

Tilburg University

Introduction

van Oorscot, W.J.H.; Komter, A.

Published in:
Sociale Wetenschappen

Publication date:
1998

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
van Oorscot, W. J. H., & Komter, A. (1998). Introduction. *Sociale Wetenschappen*, 41(3), 1-4.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

INTRODUCTION

W. van Oorschot, A. Komter (editors)*

Since Enlightenment thought introduced the discourse on individual autonomy versus political order, the question of what it is that ties individuals and groups together into broader collectivities and makes them act in accordance with collective interests has been central to social theory (Jencks 1979, Scott 1997). With the breakdown of seventeenth and eighteenth century 'moral' philosophy into what we now know as sociology, psychology and economics, the concepts used in discussions about the issue of social ties became more differentiated and different discourses started to follow their own paths. For sociologists, the investigation of the factors inducing individuals to behave in ways that produce optimal outcomes from a social perspective relates to solidarity in social systems. Within the context of rational choice theory and the theory of collective action, economists are concerned with the issue of co-operation between (freely choosing) individuals. When asked to explain behaviour that seems motivated by concern for others or the collective interest, economists tend to use concepts such as altruism and enlightened self-interest. Social psychologists studying group cohesion, dynamics and performance use concepts such as reciprocity, gift giving and social control and consider the role of individual and group identity formation. The issue is even addressed in socio-biology and evolutionary psychology. In these relatively new disciplines social organisation and co-operation in non-human societies have evolved into an important field of study (see e.g. De Waal 1996). Recently, however, efforts have been made to re-establish the connections between different disciplinary views on social ties (e.g. Hechter 1987, Mansbridge 1990, Komter 1996).

In addition to being a central issue in social theory, the social ties that bind individuals have been a major socio-political concern, especially in times of transition. During the nineteenth century a pre-occupation with the darker sides of the modernisation process was growing (e.g. Comte, Tönnies, Durkheim, Marx). This process, and in particular the increasing division of labour, individualisation and rationalisation, was perceived as a threat to social cohesion, because it would cause erosion of

* Aafke Komter is Associate Professor in the Welfare State Capacity Group of Utrecht University. Her main subjects of research are processes of inclusion and exclusion related to the exchange of goods, gifts and services.

Wim van Oorschot is Associate Professor of Sociology at the Department of Social Security Studies of Tilburg University. His work covers the effectiveness of social security administration, local anti-poverty policies, re-insertion of disabled workers and welfare state opinions.

direct ties within the family, church, neighbourhood and professional group. The social effects of unbridled capitalism would further a breakdown of industrial society by intensifying the struggle between classes. At present, some hundred years later, when the establishment and democratisation of social and political rights through the development of the modern welfare state have smoothed the sharpest social contrasts, worries about the strength and scope of the social fabric are again at the fore in the public debate. Politicians and other opinion leaders regularly manifest their concern about the ever-increasing individualisation and alleged growth of calculating behaviour among citizens, about a diminishing solidarity and about a decreasing sense of commonality and other-directedness. Such concern is often expressed in relation to the increasing multi-culturality and plurality of (post)modern societies, which induce a need for new forms and patterns of social bonds and cohesion, as well as in relation to changes in welfare paradigms and the globalisation of economies, which both put old solidarity structures and arrangements under strong pressure (Ferge 1997). Solidarity and social cohesion are clearly back on the socio-political agenda.

This special issue of *Sociale Wetenschappen* deals with the idea that the present socio-political debate suffers from two serious flaws: a superficial and undifferentiated concept of social solidarity and cohesion, as well as a tendency to take several common precepts on solidarity for granted. First, a central concern in the present political and policy debate seems to be the idea that social solidarity is waning throughout society. This general idea does not differentiate, however, between the scope and intensity of solidarity. Nor does it distinguish formal from informal solidarity, institutionalised from non-institutionalised forms of solidarity, public from privately organised solidarity, or between solidarity organised at the micro-level, the meso-level or the macro-level, or between separate domains of solidaristic arrangements like social protection, labour market relations, education and (health)care. With regard to the second flaw, general wisdom holds (a) that solidarity is a good thing in itself (i.e. only benefits society's integration), (b) that individualisation inevitably means erosion of social solidarity, (c) that reciprocity and gift relations have lost their cohesive function in our complex society, and (d) that the micro-basis of social solidarity (i.e. mutual support in small social networks based on reciprocity and fellow-feeling) has disappeared.

