Childhood memories, family ties, sibling support and loneliness in ever-widowed older adults. Quantitative and qualitative results

Eva-Maria Merz & Jenny de Jong Gierveld

Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute

DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Abstract

Using Dutch survey data and 18 in-depth interviews from a subsample this study examines the role of family relationships across life in reducing loneliness among ever-widowed older adults. Particular attention was paid to childhood memories, family ties and support from siblings. Quantitative analyses examined associations among childhood experiences of relationship with parents, family ties, and sibling support with loneliness. Qualitative data elucidate how ever-widowed adults memorize relations with parents and siblings and experience current family relations. Quantitative and qualitative data showed that emotional support from siblings reduced loneliness. Additionally, positive memories of childhood relationships and current family ties were negatively related to loneliness. Detailing how relationships across life are supportive in alleviating loneliness is key on the social research agenda.

Keywords: Widowhood, Loneliness, Childhood Memories, Sibling Support, Family Ties

Family relationships play a major role in individuals' lives and can be the source of comfort, support and protection during the whole life course. Especially in the context of life events, such as becoming older, being confronted with ill-health or widowhood, family relationships may be particularly salient for (older) adults to cope with feelings of grief, loss and loneliness. The family of origin is an important environment for individuals to form close and affective relationships over the life course (Merz, Schuengel & Schulze, 2007), including those with siblings and own children. Relationship experiences with parents during childhood may be the seedbed for support exchanges between family members throughout life. Crosnoe and Elder (2004) for example examined adjustement and functioning in later life in association with childhood experiences (however for men only). If childhood experiences also play an adaptive role in reducing loneliness in ever-widowed older adults is yet to be examined.

Earlier work has shown that widowed adults often rely on their grownup children for support in the period following widowhood (Pai & Ha, 2012; Utz et al., 2004). Relationships with and support from siblings may be important too. Siblings' common framework of relevant norms and values creates a meaningful context of shared opinions that might be important especially in crisis situations and in times of need (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003). Pinquart (2003) showed that divorced and widowed adults reported a higher quality of sibling relationships than adults in first marriage, and Cicirelli (1995) mentioned the relevance of siblings for emotional outcomes. Sibling support has been found to buffer against loneliness (De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 2008), however very little work has examined the role of sibling support in later life and in association with negative life events such as widowhood. Are siblings' emotional support exchanges associated with a lower intensity of loneliness in later life?

The current paper examined whether childhood experiences of the relationship with parents, current support from siblings and the evaluation of family ties associated with

reduced loneliness in older ever-widowed men and women. We used survey data from the second wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra et al., 2012), and an additional in-depth study of a subsample of 18 men and women who ever experienced widowhood.

Family Ties in Childhood and Adulthood

Ample evidence has shown the general salutatory effect of positive relationships on various kinds of outcome throughout life (e.g., Merz & Consedine, 2009; Merz et al., 2007). During the years from infancy to adolescence individuals gradually build up expectations regarding close ties, based on experiences in their relationships. Experiences, memories and the expectations about the availability and responsiveness of trusted figures are incorporated into a mental representation of the self, of others and of relationships, which guides perceptions and behavior in later relationships (Feeney, 2008). Children who have developed good relationships and attachment security, based on experiences with reliable caregivers, typically show positive views of the self and others and desire closeness within relationships (Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004) across the life course. They manage to maintain a balance between being autonomous and having satisfying relationships with others. Such children are expected to establish and maintain supportive relationships with family members during the adult life course until old age (Davila, Burge, & Hammen, 1997; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

Early experiences characterized by stressful childhood environments and unavailability of trusted figures lead to the development of less positive representations of relationships in which either the self and/or the relationship partners are negatively viewed. Persons who have developed such negative representations generally have pessimistic views regarding interactions with other people (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003), associated with less social support exchange (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). They have difficulties with being close accompanied by difficulties with balancing care giving and care seeking behavior within

significant relationships. Based on these considerations such adults are expected to have less satisfying and more distanced relationships with family members resulting in less support exchanges and higher loneliness during adulthood.

Family Support and Wellbeing

A large body of research has demonstrated a positive association between aspects of social support and wellbeing in later life (Reinhardt, Boerner, & Horowitz, 2006; Russell & Cutrona, 1991; Seeman, 1996). Of particular relevance to the current work are data indicating that support stemming from *within* the family may be of particular importance to wellbeing in older adults (e.g., Attias-Donfut, 2001; Grundy & Henretta, 2006 for intergenerational support; Thomas, 2010 for sibling support). Family support, however, is a complex construct (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Indeed, emotional and instrumental support may have differing associations with wellbeing (Zunzunegui, Béland, & Otero, 2001) and loneliness (Sánchez, De Jong Gierveld, & Buz, in press). Research by Voorpostel en Van der Lippe (2007), comparing support exchange between siblings (and friends), found that relationship quality between siblings was important in explaining the effective exchange of both practical and emotional support between siblings. Voorpostel, Van der Lippe, and Flap (2012) have shown that those with supportive and less strained sibling relationships experienced less negative life events such as divorce or physical and psychological illnesses, suggesting a protecting role in exposure to negative life events. Siblings may function as important sources of support to their widowed brother and sister. How this relates to loneliness however is still to be examined. Distinguishing between types of support, that is emotional and practical support may help to distentangle the complex associations between sibling support and loneliness.

In general, family relationships have been identified important resources for adults to maintain or regain health, life satisfaction and wellbeing (e.g., Merz & Consedine, 2009;

Tesch-Römer, Motel-Klingebiel, & Von Kondratowitz, 2002). As suggested by Bengtson (2004), it is necessary to look beyond the nuclear family when examining the influential power of family ties. Therefore, not only the parental home but also adult family relationships, including the extended family network, may be important factors in predicting loneliness in widowed adults.

Loneliness, Widowhood and Family Network

Perlman and Peplau (1981, p. 31) defined loneliness as "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively". Central to this definition is that loneliness is a subjective and negative experience, and is the outcome of a cognitive evaluation of the match between the quantity and quality of existing relationships and relationship standards.

Living as a couple is the living arrangement that provides older men and women with the greatest possibilities for alleviating loneliness. The benefits individuals experience from romantic relationships are distinct from those of other social bonds: the romantic relationship has a unique position in the social networks of adults. Partner relationships are associated with all kinds of outcome, such as protection and care (Zeifman & Hazan, 2008), wellbeing (Soons & Liefbroer, 2008; Soons, Liefbroer, & Kalmijn, 2009), health (Musick & Bumpass, 2012), and mortality (Drefahl, 2012). Fulfilling and satisfying partnerships protect individuals from loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, Broese van Groenou, Hoogendoorn, & Smit, 2009). Briefly, adults without a partner tend to be less protected from loneliness (Dannenbeck, 1995; Wenger, Davies, Shahtahmasebi, & Scott, 1996). Several mechanisms can explain why the absence of a partner makes people more vulnerable to loneliness. First, a key structuring influence in the social network is missing: the size and broader composition of the network are strongly linked with the presence of a partner (Musick & Bumpass, 2012; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001). Persons living alone have smaller networks than those living with a partner.

