Social ability or social frailty? The balance between autonomy and connnectedness in the lives of older people.

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Introduction

Social relationships constitute an important resource in daily life. For this reason people who are embedded in a network of meaningful personal relationships generally enjoy a higher level of well-being than those who have to do without such a network. This applies especially to primary relationships with spouses and family, but social relationships in a broader sense also have a positive influence on feelings of well-being. In late modern society such relationships have become it might argued less self-evident. Fundamental changes in contemporary societies have drastically altered the structure of daily life: granting more freedom in many areas; at the same time placing higher demands upon individuals. The more personal competencies people have, the more capable they are of shaping their lives in the way they want. They are also more likely to succeed in maintaining meaningful and supportive networks and taking advantage of these when necessary. Well-being is the greatest when people succeed at finding a good balance between individual autonomy and independence on one hand and connectedness with others in a meaningful and supportive network on the other. This balance enables people to fully enjoy the individual freedom of late modernity, and at the same time feel safe and protected in the face of limitations and adversity. It is also crucial for dealing with problematic situations and circumstances with which people are confronted, and which tend to happen more often as people age.

This chapter examines that the extent to which individuals are embedded in

a meaningful social network has enriching consequences both for their life in general and for their chances of aging *well*. The chapter is divided into the following sections: First, the chapter explores why meaningful relationships have a positive effect on personal well-being and quality of life. Second, we describe the changed social environment of late modern society and the possibilities for social integration under these new social conditions. Third, the personal networks of Dutch older adults are described, the changes that are occurring in these networks, the role of major life events and the importance of social competencies when dealing with such events. Fourth, we show what makes older adults sufficient defensible to participate in meaningful personal networks. Finally, a concluding section draws together a number of remarks about aging well in contemporary society.

The empirical data in this chapter is derived from the study *Social isolation in modern society* (Hortulanus, Machielse and Meeuwesen, 2006).[1] The goal of this research project was to map out the nature and scope of social isolation in the Netherlands, and offer insight into the background, causes and consequences of the phenomenon. The study was carried out in the form of an oral survey, gathering data in two phases. In the first phase of the study, nearly 2, 500 respondents (aged 18 years and over) were interviewed in a face-to-face setting on the basis of a very extensive list of topics. An important part of this first survey concerns a series of questions to map out the personal networks of the respondents. This was done using the exchange approach of Fischer (1982), which attempts to find out the persons with whom respondents (regularly) undertake concrete activities and/of from whom they expect support. The quality of these social contacts in terms of loneliness was determined with a validated loneliness scale (De Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis, 1984). In the second phase, six months later, a number of respondents (n=460) were interviewed for a second time. These interviews explored in greater detail a number of personal topics (such as life events, life attitude and socialisation). The questionnaire also contained questions about the support people have found after important life events and the consequences of these for their social network. The arguments in

the sections on Life Events and Personal Competences are based on the data from these in-depth interviews.

THE MEANING OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

A large number of researchers have confirmed a positive link between a meaningful personal network and a person's level of well-being (Berkman and Glass, 2000; Heller and Rook, 2001; Sarason et al, 2001; Pescosolido and Levy, 2002). This association is connected with the fact that social relationships provide several preconditions for 'social existence' (Weiss, 1974; Thoits, 1985). These are expressed in three main functions of social relationships: first, social relationships are important for the development and maintenance of *identity and self-respect*. In general, it is assumed that people develop their personal identity and self-respect by internalising the recognition and appreciation of significant others (Myers, 1999). Persons from their network also offer possibilities for determining social roles and social comparisons, and support for personal aspirations (Heller and Rook, 2001). Second, social relationships contribute to *social integration* allowing people to feel they are part of a social group in which they experience personal involvement, intimacy and friendship. Contacts within this group give people a *social* identity and a frame of reference that influence the values and norms that they develop as well as the choices and plans they make (Myers, 1999). Belonging to some group or category of people that they regard as worthy also contributes to the maintenance of self-esteem (Baumeister and Vohs, 2005).

