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). This study, therefore, investigates the prevalence, predictors, and consequences of parent–child relationships characterized by low involvement, conceptualized here as dormant relationships.

The literature on older adults' intergenerational relationship has primarily investigated the parent-child relationship from the parent's perspective, focusing on their evaluations of emotional closeness, frequency of contact or exchanges of support. These studies generally show that most parents and children maintain strong relationships, but they also demonstrate that the parent-child tie can be a source of conflict and ambivalence (Girardin et al., 2018; Lüscher, 2002; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998). While several typologies of intergenerational relationships recognize a 'detached' or relationship type characterized by a lack of engagement with parents across various solidarity indicators, few studies provided an in-depth analysis of this form (Silverstein and Bengtson 1997; Van Gaalen and Dykstra 2006; van Houdt 2023; Kim et al. 2020). To explain cases of low involvement between parents and children, sociological studies often emphasize negative aspects of the relationship, such as a combination of limited contact and low emotional closeness (Arránz Becker and Hank 2022; Kalmijn 2022), while psychological research focuses on estrangement and concentrates on the intentional dissolution of the relationship (Scharp and Thomas 2016, 2018; Conti 2015; Agllias 2016, 2011). The focus on the evaluation of the relationship and individual pathways to these types of relationships have drawn away from the sociological and structural dimensions that could explain why parents and children lack intergenerational involvement.

In social network analyses, the term ‘dormant’ social ties has been used to reflect the possibility that relationships are inactive, but not necessarily cut-off (McCarty et al., 2019). A dormant tie is defined as a relationship between two individuals which has not been active for a long time, thus lacking regular interactions and communications (Levin et al., 2011). Even in the absence of communication for many years, the relational trust between two individuals who shared a strong bond decays very slowly (source). Although people are often hesitant or anxious to reach out to dormant ties because of the long temporal interruption, research shows that they can be reactivated in some instances and as such that they may play an important role for social capital and support (Yang et al., 2021). Indeed, family ties belong to a kinship reserve which show unequal level of activation (Cullati et al., 2018). So far, literature on kinship networks has mostly stressed the frequent activation of closely related kin (mostly parents and children, but also, to a lesser extent, siblings), and the lack of activation of more remote kin for practical help (Klein Ikkink and van Tilburg, 1999). Recent publications on kinship, however, stress the importance of some remote kin, based on specific interaction histories and circumstances. This suggests that remote kin can remain dormant for a long time and be reactivated, especially in times of crises such as during the Covid-19 pandemic (Reed, et al., 2023). We take from this that the alternative is also possible, that is, strong family ties may become dormant for a variety of reasons, some not stemming from conflict and interpersonal difficulties, but following life events associated with migration, divorce and repartnering, and other sociological factors.

The first aim of this article is to get a better understanding of the prevalence and sociological predictors of having a dormant tie with one’s children. We extend current research on such parent-child relationships by adopting a personal network approach (McCarty et al., 2019). We borrow the somewhat neutral term ‘dormant’ social ties, which has been used in social network analyses, to reflect the possibility that relationships are inactive, but not necessarily cut-off. To determine whether a parent-child relationship could be characterized as dormant, we examined whether older adults’ cited their children as significant members in their family network. An advantage of measuring dormant ties using social network data rather than evaluative questions regarding the quality of the relationship, we avoid sensitivity issues and norm confirming answers. By investigating the role of both parent’s characteristics (i.e. marital status, economic resources, health) and children’s characteristics (i.e. gender, birth order, foreign residence), we provide insights into the structural conditions that make developing a dormant tie with children more likely.

The second aim of this article is to extend research by focusing on the consequences for parents of having dormant parent-child relationships. Social support is a central function of family and personal networks; it refers to their ability to respond to individuals' needs for assistance and comfort (Antonucci, 2001; Cornwell et al., 2008; Shor et al., 2013). The main concern about personal networks is the ability of their members to provide the individual with support potential or reserves (Cornwell, 2009, 2011; Moren-Cross & Lin, 2006). The perception that social support would be available, should an individual wish to access it, has been shown to be strongly correlated with healthy aging (Antonucci, 2001; Moren-Cross & Lin, 2006). While prior studies on interrupted parent-child relationships have mainly focused on dyadic relations, it has also been shown that family ties do not exist in isolation but in relation to others in the family network (de Bel et al., 2019; Widmer, 2016). One may ask whether dormant child ties contribute to decreasing support reserves available to older parents. Specifically, we investigate how dormant parent-child relationships influence cohesion in older adults' family networks by considering patterns of conflict and support within the family network. While it is unknown in this study how having a dormant tie is experienced, by considering its implications for cohesion in family support networks, we move beyond individual experiences towards more structural implications of not being involved with children.

The case of ties with adult children becoming dormant is of major interest, as the normative pressure towards connection and support is very high for parent-child relationships (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Although many parent-child relationship conform to these expectations, it is important to acknowledge the diversity and complexity inherent in family dynamics. The parent–adult child relationship plays a vital role not only in the psychological well-being of both generations but also for a series of practical matters related to care work in the family (Fingerman, Zarit, & Birditt, 2019; Carr and Utz 2020)). However, strained or conflictual family relationships can be burdensome and can have negative health implications (Widmer, Girardin, and Ludwig 2018). If feelings of affection have indeed gained precedence over feelings of obligation, the process of individualization may have affected the position and significance of adult children within their parents' family networks. Without disregarding the importance of understanding the feelings of loss, ambivalence or disappointment that may be associated with a relationship with a child having gone dormant (Agllias 2011), in this contribution we deliberately refrain from such a focus. By examining both the predictors and consequences of having dormant ties through family network data, this study provides a new perspective on family solidarity and intergenerational relationships in later life.