Second, when help is needed, persons living alone lack in-house support and, by definition, have to orient themselves towards others outside the household. Third, living alone is in many cases the result of the dissolution of a partner relationship. Those who remain alone after the death of their partner are specifically at risk of loneliness, and the effects on the intensity of loneliness are recognizable over a long period of time (Lopata, 1996; Stevens, 1995).

Involvement in relationships other than a romantic bond can also help to prevent or alleviate loneliness. Hagestad (1998) described the socially integrative role of the family, arguing that communication and historical conversations across generations help maintain continuity across life phases and strengthen a sense of belonging. The centrality of the parent-child bond in people's lives is undisputed (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), particularly for those who live alone. Dykstra (1993) and Pinquart (2003) have shown, for example, that contacts with children are more likely to reduce loneliness among formerly married than among married older adults. Siblings too are special in many ways (Bedford, 1998; Cicirelli, 1995; Connidis, 1989); there is the common blood tie, the shared history of growing up together in the same parental home and having the same background. Many widows and widowers are consequently relying on the long-standing network of siblings, the network already in place (Scott et al., 2007). The loss of a sibling has been found to contribute to loneliness among older persons (Gold, 1987).

The Current Study and Hypotheses

Ample evidence has shown the general salutary effect of positive and supportive family bonds. More specifically, adult child support has been found to increase wellbeing in older adults (Merz & Consedine, 2009). Additionally, experiences within early relationships with parents have been found to influence adult functioning (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004).

Taken together, the above mentioned evidence suggests that both experiences in childhood as well as adult family relationships may play a role in reducing loneliness in

widowed older adults. The current work intended to examine the role of childhood memories, family ties, and sibling support for loneliness in ever-widowed older adults. In order to examine whether sibling support has additional predictive power in explaining loneliness, we simultaneously examine support from both sibling and child providers.

We expected memories of positive relationships with father and mother during childhood to be related to positive adult family ties (hypothesis H1). Stronger family ties in adulthood, that is embedding in an extended family network in which family members are experienced as reliable and available are then expected to reduce loneliness in older adults (hypothesis H2). Similarly, support from the sibling network characterized by affectiveness, mutual interest and advice (i.e. emotional support) is hypothesized to predict reduced loneliness (hypothesis H3). Practical support from siblings was hypothesized to have no relations with loneliness because it may elicit unwanted feelings of dependency and might be characterized more by obligation than affective care (hypothesis H4).

To shed more light on the role of family relationships for loneliness in ever-widowed older adults and the mechanisms behind we combined quantitative and qualitative data from the NKPS. The use of multiple methods in the study of the same, rather complicated objects has been advocated since Denzin (1970). Miles and Huberman (1984, p. 234) stated: "It is important having different *kinds* of measurement, which provide repeated verification of outcomes". Reliance on quantitative data and analyses is understanding stuctures and processes that can be generalized to various populations, but there is a growing recognition that qualitative studies may be critically important in bringing in-depth knowledge about the mechanisms, the how and why of the structures and processes (Manning & Smock, 2005). For that reason we combined the quantitative analyses with qualitative in-depth data. By drawing on the quantitative data, we examined the association between childhood experiences of the relationship with parents, family ties, support from siblings and adult children with loneliness

among ever-widowed women and men, aged 50 and over. Using qualitative data from 18 semi-structured interviews, we further investigated how older adults memorize their earlier relations with parents and siblings in the parental home and how they experience current relations with brothers, sisters and other family members.

Method

Participants and Measures Quantitative Analyses

The data for the present work stem from the second wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS; Dykstra et al., 2012). The NKPS was intended to examine family and kinship relationships across the Netherlands. It is a representative panel survey among individuals living in private households in the Netherlands aged 18 to 79 years during Wave 1 Second wave data were collected in 2006/2007 with 6,026 of the former 8,161 NKPS main respondents being re-interviewed. The questionnaires in Wave 2 focused on the changes that had taken place in the lives of the respondents and their families since the first wave but also included new variables to shed more light on experiences within the parental home; these variables were central to the present study. A total of 218 older adults who ever experienced the death of a partner, aged 50 or over were selected for the quantitative analyses. Mean age was 70.52 years (*SD* = 7.29, range 53-83) and 78% were female. Of these respondents, 35 (16.1%) were repartnered after the death of their former partner.

[Table 1 about here]

Childhood experiences. Two scales were used as indicators of intergenerational relationship quality during childhood, that is ‘attachment to mother’, and ‘attachment to father’. The two scales each consisted of four indicators measuring closeness with, availability of the mother/father and support and understanding within the relationship with mother/father during childhood. An example for measuring availability in the relationship with mother is “I could always turn to my mother if I had problems”. Items on both subscales

were answered on a five point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. An average score of the four single items was calculated. Higher values on the scales indicate stronger attachment to mother and father respectively. Cronbach's alpha was .94 for both scales.

Family ties. The quality of family ties and embedding in the family was measured on a scale including four indicators covering closeness, strength, information exchange, and cohesion within relationship with members from the extended family, including siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Please note, that no items about ties with members from the nuclear family were included in the present analysis. One example item is "The ties between members of my extended family are tightly knit". Respondents evaluated their family ties on a five point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Higher values on this scale represent stronger family ties. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .85.

Support from siblings and adult children. Emotional support was measured using two items referring to how much interest and advice (ranging between 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *once or twice*, and 3 = *several times*) siblings/adult children provided to their widowed brother/sister or father/mother. Information on these aspects of support were available for a maximum of two siblings and two children. Cronbach's alpha for the emotional support variable, based on four items (i.e. interest and advice from two siblings/two children), was .72 for the siblings and .70 for child support. Instrumental support consisted of two items measuring how much support with household chores and odd jobs (ranging between 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *once or twice*, and 3 = *several times*) siblings/adult children provided. Cronbach's alpha for the instrumental support variable, based on four items, was .64 for sibling and .66 for child support.

Loneliness. Loneliness was measured using the De Jong Gierveld 11 item loneliness scale (De Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985). The word loneliness is not used in any of the

items in order to avoid feelings of embarrassment and social stigma among lonely men and women. The scale consists of items covering the availability of enough people to talk to, sources of support, people to trust, people to feel close to, and friends to call on whenever needed. An example item is "There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems." Possible answers to the items were 0 = *no*, 1 = *more or less* and 2 = *yes*. Scale scores are based on dichotomous item scores; the answer 'more or less' always indicates loneliness. The scale scores 0 refers to the absence of loneliness. The score 11 to ultimate loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, & Van Tilburg, 1999). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .83.

Control variables. Previous research has shown that loneliness varies across demographic characteristics (Hawkley et al., 2008). Therefore, we included age in years, gender, education (ranging from 1= *incomplete elementary* to 11 = *post graduate*), number of siblings and number of children and a general measure of subjective health (ranging from 1 = *very poor* to 5 = *excellent*) as control variables in the quantitative analyses.

