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INFORMAL ASPECTS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL: 

PEER SCHEEPERS AND JACQUES JANSSEN*

Abstract

In this study, we set out to answer questions related to the supposed decline of social capital in Dutch society over the period 1970-1998. We conceptualized informal aspects of social capital as pertaining to informal social relationships and mutual trust that may provide individuals with extra resources to produce various utilities. The operationalization referred to social contacts (with family, neighbours, and friends), voluntary help provision, participation in voluntary work, and level of trust. Using longitudinal data collected over the period 1970-1998, we tested hypotheses on the decline of social capital in the Dutch population in general as well as within specific social categories related to denomination, marital status, and cohort. We found that, in general, there is no sign of declining social capital over the period of investigation. The findings show that regular churchgoers, married people, the middle class, and particularly the cohort of baby boomers have high levels of social capital.

Introduction

Many people in the Netherlands are concerned about the diminishing community spirit in their country and the corresponding loss of moral values. All manner of shocking incidents cause them to become pessimistic. People are found dead in their homes several days or even weeks after their demise, youths beat up people in public while bystanders dare not interfere, and thugs rob people collecting for charity. This might give rise to the idea that family ties and the bonds of friendship in western societies are suffering from what Lane (2000) calls ‘tragic erosion’. Dorien Pessers, who quoted Lane approvingly in her column in de Volkskrant (September 2000), thinks the monocultural tragedy

* Peer Scheepers is Professor of Social Science Research Methodology at the University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Jacques Janssen is Professor of Cultural and Religious Psychology at the same university. Correspondence address: University of Nijmegen, Department of Sociology, P.O. Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands. E-mail: p.scheepers@maw.kun.nl.
described by Lane may actually have much wider implications than the much talked about multicultural tragedy.

However, earlier findings show that the above-mentioned incidents – tragic as they may be – are exceptions rather than the rule. Many people are still actively involved in community matters and little has changed in this respect over the past decade (Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport, 1998). Moreover, the Social and Cultural Planning Board (SCP) did not observe any downward trend whatsoever where efforts in support of the ‘common cause’ are concerned. The willingness of Dutch people to vote during elections has hardly changed, there is an increased participation in demonstrations and petitions, and, compared to the situation in the seventies, more people became actively organized (in the field of recreation) in the mid-nineties (SCR, 1998). Whereas many ‘traditional organizations’ saw their membership dwindle away, many ‘contemporary tertiary organizations’ attracted large numbers of new members so that the total membership of all organizations became much larger than it had been in the eighties. Last but not least, participation in organized voluntary work has remained more or less stable (SCR, 1998). Although Jolles predicted the decline of associations in society in 1959, the number of associations is actually increasing and people are joining more associations, albeit that the term of membership is generally shorter and that people adopt a more pragmatic stance (Janssen, 1994). At any rate, it may be said that people in individualizing societies want more and more tailor-made services and, therefore, the number of associations is increasing.

One might argue that these are all indications of more or less organized communal activities or merely of ‘giro activism’, while the real changes took place in the unorganized, informal interpersonal sphere: people no longer know each other, no longer trust each other, no longer visit each other, and, therefore, have no idea of the needs of others. And that used to be quite different in the past. But was it really any better in the old days? Did Dutch people visit their families, friends, acquaintances, and neighbours more often then? Were they more, or more quickly, prepared to lend a helping hand? Did they trust each other more? It was our aim in this study to answer such questions on the basis of longitudinal empirical research. Since Putnam’s study was published (1995), such questions have been linked to the social capital of society. We first deal with Putnam’s study and similar contributions, from which we infer a number of reasoned expectations, which were tested in the empirical part of this study.

Social capital: The formulation of theories and longitudinal developments

The formulation of theories: Conceptualizations and operationalizations

Like many other notions, the notion of ‘social capital’ is conceptualized in many ways and often quite differently (Portes, 1998; Dekker, 1999). The vari-
ations particularly involve the level at which social capital is measured or observed. In Becker's classic study (1964), individuals are central. In addition to the human capital they gain by way of education and training, they acquire social capital in the form of close-knit social networks in which shared standards of reciprocity prevail. In contrast to Becker, for whom social capital is a characteristic of the individual, Coleman (1988) describes social capital explicitly as a characteristic of relationships between people who are part of a group in society. Bourdieu (1985), too, considers social capital a characteristic of relationships. In his work, social capital refers to resources related to a sustainable network of reciprocal relations, which are recognized as such and exist primarily in the membership of a group. Social capital is, then, an aggregated quantity of actual or potential resources to which — in principle — people have access and which evolve from the network of social relations. Fukuyama (1999) chooses a perspective similar to that of Bourdieu and Coleman to describe social capital as a set of informal values shared by group members, which enables cooperation between them.

