The configurational approach to families: Methodological suggestions

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Abstract:

The configurational perspective on families stems from various influences, among which the contribution of Norbert Elias is central. The focus on identification with the family as a group and the set of various interdependencies (e.g. emotional, financial, practical, symbolic) among a potentially large number of family members makes it necessary to ask specific research questions and use alternative data collection methods rather than standard surveys and mainstream qualitative approaches. This chapter makes some methodological suggestions that can be applied to advance the understanding of family configurations (i.e., networks of functional interdependences existing among large sets of actors). The importance of using dilemmas to uncover the balance of power and tensions behind family identification and functional interdependences among family members is emphasized.

Keywords: research methods, family configurations, dilemmas, ambivalence, Family Network Method, Norbert Elias

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This chapter provides insights into addressing empirical research on families as configurations in which neither the family's boundaries nor the set of roles under consideration is taken for granted (Jallinoja & Widmer, 2008). From this perspective, families are analysed as large networks of interdependencies that extend well beyond households or the roles and statuses associated with the nuclear family. The following pages contain some methodological suggestions that can be applied to advance the understanding of family configurations. The importance of using dilemmas to uncovering the logics behind family identification and functional interdependences among family members is emphasised.

The configurational approach posits that families are networks of interdependencies formed among human beings; in other words, a family comprises a structure of mutually oriented and functionally dependent persons (Elias, 1978). Being interdependent means that one configuration member's practices and decisions have important consequences for those of other members. Individuals are interdependent in a family configuration because each fulfils some of the others' needs for emotional support, financial and practical resources or social recognition (Quintaneiro, 2004). Therefore, each person becomes a resource and a constraint for other configuration members, whether directly or indirectly. Thus, rather than cohesive groups bounded by the limits of the household, families are process-oriented networks of functional interdependencies in which individuals not only cooperate, but also hinder each other voluntarily and involuntarily (Widmer, 2016). Indeed, in a configurational perspective, what makes individuals interdependent are the functions they have for each other. Such functions relate with economic, pratical and emotional support, sociability, sex, identity orientation and cognitive signifiance, among other dimensions for which contributions of significant others are needed, Functional interdependencies then set specific balances of power, as the power differential between individuals is a translation of the balance of functions they have for one another (Connolly & Dolan, 2011).

Individuals in families are linked through functional balance and balance of power. In families, as in other configurations, no party has total control over another and "power games" unfold regarding the distribution of resources in terms of time, money, sociability or support (Elias, 1978). The outcomes of such power games are in most cases unintended, as they are the results of "the interweaving of countless individual interests and intentions" (Elias, 1994: 389, Newton, 1999). Therefore, the pattern of interdependencies characterizing family configurations is also largely unintended. In turn, such large configurations of interdependencies define the family's boundaries, as well as the distinction between insiders and outsiders. Such processes make understanding spouse, parent–child and sibling relationships difficult – if not impossible – without considering the pattern of interdependencies to which such dyads belong (Widmer, 2016).

Researchers who focus on configurational issues should consider methods that can best reveal

dimensions such as the importance of identification with a family, its set of functional interdependencies and its balance of tensions and power. Relational sociology, under the guidance of Norbert Elias, Georg Simmel and others (Donati, 2010; Elias, 1978; Emirbayer, 1997; Simmel, 2015) has theorized and empirically considered various processes that shape all human groupings in a variety of ways beyond families. This chapter contains some methodological suggestions that may enhance the design of future studies on family configurations. We assume that understanding the family from a configurational perspective means unfolding the set of patterns that makes it unique among human configurations (Widmer, 2010). Accordingly, this chapter describes methodological strategies followed by some European family sociology studies conducted in close connection with activities organized by the European Sociological Association on Families and Intimate Lives' Research Network 13. The selection of reviewed studies is not intended to be complete or representative. Rather, its purpose is illustrative: based on a small number of examples, we aim to emphasise a few methodological principles that may be valuable for future research.