Quantitative analyses. Pearson correlations were used to calculate bivariate associations among the study variables. Multivariately, first a hierarchical regression was performed to determine the best linear combination of demographic and childhood attachment variables predicting the evaluation of current family ties. Second, demographic and childhood attachment variables, as well as the evaluation of current family ties and variables identifying current network characteristics, that is partner status, the number of children/siblings and support received from children/siblings are taken into account to predict loneliness.

Participants and Procedure Qualitative Analyses

The criteria for inclusion in the in-depth study encompassed: NKPS respondent aged 50 or over (in Wave 2), ever-widowed, having two or more children and two or more siblings. A professional, university educated interviewer and the second author conducted the interviewing during the years 2008/9. In total 18 semi-structured interviews were realized. All

interviews took place in respondents´ homes. Ten respondents were female and eight were male. The moment of widowhood dates back 4 to 36 years, with a mean of 19.7 years. In total 9 of the 18 respondents have started a new romantic partner relationship and share living arrangements, the other 9 are living alone.

Given that researchers had at their disposal basic information of the respondents, based on the quantitative data gathered in Waves 1 and 2 of the survey, the semi-structured interview-guide included only a specialized series of topics: aspects of the relationships with children, siblings and other family members, more specifically the quality of these familial relationships. The focus was on positive as well as negative and ambivalent aspects of the sibling relationships to investigate the mechanisms behind the comforting or discomforting function of sibling relationships (Bengtson, 2004; Hogerbrugge, & Komter, 2012; Lowenstein, 2007), for those who ever in life experienced the death of a partner. The opening question was “How would you describe the relations with your family members, more specifically with your children, sisters and brothers ?”. Answers on these questions help to elicit perceptions, experiences and evaluations of past and current relationships. Additional questions were formulated to clarify answers, in order to obtain a broad and detailed overview of the relationships between respondents and their siblings and children. The interview strategy also allowed flexibility to capture unexpected findings. Duration of the interviews varied between 60 and 90 minutes.

The information gathered was tape-recorded and consequently transcribed in order to prepare the data for entry into the qualitative data management system. The second author, since many years involved in qualitative research both as teacher and researcher, took the lead in analyzing the data. Both authors have been intensively involved in exploring the coding categories and themes that emerged from the data. The analysis procedure started with open coding of the interview texts (LaRossa, 2005). Next we examined and compared the coding

categories for similarities and differences. The coding categories were brought together in several schemes of related categories. As expected sibling bonds over time are not stable, but are formed and re-formed, improving and deteriorating, depending on important life events adults are confronted with. Introducing additional elements of the life course, offered the opportunity to reassemble meaningful pieces of information (Elder, 1995). Coding schemes have been revised and expanded as our interpretations and explanations progressed. The analysis was completed by formulating theoretical propositions around the interactional processes elicited, while data saturation was discussed between researchers.

Results

Descriptive Quantitative Results and Correlations

Table 1 and 2 display the descriptives of the main variables and their correlations. As can be seen from Table 2 loneliness was not correlated with our control variables, except for health. Neither age, gender nor education associated with loneliness, whereas poor health was related to increased loneliness. Attachment to father but not attachment to mother reduced loneliness. Regarding family support, emotional support received from children and siblings correlated with lower levels of loneliness in our widowed older respondents whereas practical support was not associated with loneliness. Stronger family ties also correlated with lower levels of loneliness.

Multivariate Results

Table 3 displays the results of the hierarchical regression analysis of current family ties on demographic control variables and childhood attachment. Of the control variables, only gender was significantly associated with family ties, such that women reported higher quality. Memories of the relationships with parents during childhood, i.e. attachment to mother and father both positively predicted the current evaluation of family ties. Entering

these family history characteristics into the regression more than doubled the explained variance in current family ties (cf. Table 3).

In a second regression (cf. Table 4), family history characteristics (i.e. childhood attachment) as well as current family network characteristics (i.e. partner status, number of children and siblings, adult child and sibling support) stepwise were used to predict loneliness in our ever-widowed older adults. Among the control variables gender and health related with loneliness, such that being male and poor health is associated with higher feelings of loneliness. Attachment to father and evaluation of family ties reduced loneliness (cf. Model 1). In the next steps, current network characteristics were entered. Having a new partner reduced loneliness. Model 3 investigated the role adult child support may play in association with loneliness among older adults. Emotional support did reduce loneliness whereas number of children and practical support was not associated. Model 4 took support from the sibling network into account. Both number of siblings and emotional support from siblings were negatively related with loneliness. Both models, the child and sibling support model increased the explained variance in loneliness from 18 to 20 %, indicating that support from siblings matters in a similar way to positive outcome in older adults as does adult child support. In our final model, all predictors were included simultaneously, explaining 25 % of the variance in loneliness. In this model, father attachment, partner status, and emotional support from children as well as number of siblings remained significant predictors of loneliness.

Outcomes Qualitative Analyses

In order to better understand the possible mechanism behind the associations among childhood relationhsips, current family bonds and sibling support, we examined how older ever-widowed women and men describe and evaluate the bonds with family and siblings in particular. Based on these descriptions several theoretical lines of thinking could be elicited. The most distinctive differentiation was between older adults who evaluate current sibling

relationships as either positive or negative. Among both groups of respondents those who evaluate their sibling bonds as positive or negative, the parental home is explicitly mentioned as one of the triggers of the quality of current relationships. Further, many of the interviewees mention spontaneously the exchange of support, especially emotional support, and especially in relation to widowhood, as one of the key characteristics of optimal sibling relationships in later life. Additonally, this study shows that for the nine respondents who mention having good relationships with brothers and sisters, this is associated with lower scores on the loneliness scale for almost all of them. These respondents underline the blessings of warm relationships with brothers and sisters, being well aware of the vulnerability of these sibling bonds given the advanced age of the interviewed older adults. Not optimal sibling bonds proved to be associated with feelings of more intense loneliness. Those respondents mention the discomfort of weakened bonds with siblings.

In the next sections we describe comments of our respondents along our theoretical lines more detailed. Firstly, we address the comments of those evaluating their sibling bonds as positive. Secondly, we address the comments of those who are dissatisfied and talking about weakened bonds with brothers and sisters.

(I) The benefits of warm relationships with siblings

Of the nine respondents who are positive about the quality of their sibling bonds, two referred spontaneously to the positive quality of the bonds in the parental home, and four of them spontaneously mention the high quality of current sibling support. Three out of these nine respondents discuss broadly the improvement in the quality of sibling relationships starting in later life, more specifically after the onset of widowhood. Older adults who evaluate their sibling relationships as positive talked extensively about these bonds. Moreover, all but one of these adults have low scores on the loneliness scale as measured in Wave 2 of the NKPS. The beneficial facets of good sibling relationships are, for example,

carefully described by a woman, widowed since 9 years, living as single mother with her children (#6):

> "*My brother is very important to me, because we only have each other now. I mean (…) there are no other brothers and sisters alive anymore. Yes, if something happens, we can always count on each other, (…), yes, we share the problems, the joy, we share everything, really. If something happens, we are always there for each other, always. So, really very important for me, yes. My brother and I, we are …er, our father was a problem drinker, you see, … so we did not grew up in a balanced family.*

Apparently, the bond with her brother is helpful in alleviating loneliness; although having to cope with the daily chores of running a household with dependent children, she does not feel lonely (score on the loneliness scale 0). The *time perspective* (including both childhood and aging experiences) plays an important role in her description of the warm sibling bond. The problematic childhood experiences have welded together the siblings. This widow referred to the bond with her brother, in the context of other brothers and sisters who had died already and are sorrowly missed.