Theoretical background

The Convoy Model of Social Relationships

The Convoy Model of Social Relationships provides a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of social relationships over the life course (Antonucci, 2001; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). According to this model, all individuals are embedded in a personal network that follows them throughout their lives – referred to as the 'convoy' - and provides them with the resources they need to develop and cope with the difficulties they may encounter over the life course. Transitions or crises that individuals experience over the life course lead them to evaluate the relationships in their personal network in order to maintain those that are best able to meet their needs at the time of the transition and in the next stage of their life. This process of evaluation may result in withdrawing from certain relationships, strengthening of an existing bond, the upgrading of a bond previously considered unimportant, or reactivating old, dormant bonds (Antonucci, 2001; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Van Tilburg, 1998). Certain life transitions make this reappraisal mechanism particularly apparent, especially the decline in health that characterizes later life. In general, people whose health deteriorates withdraw from less emotional relationships, while they tend to mobilize close family members. All relationships therefore need to be redefined and negotiated over time, in line with life transitions and the new needs they generate (Connidis, 2010). Within this specific theoretical framework, dormant ties can be activated when they are needed to cope with life transitions or crises or, conversely, activated relationships may become dormant for a period of time, when they are deemed unnecessary at that time.

The Convoy model has been applied to investigating dynamic changes in tasks and forms of support in intergenerational relationships, but may be extended to cases when relationships are dormant (Antonucci et al, 2011). In the remainder of this theoretical framework, we first elaborate on the potential mechanisms that could explain who develops dormant ties and to which children. To this end, we consider the role of the family structure and the role of opportunities and needs based on parents' and children' characteristics. Then, we consider the potential consequences of having dormant ties on the wider family network dynamics. Here, the focus lies on patterns of support and conflict in the parent's family network.

Determinants of dormant parent–child relationships

The role of the family structure

The parent-child relationship exists within a network of family relations and structures, which influence the interaction patterns of family members involved (Bengtson and Roberts 1991; Szydlik 2016). Gender plays an important role in how family relations are maintained. Numerous studies have shown that mothers have more contact and greater emotional closeness with children than fathers, and that mothers often facilitate intergenerational ties by performing kinkeeping behaviors (Fingerman, Huo, and Birditt 2020; Hornstra and Ivanova 2023; Rosenthal 1985). A kinkeeper, a position traditionally fulfilled by women, is the person within the household that is involved in the management of family relationships (Hornstra and Ivanova 2023). Stronger social norms for how women regarding their role in the family could make it more difficult or socially undesirable for mothers to allow relationships with their children to become dormant.

Gender differences also extend to adult children's support behaviors and expectations. Due to persistent unequal expectations about support provision given to parents, daughters generally provide more care to parents than sons (Grigoryeva, 2017; Silverstein, et al., 2006). This greater involvement may increase daughters' visibility in their parents' perception of family ties. However, this visibility might be mitigated by gender scripts that normalize daughters' caregiving roles, thereby decreasing their distinctiveness or salience within their parents' family networks. Sons, conversely, may acquire more salience through traditional gender scripts that position them as the main inheritor of the family name and lineage, through which their role can reinforce their perceived importance in their parents' family network. Nonetheless, a reciprocal understanding of family ties suggests that daughters' assumed greater involvement would correspond to a lower likelihood of parents having a dormant tie with them.

To maintain the parent-child relationships requires more effort when it is not within the context of a marriage. Parental marital status could therefore be key to understanding who develops dormant ties with children. Whereas married men benefit from their female partner's kinkeeping efforts, divorced men do not have this advantage (Grundy 2005; Kalmijn 2007). When people repartner, they have to distribute their time among more people, which could come at the cost of the relationship with children. The shift in focus observed for men has been characterized as "swapping families" (Manning and Smock 2000; Tach et al. 2014; Townsend 2002). Also, widowhood alters parent-child relationships. Although widowed

women have been shown to receive more support, widowed men often have weaker ties (Kalmijn 2007; Tomassini et al. 2004). Separated and repartnered people may therefore be at greater risk of having dormant ties with children compared to married and widowed people.

There is an important literature on the structure of the sibship and parental attention and investments. In a life course perspective, conditions experienced early on in life are expected to impact later life outcomes, including personal relationships. Interestingly, experiences of relationships between older parents and their adult children may replicate relationships that occur during the earlier time of the family. Results reveal that on average parents invest more time and more attention on first-borns in comparison to later-borns (Lehmann et al., 2018). Older siblings have closer relationships with their parents during childhood and adulthood and parental control is greater on first-born children than later-born children. The same trends exist for only children, but with more strength. This set of results, collected in studies focused on the family factors of academic achievement, might be consequential for the understanding the role of birth order in explaining dormant children ties of older adults.