The above descriptions contain various conceptualizations with regard to the level at which social capital exists: social capital can be a characteristic of the individual (Becker) or a social group (Coleman) or even of society (Bourdieu and Fukuyama). That is rather problematic if one wants to make structured and systematic observations in order to ascertain to what extent social capital is available. In this respect, Paxton (1999) noted that theoretical studies pay little attention to the level (micro, meso, or macro) at which social capital is conceptualized. However, in more recent, more empirical studies, a perspective was chosen which enabled systematic observations at both the micro and macro levels (Putnam, 1995; Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Paxton, 1999).

In this study we opted for ascertaining the extent to which social capital exists among individuals: People may differ in terms of the extent to which they possess social capital, just as they differ in terms of the extent to which they possess other forms of capital. Similar or identical observations among individuals in other countries or at other points in time enabled the making of comparative statements with regard to social capital as a macro characteristic. Such comparisons may involve the differences between countries, however, the formulation of theories was particularly focused on relevant longitudinal comparisons, as we intend to show. Subsequently, this macro characteristic was also disaggregated to the micro level or to individuals belonging to various social categories. Thus, we were also able to make comparisons between social categories in terms of the extent to which they differ as regards social capital.

The above-mentioned conceptualizations are still rather ‘empty’. What exactly does ‘social capital’ mean? According to Putnam (1995), formal engagement and social trust are particularly indicative of the extent of social capital (Dekker, 1999; Stolle, 1999). In the Netherlands, it has already been
proven that both these indicators have more or less stood the test of time (SCR, 1998; Dekker & De Hart, 1999). The discussions they triggered primarily focused on the limited conceptualization of social capital, as it mainly, if not exclusively, involved the formal and organized aspects (e.g., membership of various intermediary organizations), while the informal and unorganized aspects were not considered. In this context, we would also like to mention that Komter (2000) observed that the discussion on solidarity paid more attention to the formal than to the informal aspects. In a more recent study, Putnam (2000) acknowledges that all informal contacts also need to be considered aspects of social capital. Therefore, in this contribution, we discuss the informal aspects in particular.

The informal aspects of social capital refer to the extent to which individuals and groups can activate additional resources on the basis of reciprocal informal or unorganized relations and mutual trust, resources which may be useful for the production of certain goods. Portes (1998) puts a great deal of emphasis on the conceptual difference between having voluntary informal contacts and relationships, on the one hand, and the additional resources which thereby may be activated, on the other. In this sense, the voluntary informal social relationships constitute the *sine qua non* for social capital: one needs to have informal social relationships in order to make use of their potential resources. Flap (1999), however, does not make such a strict distinction. He considers the various forms of engagement as well as the resources that may be acquired through them as aspects of social capital. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to provide two examples relating to two key aspects of social capital. In neighbourhoods where people keep in touch with each other and know each other (the *sine qua non*), children are able to play more freely and, on average, adults have more time for activities other than looking after their children. In a country where people expect goods to be delivered on time and intact because there is sufficient social control in the workplace (the *sine qua non*), the economy will function, *ceteris paribus*, better and more flexibly.

Echoing Portes (1998) and Paxton (1999), we would like to stress that the voluntary, informal contacts that individuals maintain with their families, friends, acquaintances, and neighbours, therefore, constitute an important informal aspect of social capital. The quality of those contacts may, of course, vary greatly, from superficial to very close, from occasional to frequent, as Flap (1999) quite rightly pointed out. Nevertheless, they have a common characteristic: they are more or less voluntary associations between people, which as such constitute conditions for or aspects of the social capital of individuals and groups as well as of society as a whole. In addition, we would like to emphasize that a situation in which people are willing to help each other also results in voluntary and informal social contacts. In other words, if people perform unorganized voluntary work and provide free aid, we also consider this to con-
stitute more or less voluntary informal relations, which as such can equally be regarded as conditions for and aspects of social capital.

