The Role of Kin in Support Networks Over the Life Course:
An Introduction to the UCNets Project[1]

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I have a two-fold purpose in my remarks. One is to introduce the UCNets study of personal network dynamics, the first wave of which is now in the field as I speak. In this survey, to be described later, we are measuring the social support networks of respondents in two age strata, 20-somethings and 50-to-70-year olds, and each respondent is to be interviewed three times over five years. (In the absence of UCNets data, I will present some other data for illustrative purposes.) My broader purpose here is to address one of the issues that we will be dealing with: the intersection of kinship, social support, life course, and life ways.

The Question(s)

The broadest research question we are asking in the UCNets project is, How do personal networks change from time to time in response to life events and life course transitions? One set of more focused questions concern the role of kin in personal networks. Who turns to kin, when, for what, with what consequences? To be yet more specific:

> * Who has or does not have kin *available* for support?--"who" being answered most critically in terms of stage in the life course and the experience of life events.
> * Given that kin are available, who draws on those kin–rather than drawing on nonkin or on no one–and, particularly, at what stage in the life course do they do so?
> * At what price comes kin support? By which I mean, how commonly do people encounter tension in kin ties even as they get support from them? When in the life course?

Kin ties operate differently and under different rules than do nonkin ties; everything social scientists know, back to 19th-century proto-anthropology, tells us that kin ties operate differently. (As an obvious example, kin ties are generally age- and often gender-heterogenous.) Yet, it is striking how often social network researchers fail to separate kin from nonkin ties in their analyses.

We know some things about variation in the extent to which people are involved with and rely on kin. We know, for example, that more educated people tend to live farther from kin and are, at least proportinateley, *less* involved with kin than are less educated people (e.g., Fischer, 1982; Compton and Pollak, 2009; Chan and Ermisch, 2015). Yet, the higher-educated also tend to have kin networks with

the greatest upward reach in class standing (Goldstein and Warren, 2000), providing at least latent source of greater social support. We know that getting married often has the paradoxical consequence of creating new, formal kin ties with new in-laws but also *reducing* interaction with kin. Widowhood and divorce paradoxically do the reverse (Gerstel and Sarkisian, 2006; Kalmijn, 2012; Guiaux, et al., 2007; Morgan and March, 1992).

One shaper of people's involvement with kin is simply availability. Obviously, a senior with a single child who is a thousand miles away is in different circumstances than a senior with three children who live nearby. Thus, we need to incorporate considerations such as differential birth rates and death rates, migration histories, and geographical distance. The relatively smaller role of kin among the better-educated that research has found may "simply" reflect their lower birth rates and higher long-distance migration rates, for example. But availability is not the whole story.

People vary in ways of life from less- to more-kin-centered--i.e., in the implicit rules for and terms of kin interaction and support[2]--and those variations probably reflect variations by education, culture, and probably generations. (Anecdotally, for example, there are families that operate on the rule that 18-year-olds are essentially on their own and families in which even 38-year-olds are momma's boys and girls.)

At the level of kin dyads, particular relationships develop histories that lead to what may seem idiosyncratic terms of relationships. Stresses and strains in kin ties may lead people to deviate from the normative understandings of who owes whom what. Research on negative ties (e.g., Leffler et al, 1986; Rook, 1992) point to such complexities. We plan to examine the life stages and transitions that drive such variations–say, early years after leaving home, or grandparenthood. We plan to examine which and how individuals manage kinship ties through stresses of life course transitions.

These are among the life-course-and-networks topics UCNets will examine.

The UCNets Project

The central research question of the project is to understand how individuals' personal support networks change in response to significant life events, including life-stage transitions. Some of these changes are outside of individuals' control–e.g., a death–but we are particularly interested in individuals' purposeful responses to the events, such as residential migration and new employment: How do people build and re-build social ties over the life course? Other goals include assessing the connection of personal support networks to health, personality, and media of communications. The approach to measuring respondents' personal networks is the same as that in my survey of over 30 years ago, described in *To Dwell Among Friends* (Fischer, 1982): Personal–i.e., egocentric--networks are made up of people with whom individuals engage in exchanges. Networks are best measured by a long and diverse set of questions which elicit the names of the actual people with whom subjects are involved.