Similarly, a widow, aged 73 years, living alone (#19), describing her sibling relations positively, framed her answer explicitly in the perspective of aging and the confrontation with the death of her partner and of siblings (who had migrated from the Netherlands to Canada):

> "*A mid-week family reunion was organized last year, and all sisters and brothers (-in-law) they came over from Canada, especially for this. (…) It was a great success. (…) I organized everything. My brother died soon after the reunion and looking back I would say that makes the reunion even more important. And then, especially when you find out that your brother falls ill and you call each other, (…) you keep in touch and my sister and I, we said, now it's just the two of us here and you have to be really nice to each other, that's what we said"*.

Also, this widow scored low on the loneliness scale (score 1) and realizes the importance of lasting sibings bonds in the light of aging and death. As mentioned by both respondents, the death of brothers and sisters affects the bonds with siblings who survive. Older adults mention their honest wish to be in contact with surviving brothers and sisters, but sometimes valuable bonds are hardly replaceable, as aptly put forward by a widower of 77 years, widowed since 36 years, living alone (#7):

> *"… and my youngest sister, she was really my closest confidant, and she died two years ago. And that (contact) always went by telephone, because she lived in America. But it is a lot cheaper nowadays to phone to America, so I would chat on the phone for at least an hour. But I was able to discuss things with her, look, (…) with my oldest sister, we are on good terms, but I can't have those conversations that I used to have with my youngest sister. And my oldest brother died too*".

The vulnerability of valuable bonds is by most interviewees explicitly recognized and especially well understood by the oldest interviewees. Several touched upon the beneficial functions of good sibling bonds, especially if one of the siblings is very recently confronted with the death of a partner. The bereaved sibling is comforted, and more frequently than before the bereaved person is emotionally supported. Those 'in the same boat', that is those who experienced widowhood already in the past, are willing and prepared to comfort the newly bereaved. Their partly shared life course eases an optimal tuning of the interrelationship. The following quote shows how a long-term widow, aged 73 years (#19) follows her heart in comforting her sister-in-law:

> "*I keep in close contact with my sister-in-law, who is now also alone, because I understand how she feels…"*

Also, for this widow, the positive bond with her sister-in-law is among the factors affecting her low intensity of loneliness (a score of 1 on the loneliness scale). The recognition of how

others feel in the particular situation of becoming a widower or widow, is consequently mentioned as a valuable aspect of sibling bonds in later life, by more than one respondent:

> "*In situations when it is needed, yes, then we are really there for each other, yes. But that is also because he lost his wife three years ago due to cancer and eh, then people often really change. From, eh, being an optimistic and easy going person and now, having to face it yourself then all over sudden it is different. And then, you understand a lot more of what others have to face"* (widow since 32 years, 62 years of age; #41).

This widow scored with 7 much higher on the loneliness scale, probably indicating that sibling contacts are important elements of the total social network as realized, but a shortage of other supporting relationships in her network might have a more decisive effect on the intensity of her loneliness as experienced.

In the citations shown until now, the most precious sibling bonds are characterized by emotional support, formulated as: 'understanding', 'being one's best confidant', and 'we are there, if something happens'. Interviewees accentuated that this emotional support becomes more and more important as one becomes older. In contrast, instrumental support between siblings tends to fade away. Several interviewees are filled with regret or nostalgia for times gone by. One of them, a widower since 32 years, now 81 years of age (#78) formulated these feelings as follows:

> "*It's like this, if something needs to be moved, then we [as siblings] always help out, that goes without saying. Then everyone helps. But it has become less and less. (…) But, we have children and grandchildren now, who can also do the job. The job has been taken over".*

In conclusion, exchange of emotional support, being one's best confidant, are central categories of quotations of older adults involved in warm and positively evaluated sibling bonds. Moreover, most of the widows and widowers cited in this context, are characterized by

low levels of loneliness. Apparently, they have a social network distinguished – among others – by good sibling contacts that contribute to the experience of low levels of loneliness. One of the respondents, however, scored high on the loneliness scale. Hence, there is no *exclusive* relationship between one aspect of the social network – in this case the sibling bonds – and the overall evaluation of one's social environment as lonely.

(II) The enduring discomfort of weakened sibling relationships and the wish for restauration

Nine of the respondents are involved in sibling relationships characterized as ambiguous and even full of conflicts. Not optimal sibling bonds prove to be associated with feelings of discomfort. Sometimes the less optimal bonds with siblings date back to the period in the parental home, as was explicitly and spontaneously mentioned by two of our respondents. For two of the respondents other events later in life were held responsible for the weakening of sibling ties. The lack of support from siblings is mentioned as an important facet of current life. Most of the interviewees continued to long for restauration of the bonds.

The comments of older adults who evaluated their current sibling bonds as 'reasonable', 'not good'or 'not good at all' are characterized by sorrowful descriptions of bonds with brothers and sisters. Interviewees explicitly refer to relational conflicts that lay behind deteriorated or even broken off sibling relationships; conflicts related to for example inapropriate words. Several examples illustrate the sadness of those involved, among which the story of a widow since 10 years, 55 years of age (#94; loneliness score '2'):

> *"The sibling relationships have been difficult for quite a while. Totally driven apart, actually. Especially with my sister. We, my sister and I were very close sisters. (…) And then, she had marriage problems and during that time, I had just met Huub* [an intimate friend of hers, JG] *, and Huub said something about her husband (…), and that's why everything went wrong. My sister blamed Huub for this and indirectly me too. (…) And then we did not see one another for a long period of time (…). In the past*

we, as brothers and sisters, always supported each other. That was necessary. Yes, we supported each other through thick and thin (…) . (her eyes fill with tears)" .

There are older adults who are more than incidentally involved in sibling conflicts. This is the story of a widow, now aged 75 years, who has cared for her first husband until he died after a long trajectory of illness and hospitalization. She became a widow at age 57. A selection of events out of her life story, that illustrate the multiple frictions with siblings:

"The sibling relationships are poor. For a long time there was disagreement between my youngest sister and my oldest sister and I was the one in the middle. (…) Now, my youngest sister also had an argument with my brother (…) My sister has broken with the whole family, and now also with me. This has given me a lot of grief (…). No, there is no support giving or receiving in this family, never listening to one another". (75 years, #52).