This chapter's main argument is that using dilemma-sensitive methods constitutes a valuable entry point for the understanding of family configurations. Sociology as a discipline has developed an interest in a variety of dilemmas generated by the unexpected and often undesirable collective consequences of the aggregation of individual actions (Kollock, 1998). Indeed, individuals are usually embedded in situations to which numerous others contribute. Therefore, the individuals' pursuit of their goals is embedded in uncontrollable collective dynamics. When negative, these dynamics have been described as vicious circles (Quintaneiro, 2004) or social double binds (Elias, 1993). On the emotional side, dilemmas translate into ambivalence, which is defined as a tension felt by an individual who faces a dilemma when, for instance, their relations with other group members are filled with love and anger or when an individual wishes to achieve autonomy and group identity simultaneously (Lüscher, 2002). According to Lüscher (2011:, 197), ambivalence entails "oscillating between polar contradictions of feeling, thinking, wanting or social structures, contradictions that appear temporarily or permanently insolvable."

The configurational perspective on families developed from a genuine interest in such situations because dilemmas and the ambivalence they generate are likely to reveal core configurational

processes. Indeed, a focus on dilemmas and ambivalence facilitates researchers' tracing the chains of interdependences and power balances that bind family members together. Consider, for instance, the case of an elderly man who requires increasing care. Some of his family members might wish to send him to a care facility or institution that provides him with the expected services to alleviate their own burden. However, such a situation entails the cost of moving him to a more distant area, so visiting him frequently is no longer possible. Neither of the available options is desirable, and the family members might have distinct opinions and personal reasons for promoting one option over another, leading to ambivalence and interpersonal tensions. Some might recommend letting the aging man move out and not seeing him on a regular basis anymore, whereas others might insist upon keeping him at home. The situation might result in a great deal of relational ambivalence among family members. They might blame each other for not doing enough or taking advantage of the situation, whereas the elderly man might consider his family members ungrateful or intrusive. The overall situation reveals the unintended consequences of the aggregation of various individual interests and strategies, as well as the balance of power and tensions unfolding among family members. In configurational terms, ambivalence (Lüscher, 2004, 2011) is found in the power-loaded interventions of third parties in matters often understood initially as private to a person or a single relationship. Such interventions are likely to increase stress and conflict across networks of family interdependences (Widmer & Lüscher, 2011). Looking for dilemmas and ambivalence therefore makes it possible to delineate the patterns that shape interdependencies in family configurations.

Family weness

Setting a family's boundaries and collective identity might shape one such dilemma. How does a person conform to the collective definition of family as an individual embedded in a complicated life? At critical points in their lives, many individuals need to redefine their families. Marriage, parenthood, divorce and widowhood are occasions in which new family boundaries are established, with possible tensions and clashes. A wedding, for instance, is an occasion that defines family insiders and outsiders, and the new partners implement several strategies, often with unexpected consequences (Castren & Maillochon, 2009). In studies inspired by the structural functional perspective, family boundaries and family weness were a non-issue, as the

nuclear family, defined by the borders of the household, was considered a self-evident unit in any analysis or understanding of the family (Parsons & Bales, 1955). We have stressed elsewhere (Widmer, 2010) that, although the structural functional perspective has lost traction in family sociology, researchers' use of household composition to define family boundaries has remained prominent, as the distinctions between single-parent families, stepfamilies, same-sex families and nuclear families shows. The configurational perspective challenges this conventional approach to families, which focuses on the household unit. Such criteria are administrative and disregard how various individuals create and understand families through their daily practices and interactions. In their book *The Established and the Outsiders*, Elias and Scottson (1994b) coined the term *family configurations oriented towards the mother* by tracing the boundaries of family configurations according to interdependences existing among individuals beyond households. In other words, the use of household composition to identify family units and study family diversity disregards the complex set of family processes and interdependencies that constantly define family (Widmer, 2010).

Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994) made this point long ago in a review paper on stepfamily research. They reported that according to empirical research conducted in the United States, a majority of children who faced the separation of their parents defined their significant family members in full or partial contradiction with household membership, generating a series of dilemmas and ambivalences regarding who was a family insider and who was an outsider. Overall, research on stepfamilies has stressed the variety of extant relational arrangements within the household and in connection with external family members (Ganong and Coleman 2012). Methodological attempts to capture family interdependencies using household structures have overlooked such dilemmas and ambivalence by applying a formal criterion to an informal issue. Indeed, if household membership is relevant enough for administrative tasks, it is cumbersome for systematic research on interdependencies. After all, what matters most in family research, as Burgess and Locke (1945) emphasized, is not the administrative classification of households, but family interactions (i.e., functional interdependencies among family members). Therefore, rather than using household composition as a decisive criterion to identify family groupings, the configurational perspective employs data collection methods that are sensitive to lay definitions of the concept of the family. For instance, what happens when family weness does not correspond to living arrangements, such as in stepfamilies? What strategies and consequences

does such a dilemma entail? How do individuals in stepfamilies deal with the nuclear family normative model? What about cases in which parents and children have contradictory definitions of their significant family members?

There is a growing emphasis in research on various family configurations that serve as alternatives to the nuclear family defined by marriage and household membership (e.g., Budgeon and Roseneil, 2004; Widmer, 2010; Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008). In configurational family research empirical analysis begins from the perspective that what makes family is the inclusion of individuals in a "we" or "weness" – that is, a co-constructed feeling of being part of a family (Castren, 2019; Castren & Widmer, 2015; Elias, 1994). Such a "we" is based on individuals' feelings of intimacy, as well as the commitments they develop over time (e.g., Weeks, 2007). The ways in which these configurations embody mechanisms of family member exclusion or inclusion have received increasing attention. To understand how identification with a family group unfolds, a series of configurational studies asked respondents to report their significant family members. The Family Network Method (FNM) is a validated instrument used on various populations (Oris et al., 2016; Wall et al., 2018; Widmer, 2010; Widmer, Aeby & Sapin, 2013). Following previous work on lay definitions of family (Furstenberg, 1987; Levin, 1993; Milardo, 1989; Pasley, 1987), it first asks respondents to identify their significant family members. The term ''family'' is deliberately left undefined to elicit personal definitions of the concept. Participants are instructed that the term ''significant'' refers to people in their families who have played positive or negative roles in their lives during the past year. First, the participants list all significant family members. Then, they are asked to provide the status of each member (e.g., father, mother, partner, and sibling) and their socio-demographic profile.

Such methods provide lists of family members of various statuses (e.g., fathers, mothers, children, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, stepparents) that can be subsumed into a small number of types using cluster analyses (Kaufmann & Rousseeuw, 1990), a multivariate statistical method that enables researchers to find groups in data automatically. The diversity of definitions of family in middle adulthood can be summarized using a limited number of distinct types. In a study of 300 women with children in a variety of family situations (Widmer et al., 2006), The most populated family configuration was almost exclusively centered on the partner and the children and therefore was identified as the type '*Nuclear family*'. All other configurations, however, extended well beyond the limits of the household. *Friend/family configurations*

focused on individuals who were considered family members but were not related by blood, marriage or partnership. *In-law configurations* had a strong orientation toward the partner and the in-laws. The partner and the partner's mother were over-represented, as were other in-law relationships. *Brother and sister configurations* included the respondent's siblings and their children and current partners. *Kinship configurations* included a variety of individuals related by blood and marriage, such as partners, parents, children, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, cousins and grandparents. *Beanpole configurations* referred to families in which several generations co-existed, with only a few family members in each of them (Bengtson, Rosenthal & Burton, 1990). They focused on blood relatives, with the inclusion of members of various generations, particularly grandparents from the mother and father's sides. By definition, they were vertically oriented rather than horizontally oriented, unlike the *brother and sister configurations*. Respondents who had *without partner configurations* did not include the present partner as a significant family member, although the partner lived, as in all other cases, within the same household as the female respondent and her child. In contrast, *post-divorce configurations* included the female respondents' former male partners and their relatives, as well as the new male partner and his relatives (his children and, in some cases, his female ex-partner).

Individuals make choices about family boundaries that arise from the intersection of social norms about what legitimately constitutes a family (see the later section on *leitbilder*), and their own practices and interdependencies (see the next section). Two individuals living in the same household featuring a divorce and a remarriage might therefore define their family in conflicting ways. For instance, one might belonging to the *without partner configuration*, and the other might belong to a *nuclear family configuration*. Therefore, as Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994) emphasized regarding post-divorce families, if a researcher asks individual members of any household who is part of their family, each member will provide a different answer. This is a major dilemma that family members must resolve: how can they be a family together if they define family quite differently? Indeed, family boundaries defined as real are real in their consequences (Merton, 1995; Thomas & Thomas, 1970).