Thirdly, social relationships are important because of the *social support* that they are able to provide. The *potential* support of personal relationships has a positive effect on well-being; in particular the expectation that in times of need people can count on others for help and support (Pescosolido and Levy, 2002). Several types of support have been identified:

instrumental support refers to material or practical help that meets the immediate need of the person involved (for example money, food, clothing,

household help, information)*;*
emotional or affective support offers people the feeling that others care about them, that there is attention for their experiences and feelings, and that they can talk about personal problems; *companionship* support takes on the form of social companionship: the joint undertaking of social activities, such as shopping, going to the movies together, going out for coffee or spending the evening playing cards (Van der Poel, 1993).

Social relationships contribute substantially to a person's well-being at all phases of the life course, but social integration and social support seem to be particularly important for older adults. As people age the possibilities of participating in social and societal life usually decrease, for instance because deteriorating health or increasingly limited mobility. In fact, chances of their needing help and support increase. However, these issues cannot be seen separately from the self-image and the self-respect that people have built up in the course of their lives. It is precisely in a life phase in which people are confronted more often with radically life changes (such as experiences of loss or illness) that self-confidence and self-respect are important competencies when finding a new balance.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN A LATE MODERN SOCIETY

While meaningful relationships with relatives, neighbours, friends and acquaintances are important resources for the personal functioning of people, and contribute to their individual well-being, such relationships have become less self-evident in late modern society. Three transition points in contemporary Western societies have had fundamental consequences for the social relationships that people have with each other in daily life. First, personal networks are affected by a process of 'de-traditionalization' or individualization (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992). Both terms refer to a transformation of traditional institutions that used to form a stable basis for social relationships. These relationships were structured and constrained by prescribed norms and behaviours. In late modern society individuals are much less guided by traditions than before. The traditional

sources of collective identity and meaning (national state, class, work, church, family) no longer offer the necessary and self-evident personal security or social integration. Individuals themselves have to steer their lives and make choices from among the possibilities and strategies that are available (Giddens, 1990). This does not mean that personal relationships are no longer affected by structural constraints. Contrary, it presumes that people deliberately integrate into networks that are relevant for the realisation of their ambitions. Due to this, the personal relationships that people maintain with each other are viewed as having become more instrumental and functional (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; see further Chapter Two).

Second, economic changes underpinning individualisation have had consequences for social relationships. Under the influence of market-oriented thinking, more emphasis has come to lie on performance, competition and 'being better than others' (Bauman, 2001). Post-industrial capitalism plays constantly into this pattern by offering people possibilities to realise their individual uniqueness, autonomy and identity. This development has a major influence on the creation of relationships in the private domain, where contrasting groups are formed on the basis of shared preferences or lifestyles (Giddens, 1991). Relationships within such groups do not have a very lasting character. They are constantly re-examined in the light of other choice possibilities or changed individual preferences. The consequence is less authenticity; rather more the commercialisation and commodification of relationships (Kunneman, 2005).

Thirdly, the rise of information and computer technology has transformed many features of the social environment. New communication possibilities have led to a fundamental change in the social space. Thanks to technological developments, social relationships are less bound to geographic limitations and social contacts can take shape over increasingly large time-space contexts (Giddens, 1984). Such developments summon positive expectations in terms of possibilities for participation and integration. At the same time, the danger looms that impersonal forms of

communication will increasingly replace *face-to-face* interactions between people.