This widow scored very high (9) on the loneliness scale. Multiple conflicts can in the end lead to the loss of hope for restauration of the bonds and to intense loneliness. Faced with this situation, older adults are more or less forced to accept the emptiness of missing relationships, feeling rejected and loosing their trust and confidence in close relationships. The negatively experienced sibling relationships and the related intense loneliness, can become so overwhelming, that older adults do not see the end of the dark tunnel. This reality of a widow aged 80 years (#44) was expressed by herself as follows:

"I have nobody"

and she scored 11, the highest score on the loneliness scale. She was confronted with the death of her first and recently with the death of her second husband. In answering the question: 'Has someone supported you and your husband during the period of his terminal illness'? she said:

"No, no, because I have nobody. I have really no person…"

The moderate feelings of loneliness of a long-term widow, now 51 years of age (#35; score of 4 on the loneliness scale) proved to be related to the breaking up of a group of four sisters. Three out of the four are still in close contact. Our interviewee apparently envies the bonds between the three sisters and is deeply unhappy with her 'staying aside'. She formulates the situation as follows:

> *"Er (…), reasonable. Well, how shall I say it. (…) We don't quarrel or anything, we can always rely on each other if needed. But we are not very close. I believe that those three together, they have more contact with each other.*

In conclusion, our data show the effects of missing the exchange of emotional support with brothers and sisters. Several of the interviewees were stricken by grief, as became clear from the comments elicited, but also from their behavior as some of the respondents started crying while describing their broken off relationships with siblings. In addition, our data illustrate the relation between the evaluation of the bonds with social network members as deficient, and the intensity of loneliness, shown by their quantative scores on loneliness.

Discussion

This study used quantitative survey data from the NKPS and additional data from a qualitative in-depth study based on a NKPS sampling frame, to investigate the associations among loneliness, childhood memories and support from siblings and family in ever-widowed older adults. First, survey data from the NKPS were used to investigate this relationship quantitatively, taking into account effects of several control variables. Second, the qualitative data were used in order to provide more detailed information about the bonds of older widows and widowers with their family, and siblings in particular. Our results provide a more thoughtful approach to shedding light on the role of siblings in older adults' social networks, both for size and composition as for the evaluative, and supportive aspects of these bonds.

Below, we discuss the results more fully, considering the unique role of childhood memories and current family relations for loneliness after widowhood.

Family Ties – the Role of Attachment to Mother and Father

Experiences and memories of the parents as a reliable resource in problem solving, as supportive, a close figure, and understanding, have been found to positively predict current evaluation of the family network (H1 confirmed) which in turn associated with loneliness such that positive family ties are related to reduced loneliness (H2 confirmed). Although previous research has always acknowledged the central role of primary caregivers, usually the mother, for the development of children, only few studies have extended this work to covering the whole life course well into old age (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010). As shown by Grossmann, Grossmann and Kindler (2005), childhood experiences with primary caregivers influence young adults' thoughts and feelings about close relationships. Generally, the current work, based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, gives some insight into the even farther reaching influences that positive relationships in childhood can have on adult relations and the evaluation of family ties in older age. In addition, experiences and memories of the father as a reliable resource in problem solving, as supportive, a close figure, and understanding, have been found to reduce loneliness in our widowed respondents. Why attachment to mothers did not associate with loneliness in our analyses is not easy to explain. Recent work however has shown that fathers play a special and sometimes unique role in upbringing children and contribute specific features to the social and emotional development of children (Mallers, Charles, Neupert, & Almeida, 2010) well into adulthood (Gilligan, Suitor, Kim, & Pillemer, 2013). Especially in stimulating exploration fathers have been shown to be important figures in children's development (Grossmann, Grossmann, Kindler, & Zimmermann, 2008). It may well be that fathers are important in stimulating contact beyond the parental home wheras mothers have been shown

to play important roles in comforting and soothing (Baumrind, 1980; Grossmann et al., 2008) and in shaping emotional experiences (Mallers et al., 2010). The current association between positive memories of childhood relations with father may have provided older adults with social skills and capacities leading to more supportive networks in adulthood, elders can rely on after widowhood. Our qualitative results too referred to the importance of the family of origin for adult functioning and the maintenance and quality of siblings bonds in particular. Interestingly, a problematic family home may have led to better sibling bonds as protection. Although not explicitely asked, several of our qualitative respondents mention their parental home and childhood situation when describing the current bonds with family, again confirming the importance of childhood experiences for adult outcome.

Sibling Support and Loneliness in Older Adults

Due to aging and life events such as widowhood, older adults have to rely on other close figures (Doherty & Feeney, 2004). Our quantitative results indicated that relationships with brothers and sisters can play a role in reducing loneliness in older ever-widowed adults. Although to a large extent overlooked in research into the wellbeing of widows and widowers and set aside the relationship with children, siblings can contribute to the wellbeing of their brothers and sisters. Both sibling structure and relationship quality have been shown to associate with wellbeing in adolescents (Vogt Yuan, 2009). Similarly, number of siblings, and especially the emotional support received from siblings proved to be associated with lower levels of loneliness in older adults (confirming H3). These quantitative results are paralleled by information from the in-depth intevriews. Those who described their relationships with siblings as characterized by emotional support tended to report low levels of loneliness. They used warm and sympathetic words to refer to the meaning of close sibling relationships. Bonds with siblings are based on regular visits to one another, but also on phoning each other. Life course events and related moves to other places require to maintain bonds over long

distances. This is especially true for siblings confronted with the out-migration of brothers and sisters. Several of the interviewees mentioned that brothers or sisters had migrated from the Netherlands to Canada or America. In these cases, emotionally supporting the widowed sibling is realized via long distance calls, and occasionally via visits and family reunions.

Our interviewees explicitly mentioned that they were well aware of the aging process and the risks of loosing their loved ones, now that they as brothers and sisters become older. Several of them described into detail the bonds with a sister or brother who passed away, and how intensely this person is missed. The need to be in close contact with brothers and sisters who still are among them, was expressed. Additionally, those siblings who are in the same boat, after the death of their partners, stated expressly that they try to comfort one another, because they can sympathize and share the feeling of their loss. In the interviews, respondents also refer to practical help exchange, which used to be a sibling task but is now taken over by the younger generation. As expected (H4) our quantitative results show that indeed practical sibling support did not predict loneliness.

Until now frequently ignored is the situation of adults who, confronted with negative life events such as widowhood, evaluate their contacts with siblings as not good. Our study showed the overall sad and miserable situations of older widows and widowers when sibling relationships do not meet the expected quality. The comments of older adults who evaluated their current sibling bonds as ‘not good’ or ‘not good at all’ are characterized by sometimes heartbreaking descriptions of ties that are deteriorated or even broken down. Many of them do envy those siblings that are still in good contact, others yearn for restauration of the bonds that are missed. Our data showed an association between sibling relationships evaluated as warm or emotionally supportive and lower levels of loneliness. On the other hand, those interviewees who identified sibling relationships as not good at all, are more frequently characterized by moderate or strong feelings of loneliness. Many recently widowed older

adults receive increased social support from the family network that protected against loneliness to a certain extent. Later on however, such contact and support started to decrease (Guiaux, Van Tilburg, & Broese van Groenou, 2007), leading to higher risks of loneliness. For that reason, it may be important to know more about the functioning of the sibling part of the social network. Siblings as part of the social relationships 'given by birth', are supposed to be less prone to network instability and to continue to function as a safety network in fighting against the onset and continuation of loneliness.