A final aspect relating to the family structure concerns whether the parent has a migrant background. There is some evidence that parent-child dyads of whom the parent has a migration background have stronger intergenerational bonds (Baykara-Krumme and Fokkema 2019; Bordone and de Valk 2016). This is reflected by higher contact frequencies, stronger family norms and more frequent upward and downward support provision compared to the majority population. This could indicate a lower likelihood of developing dormant ties among migrant families.

Opportunities and needs

People have different opportunities to maintain the parent-child relationship depending on their opportunities to keep in touch, such as their (financial) resources and geographical distance. Parents with a higher socio-economic status benefit from greater financial resources to invest in the relationship with their children. In contrast, a severe lack of socio-economic resources can also jeopardize relationships with children, as reciprocity in exchanges, even over time, may not be guaranteed (Offer, 2012). The availability of financial resources may thus contribute to strengthening the bond between parents and children, thereby reducing the likelihood of having dormant ties. However, those with a higher socioeconomic status tend to be less dependent on their children for support because they can rely on a more diverse personal network, consisting of friends and relatives (Ajrouch et al., 2005; Cornwell et al., 2008). As a result, they are less likely to mobilize children in times of need than older parents

of lower socio-economic status. Which of the two alternative hypotheses plays out may vary by gender, as particularly financial investments have been shown to protect fathers in terms of their intergenerational relationships.

Similarly, although adult children are the main beneficiaries of financial support from older parents (Kohli and Künemund, 2003), children with a lower socioeconomic status may have fewer resources to support their parents and may be less able to ensure reciprocity of exchange even in the long term (Offer, 2012). Parents and children with fewer socioeconomic resources may therefore be at greater risk of having dormant ties.

When adult children live abroad, it may challenge the maintenance of the intergenerational tie. Especially geographical distance is an important determinant for affectual intergenerational solidarity (Szydlik, 2008). In the literature, it is well established that when the geographical distance between family members is greater, there is less exchange of instrumental support and less face-to-face contact (Hank 2007; Mulder and van der Meer 2009). Longer travel times and higher costs could make it more difficult for parents and children to play an active role in each other's lives. A child's residence abroad could therefore increase the likelihood that this parent-child tie becomes dormant.

Exchanges between parents and children are responsive to the needs of those involved. Parent's ageing and health problems may trigger greater involvement from children. Indeed, adult children have been found to provide more support in response to their parents' ageing and health problems (Gans and Silverstein 2006; Grundy 1991; Kalmijn 2019). But parent's ageing also poses risks. For aging parents or those in poor health, their circumstances can be more difficult to invest in the parent-child relationship, as it challenges their mobility and support provision to children (Fokkema, ter Bekke, and Dykstra 2008; Kalmijn 2023). Adult children may be reluctant to support their older parents if their parents' health is too demanding and their resources of time, money and affection are lacking as they have to fulfil other stressful work and family responsibilities (Girardin et al., 2018). Therefore, greater demands on children in relation to weaker health could also make it more obvious when children are not (sufficiently) involved, resulting in a greater likelihood for these parents of having a dormant tie.

Children's needs could be reflected in their marital status and whether they have children or not. Partnered adult children have been shown to provide and receive less support from parents than single children of the same age (Bucx, van Wel, and Knijn 2012; Min et al. 2022; Kalmijn 2023). Especially after adult children separate, older parents can play a supportive role, which suggests that married children are less reliant on their parents (Sarkisian and

Gerstel 2008). Children's transition to becoming parents is a life event that may relate to ties becoming activated. When adult children became parents support from older parents to adult children has been found to increase (Kalmijn, 2023). Therefore, we expect that parents are more likely to have dormant ties with adult children who are married or childless.

Consequences of dormant parent-child ties on family network structures

Social support is a central function of family and personal networks; it refers to their ability to respond to individuals' needs for assistance and comfort (Antonucci, 2001; Cornwell et al., 2008; Shor et al., 2013). The main concern about personal networks is the ability of their members to provide the individual with support potential or reserves (Cornwell, 2009, 2011; Moren-Cross & Lin, 2006). The perception that social support would be available, should an individual wish to access it, has been shown to be strongly correlated with healthy aging (Antonucci, 2001; Moren-Cross & Lin, 2006). One may then ask whether dormant child ties contribute to decreasing support reserves available to older parents. The literature also stresses the importance of active aging, i.e. continuing to play critical roles for others while growing older. Providing companionship, care, and support to others has been shown to critically contribute to a variety of dimensions of healthy aging. However, it is not the provision of actual support that is key, but the recognition of the active role of the older adults in their network. In that perspective, having dormant child ties may decrease the likelihood of developing care roles within the family, as adult children are the main beneficiaries of older adult's support within the family, especially in relation to their parental tasks. Interestingly, the impact of developing dormant ties with adult children may also have consequences for the family network as a whole, as it contributes to less supportive interactions among other family members, such as those between the partner and their children and grandchildren.