These broader societal developments not only have major consequences for relationships in the public domain but also for relationships in the private sphere of life. In this context Giddens (1994) speaks of 'a transformation of intimacy' with the de-institutionalisation of the private sphere of family life. Personal relationships are less obligatory and rigid and more flexible and voluntary than before. However, this does not mean that there are no longer structural constraints that affect the formation of networks. For example, work and income still condition the opportunities to find and maintain relationships (Van Tilburg and Thomese, 2010). In late modern society the association between social positions and network structure is more complex than before. So have emancipation processes had an influence on traditional male and female roles. The result is an increased labour participation of women, which has far-reaching consequences for family life; whereas women used to be responsible for family relationships, they build their own life ever more often outside traditional family contexts. Their former role of *socializer* has now strongly come under pressure (Putnam, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this way many personalized contradictions are also articulated in family relationships and in other personal relationships (Van Tilburg and Thomese, 2010).

Moreover, changing demographics created more complex family structures and an increasing insecurity about the content of these relationships. In late modern society family ties are based less on traditional rules of belonging, on 'natural' feelings of duty and obligation. By contrast, the significance of friendship and other informal relationships has increased (Allen, 2008). These relationships, that are based on willingness, mutual affinity, love and affection, have taken over part of the role and function that family relationships used to have. In contrast to family relationships, friendships are entered into voluntarily. Friendships arise out of motivations that emanate from a person's own needs and not from given realities or social obligations. They are based on shared interests and values, on mutual

affection and reciprocity options (Friedman, 1989). Such voluntary interdependence implies a general reciprocity in terms of, for example, mutual help, respect and support. Although in their friendships people strive towards a mutual exchange of support, respect and love, they will also try to maintain the equality if they are (temporarily) in an unequal situation (Pahl, 1998). In this way, friendship networks can offer the continuity and security that are so important for personal well-being.

Loneliness, social isolation and social exclusion

Fundamental societal transitions have influenced (and are still influencing) social life in general, and mutual relationships that people maintain with each other in daily life in particular. Family relationships have become less self-evident and the importance of self-chosen relationships has increased. Due to this in late modern society network structures has become much more diffuse and less certain. Liberation from traditional and self-evident bonds is accompanied by the emergence of other types of social bonds that are often more abstract and less visible but at the same time imply new dependencies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The degree to which people can participate in these networks is crucial for their possibilities to independently mould their own identity and life. This new social environment offers many new challenges, but also brings uncertainty and risks along, because individuals are required – more than before – to shape their own social world autonomously (Beck, 1992).
Modernization and individualization processes may have well produced more freedom, but at the same time higher demands are made on people. Under the conditions of late modern society ample social competencies and skills are necessary to participate in social and societal life. Not everyone is equally capable of developing a solid identity and participating in relevant social bonds in society. For some, the new social conditions entail a widening of their field of action: they have enough competencies to react actively to the social changes and know how to fully take advantage of the increased freedom. They find possibilities to express their autonomy and independence and are capable of participating in meaningful networks that

are relevant in order to realise their ambitions and goals. Others experience the freedom rather as a burden, and feel uprooted (Ehrenberg, 1995; Bauman, 2001). They miss the capacities that are needed to develop an active personality and choose (consciously or otherwise) for the more passive strategy of adjustment and docility (Côté and Levine, 2002). This passivity is often accompanied by avoidance behaviour, in which people gradually retreat from social and societal life (Machielse, 2006a).

When people participate less in social and societal bonds and are not capable of building meaningful personal relationships, this has a negative influence on their quality of life. The lack of personal contacts, or the feeling that existing contacts do not meet the demands set, form a serious threat to individual well-being. Perlman and Peplau (1982) describe a number of important manifestations of *loneliness*: feeling symptoms (such as depression, stress, boredom), motivational symptoms (increased activities or apathy), cognitive symptoms (such as a low self-image or a strong self-orientedness), behavioural symptoms (abnormal patterns of self-revelation), physical complaints (sleeplessness, headaches, alcoholism). As people further retreat from society a situation arises of social isolation, social exclusion or marginalisation.