Limitations and Concluding Remarks

Although presenting an interesting contribution to our understanding about the role of family relationships for loneliness after widowhood by paying particular attention to sibling support, based on both quantitative and qualitative data, the current study is not without limitations. First, we had to rely on retrospective measuring of childhood experiences. Adult respondents were asked to recall their experiences with parents before age 15. Evidence in childhood abuse and neglect studies (cf. Hardt & Rutter, 2004 for an overview) showed that adverse life events in childhood tend to be correctly recalled or underestimated when retrospectively memorized in adulthood. Less is known, however, about the correct recalling of positive relationship aspects in their childhood experiences by adults. McCormick and Kennedy (1994) do find continuity between retrospective childhood attachment and current adolescent attachment measures. If this continuity holds until late adulthood remains however uncertain.

Second, no valid quantititative measures of sibling conflict were available from the survey. Although respondents have been asked about negative aspects and conflicts in their relationships with family members, the items referring to siblings relationships were very skewed and showed no variance and could therefore not been used in the quantitative

analyses. For a better compatibility between the quantitative and qualitative reports it would have been valuable to use more parallel measures.

In analyzing the qualitative data, it was shown that experiencing warm sibling bonds was associated with lower loneliness, and deteriorated or broken down sibling relationships were associated with higher levels of loneliness. The latter group used a varied set of words to indicate their feelings of sadness and grief. However, none of them explicitly used the word loneliness to describe their feelings. We interpret this in the light of their feelings of social stigma and taboo as connected to the phenomenon of loneliness. It was only in using their scores on the loneliness scale that we were able to connect the evaluation of the quality of the bonds with siblings and loneliness. On the other hand, this procedure illustrates the rich potential of a research design that encompasses both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

In sum, the current study is a first step in elucidating some of the complex associations family relations might have with loneliness in widowed older adults. Both the quantitative and qualitative results showed that family bonds, in particular sibling relationships and emotional support may be major sources in reducing loneliness. In addition, childhood memories of relationships with father have been found to predict loneliness. Attachment concepts may help linking personal childhood experiences to social circumstances (Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2008) as attachment ties can be considered the first social ties through which children develop and experience future relationships. This process may be key to elucidating the complex interplay among family relations throughout the whole life course, from childhood well into old age. Given the importance of social relationships for health, and other kinds of adaptive outcome, especially during negative life events, work detailing how family relationships in childhood and adulthood are experienced is a central issue on the social research agenda.

References

Attias-Donfut, C. (2001). The dynamics of elderly support: the transmission of solidarity patterns between generations. *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie und Geriatrie, 34,* 9-15.

Baumrind, D. (1980). New directions in socialization research. *American Psychologist, 35,* 639-652.

Bedford, V. H. (1998). Sibling relationships troubles and well-being in middle and old age. *Family Relations, 47,* 369-376.

Bengtson, V. L. (2004). Beyond the nuclear family. The increasing importance of multigenerational bonds. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63,* 1-16.

Cicirelli, V. G. (1995). *Sibling relationships across the life span*. New York, NY, US: Plenum Press.

Connidis, I. A. (1989). Siblings as friends in later life. *American Behavioral Scientist, 33* (1), 81-93.

Crosnoe, R., & Elder, G. H. Jr. (2004). From childhood to the later years: Pathways of human development. *Research on Aging, 26,* 623-654.

Dannenbeck, C. (1995). Im Alter einsam? Zur Strukturveränderung sozialer Beziehungen im Alter. In H. Bertram (Ed.), *Das Individuum und seine Familie.* (pp. 125-156). Opladen (Germany): Leske + Budrich.

Davila, J., Burge, D., & Hammen, C. (1997). Why does attachment style change? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73,* 826-838.

De Jong Gierveld, J. (1987). Developing and testing a model of loneliness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 53,* 119-128.

De Jong Gierveld, J., Broese van Groenou, M., Hoogendoorn, A. W., & Smit, J. H. (2009). Quality of marriages in later life and emotional and social loneliness. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences, 64B,* 497-506.

De Jong Gierveld, J., & Dykstra, P. A. (2008). Virtue is its own reward? Support-giving in the family and loneliness in middle and old age. *Ageing & Society, 28,* 271-287.

De Jong Gierveld, J., & Kamphuis, F. (1985). The development of a Rasch-type loneliness scale. *Applied Psychological Measurement, 9,* 289-299.

De Jong Gierveld, J., & Peeters, A. (2003). The interweaving of repartnered older adults' lives with their children and siblings. *Ageing & Society*, *23,* 187-205.

De Jong Gierveld, J., & Van Tilburg, T. G. (1999). *Manual of the Loneliness Scale.* Amsterdam: VU University.

Denzin, N. K. (1970). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods.* Chicago: Aldine de Gruyter.

Doherty, N. A., & Feeney, J. A. (2004). The composition of attachment networks throughout the adult years. *Personal Relationships, 11,* 469-488.

Drefahl, S. (2012). Do the married really live longer? The role of cohabitation and socioeconomic status. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *74,* 462-475.

Dykstra, P. A. (1993). The differential availability of relationships and the provision and effectiveness of support to older adults. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 10*(3), 355-370.

Dykstra, P. A., & De Jong Gierveld, J. (2004). Gender and marital-history differences in emotional and social loneliness among Dutch older adults. *Canadian Journal of Aging/La Revue canadienne du vieillissement*, *23,* 141-155.

Dykstra, P. A., Kalmijn, M., Knijn, T. C. M., Komter, A. E., Liefbroer, A. C., & Mulder, C. H. (2012). *Codebook of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, a multi-actor, multi-method panel study on solidarity in family relationships, wave 2. NKPS working paper, no. 8.* The Hague, Netherlands: Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute.

Elder, G. H. J. (1995). Life trajectories in changing societies. In A. Bandura (Ed.), *Self-efficacy in changing societies.* (pp. 46-68.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Feeney, J. A. (2008). Adult romantic attachment. Developments in the study of couple relationships. In J. Cassidy, & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment. Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 456-481). New York/London: Guilford.

Gilligan, M., Suitor, J., Kim, S., & Pillemer, K. (2013). Differential effects of perceptions of mothers' and fathers' favoritism on siblng tension in adulthood. *Journal of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sceinces and Social Sciences, 68,* 593-598.

Gold, D. T. (1987). Siblings in Old Age: Something Special. *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue canadienne du vieillissement, 6,* 199-216.

Grossmann, K., Grossmann, K. E., & Kindler, H. (2005). Early care and the roots of attachment and partnership representations. In K. E. Grossmann, K. Grossmann, & E. Waters (Eds.), *Attachment from infancy to adulthood. The major longitudinal studies* (pp. 98-136). New York/London: Guilford.

Grossmann, K., Grossmann, K. E., Kindler, H., & Zimmermann, P. (2008). A wider view of attachment and exploration. The influence of mothers and fathers on the development of psychological security from infancy to young adulthood. In J. Cassidy, & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment. Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 857-879). New York/London: Guilford.