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[2] Eric Giannella and I are completing a paper on the 1977-78 Northern California Community Study network data (Fischer, 1982) that identifies levels of kin-involvement and -dependence as an important variation in individuals' network "styles."

To these research ends:

> * We are sampling respondents at two specific slices of the life span, respondents aged 21-30 and respondents aged 50-70, targeting 600 cases of each in the San Francisco Bay Area. We focus on ages where we can expect more than the usual number of life events and life transitions.

> * We take a simple inventory of the family members–parents, adult children, siblings, in-laws--whom respondents have and ask how close they live.

> * We ask several name-eliciting questions to generate a roster of people in respondents' networks–questions such as the people with whom respondents "typically do ... social things ... such as going shopping, out for drinks, to the park"; the people with whom they "confide in" about "personal matters"; and those whom they would ask if they were "seriously injured or sick and needed some help for a couple of weeks." Importantly, we also ask respondents to name people whom *they* help and also the "people that you sometimes find demanding or difficult." We then ask many questions designed to elicit descriptions of named people.

> * In addition, we ask questions designed to get at respondents' feelings about their ties; respondents' physical and mental health; the life events and life transitions that recently occurred to them; and their personalities.

> * We plan to survey the same respondents about 12-18 months after the first wave and again 12-18 months after the second.

> * An additional dimension of the study is a mode experiment, comparing web-based to in-person interviews.
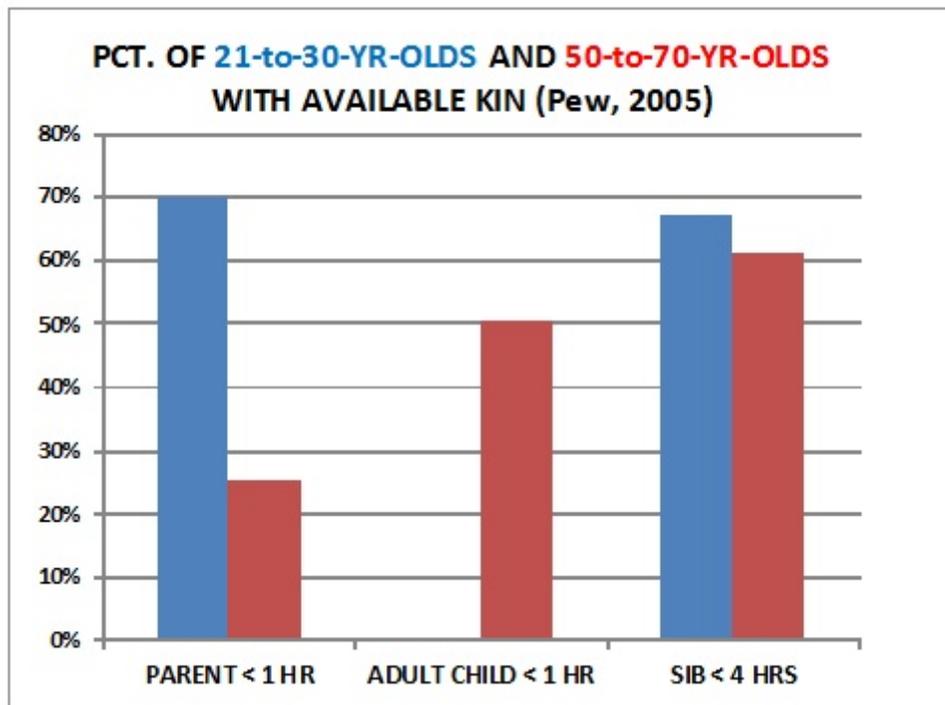
This is a challenging research design, survey instrument, and sampling frame. Our focus in the long run, however, is on the within-person changes we observe.