Another key aspect of social capital that Putnam (1995) and also Fukuyama (1995, 1999) and Paxton (1999) placed on the research agenda is ‘trust’. That is to say, people’s trust in institutions and also their general trust in other people. Paxton calls this the ‘subjective’ description of those ‘objective’ engagements that the individual considers reciprocal and confidence-inspiring (1999). Trust is the lubricant for all social interactions without which people would not be able to cooperate well with each other. Fukuyama (1999) defines this aspect of social capital as the set of informal standards on which mutual trust is based. This finds expression in speaking the truth, meeting one’s obligations, and reciprocity. People display this trust to the extent to which they trust each other and large public institutions (religion and politics, justice and the police). According to Fukuyama, this explains why the Russian economy does not function properly, no matter how much money is pumped into it. The goods arrive too late or disappear because the participants in commerce do not trust each other sufficiently. As in the model of the classic ‘prisoner’s dilemma’, people put their own interests first and thereby suffer damage collectively. Putnam (1995) argued extensively that the social capital in the USA has decreased since the sixties as a result of an economic policy that exploits people and sets them against each other. Such policy depletes social capital and finally turns on itself: it causes an economic impasse.

Longitudinal developments: Hypotheses

However divided earlier theoretical studies may be over the conceptualization of the formal and informal aspects of social capital, there does seem to be some consensus as regards the presumed developments in the scope of social capital. Paxton (1999) is right in stating that many authors have been inspired in this respect by Tönnies’ classic study *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887/1957). Tönnies described the ideal type of *Gemeinschaft* (community) as a society based on *Wesenwille* (natural will). Fundamentally, people want to participate in collectivities, families, neighbourhoods, and friendships in which individuals, despite differences, constitute a close-knit community. Such relationships are not chosen: they are self-evident, totalitarian, affectively rooted and tradition-oriented. Their prototype is the parent-child relationship. The *Gesellschaft* (association) is based on what Tönnies calls *Kürwille* (rational will): civilized man, detached from the natural context, enters into new relationships on the basis of his personal interests. Such relations are consciously chosen, partial, rational, and goal-oriented. Nisbet (1976) considers this development against the background of two revolutions (the Industrial Revolution and French Revolution) converging in the process of individualization. The individual was ‘liberated’ from the limitations of previously existing communal structures and
became ‘independent’ within the family and community. The individual became a separate world. As the individual was proclaimed the norm, self-care and self-sufficiency became the fundamental principles of life as a whole and people were expected to adopt an autonomous and independent stance (Schnabel, 1999).

Some authors see such developments in a positive light. Durkheim, who wrote a critical review of Tönnies’ famous book in 1889, expressly chose the term *solidarité organique* to typify future society and reserved the label *solidarité mécanique* for traditional society. The old society was the sum of similarities, the new society a functional whole of differences. Irrefutably, the individual has gained more freedom of choice (Beek, 1986/1992; Giddens, 1991; Beck & Sopp, 1997). Other authors also point to the negative aspects of individualization. In an historical analysis, Baumeister (1987) showed how the self lost its self-evidence over the course of time and became a task for many and a problem for some. Heitmeyer (1997) is of the opinion that individualization processes are mainly accompanied by crises in the structure and regulation of society and, more particularly, in social cohesion: he states that the community of social relations will ultimately cease to exist (1997: *Auflösung von Vergemeinschaftung*). Fukuyama (1999), too, states that modern individualistic culture is in danger of losing ‘community’. At the level of the individual, this may lead to increasing egocentrism and egoism, and to decreasing altruism. Like Putnam (1995), we inferred from this a hypothesis for the longitudinal development of this aspect of social capital: individuals maintain increasingly few social contacts.

Other authors point to a number of other aspects of individualization (Hitzler, 1997; Beck-Gernsheim, 1997; Berger, 1997; Vester, 1997). Heitmeyer (1997) states that individualization processes, in a more general sense, are accompanied by collective disorientation, a phenomenon that also features in the works of Fukuyama (1999) and Paxton (1999) in the context of ‘trust’, another important aspect of social capital. Thus, we arrived at the hypothesis that individuals would trust each other increasingly less in our individualistic culture. Both Fukuyama (1999) and Paxton (1999) provide empirical evidence for this hypothesis. Whether or not this development is also evident in the Netherlands has not yet been sufficiently investigated.

**Subcultural differences: Hypotheses**

So far, we have considered social capital primarily as an aggregated macro characteristic of society, built up of individual characteristics, as did our predecessors in this domain. However, if social capital is built up of individual characteristics, it may also be disaggregated to individuals or to social categories of individuals, which differ from each other in terms of the extent to which they possess social capital. Remarkably, few, if any, theories have been formulated
regarding this aspect and, consequently, there are few empirical studies available that may shed some light on this (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998; Flap, 1999), one such study being De Hart (1999). We tried, therefore, to fill this lacuna.