The constitution of family weness has much to do with how individuals construct their life trajectories (de Carlo, Aeby & Widmer, 2014 ; Widmer, 2010). Family weness is the result of a life course cumulative process in which various decisions concerning marriage, fertility, separation and divorce, as well as migration and job orientations, play out. Widowhood,

separation and divorce are associated with individuals' reorganization of their family ties (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Widowed and divorced people have a larger proportion of extended kin and friends compared to married people (Cornwell, 2011). Compared to married individuals, widowed individuals are more likely not only to develop relationships with siblings, but also to receive support from them (Ha, 2008). Therefore, their personal networks are heterogeneous, which translates directly into their family weness (Girardin & Widmer, 2015). Because they are especially at risk of losing significant ties with their children, divorced men sometimes seek to compensate such losses by investing in other ties (Campbell, Connidis & Davies, 1999). Childless individuals also invest in alternative family ties such as with siblings, diverse extended kin or friends who become family insiders because they possess important emotional support potential (Schnettler & Wöhler, 2013).

Interestingly, weness dilemmas become even clearer when researchers decrease the maximum number of family members that can be cited, which is a methodological tool intended to force respondents to make choices under constraints related to their significant others (Girardin et al., 2018). Interdependencies and the tensions they generate are also revealed by the comparison of various individual interviews with adults and children stemming from the same family configuration (Branen, 2013; Castren, 2019), as well as differences between descriptions provided by respondents in a variety of interview settings (e.g., individual interviews using the FNM and its derivatives, narrative interviews, focus groups). Researchers should also be aware of the difference between private and public interviews. The interview, whether it occurs in the presence of other family members or in private with the interviewer, can be used to disentangle interdependencies (Castren and Widmer, 2015). Indeed, qualitative research can make unique contributions to configurational family analysis, as it can delve deeper into personal understandings of patterns of interdependencies compared to quantitative formal methods.

A clear example of a qualitative approach to family weness is provided by negotiations surrounding the family name in marriage. A variety of strategies stem from Castren's (2019) empirical study in Finland, which we review in brief here. Castren began by emphasising the dilemma caused among young couples by the issue of the family name. Specifically, this entailed the desire to share a surname with future children (emphasizing family weness), which contrasted with the desire to seek an individual identity and favour gender equality by keeping one's birth name. Castren's study was therefore built on a predefined dilemma that served as an

indicator of the tensions and power relationships present in new families in Finland. In methodological terms, the study conducted joint interviews of both partners in each couple, because such interviews enable researchers to observe partners in the midst of the decision-making process. The point was not only to collect accounts from two people, but also to observe how interdependencies are shaped in interactions.

In addition, the analysis heavily relied on Jokinen's (2005) earlier conceptualization of gender reflexivity in Finland, which, according to Castren (2019), offered the means to investigate how couples' awareness of gendered expectations and inequality influenced negotiations about names. Configurational studies often use typologies or conceptual models to develop their cases and increase their generalizability (Lück et al., 2017; Widmer, 2006; Zartler, 2015). The study's results revealed three patterns of reasoning regarding the marital name. In the first, the woman's taking the man's name at marriage was taken for granted, as though it were self-evident. Changing names was seen as intimately linked with becoming "us," a new family unit, of which the shared surname was a valued symbol. The existence of gender-specific expectations and their heterosexual foundations were not reflected, and people did what they were supposed to do as women and men according to the conventional understanding of proper gender roles and family. In the second pattern, the symmetric position of women and men under Finland's current name law was acknowledged and was seen as giving couples the right to choose. However, it was considered the woman's choice rather than the man's choice. The second pattern drew on reasoning that highlighted the marital name as an issue that partners decided individually in principle but which was, in practice, a matter of the woman's choice to keep or change her name. In the third pattern, the discourse on names recognized women and men's equivalent positions in relation to the marital name and led to a decision that was difficult to make when partners were drawn to the one-name-for-a-family model, as only one name could be chosen to represent the family unit being formed. In the cases described by Castren (2019), ambivalences in family relationships were central. Such ambivalences took the shape of a dilemma for young couples, especially among women: how does one combine gender equality, and the family as a collective identity superseding individual orientation and interests? The three patterns of weness revealed by this empirical study enable the reader to understand the balance of tensions and power that Finnish couples face in direct connection with their social context. Such understanding is precious, as it indicates future conflicts and ambivalences that are likely to accompany husbands