Social isolation refers to the inability to maintain meaningful and supportive personal relationships. When the incapacity to entering into or maintaining personal networks is accompanied by a shortage of moral or social integration in society, and people no longer have the feeling of being part of a meaningful cultural and normative world that is shared with others – there is *social exclusion.* In late modern society social isolation and social exclusion is rather invisible, because it presents many (outward) similarities with independency and going one's own way.When people don't even come into contact with facilities of the welfare state anymore, we can speak of institutional exclusion or *marginalisation* (Machielse, 2006b).

A network with meaningful, supportive relationships is indispensable to personal functioning. At the same time we have seen that social conditions

in contemporary society have fundamentally changed. Whereas younger generations experience these modern situation as natural, older generations have experienced the consequences personally – in the relationships with their spouses and children, in the wider family network, in their circle of friends and acquaintances and in their living environment (Victor et al., 2009). The question now is what makes older adults sufficiently able to handle things in this new social environment, in general and in dealing with major life events. What does social ability mean in the later life phases in which independence and the ability to cope on one's own often decrease due to deteriorating health or limited mobility, and in which ever more people keep dropping out of the network? And what is the meaning of personal relationships when dealing with such setbacks?

THE SOCIAL NETWORK OF OLDER ADULTS

The above section argued that social relationships fulfil several important roles that contribute to a person's individual well-being. The question now is how we can best typify these relationships with an eye on the aforementioned meanings: contributing to self-respect and self-confidence, giving the feeling of belonging, and offering social support. It will be clear that here typifications do not suffice when referring to the *scope* of the network. The number of contacts a person has says little about the *quality* of contacts in terms of meaningfulness, social support, appreciation or recognition. To describe the social networks of older adults this chapter makes use of the social contacts typology developed by Hortulanus, Machielse and Meeuwesen (2006). This typology takes account of two dimensions of the social network: the scope of the social support network and the presence or absence of feelings of loneliness. Each dimension is related to an essentially different aspect of the social network. People with a large network can feel lonely nonetheless, because the existing contacts do not meet their needs. By contrast, someone with a small network can be satisfied because the contacts are sufficiently supportive.

The typology for social contacts consists of four categories: The *socially*

competent have many contacts, their social network functions satisfactorily and they do not feel lonely. The *socially inhibited* have only a few contacts, but they appear to be sufficient and meet their social needs. The *lonely* have many contacts yet feel nonetheless lonely because the existing contacts do not meet their wishes. The *socially isolated* are worst-off – they have few or no meaningful contacts, and feel lonely and unhappy.

Using this typology we can affirm that two-thirds of the Dutch adults (64 per cent) have a meaningful social network that meets their needs and desires. For the rest, the social network looks less attractive. About 6% of the Dutch live in actual social isolation; these people have few or no supportive contacts, and deal with strong feelings of loneliness. The socially inhibited and the lonely make up respectively 8% and 22% of the Dutch population; they are vulnerable because of a limited size or limited quality of their network, and are at an increased risk of social isolation (Hortulanus et al, 2006) (see Table 1 for a summary).

Table 1- Typology of contacts in the Netherlands, per age category (%)

Age	Socially competent	Lonely	Socially inhibited	Socially isolated
18-30	67	22	7	4
31-40	67	19	8	5
41-50	69	21	5	5
51-60	62	24	7	7
61-70	62	20	11	6
71-80	49	29	8	14
≥81	38	26	20	20
Average	64	22	8	6

Source: Data file on Social Isolation in the Netherlands (Hortulanus et al, 2006).

Table One demonstrates how the network appears less favourable as people age. The share of socially competent persons is far below average in the oldest categories. In the group aged ≥81 we find nearly three times as many socially inhibited persons (20%) and even five times as many socially isolated individuals (20%) than in the youngest age category. Although the *socially inhibited* are satisfied with the quality of their existing contacts, they are vulnerable. They depend on only a few others: if one or more

persons drops out from that network, this implies a risk of isolation. Both the *lonely* and the *socially isolated* deal with feelings of loneliness. They admit to be familiar with 'experiencing a sense of emptiness', 'not having enough people to fall back on', 'missing companionship', 'missing people around them', and 'having no friends to call on when in need' (Hortulanus et al, 2006, p 45).