There are many who, in the Durkheimian tradition, regard church communities as moral communities which to some extent provide their members with comfortable conditions (Himmelstein, 1986; Dekker, De Hart & Peters, 1997; Scheepers & Van der Slik, 1998). Religious people meet each other in church, speak to each other, and discuss not only problems encountered in everyday life, but also political and moral issues. They constitute a social network that functions as a subculture (Peters & Schreuder, 1987; De Hart, 1999). Bekkers (2000) proved that the earlier finding that frequent churchgoers do more voluntary work is largely explained by their being members of a social network. From this data, we inferred the hypothesis that the members of denominations possess a considerable amount of social capital. From this we also inferred the hypothesis that social capital increases to the extent to which people attend church. De Hart and Dekker (2000) provided empirical evidence for a similar hypothesis on church membership and voluntary work, but this did not extend to the informal aspects of social capital. It is difficult to ascertain in advance whether or not, and if so, to what extent there are differences between denominations in this respect. According to Durkheim’s study of suicide, one might expect more social cohesion in the Catholic group and less in Protestant groups. However, recent turbulent developments in the Catholic Church cast some doubt on this. De Hart (1999) shows that, although the differences between denominations are relatively small as far as participation in voluntary work is concerned, the balance tips slightly in favour of Protestants. We can say with somewhat more certainty that people, from the moment they turned their backs on the church, had to do without this social capital, and thus ceteris paribus had gradually less access to social capital than those who remained members of the church. This was particularly the case in the seventies, when the secularization process gained momentum (Te Grotenhuis, Peters & Scheepers, 1998; Peters, Felling & Scheepers, 2000). We also tested this hypothesis. It is possible, however, that the lapsed churchgoers succeeded over the years in acquiring social capital in other ways, if only because their number grew steadily in the Netherlands.

With respect to civil status, Durkheim’s treatise is complex and it is uncertain whether his views on this are still applicable within the current context. First of all, he stresses that it is the family (i.e., having children) and not so much marital status that determines the extent of social integration (Suicide, 1990 edition). Marriage is mainly a normative, suicide-restraining factor for women, especially in areas with high divorce rates, and older men (Suicide, 1990 edition). Unequivocal expectations cannot be formulated on the basis of
these findings. Generally speaking, one might expect a higher level of social capital among married people.

Our last hypothesis was directly inferred from the above-mentioned longitudinal developments concerning social capital. If an individualization process is indeed taking place, the older cohorts should possess more social capital than the younger cohorts. After all, the older cohorts grew up in social conditions deeply marked by these individualization processes. Putnam (1995, 45-46) goes as far as to state that he holds the cohorts born and raised after W.W. II — i.e., the baby boomers — responsible for the decrease in social capital. In the Netherlands, this cohort is also occasionally portrayed as the cohort that gave momentum to the individualization process at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies (Kossman, 1978; Abma, 1990; Blom, 1996). In other studies, the problems associated with the individualization process, from moral disorientation to voting for ultra right-wing parties, are also mainly related to the younger cohorts (Heitmeyer, 1997). In the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany (Scheepers, Eisinga & Lammers, 1993; Lubbers, Scheepers & Billiet, 2000; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2000), some evidence seems to support this. Therefore, we also tested the hypothesis that the older cohorts should possess more social capital than the cohorts born after W.W. II.

Finally, from the theories formulated by Bourdieu (1985), we inferred that social capital can increase the yield of economic and cultural capital. Portes (1998), on the other hand, is of the opinion that there are also reasons to consider these forms of capital as reciprocal. In empirical research, income or occupational group is often taken as an indicator of economic capital and education as an indicator of cultural capital. In order to explore the relationships between the various aspects of capital more deeply, we included these aspects as control variables.

Data

The data against which the above-mentioned expectations were tested, were derived from the series of data collected by the Social and Cultural Planning Board and placed under the heading of Cultural Changes (Becker, 1999). Testing the data involved repeated cross-sectional surveys on the basis of random samples (with the numbers of respondents ranging between 1,800 and 2,400 per year of data collection) which have proven to be representative of the Dutch population in the collection years in question, although some differences between the general population and the research population have also been found. We screened this data for valid measurements on research questions. We made a pooled file of those data sets that contained multiple valid measurements in order to facilitate longitudinal analyses. The data used were collected between 1970 and 1998. All these datasets are available through the Steinmetz
Dependent variables: Aspects of and conditions for social capital
Flap (1999) saw a problem in the measurement of social capital: in his opinion, there was no consensus on effective, reliable, and efficient measurement. Snijders (1999) adopted the (network-like) definition of Sandefur and Laumann (1998) and states that the measurement should be focused on the extent to which others may offer help, possess resources, and are prepared to help an individual by using these resources. Such complex data are not yet available and certainly not in relation to a longer period of time. Following Paxton (1999), we divided social capital into several indicators for which valid measuring instruments did exist.

