Family background and residential choice
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CHAPTER 7

Conclusion and discussion
This study has contributed to our knowledge concerning residential choice in the Netherlands by examining the influence of the wider family context. I investigated the effect of a broad range of family background characteristics and childhood experiences, and the influence of family members within and outside the household on the timing of leaving the parental home, homeownership, residential environment choices, distances between men and women in couples and their parents and the geographical dispersion of siblings. Particular attention was also paid to the effects of life course characteristics such as the family and occupational careers on residential choices and on gender differences within couples and families. The main research question addressed in this study was: How are residential choices influenced by the family context, and to what extent does this influence differ between men and women and between couples and singles?

Residential choices have a strong effect on people’s well-being and quality of life. Dwellings differ with respect to their quality and the space they offer and residential locations differ in the extent to which they provide services and facilities. Studying residential choices, and looking specifically at the differences in residential choices of particular subgroups, provides insight in the extent to which people differ in their residential choices and in the possible constraints they face in realizing their residential preferences. Differences between subgroups can be a sign of differences in preferences and needs but also of inequality with respect to housing and location choices. Regarding the timing of leaving the parental home, it has been shown that those who leave home at a young age, are likely to be disadvantaged in the development of their family and occupational career later in the life course (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999). With respect to homeownership, we know that owner-occupied dwellings are in general of higher quality than rental dwellings, owning a home may be a good financial investment and homeownership can be seen as a status symbol (Boehm and Schlottmann, 1999; Conley, 2001; Helderman, 2007). Differences in the homeownership chances of different subgroups can thus lead to disadvantages of certain groups in their housing careers (Henretta, 1984; Kurz and Blossfeld, 2004).

Studying families is important because even in a Western, rather individualistic society such as the Netherlands, the family still plays an important role in people’s opportunities, choices and behaviour. It has been argued that changes associated with the second demographic transition (Van de Kaa, 1987) such as the increase of divorce, the postponement of marriage and childbirth, the lower fertility rates and, as a result, the decline of family size, may have led to diminishing family ties and a decrease in contact frequency and the exchange of support between family members. However, recent studies have shown that feelings of family solidarity are still strong. Despite individualization and urbanization, the family has remained important during the 20th century and intergenerational contact and exchange of support are far from diminishing (Bengtson, 2001; Grundy and Shelton, 2001; Komter and Vollebergh, 2002). In today’s ageing society, the relevance of and need for contact and support among
family members, in terms of care for elderly parents for instance, may even have increased. Because of the raise in life expectancy during the 20th century, the duration of relationships between family members, especially between siblings, has increased. As a result, parents, children and siblings share a larger part of their lives together. Family members may need more care in old age, but they can also rely on each other for support throughout a large part of the life course. Sibling relationships are potentially the longest-lasting relationship in an individual’s life and it has been shown that sibling ties are especially highly valued in old age (Voorpostel et al., 2007). Studying the extent of the influence that family members who do not live in the same household (anymore) exert on each other’s residential choices contributes to our insight in the current strength of family ties in people’s lives and in the extent to which they may exchange care and support.

Most previous studies on residential choices have focused on the influence of socio-economic and household characteristics. These studies often draw from a life course perspective in which characteristics of the family and occupational careers and the value attached to these careers are expected to influence residential choices. It has often been shown that singles and young couples who have just started their occupational careers have a preference for living in apartments in urban environments that offer many facilities, services and entertainment, while later in the life course, couples often move to single family dwellings in child friendly suburban environments when they (plan to) have children (Michelson, 1977; Courgeau, 1989; Brun and Fagnani, 1994; Kulu, 2008). Older people have been shown to be more likely to move to more rural areas, for instance after retirement (Van Dam et al., 2002). Previous research has shown that the phase of the life course and the value attached to the different careers have a strong influence on residential choices (Bootsma, 1995). In this study, I went beyond these socio-economic and life course characteristics and features of the current household of individuals by concentrating on the influence of the family in a broad sense. I added to the analyses childhood experiences, family background characteristics, and the residential choices of family members outside the household. Moreover, I looked at the possible additional effects of this wider family context on residential choices and discovered that this context adds significantly to our knowledge of residential choices.

An important characteristic of this study is its interdisciplinarity. Residential choices, typically a geographical study domain, are explained from a range of sociological, demographic, and geographic theories. The theoretical frameworks in the previous chapters draw from theories on socialization, intergenerational transmission, family sociology, the life course, family migration and gender inequalities.