While We Wait: Some Data

I expect that the published paper for this conference will present wave 1 results from UCNets. Meanwhile, I can provide a sense of the analysis we intend using a 2005 Pew Research Center survey done of the general population. The Pew survey asked respondents many questions about their relatives–who existed, how far away they lived, and whether the respondent had gotten or given various things to those relatives.

I present here a few quick results as a promissory note on the UCNets data. But there a couple of caveats: The Pew data are not nearly as rich as the data we will get from UCNets. For example, Pew asked about categories of alters–parents, siblings, children--rather than about specific people. Also, my analysis here is meant only as a brief look for illustrative purposes.

I analyze the same age groups that UCNets will examine, 21-to-30 year-olds and 50-to-70-year-olds, we learn from the Pew survey that:

PCT. OF 21-to-30-YR-OLDS AND 50-to-70-YR-OLDS WITH AVAILABLE KIN (Pew, 2005)

(Bar chart: Y-axis shows 0% to 80% in 10% increments. X-axis categories: PARENT < 1 HR, ADULT CHILD < 1 HR, SIB < 4 HRS.)

- PARENT < 1 HR: blue bar ≈70%, red bar ≈25%
- ADULT CHILD < 1 HR: red bar ≈50%
- SIB < 4 HRS: blue bar ≈67%, red bar ≈61%

* About one-fourth of 50-to-70-year-olds had a parent within an hour's drive–a parent who was probably more burden than help. About half of the 50-to-70-year-olds reported having an adult child within an hour's drive and over 60 percent had a sibling within a four-hour drive. About 20 percent of this older group had *neither* an adult child within and hour or a sib within four hours.

* About two-thirds of 20-somethings had at least one parent within an hour's drive. (Dropping respondents who lived with a parent, 64% lived within an hour of a parent.) About two-thirds had at least one sibling withing a four-hours' drive.[3] Alternatively, about 15 percent had *neither* a parent within an hour nor a sib within four hours.

* Looking more closely at the 21-to-30-year-olds, we learn that: Indeed, the more educated the respondents, the less likely they were to report nearby parents or sibs. Hispanics were three times as likely as non-Hispanics and parents twice as likely as non-parents to report nearby kin. And, as might be expected, respondents who had live their entire lives in the same place were about five times likelier to have parents or sibs nearby.[4]

I next ask, Who draws on those available kin? For these illustrative purposes, I just focus on the 20-somethings from here on: *Among the 21-to-30-year-olds who reported a parent within an hour's drive*, which ones were more or less involved with and supported by a parent? Pew asked respondents about

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[3] Pew asked the one-hour question of parents and children, the four-hour question of sibs.

[4] The education difference, by the way, remains strong even when controlling for lifetime in the community.

receiving "financial help," "help with childcare," "help with errands, housework or home repairs," and receiving "any gifts" from their parents or a selected parent within the previous 12 months. (Obviously, for some purposes, like getting money, distance matters little. In a full analyses of these data, one would want to model each type type of assistance separately.)

The results of regression analyses[5] show these key findings.[6]

> * All else equal, 20-something women were about twice as likely as men to report receiving various sorts of help (although not giving more help).[7]

> * For the most part, parents living nearer were likelier to be reported as sources of help.