Except for age, the social ability is influenced by situational en structural characteristics of people. In all age categories, divorced and widowed people have twice as much chance to get socially inhited or socially isolated. This is even more so for people in urban areas; the chance to become socially inhibited or socially isolated in cities is considerably higher than in rural areas (10% versus 3%).

CHANGES IN THE NETWORK

Over the life course, social networks change in composition, size and quality. This process can be understood from a variety of perspectives: social and personal transitions in later life, the changes in the expected returns from relationships within the network, and alterations in an individual's motivation that are associated with the limited time horizon of older adults (Van Tilburg and Thomese, 2010; Carstensen et al, 2006). The research reported here found that alterations to personal networks are linked to major changes or events in life that have consequences for existing relationship patterns. Major events may cause networks to increase or decrease in size or quality. Some events lead to an *expansion* of the network such as having children or getting married. There are also events that affect the network *negatively*, in the sense that they have a detrimental effect on the size or quality of the social network. These are experiences that imply some degree of loss. Older adults are generally confronted with such experiences more frequently than younger people. Events or circumstances that decrease the social contacts of older adults are losing one's partner and death of a loved one. Other reasons are mentioned that can be understood from a life-course perspective, such as issues that are more process-like and

do their work gradually, like senescing and a deteriorating health condition.

The decrease of the number of contacts does not happen to the same degree for all older adults. It is striking that a decrease is observed most often among lonely and isolated older adults. It is thus precisely those who are already unhappy about the *quality* of their network who see it become gradually smaller; for them the decrease of the network size is not the result of *selective shrinking* due to changed emotional engagement (Carstensen et al., 2006). It is particularly the consequence of a lack of personal competencies that are necessary to maintain meaningful relationships which meet their needs and desires. Factors interrelated to the life course, like senescing and deteriorating health, have a negative influence on their network. The actual loss of one or several network members often marks a turning point in the negative sense.

Among *socially competent* older adults the opposite seems to be happening. Satisfaction about the quality of the existing network appears to make it easier to maintain contacts or even expand the network. Senescing and deteriorating health have hardly any influence on their social networks. Their quality and size are sufficient to compensate for these changes and maintain a good quality of life. Here we see the 'Matthew effect' in operation: those who already have a meaningful network are generally able to hold on to that network, whereas those whose network functions less well see it further disintegrate. A decrease in number of social contacts tends to lead to a loss of quality of life, especially for the lonely and the isolated, who weren't happy with their social life in the first place.

LIFE EVENTS

Important life events can have prolonged effects in the lives of people. An event that took place a long time ago can still have an enormous impact on someone's present life. The most important *positive events* that keep having an influence at an older age are related to the individual's personal life such as a good marriage and having children. The importance of a happy youth is

the most salient. Three out of four older adults indicated that this was determinant, in a positive sense, for their later life: a contented childhood and loving parents seem to form a solid buffer against negative events later in the life course (Hortulanus et al., 2006).

The most important *negative* events that keep influencing a persons' life are those of a personal nature, such as a lack of attention and love during one's youth, the loss of a dear one, a serious illness (of oneself or an important other), problematic relationships or the inability to find a suitable partner, and carrying a secret. There are also circumstances or events related to the societal roles people fulfil. The most important ones are not having an education, problems at work, work disability and retirement. All these aspects tend to have a negative influence on quality of life up to an advanced age.

The number of negative events that still play a role in older adults' lives varies strongly for the four contact groups. Whereas the number of positive and negative events is fairly balanced among *socially competent* older adults, the *lonely* mention twice as many negative as positive events, and the *socially isolated* even three times as many. Failure to form intimate ties in one's youth is much more common among the two high-risk groups and the socially isolated than among the socially able. The same applies for disappointments due to unrealised goals and for carrying a secret. In addition to negative events which more or less belong to the normal course of life, the two high-risk groups and the socially isolated have been hit more often in their lives by traumatic events which keep influencing their lives negatively even at an advanced age.