and wives throughout their lives together in Finland. Alternative settings in which ambivalences are present can be emphasized, such as the unequal inclusion of family members in typical family celebrations such as weddings, birthdays or funerals, as well as the study of gifts and celebrations (Castren & Maillochon, 2009). Such methodological approaches are likely to reveal various ways in which family boundaries and weness are shaped. In all such cases, a focus on the persons excluded and the reasons given by the interviewees for such exclusions is likely to highlight the balance of tensions and power that shapes family boundaries and weness.

Looking for patterns of interdependency

For many years, family researchers have been interested in collective processes and patterns of interactions. System-oriented sociology researchers considered families groups rather than configurations and therefore promoted methodological approaches that considered families as wholes or sub-systems and measured them accordingly (Olson et al., 1983; Parsons & Bales, 1955). Individuals appeared only subsequently and were usually considered only as incumbents of roles and functions. Such theorization had considerable empirical consequences, especially for measurements. For example, family system cohesion was measured using true–false answers to statements such as "Family members consult other family members on their decisions" (Olson, McCubbin, et al., 1983). Such indicators have validity problems when applied to many contemporary families. In fact, if such scales were used to interview subjects living in step-households, the reports of all household members would include different sets of people. Interestingly, major current social surveys often limit their inquiry of families to within household dynamics. For instance, when the division of family work is measured, only the division between coresident partners is often considered (e.g., ISSP Group, 2016).

Understanding families as configurations enables researchers to seek methods that demonstrate the patterns of interdependencies that link family members together. Family interdependences are needs that individuals can only fulfil in relation to other members. As noted above, such interdependencies create dilemmas that are indicative of the overall balance of tensions and power at the root of daily interactions and long-term ties in families. From that perspective, the positive dimensions of family interactions should be considered in relation to the negative dimensions, given that resources are scarce and their allocation and exchange are embedded in

power relations. Popular concepts in family research such as family bond, family solidarity and family support emphasise the positive impact of family interactions and the ways families create and sustain cohesion. Such concepts ignore conflict and violence. Family researchers should keep in mind that all human configurations feature an ever-shifting balance of tensions and power (Elias, 1978; Elias, 2013). Such a balance should be examined by identifying together positive and negative patterns of relationships and meanings (Simmel, 2015), rather than by focusing on single variables or factors. Indeed, dilemmas and ambivalences are never created by single forces, such as a drive towards autonomy in relationships. Contradictions necessitate the rise of at least two opposite forces, and often many more, such as when one family member's drive towards autonomy collides with the solidarity and equality expectations of other family members. Therefore, methods designed to uncover patterns in dilemmas and contradictions rather than single dimensions of family interactions are crucial to the configurational perspective on families. Stepfamily research, for instance, stresses the ambivalence present in the relationships between child, mother, father, stepfather and stepmother because of the dilemmas that co-parenting among several adults in divorce chains generates (Finch & Mason, 1993; Hetherington, 2003; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Similarly, ambivalence between adult siblings or adult children and their parents generated by intergenerational relationships and elderly care has been documented extensively by social gerontologists (Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Lüscher, 2002). In both cases, a configurational approach goes beyond dyadic analysis and seeks patterns of interdependences and their embeddedness in social structures and the life course (Widmer, 2010).