The first element that we wish to mention relates to the social contacts that Dutch people maintain. We described this element as a condition for or an aspect of social capital. First, we selected questions which would help us to ascertain whether the respondents had visited family members and/or were visited by family members in the week prior to the interview. The answers to these questions proved to be related and we combined them into a single index. Secondly, we selected similar questions with respect to neighbours. The answers to these questions also proved to be connected and were also combined into a single index. The scores on both indices varied from 0 (no contacts with family members or neighbours) through 1 (either visited or was visited) to 2 (visited and was also visited). A second aspect of social capital relates to the extent to which Dutch people perform voluntary work and/or help others. The information obtained by these questions is discussed separately. The third aspect of social capital relates to the extent to which the respondents generally trust or distrust other people (‘You really do not know who to trust nowadays’), measured as a Likert item with 5 categories. This information was also treated as a separate aspect of social capital. By following Paxton (1999) in this way, we think we found a solid basis for an empirical study of the controversial hypotheses of some scientists and the rough speculations of many others.

Independent variables
In order to ascertain whether or not they were part of a church community, we used information on the respondents’ religious upbringing and their current church membership. Those who were not raised religiously and were not members of a church were considered a separate category. Next, we considered the
members of the major denominations (Netherlands Reformed Church, Reformed Churches, Roman Catholic Church): people who said they had been raised religiously and considered themselves members of a church. In addition, we distinguished people who had decided at a given point in time to leave their denomination, i.e., the lapsed churchgoers, who said they were raised religiously, but no longer considered themselves to be members of a church. All these questions involved the respondents' subjective definition, as did the question on the social class to which the respondents belonged: working class, lower middle class, or higher middle class.

The cohorts were constructed according to the periods in which the respondents were born (1897-1906, 1907-1916, 1917-1926, etc., up to and including those born after 1967). As we wanted to present pure and direct, that is, controlled effects of these independent variables, we added some control variables that possibly have some connection with the predictors already mentioned: highest level of education, current civil status (people who did not or did not yet have a partner, divorcees, widows/widowers, and married people), sex, and the degree of urbanization. We also included the effect of age in spite of problems related to multicollinearity (cf. Te Grotenhuis et al., 1998).

Results

Longitudinal developments in informal aspects of social capital
Let us first consider how the informal social contacts of Dutch people have developed over the years. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview.

Table 1: Social contacts with family members and acquaintances in percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>no contact</th>
<th>some contact</th>
<th>frequent contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>69.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Social contacts with neighbours in percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>no contact</th>
<th>some contact</th>
<th>frequent contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows that the percentage of Dutch people who had no contact with family members and acquaintances decreased from 10.5 to 6.4 between 1975 and 1996. The percentage of Dutch people who had frequent contact with family members and acquaintances increased slightly from 63.4 percent in 1975 to 69.6 percent in 1996. These developments do not point in the direction presumed and indicated by the theorists. Moreover, it is remarkable that almost two-thirds of Dutch people maintained contact with family members and acquaintances. The percentage of Dutch people that maintained contact with neighbours (see Table 2) proved to be considerably lower: this fluctuated around 20 percent. However, this does not mean that the percentage of people that did not maintain contact with neighbours increased. That percentage even somewhat decreased over the years: from 55 to 52 percent.

Let us now consider how Dutch people’s participation in voluntary work and unpaid aid have developed according to this data.

Table 3: Participation in voluntary work and unpaid aid in percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>voluntary work</th>
<th>unpaid aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of Dutch people who supported the common cause through voluntary work fluctuated between 26 and 29 percent in the nineties, a percentage that was somewhat lower than that obtained by log-based measurements (De Hart, 1999). There was no unequivocal downward or upward trend, which was also corroborated by other data for the period 1975-1995 (Kraaykamp, 1996; De Hart, 1999). The same goes for the percentage of Dutch people who participated in unpaid aid. That percentage fluctuated at a somewhat lower level between 21 and 24 percent and did not show any clear trend, although there was a slight decrease in voluntary work and unpaid aid.