In each chapter I addressed a separate part research question that dealt with the influence of family (family background, family members outside the household and/or one’s own household situation) on a specific residential choice. In Chapter 2 the influence of family
background characteristics on the timing of leaving the parental home for men and women was reported. In Chapter 3 I dealt with the extent to which resources, household context, and family background characteristics influence the homeownership of single men and women and men and women in couples. In Chapter 4 I addressed the influence of (residential) childhood experiences and the residential choices of family members outside the household in addition to life course characteristics on residential environment choices. The geographical distance between couples and both sets of parents and the extent to which this distance is influenced by the characteristics of both partners in the couple and both sets of parents, is described in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 concerns the influence of life course needs and sibling ties on their geographical dispersion.

7.1 Summary of the results
7.1.1 Competing life course careers: the family and occupational career
The family and occupational life course careers have a great influence on the residential career and they often compete when it comes to residential choices. I examined the influence of socio-economic status and household situation on all the residential choices examined in this study. For the timing of leaving the parental home and the likelihood of being a homeowner, I focused specifically on the differences between singles and couples.

Chapter 2 shows that the educational career plays an important role in the process of leaving the parental home. Enrolment in education clearly accelerates this process for single men and women and a higher level of education leads to leaving home to live alone at earlier ages. In Chapter 3 we see that a higher income and especially a higher level of education strongly increase the chances of living in an owner-occupied dwelling. Being highly educated strongly increases the likelihood of living in suburban and urban areas rather than in rural areas and being enrolled in education is strongly associated with living in a city (see Chapter 4). In Chapter 5 I conclude that the more highly educated also live further away from their parents and in Chapter 6 we see that networks that consist mostly of highly educated siblings are more dispersed than networks with mostly less-well educated siblings.

There is a clear difference between singles and couples in residential choices. In Chapter 2 I show that leaving home to live alone is more common among young adolescents between 16 and 20 years old, while leaving home for reasons of marriage or cohabitation is most likely to occur between the ages of 21 and 25. The influence of the level of education on leaving the parental home also differs between singles and couples. For leaving home to live alone, the more highly educated have a greater likelihood of leaving home than the less-well educated, while among young adults who leave home to live with a partner, the greatest likelihood is found among the less well educated. The level of education and the family career thus clearly influence the decision to leave the parental home in different ways. The household context also influences homeownership to a large extent. The results reported in Chapter
3 show that, compared with married couples without children, couples with children are far more likely to be homeowners and cohabiting couples without children, singles and single parents are less likely to be homeowners. Couples and singles also differ with respect to the effect that socio-economic resources have on their likelihood of being a homeowner. While couples in which one of the partners is self-employed have a greater likelihood of being homeowners, no effect of self-employment was found for singles. With respect to the choice of a residential environment, the study in Chapter 4 shows that, compared with couples without children, singles are most likely to live in urban areas, while couples with children are the least likely to live in cities. Chapter 5 shows that having young children decreases the distance between women and their parents and that cohabiting couples live farther away from both sets of parents than do married couples. Chapter 6 shows that life course needs of siblings, as reflected by their socio-demographic characteristics, have an important influence on the geographical dispersion of sibling networks. Socio-demographic characteristics that enhance moving away because of life course needs and preferences are associated with a greater geographical dispersion of siblings.

Differences between singles and couples are also found for the effect of family background characteristics. Having highly educated parents does accelerate the process of home leaving to live alone, but does not do so for leaving home to live with a partner. Moreover, having religious parents delays home leaving to live with a partner for women, but has no effect on women leaving home to live alone (see Chapter 2). Regarding homeownership, it seems that fathers who are self-employed tend to support their single children financially, but not their children in couples, while family size does affect the homeownership chances of men and women in couples negatively, while it has no effect on singles (see Chapter 3).

7.1.2 Family background: resources, shared preferences, and family ties
Parents and family background exert a strong influence on children through the intergenerational transmission of resources and attitudes together with socialization and residential childhood experiences. I examined the influence of family background characteristics on the timing of leaving home, homeownership, the residential environment type, distance between men and women in couples and both sets of parents and the geographical dispersion of siblings. The influence of residential childhood experiences is studied on the residential environment choice and the dispersion of siblings.

The timing of leaving the parental home and homeownership later in life is to a large extent influenced by the parents’ resources. The research reported in Chapter 2 shows that having parents with greater resources hampers the transition of leaving the parental home, probably because they create a feathered nest. After a certain age, this effect changes direction and parental resources seem to facilitate leaving home. Parental resources also influence people’s homeownership chances. In Chapter 3, strong intergenerational transmission of
homeownership is described. People whose parents own a home are far more likely to become homeowners themselves later in life than are people whose parents do not own their home. A higher socio-economic status of the father also increases the likelihood of becoming a homeowner. Parents thus seem to use their own resources in helping their children realize their residential choices.