A series of studies using social network questions examined families in several countries from that perspective (Oris et al., 2016; Wall et al., 2018; Widmer, Aeby & Sapin, 2013). In all such surveys, a set of questions about emotional support and conflict among listed family members was used in accordance with the FNM (Widmer, 1999). Emotional support was typically measured using questions such as the following: "Who would give emotional support to X (i.e., each individual included in the respondent's family configuration, considered one by one) during routine or minor troubles?" Conflict was investigated with the following question: "Each family has its conflicts and tensions. In your opinion, who makes X (i.e., each individual included in the respondent's family configuration, considered one by one) angry?" Respondents had to evaluate not only their own family relationships, but also those among all their significant family

members (Widmer, et al., 2013). Each set of responses is transformed into a matrix such as the one presented in Table 1, which shows responses given by one respondent in a study of middle adulthood parents in Switzerland about the provision of emotional support (Widmer et al., 2012).

In this matrix, each dependency is represented by 1. An absence of dependency leads to a 0, and interdependence (both actors being dependent of each other) is represented by 1 at the two possible intersections between the actors. For instance, because the respondent's son and the respondent's mother are interdependent for emotional support, there is a 1 in the intersection of the rows of the son and the columns of the mother. Note that the dependencies are directional: the lower and upper halves of the matrix can be different, revealing cases in which only one actor is dependent on the other. This is reflected in the fact that the nephew, for instance, is dependent on the respondent, but the respondent is not dependent on the nephew.

Table 1. Matrix representation of interdependencies in one family configuration

	Respondent	Partner	Son	Father	Mother	Nephew	MotherOfPartner	DaugtherOfParther	DaugtherOfPartner	Friend
Respondent	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Partner	1.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1,0
Son	1.0	1.0	1,0	1.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Father	1.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Mother	1.0	0.0	1,0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Nephew	1.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
MotherOfPartner	1.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
DaugtherOfParther	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
DaugtherOfPartner	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Friend	1.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1,0

The respondents' configuration of Table 1 includes 10 persons (including herself) from three generations living in different households, with the inclusion of a partner, children, in-laws, step children and parents, relatives, etc. Network methods enable researchers to understand the chain of interdependencies connecting key family members. For instance, rather than asking each respondent to provide an overall assessment of family cohesion, one can operationalize cohesion of ties within one's family network by its density; that is, the number of existing connections divided by the number of pairs of family members cited by the respondent (i.e., potential connections; see Wasserman & Faust, 1995). Answers to such questions can also be used to provide a visual representation of family interdependencies as evidenced by Figure 1. Socio-metric matrices and their corresponding graphs offer visualization capturing the chains of interdependencies linking family members together. In Figure 1, there are 27 arcs (i.e., someone available to help someone else in case she or he needs it) from the potential 90 arcs existing

among 10 persons (10 × 9). As in other configurational studies using social network methods (Widmer, 2010; Widmer, Aeby & Sapin, 2013), arrows point to persons providing resources, which is consistent with the conceptualization of ties as dependencies. Socio-metric graphs are of great value to configurational research because they enable researchers to visualize family interdependencies. The graph in Figure 1 in particular reveals a rather dense configuration of support, with the respondent playing a major role. However, the partner's daughters have no connection with members of the respondent's family except for their father. In contrast, the partner's mother is integrated in the respondent family by an interdependence with her.

Figure 1. Support relationships in the respondent's family configuration (arrows point to resource individuals)
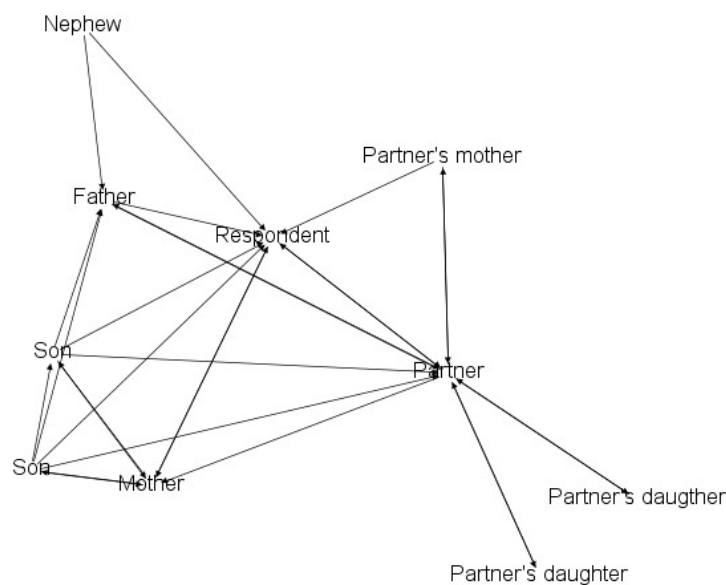
The dilemma facing this female respondent is revealed when one considers the other face of supportive interdependencies (i.e., the conflict relationships). Figure 2 reports conflict interactions between family members according to her. In this case, the arrows point towards individuals who are sources of anger for others, always from the perspective of the respondent. The configuration seen from that angle is quite different. Indeed, the density of conflict is much