Next, we discuss the extent to which Dutch people trust their fellow citizens (see Table 4).
Table 4: Trust in other people in percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>no trust</th>
<th>great trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of those who said they trusted other people fluctuated between 39 and 46 percent, and did not show any clear trend in any direction. Although it is tempting to regard these fluctuations as indications of period effects, we must stress here that these are only small fluctuations.

Social capital within subpopulations

At the population level, we found that there mainly seemed to be stability with regard to the extent of informal aspects of social capital in the Netherlands over the period 1970-1998. This raises the question of whether or not, and to what extent, a more than average amount of social capital, divided into several aspects, is or has been present within certain subpopulations. To find an answer to this question, we tested the above-mentioned hypotheses using multiple regression analysis (using dummies: see Hardy, 1993) for both the data of the individual years and pooled data. For the sake of convenience, we present only the results of the analyses of the pooled data here.

First, we tested the hypothesis that people who go to church more often possess the more informal aspects of social capital. Table 5 reveals that the relationship between church attendance and the frequency of social contacts with family members and acquaintances was indeed significantly positive, although not pronounced (0.032 on the pooled data): the more often people went to church, the more social contacts they had with family members and acquaintances. The parameter in the adjacent column shows that church attendance had no effect on contacts with neighbours: this parameter was not found to be significant. However, we again found a small positive regression parameter (0.052): the more people went to church, the more hours they spent participating in voluntary work. This was also related to the hours spent participating in unpaid aid: church attendance was found to have a small positive effect (0.024 on the pooled data). Finally, we found a small but significant positive effect (0.019) of church attendance on trust in other people. On the basis of these findings, we may state that the first hypothesis was not refuted empirically. Dutch people
Table 5: Social contacts with family members and acquaintances; social contacts with neighbours; hours spent on voluntary work; hours spent on unpaid aid; trust in other people; parameters of multiple regression analyses on pooled set

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variables</th>
<th>Contact Family</th>
<th>Contact neighbour</th>
<th>Voluntary work</th>
<th>Unpaid aid</th>
<th>Trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church attendance</td>
<td>0.032*</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.052*</td>
<td>0.024*</td>
<td>0.019*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Denomination

Never been member (ref. cat.)

Catholic 0.032 0.001 0.032* 0.027* -0.067*

Ex-Catholic 0.079* 0.064 0.020 0.011 0.071*

Neth. Reformed 0.031 0.074 0.055* 0.019 -0.026

Ex-Neth. Reformed 0.144* -0.043 0.030 0.030 0.015

Re-Reformed -0.008 0.048 0.050* 0.015 0.122*

Ex-Re-Reformed 0.028 -0.037 -0.017 0.021 0.136*

Civil status

No partner (ref.cat.)

Married 0.096* 0.109* 0.039* 0.004 0.047

Divorced 0.004 0.063 0.001 0.010 -0.066

Widower 0.056 0.244* 0.011 -0.027 -0.012

Cohort

1897-1906 -0.244* -0.025 -0.356 -0.350 -0.091

1907-1916 -0.226* -0.223* -0.310* -0.223* -0.026

1917-1926 -0.156* -0.204* -0.170* -0.122* -0.002

1927-1936 -0.095* -0.178* -0.078* -0.053 0.010

1937-1946 -0.067* -0.042 -0.031 0.011 -0.024

1947-1956 (ref.cat.)

1957-1966 0.026 -0.097* -0.036* -0.050* -0.085*

1967- 0.147* -0.013 -0.085* -0.103* -0.107*

Age 0.002 0.004* 0.002 0.001 -0.004*

Subjective social class

Working class 0.027 0.008 0.007 0.016 -0.157*

Lower middle class 0.059 0.002 0.012 0.012 0.010

Higher middle class 0.085 -0.085* 0.052* -0.003 0.135*

No class mentioned (ref.cat.)