Grossmann, K. E. (2004). Theoretische und historische Perspektiven der Bindungsforschung [Theoetical and historical perspectives of attachment research]. In L. Ahnert (Ed.), *Frühe Bindung. Entstehung und Entwicklung* [Early attachment. Formation and development] (pp. 21-41). Munich, Germany: Reinhardt.

Grundy, E., & Henretta, J.C. (2006). Between elderly parents and adult children: a new look at the intergenerational care provided by the 'sandwich generation'. *Ageing & Society, 26,* 707-722.

Guiaux, M., Van Tilburg, T., & Broese van Groenou, M. B. (2007). Changes in contact and social support exchange in personal networks after widowhood. *Personal Relationships, 14,* 457-473.

Hagestad, G. (1998). *Towards a society for all ages: new thinking, new language, new conversations.*Unpublished manuscript, New York.

Hardt, J., & Rutter, M. (2004). Validity of adult retrospective reports of adverse childhood experiences: review of the evidence. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 45,* 260-273.

Hawkley, L. C., Hughes, M. E., Waite, L. J., Masi, C. M., Thisted, R. A., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2008). From social structural factors to perceptions of relationship quality and loneliness: the Chicago health, aging, and social relations study. *Journals of Gerontology, Social Sciences, 63B,* S375-S384.

Holmes, B. M., & Johnson, K. R. (2009). Adult attachment and romantic partner preference. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 26,* 833-852.

Hogerbrugge, M. J. A., & Komter, A. E. (2012). Solidarity and ambivalence: Comparing two perspectives on intergenerational relations using longitudinal panel data. *The Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences 67,* 372-383.

Kachadourian, L. K., Fincham, F., & Davila, J. (2004). The tendency to forgive in dating and married couples: The role of attachment and relationship satisfaction. *Personal Relationships, 11,* 373-393.

Kobak, R. R., & Sceery, A. (1988). Attachment in late adolescence: Working models, affect regulation, and representations of self and others. *Child Development, 59,* 135-146.

LaRossa, R. (2005). Grounded theory methods and qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67,* 837-857.

Lopata, H. Z. (1996). *Current widowhood; myths and realities*. Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications.

Lowenstein, A. (2007). Solidarity–Conflict and ambivalence: Testing two conceptual frameworks and their impact on quality of life for older family members. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences, 62B,* S100-107.

Mallers, M. H., Charles, S. T., Neupert, S. D., & Almeida, D. M. (2010). Perceptions of childhood relationships with mother and father: daily emotional stressor experiences in adulthood. *Developmental Psychology, 46,* 1651-1661.

Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2005). Measuring and modeling cohabitation: New perspectives from qualitative data. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67,* 989-1002.

McCormick, C. B., & Kennedy, J. H. (1994). Parent-child attachment working models and self-esteem in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 23,* 1-18.

Merz, E.-M., & Consedine, N. S. (2009). The association of family support and wellbeing in later life depends on attachment style. *Attachment & Human Development, 11,* 203-221.

Merz, E.-M., & Consedine, N. S. (2012). Ethnic group moderates the association between attachment and wellbeing in later life. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 18,* 404-415.

Merz, E.-M., Schuengel, C., & Schulze, H.-J. (2007). Intergenerational solidarity: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Aging Studies, 21,* 175-186.

Merz, E.-M., Schuengel, C., & Schulze, H.-J. (2008). Inter-generational relationships at different ages: an attachment perspective. *Ageing & Society, 28,* 717-736.

Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P. R., & Pereg, D. (2003). Attachment theory and affect regulation: The dynamics, development, and cognitive consequences of attachment-related strategies. *Motivation and Emotion, 27,* 77-102.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: a sourcebook of new methods.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Musick, K., & Bumpass, L. (2012). Reexamining the case of marriage: Union formation and changes in well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 74,* 1-18.

Pai, M., & Ha, J.-H. (2012). Impact of widowhood on parent-child relations: Does parents' personality matter? *Journal of Marriage and Family, 74,* 494-509.

Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1981). Toward a social psychology of loneliness. In R. Gilmour & S. Duck (Eds.), *Personal relationships 3: personal relationships in disorder.* (pp. 31-43). London: Academic Press.

Pinquart, M. (2003). Loneliness in married, widowed, divorced, and never-married older adults. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 20*, 31-53.

Pinquart, M., & Sörensen, S. (2001). Influences on loneliness in older adults: A meta-analysis. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *23*(4), 245-266.

Reinhardt, J. P., Boerner, K., & Horowitz, A. (2006). Good to have but not to use: Differential impact of perceived and received support on well-being. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 23,* 117-129.

Repetti, R. L., Taylor, S. E., & Seeman, T. E. (2002). Risky families: Family social environments and the mental and physical health of offspring. *Psychological Bulletin, 128,* 330-366.

Rossi, A. S., & Rossi, P. H. (1990). *Of human bonding, parent-child relations across the life course.* New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Russell, D. W., & Cutrona, C. E. (1991). Social support, stress, and depressive symptoms among the elderly: Test of a process model. *Psychology and Aging, 6,* 190-201.

Sánchez, M. M., De Jong Gierveld, J., & Buz, J. D. (in press). Loneliness and the exchange of social support among older adults in Spain and the Netherlands. *Ageing & Society.*

Scott, S. B., Bergeman, C. S., Verney, A., Longenbaker, S., Markey, M. A., & Bisconti, T. L. (2007). Social support in widowhood : A mixed methods study. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 1,* 242-266.

Seeman, T. E. (1996). Social ties and health: The benefits of social integration. *Annals of Epidemiology, 6,* 442-451.

Soons, J. P. M., & Liefbroer, A. C. (2008). Together is better? Effects of relationship status and resources on Young adults' well-being. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 25,* 603-624.

Soons, J. P. M., Liefbroer, A. C., & Kalmijn, M. (2009). The long-term consequences of relationship formation for subjective well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 71,* 1254-1270.

Stevens, N. (1995). Gender and adaptation to widowhood in later life. *Ageing & Society, 15,* 37-58.

Tesch-Römer, C., Motel-Klingebiel, A., & Von Kondratowitz, H.-J. (2002). The relevance of the family network for the quality of life of elderly people: comparing societies and cultures. *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie und Geriatrie, 35,* 335-342.

Thomas, P. A. (2010). Is it better to give or to receive? Social support and the well-being of older adults. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences, 65B,* 351-357.

Uchino, B. N., Cacioppo, J. T., & Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K. (1996). The relationship between social support and physiological processes: A review with emphasis on underlying mechanisms and implications for health. *Psychological Bulletin, 119,* 488-531.

Utz, R. L., Reidy, E. B., Carr, D., Kessler, R., Nesse, R., & Wortman, C. (2004). The daily consequences of widowhood: The role of gender and intergenerational transfers of subsequent housework performance. *Journal of Family Issues, 25,* 683-712.

Van Aartsen, M. J., & Jylha, M. (2011). Onset of loneliness in older adults: Results of a 28 year prospective study. *European Journal of Ageing, 8,* 31-38.