The same line of reasoning may apply to negative or ambivalent relationships (Girardin et al., 2018; Widmer, 2016; Widmer & Lüscher, 2011). Previous studies on family ties highlight the importance of family networks' overall composition in understanding the prevalence of emotional support and conflict in families. The focus on intergenerational ties, including those with adult children and grandchildren, in older adults' family networks gives rise to tensions, as these ties are framed within a set of family support obligations, caregiving duties, and expectations for normative family behaviours including fairness in resource allocation (Connidis, 2012; Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Finch & Mason,1993; Girardin et al., 2018; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; Taylor & Norris, 2000; Widmer, 2016). Some socio-emotional selectivity processes may occur by which some older adults disengage from negative and

stressful personal relationships and focus on positive ones, in order to avoid regular negative interactions and maintain only low-stress relationships. Such processes may enable older adults to better adapt to the old-age constraints and maintain well-being (Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen et al., 1999; Luong et al., 2011). Although liberating oneself from negative and stressful relationships with adult children is a difficult task for many, as getting older means turning back to children for family support, we expect that making relationships with some adult children dormant may reduce levels of family stress and conflict experienced in family networks. This is expected to be true either for the direct ties of the older adults with their family members, or indirectly, as far as ties among their significant family members are considered.

Summary and hypotheses

This research addresses the presence of children in older adults' family network and examines the prevalence of dormant parent-child relationships; when parents report that their children have not played an important role over the past year. Our study distinguishes structural predictors of having dormant ties on both the parent and the child level, as well as the network consequences of having such dormant ties. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the hypotheses that guide this study in which the theoretical mechanisms established above are structured according to parent-level characteristics and child-level characteristics. As a summary, while kinkeeping roles and resources of parents are expected to decrease the likelihood of dormant ties with children, family complexity is hypothesized to increase it. For children, we expect similar factors to play out, in addition to birth order effects associated with dilution processes. The spatial proximity of adult children is also expected to decrease dormant ties. This research also considers some consequences of having dormant ties with some or all children, as parent-child relationships do not exist in isolation but are part of a wider family network. Overall, our expectations are that dormant ties with children decrease the activation of one's networks of significant family members, with both support and conflict decreasing, both in the interactions between the parents and their set of significant alters, and among them (density of support or conflict).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Methods

Data and sample selection

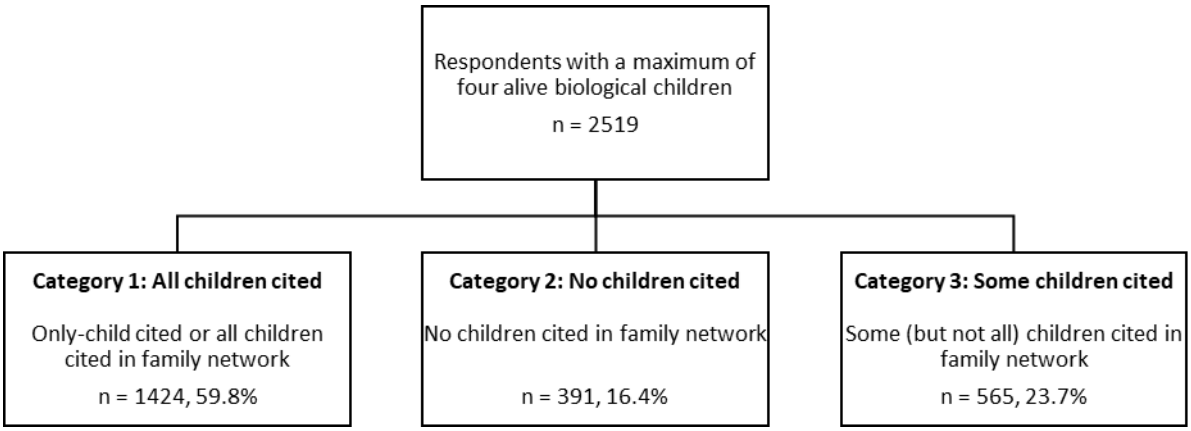
We employed data from the Vivre-Leben-Vivere survey (VLV) collected in 2011-2012 among a representative random sample of Swiss older adults aged 65 and over, which was stratified by age, gender, and canton. In total, 3,032 participants completed the paper-pencil self-administered questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. The survey covered a wide range of topics relating to vulnerability and resources in older age, including detailed information on self-reported family networks. For this study, we focused on respondents with at least one biological child who was alive at the time of data collection (458 observations excluded). Parents with adoptive children were excluded, because numbers were too small to test the different mechanisms that might be at play (n = 47). As the measure of the family network allowed for up to five names to be included, we focused on parents with a maximum of four children (n = 110 excluded). Finally, parents who experienced the death of more than one child were also excluded to ensure correct coding of the family network (n = 28 excluded). The analytical sample consisted of 2,389 individuals with x number of children.

Measures

Our key variable of interest aimed to measure dormant parent-child relationships. To determine whether a parent-child relationship could be characterized as dormant, we examined whether children were cited in the parent's family networks. Respondents were asked to cite a maximum of five people who they considered to be significant members of their family. Significant family members meant people who in the past year played a positive role (persons who helped, supported, or defended the respondent) or a negative role (respondents were annoyed by this person). This definition allows for inclusion of support, ambivalent and negative relationships. Based on parent's reports, we compared their children's age, gender and region of residence with these characteristics of the cited family network persons. We determined whether a child was cited as a network person in three steps: first, we matched children and family network persons with the exact same age, gender, and region of residence (% of children matched); second, we matched remaining children and network persons with the same gender and region of residence, and an age difference of one year (% of children matched); and third, unmatched children and network persons with two out of three same characteristics were matched (% of children matched). This three-step procedure ensured the most precise match and avoided double matches. On the child-level,

children with a match in step 1, step 2 or step 3 were coded to be cited in the family network. On the parent-level, we computed a categorical variable with three categories: all children cited, no children cited, and some children cited. Our conceptualization of dormant parent-child relationships can be found in Figure 1. Figure 1 distinguishes category 1, where there is no dormant tie with children, from categories 2 and 3, where there are dormant ties with children, that are either fully present (category 2) or partially present (category 3).