Through socialization and childhood experiences, parents transmit attitudes to their children and they develop preferences. The parents' level of education seems to have a particular influence on residential preferences later in life. I found that, even after controlling for their own level of education, those with highly educated parents leave home to live alone at younger ages (Chapter 2) and are more likely to live in suburban and urban areas (Chapter 4), than are those with less-well educated parents. Moreover, people in couples who have highly educated parents are found to live farther away from them than are people with less-well educated parents (see Chapter 5) and siblings with highly educated parents are more dispersed than siblings with less-well educated parents (see Chapter 6). The strong intergenerational transmission of homeownership reported in Chapter 2 can also be seen as a sign of shared preferences: people who grow up in owner-occupied dwellings are likely to develop a preference for living in a dwelling of the same quality later in life.

In Chapter 4 we see that residential childhood experiences have a strong influence on the residential environment and location choices made later in life. Growing up in a certain residential environment type strongly increases the likelihood of living in that environment type later in life. This effect is found even when ruling out residential inertia or return migration by only looking at people who moved away from their childhood place of residence. Residential childhood experiences have an even greater effect on residential environment choice than the current life course or socio-demographic characteristics do. This finding is a clear sign of the development of a preference for the environment type in which one grew up. For Sweden, we also found that sibling who grew up in small towns or rural areas live more dispersed than siblings who grew up in urban or suburban areas. Moreover, siblings originating from the northern part of Sweden live more dispersed than siblings from the more densely populated middle or southern parts of Sweden. There, apparently, the desire to move away is weaker than in more rural or remote and northern area (see Chapter 6).

The decision to leave the parental home and the likelihood of being a homeowner are also strongly influenced by the atmosphere at home, which can influence family ties later in life. When parents have a good relationship quality and live together, young adults stay at home longer than when parents quarrel frequently or are divorced. Family size also matters: having more siblings increases the risk of leaving home. A pleasant atmosphere in the parental home and the availability of resources and privacy seem to create a situation in which young adults feel comfortable enough to stay at home until they are ready to leave for independence or to
form their own union (see Chapter 2). In Chapter 3 I reported finding that having experienced a parental divorce during childhood decreases the likelihood of owning a home later in life. Interestingly, while parental divorce can lead to earlier home leaving and a greater distance between people and their parents, siblings from divorced families tend to be more clustered than siblings from families in which both parents lived together during childhood.

7.1.3 Linked lives: family members outside the household
Family members influence not only people’s residential choice through socialization during childhood, but also their preferences and behaviour later in life. In this study I examined the association between people’s residential environment choice and that of their parents and siblings, the distance between couples and both sets of parents, and the extent to which life course needs and sibling ties of siblings affect their geographical dispersion.

The development of shared preferences for a certain residential environment type is clearly shown in Chapter 4. A strong association is described between the residential environment type of parents and their adult children and an even stronger association among the residential environment types of siblings. People whose parents live in suburban areas are more likely to live in the suburbs themselves and siblings’ residential environment types are very likely to be similar. These results are also found when ruling out residential inertia. Continued socialization, similar preferences, and possibly a wish to maintain close family ties seem to play a role in people’s residential environment choices.

Family ties and care and support needs are associated with distances between family members. In Chapter 5 I compared men and women in couples with respect to the distance to their parents and considered the influence that the household type of both sets of parents has on this distance. I found that couples live farther away from the separated mother or widowed father of the man relative to both parents of the man living together, and that they live closer to the widowed mother of the man. The household type of the woman’s parents does not seem to influence the distance between the couple and her parents. Neither does the age of the parents affect the distance between the couple and both sets of parents. It seems that the distance between couples and both sets of parents is partly associated with the care needs of the man’s mother, but not with other care or support needs the parents may have.

The study of the geographical dispersion of sibling networks reported in Chapter 6 shows a clear influence of family members outside the household on location choices. I find indications that siblings who show similarities in their life course needs are more clustered geographically than siblings who are more different. We also see that when siblings differ more with respect to their life course needs, they are more dispersed. Sibling networks with a high diversity in age and socio-economic status live more dispersed than sibling networks
with less variation in these respects. The influence of sibling ties on geographical dispersion is also investigated. Evidence is found that sibling ties are developed during childhood, and that stronger sibling ties decrease the geographical dispersion of siblings later in life.