Van IJzendoorn, M. H., & Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2010). Invariance of adult attachment across gender, age, culture , and socioeconomic status? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 27,* 200-208.

Vogt Yuan, A. S. (2009). Sibling relationships and adoslecents' mental health: The interrelationship of structure and quality. *Journal of Family Issues, 30,* 1221-1244.

Voorpostel, M., & Van der Lippe, T. (2007). Support between siblings and between friends: Two worlds apart? *Journal of Marriage and Family, 69,* 1271-1282.

Voorpostel, M., Van der Lippe, T., & Flap, H. (2012). For better or worse. Negative life events and sibling relationships. *International Sociology, 27,* 330-348.

Wenger, C. G., Davies, R., Shahtahmasebi, S., & Scott, A. (1996). Social isolation and loneliness in old age: Review and model refinement. *Ageing & Society, 16,* 333-358.

Zeifman, D., & Hazan, C. (2008). Pair bonds as attachments. Reevaluating the evidence. In J. Cassidy, & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment. Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 436-455). New York/London: Guilford.

Zunzunegui, M. V., Béland, F., & Otero, A. (2001). Support from children, living arrangements, self-rated health and depressive symptoms of older people in Spain. *International Journal of Epidemiology, 30,* 1090-1099.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables (N = 218)*

Variables	*M*	*SD*	Range
Gender (% female)	77.52		0-1
Age (years)	70.52	7.28	53-83
Education	4.93	2.73	1-11
Partner status (% repartnered)	16.06		0-1
Health	3.81	0.73	1-5
Year widowhood	1994	8.06	1961-2003
Attachment to mother	3.81	0.96	1-5
Attachment to father	3.56	0.95	1-5
Number of children	2.96	1.49	1-10
Practical support from children	1.47	0.48	1-3
Emotional support from children	2.41	0.53	1-3
Number of siblings	5.01	3.33	1-17
Practical support from siblings	1.08	0.24	1-3
Emotional support from siblings	1.79	0.57	1-3
Evaluation of family ties	4.13	0.59	1-5
Loneliness	3.65	2.98	1-11

Table 2. *Correlations Among Demographic Control Variables, Childhood Memories, Siblings Support, Family Ties and Loneliness (N = 218)*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Gender	-														
2. Age (years)	.02	-													
3. Education	-.23**	-.07	-												
4. Partner status	-	-.14*	.17**	-											
5. Health	-.17*	-.08	.19**	.11	-										
6. Year widowhood	-.20**	-.11	.12	.02	.02	-									
7. Attachment to mother	-.10	.06	-.23**	-.03	.03	-.01	-								
8. Attachment to father	-.04	-.08	-.17**	-.04	.03	-.05	.21**	-							
9. Number of children	-.04	.30***	-.09	-.01	-.01	-.06	.06	.00	-						
10. Practical support from children	.20**	-.03	.08	-.17*	-.11	-.02	-.04	-.08	-.12	-					
11. Emotional support from children	.22**	.04	.08	-.08	-.07	.10	-.08	-.01	-.00	.33***	-				
12. Number of siblings	-.02	.10	-.22**	-.07	.09	-.06	.03	-.08	.16*	.16*	.07	-			
13. Practical support from siblings	.06	.00	.01	.04	-.10	.01	.06	-.08	-.05	.23**	-.05	-.00	-		
14. Emotional support from siblings	.13*	.09	.03	-.02	-.07	-.08	.01	-.05	.06	.18**	.34***	-.11	.15*	-	
15. Evaluation of family ties	.14*	.02	-.07	-.15*	.06	.01	.27***	.24***	-.06	.18**	.23**	.01	-.00	.16*	-
16. Loneliness	-.12	.01	-.07	-.07	-.27***	.05	-09	-.16*	-.05	-.12	-.23**	-.13	-.01	-.15*	-.23**

Note. Gender and partner status are dummy coded, such that 1 is female and having a partner. $^{\dagger}p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3. *Family History Predicting Current Family Ties (N = 218)*

Predictors	Step 1			Step 2		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
Background characteristics						
Gender	0.22	.10	0.15*	0.30	.10	0.21**
Age	0.00	.01	0.02	0.00	.01	0.03
Education	-0.01	.02	-0.06	0.01	.02	0.05
Health	0.08	.06	0.09	0.06	.05	0.07
Year widowhood	0.00	.01	0.05	0.00	.01	0.06
Family history characteristics						
Attachment to mother				0.16	.04	0.25***
Attachment to father				0.13	.04	0.20**
R^2		.10			.22	
R^2 adj.		.06			.17	
Coll.		> .745			> .727	

Note. Gender and partner status are dummy coded, such that 1 is female and having a partner. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4. *Family History, Current Family Ties and the Functioning of the Current Family Network Predicting Loneliness (N = 218)*

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
Background characteristics															
Gender	-1.22	.49	-0.17*	-1.58	.52	-0.22**	-0.89	.50	-0.13†	-1.23	.49	-0.17*	-1.38	.52	-0.19**
Age	-0.01	.03	-0.01	-0.01	.03	-0.03	0.01	.03	0.02	0.00	.03	0.01	0.01	.03	0.01
Education	-0.13	.08	-0.12†	-0.12	.08	-0.11	-0.10	.08	-0.09	-0.81	.08	-0.17*	-0.14	.08	-0.13†
Health	-1.07	.27	- 0.26***	-1.06	.27	- 0.26***	-1.14	.27	- 0.28***	-1.01	.27	- 0.25***	-1.05	.27	- 0.26***
Year widowhood	0.01	.02	0.03	0.01	.02	0.02	0.02	.02	0.05	0.01	.02	0.01	0.01	.02	0.02
Family history															
Attachment to mother	-0.19	.22	-0.06	-0.18	.21	-0.06	-0.24	.21	-0.08	-0.21	.21	-0.07	-0.23	.21	-0.07
Attachment to father	-0.41	.21	-0.13†	-0.42	.21	-0.14*	-0.43	.21	-0.14*	-0.51	.21	-0.17*	-0.52	.21	-0.17*
Current family ties	-0.78	.35	-0.15*	-0.85	.34	-0.17*	-0.51	.35	-0.10	-0.62	.34	-0.12†	-0.57	.35	-0.11
Current network characteristics															
Partner status				-0.72	.32	-0.15*							-0.78	.32	-0.16*
Number of children							-0.15	.13	-0.08				-0.10	.13	-0.05
Practical support from children							-0.34	.42	-0.06				-0.18	.44	-0.03
Emotional support from children							-1.07	.40	-0.19**				-0.85	.42	-0.15*
Number of siblings										-0.15	.06	-0.17*	-0.13	.06	-0.15*

Practical support from siblings				-0.16	.78	-0.01	-0.32	.80	-0.03
Emotional support from siblings				-0.78	.34	-0.15*	-0.47	.36	-0.09
R^2	.16	.18	.20	.20		.25			
R^2 adj.	.13	.15	.16	.16		.19			
Coll.	> .836	> .756	> .789	> .775		> .697			

Note. Gender and partner status are dummy coded, such that 1 is female and having a partner. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$