lower than the density of support, corresponding to the general case of family configurations. Interestingly, this female respondent captured almost all negative interactions in the family configurations, except for two that focused on her mother. Figures 1 and 2 show she is the person in charge of many things in the family with consequently great centrality in conflict, including tense relationships with her partner's two daughters, who were unconnected with her for support. This relates to patterns we have described as overload, which is typical for women burdened with family responsibilities (Aeby et al., forthcoming ; Sapin et al., 2016). This pattern presents an interesting paradox: the person helping most is also the one who creates the most conflict and tension within the family configuration.

Figure 2. Conflict relationships in the respondent's family configuration (arrows point to conflict-generating individuals)
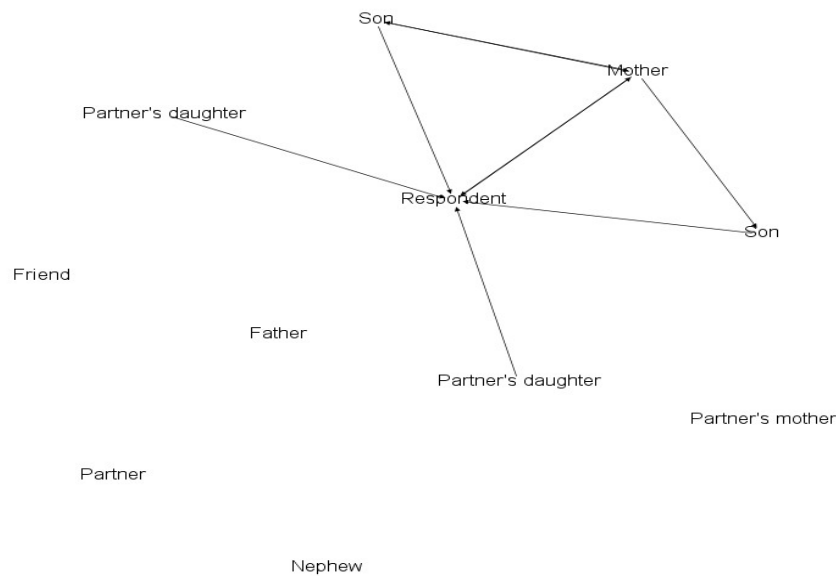
Such patterns are present in all age groups and life situations where critical resources are lacking (Aeby et al., forthcoming; Girardin et al., 2018; Sapin et al., 2016). Let us consider old age as an example using the *Vivre-Leben-Vivere* data, a large representative survey of residents in

Switzerland aged 65 and older (Oris et al., 2016). Family configurations in which all the members are strongly interconnected through long-lasting and intimate relationships, with frequent contacts and exchanges of various resources (high density of connection), often trigger a significant level of tension and conflict (Girardin et al., 2018). Although ensuring effective support and trust, tight interdependence among family members enhances individual expectations, claims, and obligations because of the increasing collective nature of normative control and support (Coleman, 1988), with likely negative consequences including family interference (Johnson & Milardo, 1984) and threat to individual autonomy (Cornwell, 2011). Therefore, dense support, with its strong underlying normative pressure, creates tension and conflict if expectations and obligations are not respected, or if individuals claim too much autonomy. Thus, dense family configurations are not solely supportive but also a source of stress and conflict (Widmer, 2010). Negative feelings about family members were developed by individuals in family configurations where the activation of intergenerational ties was not met by sufficient resources, such as when the income of the family was low or the health of the aging respondent was rather poor (Girardin et al., 2018).