Social support helps people process and manage negative events. This is mainly about *emotional* support of a spouse, friends, family, friends and neighbours, sometimes supplemented by professional support from organisations or institutions. *Practical* support and information can also be important for processing things that happen. In some cases an appeal is made only to professional support, which mostly involves psychiatric help or

help from social workers. When someone can mobilise the necessary help and support, he is more capable of limiting or alleviating the negative consequences of an event. Persons with a meaningful network are therefore more capable of facing adversity and problems. There are however large differences in the social support that people can expect after a dramatic event. Although such support is self-evident for the socially competent, the same does not apply for the lonely, the socially inhibited or the socially isolated. Especially the last group is worse-off in this respect. After a drastic event they must do without the help or support of others, even though they do need it. In many cases there just isn't anyone in their environment that can offer help. They are also less adept at reaching professional organisations. All of this causes major life events to keep influencing their lives negatively. The socially able are better equipped to process negative events because their social networks offer more protection and support.

PERSONAL COMPETENCIES

The negative consequences of major life changes can be limited when people get the right help and support. This does require solution-oriented action from the person involved. Mobilising support in one's own network or seeking professional guidance and support appeals to individuals' personal competencies and the capacity for self-management. Coping strategies play an important role here (Hortulanus et al, 2006; Machielse, 2006a).

In general, two types of reactions to life events can be found in terms of general coping strategies: an *active* form of coping, which is aimed at a positive transformation, and a *passive* form of coping, which leads to a negative transformation (Lazarus, 1966). In an *active* strategy a person tries to find a place for the negative emotions that accompany negative experiences. One seeks for ways to undo the negative situation, for example by an active process of revising or reappraising an event (e.g. Taylor, 1983). An active strategy presumes open communication with members of the social network, the ability to share emotions, mutual involvement and trust. A *passive* coping strategy, by contrast, manifests itself in emotional denial,

withdrawal and avoidance behaviour. The involved person is confronted with strong feelings of fear and shame, and the feeling of losing a foothold in all aspects of life. There is no open communication with others, which keeps away adequate help. The strategy that someone chooses (deliberately or otherwise) depends on personal competencies such as self-confidence and social skills. The fewer personal competencies a person has, the greater the chances of a passive coping strategy (Côté and Levine, 2002).

Personal competencies and an active coping strategy are thus important when processing negative events. When someone is more competent - has more self-respect, is capable of overcoming feelings of fear, guilt and shame, and dares show others his vulnerability - more adequate help can be offered. This can help people resume the thread of their lives in the course of time. For people with fewer competencies, negative events form a turning point in the negative sense. They run the risk of losing control over their lives and get into a downward spiral in which various problems keep piling up in the course of time. Personal competencies thus form an essential aspect of communicative self-management; the ability to take initiative, to bring about a situation that is perceived as meaningful, and to search for alternatives if the situation does not satisfy (Cornelis, 1997). It is the steering competencies which are necessary in contemporary society when striving for independence and autonomy.

The basis for the development of such steering competencies is laid down during one's younger years (Taylor, 1989). We already saw that a happy and loving youth can constitute a protective factor for problems and adversity. The trust that exists between children and parents/carers under normal circumstances forms the basis for personal identity as well as the emotional and cognitive orientation towards the world and others. It also underlies the feeling of *ontological* safety that people normally develop (Giddens, 1991, p 38). This safety system can be seen as a sort of emotional protection against existential fear and against future threats and dangers. It is the protective cocoon that normally ensures that someone can deal with changes and uncertain or difficult circumstances later in life. These early life experiences

are also of essential importance for *becoming social* (Giddens, 1991, pp 39-40). The development of competencies continues during a person's entire life cycle, via interactions in diverse social circles such as the neighbourhood, the school, work and friendship circles. The versatility of these social circles illustrates the complex interactions between the individual circumstances and the societal context in which individuals find themselves. The more a person is involved in social contexts, the more his competencies will be adequate and conducive towards meaningful relationships. By contrast, people who have few interactions with others have less developed and thus less adequate competencies. This results in a passive coping strategy perpetuating or even enhancing the social isolation (Côté and Levine, 2002; Machielse, 2006a).