Sex

Male (ref.cat.) 0.093* 0.104* -0.020 0.075* -0.060*

Female 0.008 -0.028* 0.049* 0.005 0.187*

Education 0.016* 0.025* 0.014* 0.001 0.003

Size of place of residence

Explained variance 2.8% 2.9% 7.8% 3.8% 11.3%

F-value 8.4* 5.1* 37.8* 17.1* 53.3*

N 6168 4075 10461 10417 9854

* P < 0.05
who attended church more often over the past decades did indeed possess more social capital. The results shown in Table 5 reveal that the differences between denominations were small and in most cases not significant. People who left the Netherlands Reformed Church or the Catholic Church were found to maintain more regular contacts with family members than people who had never been member of a church. We found no significant differences in the extent to which church members and non-members maintained contacts with their neighbours. Furthermore, Catholics, Re-Reformed, and Netherlands Reformed apparently participated somewhat more in voluntary work than non-members. Catholics participated somewhat more in unpaid aid. Those who left the Catholic and Re-Reformed Churches as well as members of the Re-Reformed Church seemed to have more trust in others. On the basis of these findings, we may state that membership of a denomination did not provide any guarantees for social capital in the past decades. On the other hand, bearing in mind the earlier finding that church attendance contributes to social capital, one might conclude that membership, though not significant, was a necessary condition for this.

Next, we examined whether or not, and to what extent, being part of a family could be related to amount of social capital. Table 5 shows that married people maintained more contacts with family members, acquaintances, and neighbours than single people: those parameters were significant for some of the years (not presented) as well as for the pooled data. However, married people did not distinguish themselves from single people as regards unpaid aid and trust in other people. Contrary to our hypotheses, but understandably, widows and widowers had more contacts with neighbours than single people (see Table 5). We would like to point out that divorcees did not differ in any respect from single people. All in all, these findings mean that we found some indications that married people possess more social capital than single people.

We then examined the hypothesis on which there seems to be much consensus in the individualization tradition: young cohorts should possess much less social capital than older cohorts raised in cohesive social contexts in the 'good old days'. To this end, we compared all the differentiated cohorts with the cohort born in the post-war years, the baby boomers, who should possess a relatively low level of social capital, according to Putnam. The comparison of cohorts (see Table 5) showed that the older cohorts (born between 1897 and 1946) maintained consistently fewer social contacts with family members and acquaintances than the cohort born between 1947 and 1956. Only the youngest cohort, i.e., people born after 1967, maintained more social contacts than the above-mentioned post-war cohort. Table 5 also shows that most of the cohorts, those born between 1907 and 1936 and the cohort born between 1957 and 1966, maintained significantly fewer social contacts with neighbours than the post-war cohort, born between 1947 and 1956. The same pattern, but then more pronounced, was found with regard to the number of hours spent on voluntary
work: all the other cohorts distinguished themselves in a negative sense from the post-war cohort (1947-1956), as the negatively significant parameters reveal. This means that the latter spent more hours on voluntary work. Again, the same pattern was found when we compared the cohorts with regard to the number of hours spent on unpaid aid. Practically all the other cohorts distinguished themselves in a negative sense from the post-war cohort, which means that this cohort born between 1947 and 1956 had the most social capital comparatively, particularly when we consider that the age effect was quite minor, if at all significant. This pattern, however, did not hold for trust in other people. There we found no cohort effect but instead an effect of age: the older one is, the less one trusts other people.

All in all, these findings by no means constitute the empirical evidence that we would expect on the basis of the speculations of Putnam and the individualization theorists. On almost all the differentiated aspects of social capital, the cohort born between 1947 and 1956 scored positively, especially when compared with the older cohorts. It is remarkable that this cohort, which was raised in the ‘traditional pattern’ but rebelled against it, appears to have more social capital than the older generation. On the other hand, the finding that the youngest cohorts, born after 1957, possess less social capital than the post-war cohort meets the expectations of the individualization theorists. It is clear that we must be careful with this interpretation. We come back to this in our conclusion.

Finally, we would like to discuss the results with respect to the relation between the factors we included as control variables and social capital. We found that higher middle class people performed more voluntary work. What struck us was that people who considered themselves part of the working class proved to have more social contacts with family members, acquaintances, and neighbours, spent more hours on voluntary work, and had more trust in other people. These findings were relatively consistent: similar results were found for various years of measurement as well as for the pooled data, although they did not reach the level of significance. This certainly does not apply to education, a variable that is strongly related to the class to which people belong. The effect of education was negative on social contacts with neighbours, but positive on participation in voluntary work and trust in other people. No effect of education was found on social contacts with family members and acquaintances, or on participation in unpaid aid. Two other variables we wish to discuss here are sex and place of residence. We did not make any explicit hypotheses with regard to these variables, but the findings are nonetheless interesting. Women proved to have more contacts with family members, acquaintances, and neighbours than men, and also spent more hours on unpaid aid. Men, on the other hand, had more trust in other people. Finally, we would like to point to some of the differences between cities and rural communities. Those differences are small, but
insofar as they were significant, city people proved to have more social contacts with family members, acquaintances, and neighbours, and also spent more hours on voluntary work. The impression of the rural communities being more social and cohesive, which some of us may have, seems not entirely justified.