The contributors to this special issue of *Sociale Wetenschappen* believe that more can be said about the issue of social solidarity and cohesion. They will illustrate this by offering a counterweight to the common precepts in the form of theoretical insights from different academic discourses on social ties and bonds, as well as some results of recent empirical studies in the field.

In the first article Wim van Oorschot and Aafke Komter identify and discuss three separate discourses or theoretical perspectives on what it is that binds individuals together. One discourse is dominated by 'solidarity' and largely contains contributions from sociologists; the second revolves around the concept of 'reciprocity', which has been developed by anthropologists, sociologists and social-psychologists;

the third discourse is known as 'rational choice' theory, and reflects the work of economists, as well as sociologists. Van Oorschot and Komter will combine elements from these discourses in their discussion of three topics considered relevant with regard to some of the common precepts concerning solidarity: motives people may have for supporting solidary relations and arrangements, the socially excluding effects of solidarity as opposed to its including effects, and, finally, the consequences of the process of individualisation for social bonding. One of their conclusions is that individualisation might be seen not as a threat to solidarity but as an opportunity for it and even as a prerequisite for the functioning and viability of complex modern societies.

The next two contributions contain empirical data about concrete cases of solidarity. First, Aafke Komter and Wilma Vollebergh present some new analyses of empirical data from an earlier research project on giving in the Netherlands (Komter & Schuyt 1993). They regard giving help and care as a reflection of solidarity. They examine the nature and determinants of intergenerational solidarity and compare the relative importance of familial and intergenerational solidarity with solidarity towards friends. Their results show that solidarity towards one's own parents is based mainly on the Durkheimian norms of moral obligation, or inner duty, whereas feelings of affection are reserved for solidarity towards friends. Apart from influences of age, gender and education, having children appears to inhibit solidarity towards people outside one's own immediate family. *The overall conclusion is that familial solidarity retains an overarching role when compared with solidarity towards friends; albeit only in terms of the frequency of offered assistance and care and not in terms of the accompanying feelings: love is reserved for helping friends, while duty is the main feeling when helping one's parents.*

The third article by Jack Burgers discusses the case of housing illegal immigrants against the background of formal state solidarity. Most scholars perceive informal solidarity as a substitute for formal solidarity: when the latter decreases, the former needs to increase. Alternatively, Burgers argues, formal and informal solidarity may be regarded as communicating vessels: a high degree of formal solidarity goes together with a high degree of informal solidarity. Using empirical data on the housing situation of undocumented immigrants in the city of Rotterdam, Burgers shows that the different ethnic communities differ with respect to ethnic solidarity (landlords who lodge tenants belonging to the same nationality). More generally, however, the informal housing market for immigrants appears to resemble the formal market in that it is strongly decommodified (i.e. non-commercial). Burgers concludes that the communicating vessels model of formal and informal solidarity explains the housing situation of undocumented immigrants more accurately than the substitution model: the formal housing market is conducive to informal solidarity.

In the fourth article Van Oorschot tests empirically the prevalence and relative importance of a number of theoretically deduced deservingness criteria on data of a national Dutch survey on welfare state solidarity carried out in 1995. The criteria of

control, identity, reciprocity, need and social risk all play a role in people's opinions on the degree to which different kinds of needy groups in society should be supported. The first three, however, are the most important, meaning that in present Dutch society solidarity is felt most strongly with those who are victims of detrimental factors beyond their control, who belong to 'our kind of people', and who have done or might do something for us in return. Other analyses show that people differ in the degree to which their solidarity with others is conditional. That is, some people tend to apply more of the deservingsness criteria and to adhere to them more strongly than others. The broader implication of the article is that modern welfare state solidarities transcend the issue of solidary relations between simply categorized groups like 'workers vs unemployed', 'young vs old', 'high incomes vs low incomes', and 'tax payers vs benefit recipients'. But also, that people's attitudes towards rules for rationing welfare might be as important to understand welfare state solidarities as their willingness to pay for it.

The final contribution by Romke van der Veen concerns the theme of solidarity and social security. It addresses the question of how the recent decollectivisation of the Dutch social security system can be understood in terms of a sociological perspective on solidarity, and what the possible consequences of such decollectivisation might be. The proposition is that decollectivisation of social security can strengthen actual solidarity within groups of workers or citizens, but carries with it the risk of creating stronger boundaries between groups and consequently of decreasing solidarity between groups. Decollectivisation cannot be simply equated with a loss of solidarity. There is 'solidarity-gain' in increased actual solidarity and in a diminishing risk of evasion, but there is also 'solidarity-loss' in the rise of stricter boundaries and the increase of risk-selection on the labour-market.