### 7.1.4 Gender differences: male dominance versus female family ties

Men and women differ in their residential choices through gender inequalities within couples, differences in family background, and in the strength of family ties. I examined the differences between single men and women in their home-leaving process and in their likelihood of being a homeowner. For men and women in couples, I have examined the extent to which the characteristics of both partners influence the likelihood of being a homeowner and on the distance between men and women in couples and both sets of parents.

In Chapter 2 I show that, in general, women leave home at earlier ages than men do, especially when they leave home to live with a partner. This difference is probably caused by the fact that women are often a few years younger than their partners and thus form a union at earlier ages. The fact that women leave home to live alone earlier than men do is often explained by the fact that young women seem to grow up faster than young men do and feel a need for independency at earlier ages. From Chapter 2 we can conclude that women are less likely to be homeowners than men are. By comparing the likelihood of being a homeowner for single women and single men, I found that although income is important for both genders, the effect of the level of education is markedly different. Men with a university degree are significantly more likely to be homeowners than women with a university degree. It may be the case that men see buying a home as a good financial investment, and feel comfortable doing so on the basis of their earning potential, while for women their current income is more important and they may want to wait until they have a partner before buying a home.

With respect to homeownership and distances between couples and both sets of parents, I also found clear indications of gender inequalities within couples. The results reported in Chapter 3 showed that the male partner’s level of education contributes more to the likelihood of living in an owner-occupied dwelling than the resources of the female partner do. A male partner’s high level of education increases the likelihood of the couple living in an owner-occupied dwelling to a significantly larger extent than does a high level of education of the female partner. With respect to the distances between couples and the parents of the male and female partner (see Chapter 5), I found that, on average, couples live closer to the parents of the man than of the woman. This difference can be explained by differences in the socio-economic position and age between the male and female partners. The level of education of the male partner has a stronger effect on the distance to both sets of parents than does the level of education of the female partner. The man seems to have more bargaining power within the couple and couples seem to choose their location based on his socio-economic position and career opportunities.
However, when a couple have young children, they tend to live closer to the parents of the woman than when they do not have children; an effect that is not found for the distance to the man’s parents. This finding could indicate that couples rely more on the support of the woman’s parents regarding childcare or that the stronger family ties of the woman are more valued when a couple have young children. In the beginning of a relationship the dominance of the male’s socio-economic position seems to prevail, but later on in the relationship, when there are children present, ‘family’ appears to be valued more and it seems that the stronger family ties of the female partner gain importance.

Evidence was also found that parental resources and the atmosphere at home have a greater influence on women than on men. Parents seem to be more willing to provide financial help for their daughters than for their sons with respect to both leaving home and homeownership: a higher socio-economic status of the father increases the likelihood of leaving home for women but not for men (Chapter 2) and increases the likelihood of being a homeowner for single women and women in couples but, decreases this likelihood for single men and has no effect on the homeownership chances of men in couples (Chapter 3). A parental divorce or unpleasant home situation, measured by parents having frequent quarrels, accelerates the process of leaving home to a greater extent for women than for men (Chapter 2) and a parental divorce decreases the likelihood of women in couples being homeowners (Chapter 3). The results reported in Chapter 2 also show that women with stepparents are even more likely to leave home than are women from a single parent family, while living with a stepparent has no significant effect for men on leaving home to live alone.

7.2 Reflection on the data and methods

7.2.1 Reflection on the data
The theoretical questions on the influence of the wider family context on residential choices that have been addressed in this study could only be answered by using data that included information not only on the socio-demographic characteristics of individuals, but also on their childhood and family of origin, and on the current characteristics of family members outside the household. The Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS; Dykstra et al., 2005) and the Swedish register database ASTRID, provided such data. To detect patterns in the residential choices of different subgroups in society such as singles and couples and men and women and to perform multivariate analyses, a large-scale dataset was needed. The NKPS, consisting of over 8000 respondents, and the ASTRID database, consisting of the entire Swedish population of more than 9 million people, conformed to our requirements.

The NKPS included data on a representative sample of 8161 Dutch residents on a broad range of socio-economic, demographic, geographic and family characteristics. Information on family background and childhood was obtained through retrospective questions. Information on family members outside the household was also gathered. This approach allowed me to
take into account many relevant characteristics when explaining people’s residential choices. Unfortunately, the NKPS only provides limited information on the family background of the respondent’s partner. When analysing the residential choices of couples, the characteristics of the family of origin and the siblings of both partners are especially needed to fully understand these choices and the power balance within couples. Immigrants were underrepresented in the NKPS sample so that the effect of immigrant status and possible differences in culture could not be analysed thoroughly. Another interesting subgroup with respect to the research questions addressed in this study, namely single parents, also sometimes turned out to be too small to analyse in detail.