SOCIAL ABILITY OF OLDER ADULTS

As people age, they have to deal more often with major life changes in various areas of life; some life changes are connected with the process of senescing, such as the death of dear ones, limited mobility or a deteriorating health condition. Other life changes emanate from societal norms that allocate certain roles to people, such as work or retirement. Personal competencies, the capacity for self-management and the quality of the social network are determinant for the possibilities that older adults have to deal with such changes. The more personal competencies they have, the more possibilities they enjoy for communicative self-management in the sense that they are more capable of shaping their lives in the way they want. They also succeed more in maintaining supportive networks and taking advantage of them in coping with fundamental changes in personal life. The degree to which people are capable of finding a good balance between individual autonomy or independence and connectedness with meaningful others is crucial. Aging well means attaining such a balance. In this context it is interesting to look at the personal competencies in the four contact groups (see Outline 1).

Outline 1. Subgroup typification of the social contact typology by degree of personal

competencies

	Socially competent	Lonely	Socially inhibited	Socially isolated
Many personal competencies	Balanced people	Misunderstood	Ambitious	Problem concealers
Limited personal competencies	Sheltered	Disappointed	Socially inept	Defeated

Source: Hortulanus, Machielse and Meeuwesen, 2006: 221.

Socially competent individuals with *many* personal competencies are people in balance. They know how to find the proper balance between autonomy and connectedness. Socially competent individuals with *limited* personal competencies can also be classified as able because they have a network that can offer effective support when needed. This network can compensate for the limited personal competencies: they feel safe, even when their ability to cope on their own comes under attack. In case of drastic events they are able to optimally take advantage of the existing network and face the problems. Both groups enjoy a good balance between connectedness and independence. The combination of personal input and input of the social network is in both cases such that striving for self-development and autonomy can continue, even in the presence of adversity and problems.

The *socially inhibited* with major personal competencies appear to deploy them mainly to satisfy their ambitions. They renounce – albeit temporarily – tight social relationships, compensating the lack thereof with activities that fill their time and sometimes also give them some degree of status. When socially inhibited persons have minimal personal competencies, their social ineptness is more noticeable. They are dependent on a small social network that provides only a limited degree of connectedness.

For the *lonely*, the balance between independence and connectedness is disturbed in a different manner. Although they are connected to a large

number of people, they feel misunderstood or disappointed. Lonely persons with major personal competencies feel misunderstood because they have suffered experiences of emotional loss. Lonely persons with limited personal competencies are very disappointed in others, because those people cannot reduce their feelings of dependence and limited connectedness.

The *socially isolated* with major personal competencies experience a strong discrepancy. They can do a lot and can even handle themselves in more or less functional social environments. This allows them to hide well the problems they have with establishing and maintaining closer personal relationships. The socially isolated with limited competencies have little more than that if they are to keep up appearances. They are not connected with the people around them, and feel defeated. This makes them the opposite of the socially able with major social competencies (Hortulanus et al, 2006).

AGEING WELL

From the above it has become clear that the chances of good aging are unevenly distributed. People who have had a protective and happy youth that helped them develop good personal competencies are more successful later in life when it comes to building and maintaining a network that is meaningful and supportive, and can contribute to a feeling of well-being. Those who are less lucky and grow up in a situation that has few possibilities for developing good personal competencies tend to also be at a disadvantage in their adult lives. Hence in many cases Aging Well is the result of having a Good Youth. The disadvantages often have a persistent character, which has serious consequences.