Conclusion

For the time being, there does not seem to be any tragic decline of informal social relations in the Netherlands. The pessimism of certain journalists and individualization theorists was not supported by the available longitudinal material, at least not for the periods we were able to study empirically. Earlier studies of the Social and Cultural Planning Board have already showed that Dutch people do not display less social and political participation. By and large, the data analysed here show that the same is true for maintenance of informal contacts, informal help provision, and general trust, aspects we considered indicative of the informal aspects of social capital. None of the data indicated a quick or gradual erosion of the informal aspects of social capital. In most areas, we could not find any trends. As far as family contacts are concerned, there was even an increase in contacts, albeit a small one. Only voluntary work and unpaid aid showed a very small decrease. That problems may be expected in this area was also clear from earlier studies (Dekker & De Hart, 2001). The fact that UNESCO proclaimed 2001 the year of volunteers makes it clear that the problems are global, especially with regard to the future of the younger generations. In a recent report of the Dutch Voluntary Work Organizations (Wilbrink, 2001), a similar conclusion was drawn: young people would much rather read a book than do voluntary work.

The relation between social capital and cohort is crucial for future developments. The data shows there is a curvilinear relationship: the older and younger cohorts are less active in unorganized voluntary work and unpaid aid. It is the middle group that distinguishes itself positively, precisely the cohort which Putnam presumed possessed the least amount of social capital. The main question is whether the age or the cohort effect is dominant. In the case of a dominant age effect, there is no reason to worry: there will undoubtedly come another group of middle-aged people which is willing to maintain contacts with and care for others. If the cohort effect (the cohort of baby boomers contributes more to the social capital of society) is dominant, the decrease in voluntary work will take place more gradually. Much remains uncertain, but we found no indications that support the popular and simplistic views that the sixties triggered a process of social decline. On the contrary, the generation that was responsible for the revolution in those days was found to have more social capital than the preceding and following generations. If there was any decline in
social capital, it must have occurred in the years thereafter, when society was dominated by yuppies, who were typified by Jennings and Markus as socially progressive, but economically conservative (ISR Newsletter, 1986). At any rate, there are indications that the young people of today hesitate to become socially active and do so at an increasingly older age (Janssen, 2000). This aspect, therefore, deserves to be investigated in more detail. The recent trend of the ‘caring yuppie’ (Vrij Nederland, 3 February 2001) still has to prove that it is here to stay. As far as we know, this new phenomenon has not led to any visible social help, but it is a pleasant thought that the youngest generation is considering the ‘marketing tools of charity’.

Churchgoers possess more social capital, but denomination does not play a role in this. Lapsed churchgoers seem to have had few problems with their loss of social capital. Apparently, church membership is not a significant precondition for social activity. On the other hand, those who are active in the church were also found to be active outside it. Perhaps social desirability intervenes in this relationship, as already found by Batson (Batson et al. 1993). People who want to be good Christians have to be socially active according to their creed. Therefore, there may be a tendency to overestimate social activity. Married people were found to have more social capital, or should we conclude that people who have more social capital more often get married? The data do not allow for a definitive conclusion. As far as sex and place of residence are concerned, we found only minor fluctuations. We must, therefore, conclude that there is little room for a Durkheimian interpretation of the current developments (an interpretation which, owing to its complex nature, was not convincing anyhow).

Remarkably, we found only minor effects of education on social capital. Further research is required to check whether there is a difference between formal and informal social contacts in this respect: our finding possibly only holds for informal social contacts. On the other hand, we did find that particularly people who consider themselves part of the working class possess slightly more social capital. Against the background of Bourdieu’s theory on the relations between various forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1985), it may be that precisely this class (subjectively defined) invests more in social capital than others in order to generate other forms of capital.

All in all, we may conclude that some dust has been blown up, but that no landslide has occurred in the Dutch polders. The world may be coming to an end, but in our country, this is taking place so gradually that it is hardly noticeable. Undoubtedly, social changes are taking place in various areas (moral values, religious views, etc.), but these involve a gradual process (see Felling, Peters and Scheepers, 2000). It is safe to say that the Netherlands possesses a relatively stable social capital.
REFERENCES