FIGURE 1: Measurement of dormant parent-child relationships (according to parents)



We investigate the role of parent's characteristics of gender, marital status, age, education, income, country of birth and their self-rated health. Males were coded to 1 and females to 0. Marital status was coded into four categories: (1) married, when the parent was in a cohabiting relationship and the child was from the current union, (2) remarried, when the parent was in a cohabiting union and the child was from a previous union, (3) separated, when the parent was not in a cohabiting union and separated, and (4) widowed, when the parent was not in a cohabiting union and widowed. Parent's age was grouped into categories age 65-74, age 75-84 and age 85+. For parent's education, the category of lower education included primary school and lower secondary school, the middle category included lower vocational training and upper secondary school, and the category high education included upper vocational training and university. Parental income was grouped into low (between 1200 Swiss francs to 3599 Swiss francs), average (3600 to 7199 Swiss francs) and high income (over 7200 Swiss francs). We distinguished parents who were born in Switzerland (Swiss-born) and those who were born in a different country (foreign-born). Finally, parents were asked to rate their current health on a five-point scale of poor, rather poor, satisfactory, good, to very good.

We included children's characteristics of gender, marital status, birth order, own children, age, occupation, and country of residence. These were based on the parent's reports. For child's gender, we distinguished sons and daughters. For marital status, we distinguished married, single, and separated children. As there were only 43 widowed children, these were included in the singles category. We included the child's birth order and distinguished whether someone was only-child, first-born, or later-born. Child's age was included continuously and centered at the mean. Their occupation was grouped into three categories: low occupation, which included unqualified workers, manual workers, farmers; middle occupation, for qualified, intermediate and independent workers; and high occupation, for liberal workers, intellectual managerial workers, and leaders. Finally, we distinguished children who resided in Switzerland and children who resided in a different country.

We investigate the consequences of having dormant parent-child relationships by examining patterns of conflict and support within the family network as an outcome variable. Respondents were asked to report on their own supportive and conflictive relationships with each network person one by one, and to report on all relationships between the cited network persons. The specific questions are outlined below, where *X* refers to the respondent or a cited network person.

- Emotional support: "Who would provide emotional support to *X* when routine or minor troubles are experienced?"
- Conflict: "Every family experiences tensions and conflicts sometimes. Who often makes *X* angry (for example: who do you often get upset with)?"

Based on the reported supportive and conflictual ties within the network, a density measure is calculated. Network density refers to the proportion of supportive/conflictual ties between two people over the number of the total possible ties existing in a family network according to the number of persons present. In high-density network nearly all members are interconnected, whereas in a low-density network there are few connections between its members (Sauter et al., 2023). This indicator is measured on a scale from 0 to 1, with a value of 1 indicating that the family network has as many existing connections as possible (Broese van Groenou and van Tilburg, 2007).

Analysis plan

Data were collected based on parents' reports and initially stored in a wide format. Using this format, we first describe patterns of dormant parent-child relationships by parents' background characteristics, separately for men and women. The data were then transformed

into a long format, with children nested within parents, to analyze the determinants of dormant parent-child ties. Multilevel logistic regression models were employed to assess whether a child was cited in the parent's family network, distinguishing between parent-level and child-level characteristics. Finally, we examined whether parents' citation of children was associated with network density, measured in terms of emotional support and conflict, using linear regression models based on the wide-format data.

The degree of missing values was low for independent variables of parents (less than 2%), but slightly higher for parental income (16%). To account for missing data on the parent-level, we used the multiple imputation by chained equation approach. For parental income, multiple imputation has been shown to reduce bias (Schenker et al., 2006). We ran 25 imputations and applied Rubin's rule to pool the results from each model into a single set of estimates and standard errors (Rubin, 1987). The regression models were performed on the nonmissing cases of the outcome variables. Child data had between 2% and 6% missing variables. Children with missing data were dropped.

Results

Descriptive findings

We begin by describing the prevalence of parents who had no dormant ties with children, all dormant ties, or some dormant ties, for men and women separately (Table 2). The majority of men (57%) and women (62%) had no dormant ties with children in their family network. These parents considered all children to be significant members of their family who played an active role in the past year, whether this was positive or negative. A considerable group of parents did not consider any of their children as part of their significant family network members. Specifically, 18% of men and 14% of women had dormant ties with all children. This group included those who had one child. A third group had some dormant ties, namely 25% of men and 24% of women, meaning that they cited some children to be part of their family network but not all of them. Although we observe the same pattern for men and women, men significantly more often had dormant ties compared to women. However, differences between men and women were smaller than expected. Both women and men quite often experience dormant relationships with children.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Determinants of dormant parent-child relationships

Parent-level predictors

We investigated whether structural characteristics of parents would predict who had dormant ties with children (Table 3). Consistent with hypothesis 1a, men's marital status played an important role. Compared to married men, repartnered men were more likely to have dormant ties with children (log odds = 1.26, $p < 0.00$). Separated men, however, were not more likely to have dormant relationships. This could be explained by a 'swapping families' perspective; whereas men who have a new partner shift focus to the 'new' family, separated men who did not repartner do not have to divide their time between more people. Widowed men were less likely to have dormant ties than their married counterparts (log odds = -0.56, p = xxx). Counter to hypothesis 1a, marital status did not play a role for women. This suggests that, as kinkeepers, women maintain ties with children regardless of the relationship with the other parent.