Older adults with good social competencies have the resilience that is necessary to deal with setbacks and problematic life changes. Active coping strategies have become a natural part of their actions, enabling them to better deal with new societal conditions and with more personal problems that can arise in the course of life. They are also capable of building a

meaningful network which can offer adequate support during negative events and circumstances. The most ideal situation is that of *socially competent* older adults with major personal competencies, but the socially competent with limited personal competencies do well too. Although they have less self-confidence, social skills and problem-solving abilities, they feel safe in a network that offers support and contributes to their feeling of well-being. The quality of their network is sufficiently good to catch changes related to aging and maintain a good quality of life.

We have also seen that good personal competencies do not necessarily have to lead to good networks. Personal competencies tend to be deployed chiefly in specific life domains like work situations or other formal contexts. We see this, for example, with the *socially inhibited* who have good social competencies. They are ambitious and attach great value to social success and a social position. It is only when the socially inhibited lose this role because they lose their job or because they can no longer participate in society due to deteriorating health or limited mobility that the lack of a supportive network becomes manifest.

The worst-off are the *socially isolated*. They do not have a supportive network, and miss the competencies to actively react to life events by themselves. A lack of direction and self-management makes them lean on others, burdening the existing contacts and making it much more difficult to maintain them. They usually follow passive strategies, experience little support from their social network, or do not know how to take advantage of the existing support. Those with major social competencies are often still capable of managing by themselves in practical terms. Their problems, then, remain hidden.

Socially isolated people with limited personal competencies are often cut off from every aspect of regular life. In addition, they are no longer able to find their way to facilities of the welfare state and are mainly busy trying to ‘survive’. Their incapacity to be part of relevant networks is often accompanied by a lack of meaning. The social conditions of contemporary

society make their lives even more harrowing; their passivity and withdrawal behaviour ensure that they literally become ‘invisible’.

CONCLUSION

In recent decades our society has greatly changed under the influence of processes of individualisation and modernisation. These processes have drastically altered the social structure of daily life, and the personal relationships people are involved in. The liberation from traditional and self-evident bonds implies that people can give shape autonomously to their own social world. This may have brought along more freedom, but at the same time sets higher demands from individuals. People are less able to fall back on ‘given’ bonds such as family or neighbourhood relationships. Good personal competencies are necessary to function well in this new social environment and make meaningful contacts. Such competencies are important in two ways: they enable people to function autonomously, and they should also make it possible to build a meaningful network and use it when necessary. The latter means that people can show their vulnerability and know how to ask for help in times of adversity. It also means they are also able to build a certain degree of credit for moments in which the relationship is temporarily out of balance.

Although the social networks of older adults are not essentially that different than those of younger age categories, distinctions can be identified in the binding patterns of generations. The current older generation grew up in a time when family bonds were more or less taken for granted and could serve as a buffer against problems and misfortune. In this fast-changing society this is not so self-evident. Children live further away from their parents, women’s participation in labour has increased sharply, and the significance of the neighbourhood has become less. The problems that aging persons encounter in making meaningful relationships are not the result of biological senescense, but situated within a particular societal constellation of the late modern society in which social competencies are more important than before.

New generations have to work actively at building a network with family and friends that offers safety and protection, and is supportive of their personal and societal participation. The situation in which people grow up is important for their opportunities to build up meaningful and supportive relationships in later life. aging well does not mean that people are not confronted with circumstances that make them vulnerable; it means that they belong to a network that makes it possible to cope with that vulnerability. Finding a good balance between independence and connectedness is crucial; aging well means that someone can fully utilize the freedom of modern life and at the same time is feeling safe and protected in coping with problems and failures. For future generations of older adults, a good balance between independence and connectedness is crucial: only then can they fully enjoy the freedom, and at the same time feel safe and protected in the face of limitations and adversity.

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Note

1. Additional information about the study and research methods used can be found in Chapter 3 of the book Social isolation in modern society (Hortulanus et al., 2006).