> *Looking at specific kinds of help shows variations. In particular, all else equal, respondents with higher incomes were less likely than those with lower income to report getting financial help; Hispanics were twice as likely to report getting errand-type help than non-Hispanics; and blacks were half as likely as non-blacks to report getting a gift from parents.[8]

Finally, I examined the quality of young respondents' ties to parents to address the issue I raised before, At what price kin support? (Again, the subsample here is just 20-somethings with parents within an hour's drive.) The Pew survey asked five questions to get at the quality of the parental tie. I coded the tie as "strained" if the respondent answered negatively to any of the five.[9] By this low threshold, 41 percent of the 20-somethings reported a less-than-optimal parental tie. Black respondents were more

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[5] The answers here are based on logistic regressions for 21-to-30-year-olds who reported a parent within an hour's drive (including respondents who shared a household with a parent). I report effects that are significant at p<.01 only, because the SPSS program I used calculated significance based on weighted cases and the weights for this age group are quite high. Obviously, for more than the illustrative analysis I am doing here, corrected weights and fuller models would be used. The predictors include: distance from the respondent (where the least distance is in the same household), gender, having lived in the same community one's whole life, years of education, Hispanic, black, other race, married, with vs. without a child under 18 in the home, and income.

[6] I also looked at reports of contact frequency: (1) Seeing parents in person: Distance matters, even within a one hour-drive; nearer parents–including those in the same household-were reported as seen more often. That aside, black respondents reported more in-person contact. (2) Phoning parents: The most important factor was that women reported speaking more often to their parents than men did (not surprisingly--Fischer, 1988). Again, blacks also reported speaking more often than whites did.

[7] In similar models, women were no more likely than men to report giving money or practical aid to parents, but much more likely to report giving a gift.

[8] Of course, having children under 18 at home largely determined, along with gender, getting child care help.

[9] The questions: How satisfied the respondent was "with the relationship with your parents" and four versions of "which word best describes your relationship with your [mother/father]..."– close versus distant; tense versus easy-going. I coded a respondent who gave any response to the first question other than "very satisfied" or a negative response to any of the other four questions as having a "strained" tie to his or her parent(s).

likely to do so than non-blacks (55% v. 38%) and low-income respondents more than high-income ones (gamma = .16). Logistic regression shows that these two factors are independently predictive.

But, how does a strained tie affect support? Or, put another way, who receives support *despite* a strained relationship? And what kind of support? At this stage of the analysis, the n's get small and the data analysis stretched. But a few points are suggestive:

> * Respondents with "strained" ties are *not* less likely to report help from parents and for a couple of groups are *more* likely than those with strained ties–which suggests that the help, the call for help, or the need may cause strain. (This is consistent with Offer's [2012; Offer et al., 2012] analyses of how expectations of reciprocity create strains among low-income people. See also Robertson et al., 1991.)

> * Specifically, black respondents and respondents with lower incomes were more likely to report financial aid when they also reported a strain in the relationship.[10] And, black respondents were also likelier to report getting "errand help" and a gift if they also reported a strain than if they did not.

> * Hispanic respondents were much likelier to report getting childcare help from parents when they had strained ties (67%) than when they did not (27%).

Conclusion

The basic purpose of this presentation was two-fold: to raise a few research topics around the question of who gets and who does not get help from kin, especially when we consider people who have kin available; and to describe the UCNets project that will systematically address such questions. Using the 2005 Pew survey as illustrative of the analysis we plan, I found that

> – about two-thirds of 21-to-30-year-olds reported a parent nearby; few reported neither a parent nor a sib in the general region. The less educated, Hispanics, and parents more often reported close kin nearby;
>> – among twenty-somethings, women more often reported getting help from nearby parents;
>> – those living to closer to parents did;
>> – those with needs were likelier to report getting help;
>> – there appeared to be variations by race and ethnicity in getting support; and
>> – reporting getting help from parents and reporting strains with parents seemed to go together, especially for black and Latino respondents.

I look forward to updating these materials with the results from UCNets.

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[10] Among black respondents: 68% of those coded with "strained" parental ties reported financial aid versus 45% of those who did not report a strain. (For non-blacks, the percentages are 65% and 59%.) Among lower-income respondents (under $50,000), 76% of the strained category reported financial aid versus 64% of the not-strained. (Among higher-income respondents, the results were 49% and 48%.)

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