We investigated the role of parent's opportunities and needs in terms of socioeconomic status and health expecting that parents with fewer resources would be more likely to have dormant ties, for which we found partial support (hypothesis 1b). There was an interesting socioeconomic difference between men and women. Men in the lower income groups were more likely to have dormant relationships compared to men in high income groups, but there was no difference for men in terms of the level of education. In contrast, for women education appeared to be more important than income. Women with less education were more likely to have dormant ties. We expected that although parents with weaker health would have a greater need to activate their ties with children, in practice, they would have fewer opportunities to do so. However, we did not find convincing evidence that parents with weaker health were more likely to have dormant ties, although there was a marginally significant effect for men in this direction. Finally, we investigated the role of parents having a migrant-background, but found no support for this hypothesis.

Child-level predictors

We examined whether there were patterns in terms of which parent-child relationships became dormant (Table 3). We expected that because of gendered kinkeeping behaviors, parents would be more likely to have dormant ties with sons compared to daughters (hypothesis 2a). We found partial support for this hypothesis. Both men and women were more likely to have dormant relationships with sons. Both the child's marital status and whether the child had

children were not associated with differences in the likelihood of having dormant relationships.

Based on the idea that parents who have multiple children have to divide their time and resources between children, we expected that parent would be less likely to have dormant relationships with only-children and more likely to have dormant relationships with later-born children compared to first-born children (hypothesis 2b). We found that both men and women with an only-child were less likely to have a dormant relationship with this child. However, we did not observe a difference between first-born and later-born children.

We also investigated whether children's opportunities and needs (occupation and country of residence) mattered (hypothesis 2c). We found that parents were more likely to have dormant ties with children who lived abroad. However, there was no support for an occupational difference for children.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Control variables

An important control variable concerned the size of the network. We found that when people cited more people in their family network, this likely included the child.

Network consequences of dormant parent-child relationships

We investigated the network consequences of dormant parent-child relationships (Table 4). We expected that parents with dormant ties would receive and provide less emotional support and have lower emotional support density within their networks (hypothesis 3a). We found that men and women who had dormant relationships received similar levels of support from network members as those who did not have dormant child ties, controlled for the size of the network. However, a marginally significant effect for women suggests that support might be somewhat lower for women who had dormant ties with all children. Important differences were found in terms of parents' emotional support provided to others. Men and women with dormant ties provided less emotional support to their network members, both when all parent-child ties were dormant or when some ties were dormant. Differences were also found in terms of emotional support density when parents had all dormant ties, but not when they had some dormant ties. It suggests that there is an important difference between not having any children around or having some children around but not all. The latter group may select the most valuable ties and could do so in a linked way. This means that parents may mention only

one or two of their several children, those to whom they feel closer or on whom they depend the most, and the family members of the cited children (partners and children). This has some consequences for support exchanges within the family network. For example, when a parent also cites a child's partner, the parent provides support to the child but not always to the partner, and the partner provides support to the child but not always to the parent, which results in less support exchanges for the parent but greater density in the network.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

We investigated the role of conflict in the network as well. We found that men who had dormant relationships did not significantly differ from men who did not have dormant relationships in terms of the levels of conflict they were bothered by, although men with all dormant ties were marginally less bothered by conflict of others. For women, there was no difference by dormant parent-child relationships in terms of the conflict they were bothered by. Similar to the patterns in emotional support, we observed that the most important difference was in terms of the parent's behavior towards others. Men who had all or some dormant ties, caused less conflict to others compared to men who had no dormant ties. For women, this was the case when they had all dormant ties but not when there were some dormant ties. There were no differences in terms of conflict density in the network, expect for men who had all dormant ties who had less conflictual networks compared to men who had no dormant ties.

Discussion

Processes of individualization have altered expectations and norms regarding family obligations. While studies have shown that older adults actively generate their social and family networks, the possibility that the role of children in such networks may for some time be limited has received little attention (Carstensen 1992; Widmer and Girardin 2016). In this study, we investigated the presence of children in parent's family networks. Specifically, we investigated the predictors and consequences of dormant parent-child ties by looking at the presence of children in older adults' family networks.

By describing patterns of dormant parent-child relationships, we showed that many older adults experience a dormant tie with one or more children. Almost 40 percent had one or more dormant ties with children. This is in conflict with studies that observed a continued high commitment and involvement. It is unlikely that all these dormant ties are dormant because of conflictual relationships. Rather, it shows that the necessity or obligation to play an active role

may have changed. It fits the idea that familial obligations have become less strong and raises questions regarding our expectations of family support.