The ASTRID database is a very rich micro-level register database that is annually updated. It includes information on, among other things, level of education, residential location, housing type, and marital status. Further information is available from the census data that have been collected every five years from 1960 onwards and is added to the register data. Because of the availability of linkages between family members that do not live in the same household, we were therefore able to study the geographical dispersion of sibling networks not only by looking at their current characteristics but also by taking into account their family of origin. A minor limitation of the dataset is that residential location information is available on a 100-by-100-metre-square level. Although this scale provides very detailed information on one’s place of residence and is very useful for examining distances, it is not possible to determine whether people in the same square live in the same household or just very close to each other.

7.2.2 Measuring preferences

In this study the concepts of preference and attitude played an important role. It has been hypothesised that, through socialization, parents transmit attitudes to their children and that parents and their adult children and siblings develop shared preferences because of common (residential) childhood experiences, family ties, and continued socialization. It has also been asserted that the family and occupational career can be competing and that values attached to either career influence residential choices. I have used the concepts of value and attitude as mechanisms or explanations that are likely to underlie the associations found between the residential choices and the characteristics of family members, family background, and the occupational and family life course careers.

However, I have not used direct measurements for attitudes towards family or work in my analyses, even though the survey data from the NKPS I used in Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5, included questions on family solidarity, family ties, and work orientation. In earlier phases of several analyses, I included diverse measurements of family solidarity, the importance of having children, attitudes towards family support, and work orientation. The effects of these attitude measurements were either negligible or disappeared once socio-demographic characteristics, such as level of education or age, were taken into account. I therefore used
socio-economic and demographic characteristics instead of measurements of attitudes in the analyses. It had already been shown that housing preferences are strongly related to socio-demographic characteristics of individuals (Coolen and Hoekstra, 2001). Because of this association, naturally adding stated preferences in a model that already includes these socio-demographic characteristics, would not add much to the explanation of housing choices.

Another reason for the lack of effect of preferences that I found in earlier analyses could be that the association between attitudes and behaviour is not as strong as is sometimes assumed in research on attitudes. People may have different attitudes but still show the same behaviour. In their research on the preferences of Dutch adolescents on union formation, De Valk and Liefbroer (2007) show that stated preferences are often not in line with actual behaviour. These authors suggest that this discrepancy is partly caused by the greater extent to which actual behaviour is influenced by constraints than preferences are (De Valk and Liefbroer, 2007).

A difficulty with measuring preferences lies in the operationalization. What the relevant values or attitudes are that should be measured are often difficult to specify and determine (Coolen and Hoekstra, 2001). The survey items on family and work orientation in the NKPS seem to be more suited to the measurement of attitudes towards solidarity in families and the possible exchange of care and support than to differences in residential choices.

7.3 Suggestions for further research
This study has provided evidence for the strong influence of the wider family context on residential choices in the Netherlands. From the results found here questions for further research evolve. The influence of socialization during childhood on several life course careers has already been investigated in many previous studies. However, the extent to which continued socialization plays a role in decisions in the life course careers of individuals later in life, could be investigated in more detail in future studies. It would be worthwhile to investigate the role of family members outside the household such as parents and siblings concerning people’s decisions and preferences throughout the life course. Do changes in the parent’s marital or household situation after childhood affect the family ties, preferences, and resources of their adult children? Do siblings indeed serve as an example for each other later in life? And if so, which siblings are followed and which siblings are followers?

This study has detected a number of gender inequalities, not only within couples and in the effect of their family ties and background but also in the extent to which men and women make different choices based on their own household situation and resources. However, the data used here did not allow the investigation of the specific causes underlying the differences found. It would be interesting to study the motives behind residential choices of men and women in more depth to see whether it is indeed the case that women base their
residential choices more on family motives while men choose from an economic perspective, and to investigate the dynamics within couples to see whether the bargaining power between partners changes when they have children.

With regard to research on values, it would be worthwhile examining and disentangling the influence of such underlying mechanisms as socialization and the development of shared preferences on the behaviour of people later in life. Are preferences only developed during childhood and do the decisions of family members outside the household later in life indeed serve as an example? And is this situation the result of shared attitudes or merely of similarities in socio-demographic respect?

References