Our study provides some insights into the structural factors that play a role in having dormant ties with children. Particularly for men, investments in the relationship with the child appear to have long-lasting implications. Men who repartnered or with a lower income were more likely to have dormant ties. Although it has been suggested that the financial component has generally become less guiding in family relations, this cannot be concluded for men in this study. Our study suggests that parent's investments may be greater in only-children compared to later -born children, as parents were much less likely to have a dormant relationship when they had only one child. When multiple children are present, some selection may occur in who is best able or willing to be actively involved in support provision of parents. Our results suggests that when children reside abroad, this is more challenging. These findings are consistent with the Convoy Model of Social Relationships (Antonucci, 2001; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), which postulates that individuals tend to evaluate the relationships that follow them through the life course according to their needs. Some of these relationships may become dormant because they do not meet the individual's needs or are perceived as too constraining at a given point in the life course. At the same time, certain socio-emotional processes may occur that lead to a withdrawal from negative and stressful relationships and the maintenance of only positive relationships that enable older adults to adapt better to old-age constraints (Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen et al., 1999; Luong et al., 2011). What the results of this study show, and what has never been highlighted in research, is that these different processes also apply to some older adults' parent-child relationships.

The results of this study indeed confirmed that dormant ties with adult children play a critical role for both support reserves and conflict within family networks. Interestingly, dormant child ties do not contribute to decreasing support reserves available to older adults but rather to weakening the role of older adults as support providers. This is important and to some extent ambivalent. First, the fact of sustaining meaningful social roles in aging has been shown to critically contribute to a variety of dimensions of healthy aging. On another hands, providing actual support, especially if the support provided is demanding, proved to have negative consequences, as it puts older adults under stress. Individuals may become overloaded with support responsibilities, which may prove detrimental for their health. In that respect, making relationships with some children dormant may decrease the pressure associated with support provision for some older adults. The results achieved for conflict are fully in line with this interpretation, as dormant relationships with children decrease the

conflict experienced by older adults in their family networks. Indeed, older adults who have dormant ties with their children experience in general less conflict-oriented relationships with their family members, either as a person who is a source or a target of conflict. Interestingly, for both support and conflict experienced by older adults in family networks, the presence of dormant ties with children has an impact beyond the relationships that respondents have with family members, but also the relationships developing among their significant family members, decreasing the density of both support and conflict. Previous research stresses the contribution of intergenerational ties to bonding structures, or bonding social capital, that is cases where network closure is present, increasing the collective dimension of support, leading to greater trust, but also greater normative control.

In conclusion, our findings highlight the dynamic and complex patterns in parent-child relationships in later life, revealing the nuanced role that dormant ties play in older adults' social and familial networks. Far from merely representing conflict or estrangement, these dormant relationships reflect broader societal shifts in familial expectations, individual agency, and the adaptive strategies of aging individuals. By identifying key predictors—such as gender, income, repartnering, and geographical distance—we highlighted how structural and personal factors shape the presence of dormant ties. The results highlight that familial cohesion and well-being in old age may not depend solely on the continuous activation of family ties. Instead, dormant ties may serve as a strategic means for older adults to manage emotional strain and reduce conflict, while subtly reshaping their roles as support providers. This reconfiguration not only impacts individual well-being but also reverberates through family networks, influencing the overall structure and function of intergenerational connections. These insights invite a reevaluation of how support, obligation, and connection are understood in contemporary family life, and call for further exploration into how such dormant relationships might be reactivated or maintained in ways that reflect both personal choice and shifting cultural norms.

TABLE 1. Processes and hypotheses predicting dormant parent-child relationships and their network consequences

	Process	Measures	Hypotheses
Parent-level predictors			
Hypothesis 1a	Kinkeeping and family complexity	Parent's gender and marital status	Separated and repartnered parents are more likely to have dormant ties with children compared to married parents, but we expect that this effect is stronger for men than women
Hypothesis 1b	Opportunities and needs	Parent's occupation, income, health, and migration background	Parents with a lower socioeconomic status, weaker health and no migration background are more likely to have dormant ties with children compared to parents with a higher socioeconomic status and better health
Child-level predictors			
Hypothesis 2a	Kinkeeping and dilution theory	Child's gender and birth order	Parents are more likely to have dormant ties with sons and later-born children
Hypothesis 2b	Opportunities and needs	Child's country of residence, occupation, marital status and children	Parents are more likely to have dormant ties with children who have lower occupation, reside abroad, are single or childless
Network consequences			
Hypothesis 3a	Decreasing support reserve	Emotional support received, emotional support provided, and emotional support density	Parents with dormant child ties are expected to experience lowers levels of emotional support received from others and emotional support provided to others, and to have lower emotional support density networks
Hypothesis 3b	Socio-emotional selectivity	Conflict bothered by others, conflict caused to others, and conflict density	Parents with dormant child ties are expected to experience lower levels of conflict bothered by others and conflict caused to others, and to have lower conflict density networks

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of parent, children and network characteristics women and men

	Men		Women	
	N / mean	% / SD	N / mean	% / SD
Parent's characteristics				
Dormant parent-child relationships				
No dormant ties	727	57.2%	697	62.3%
All dormant ties	232	18.3%	159	14.3%
Some dormant ties	312	24.6%	253	22.8%
Parent's marital status				
Married	794	62.7%	435	39.6%
Repartnered	155	12.2%	76	6.9%
Separated	138	10.9%	147	13.4%
Widowed	179	14.1%	441	41.1%
Parent's income level				
Low income	189	16.6%	341	37.5%
Average income	583	51.2%	421	46.3%
High income	367	32.2%	148	16.4%
Parent level of education				
Low	143	11.4%	291	26.5%
Medium	656	52.2%	595	54.2%
High	459	36.5%	212	19.3%
Parent's self-rated health (range: 1-5)	3.6	0.8	3.5	0.8
Parent's age (range: 65-101)	78.2	8.3	77.8	8.3
Parent is foreign born (ref. = Swiss born)	218	17.2%	250	22.6%
Children's characteristics				
Child's gender son (ref. = daughter)	1411	50.1%	1219	50.5%
Child's birth order				
Only-child	244	8.6%	229	9.3%
First-born	1028	36.2%	881	35.9%
Later-born	1569	55.2%	1345	54.8%
Child's marital status				
Married	1699	60.5%	1515	62.3%
Single	750	26.7%	531	22.0%
Separated	358	12.8%	371	15.1%
Child has no children (ref. = has children)	840	69.0%	638	27.1%
Child resides abroad (ref. = in Switzerland)	286	10.4%	212	8.9%
Child's occupation				
Lower class	112	4.0%	122	5.1%
Middle class	1515	54.3%	1349	55.8%
Upper class	1084	38.1%	902	37.3%
Inactive				
Network characteristics				
Emotional support received (range: 1-5)	1.5	1.3	1.6	1.2
Emotional support provided (range: 1-5)	2.1	1.5	2.2	1.5
Emotional support density (range: 0-1)	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.3
Conflict caused by others (range: 1-5)	0.5	0.8	0.5	0.7
Conflict caused by self (range: 1-5)	0.5	0.8	0.4	0.8
Conflict density (range: 0-1)	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2
Network size (range: 1-5)	3.5	1.5	3.5	1.4
Total parents	1276		1113	
Total children	2845		2458	

Table 3. Two-level random-intercept models of parents' citation of children in the family network for women and men

	Men		Women	
	Dormant tie		Dormant tie	
	Log odds	t-statistic	Log odds	t-statistic
Parent's characteristics				
Parent's marital status (ref. = married)				
Repartnered	1.26**	(4.80)	0.19	(0.46)
Separated	0.15	(0.52)	-0.09	(-0.25)
Widowed	-0.56*	(-2.12)	-0.36	(-1.29)
Parent's income level (ref. = low)				
Average income	-0.21	(-0.83)	0.04	(0.17)
High income	-0.68*	(-2.36)	-0.32	(-0.88)
Parent's level of education (ref. = low)				
Medium	-0.23	(-0.81)	-0.28	(-1.15)
High	-0.16	(-0.51)	-1.18**	(-3.38)
Parent's self-rated health	0.18~	(1.65)	-0.12	(-0.97)
Parent's age	0.00	(0.37)	-0.00	(-0.14)
Parent is foreign born (ref. = Swiss born)	-0.38	(-1.57)	-0.07	(-0.26)
Child's characteristics				
Child's gender (ref. = daughter)	0.45**	(3.16)	0.66**	(3.85)
Child's birth order (ref. = first-born)				
Only-child	-1.44**	(-4.63)	-1.06**	(-2.98)
Later-born	-0.07	(-0.53)	0.05	(0.30)
Child's marital status (ref. = married)				
Single	0.20	(0.93)	0.10	(0.38)
Separated	0.11	(0.53)	-0.03	(-0.14)
Child has children	0.16	(0.82)	0.17	(0.74)
Child resides abroad (ref. = Switzerland)	0.46*	(2.06)	0.89**	(3.19)
Child's occupation (ref. = lower class)				
Middle class	-0.43	(-1.22)	-0.44	(-1.23)
Upper class	-0.43	(-1.17)	-0.32	(-0.85)
Inactive	0.84	(1.53)	0.20	(0.30)
Network characteristics				
Size of family network	-0.89**	(-12.04)	-0.77**	(-9.25)
Constant	1.42	(1.19)	1.94	(1.35)
Constant	0.47**	(4.98)	0.58**	(5.28)
Observations	2222		1746	

t statistics in parentheses

Source: VLV1 (2011)

~ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 4. Linear regression models on network consequences of dormant parent-child relationships for men and women

	Men (N = 1100)					Women (N = 874)				
	All dormant ties		Some dormant ties			All dormant ties		Some dormant ties		
Dependent variable	Beta	t-statistic	Beta	t-statistic	Adjusted R-squared	Beta	t-statistic	Beta	t-statistic	Adjusted R-squared
Emotional support										
Received from others	-0.14	(-1.27)	0.05	(0.52)	0.13	-0.25~	(-1.94)	0.12	(1.24)	0.12
Provided to others	-1.17**	(-9.78)	-0.29**	(-2.60)	0.13	-1.06**	(-7.41)	-0.27*	(-2.12)	0.15
Density	-0.10**	(-3.86)	-0.02	(-0.76)	0.04	-0.16**	(-5.60)	0.00	(0.08)	0.09
Conflict										
Bothered by others	-0.12~	(-1.65)	-0.09	(-1.63)	0.06	-0.05	(-0.71)	0.02	(0.38)	0.08
Caused to others	-0.27**	(-3.99)	-0.15*	(-2.35)	0.07	-0.24**	(-3.13)	-0.02	(-0.31)	0.07
Density	-0.04*	(-2.27)	-0.02	(-1.28)	0.06	-0.03	(-1.50)	-0.02	(-1.17)	0.05

Note. Controlled for parent's marital status, age, education, income, health, country of birth and size of the network.

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