This example emphasizes that collecting family network data helps scholars understand the balance of tensions and power that individuals face when dealing with the dilemma of helping a family member and interfering with her or his life (Widmer et al., 2008). Network methods are largely adaptable to a survey context and therefore make it possible to provide detailed information on family configurations in large representative samples. Such methods are an entry point to the understanding of family weness and interdependencies at a population level. Despite some of their limitations associated with the time-consuming process of collecting such data, especially when information is requested from all network members, social network methods are optimal for dealing with patterns of interdependencies when analysing family relationships. They provide a graphical representation of interdependencies that is extremely valuable in this regard. Such methods also help relate family sociology with the expanding world of social network research. The idea that the pattern of social ties in which actors are embedded has important consequences for those actors has been stressed by sociology since its origin (Freeman, 2004). Starting in the 1930s, theoretical and methodological developments first associated with the figure of Jakob Moreno (1934) made it possible for social scientists to develop a body of

empirical studies uncovering such patterns in a variety of social settings, such as the job market and industrial relations, affiliations to parties and clubs, and international affairs (Scott, 2002). Although anthropologists' work on kinship systems using social network analysis has been extensive (Scott, 2002), the use of social network analysis of family issues in Western societies has remained for a number of decades rather limited. One exception was the seminal work of Elisabeth Bott (1957), who related couples' internal divisions of roles and labour to the pattern of relationships they develop with friends and kin. However, such attempts at linking family issues with social networks were quite limited until the early 2000, with a few notable exceptions (i.e., Milardo, 1988, 1989; Stein et al., 1992). Although such studies focused on the connection between families and their networks, the configurational perspective went a step further by considering families as networks (Widmer, 2016). Such a configurational perspective relates well with work on personal networks from a life-course perspective with its emphasis on linked lives unfolding through time (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Giele & Elder, 1998), although life-course researchers who rather consider relationships as resources do not generally share its focus on power relationships, ambivalence and dilemmas. Such interest in the dark side of relationships is to some extent explained by the large set of obligations associated with family life, especially intergenerational relationships, which make them in many instances prone to ambivalence and dilemmas (Girardin et al., 2018; Lüscher, 2002). Indeed, personal network research from a life-course perspective does not develop an exclusive focus on family ties, whereas the configurational perspective of families obviously does.

Going deeper into interdependencies

Formal approaches stemming from network analysis are a major avenue for a configurational approach to families. Qualitative methods are complementary because they provide a more in-depth understanding, from the actors' perspectives, of the various meanings given to interdependencies. Grounded theory and other fully inductive approaches have achieved a high level of visibility in the social sciences in recent decades. However, one may be sceptical about their merits for configurational studies because it is doubtful that many respondents will deliberately emphasize their functional dependencies on others in interviews. What a number of qualitative empirical studies using such inductive approaches rather show is that respondents tend to stress autonomy and independence as key principles of their private and family lives,

following normative imperatives of late modernity concerning intimate relationships (e.g., Mason et al., 2007). Because autonomy in intimate relationships and family harmony have achieved such normative premium, the social desirability to stick with them in fully open interviews is high. To examine the patterns of interdependencies that individuals develop in their family interactions, researchers are helped by prior conceptual models and typologies (Widmer, 2010). Therefore, to achieve a configurational understanding of families, deductive qualitative methods (Gilgun, 2005), which stress key questions about configurations and use conceptual models, are preferable even though such questions and models may not be the ones that directly develop in the minds of the interviewees when they are first asked to describe their family lives or intimate relationships.

Scholars can achieve a deeper understanding of interdependencies through a number of methods in qualitative research. In general, the focus of qualitative interviews on dilemmas is advisable: interviewers might ask respondents to list issues or conflicts that they meet in their daily life or in critical transitions in relation with solidarity practices and group memberships, as well as how they try to solve such issues. Such emphasis on ambivalent situations is in line with the understanding of family configurations as sets of actors made interdependent by their needs for each other's assets and resources. Researchers may ask respondents how they think the other family members understand dilemmas. They may conduct multiple interviews on the same set of issues with a variety of family members to find out how their interlocking perspectives may create misunderstandings that then reverberate upon all members' interdependencies. It is obviously difficult for a researcher to interview a large number of family members, especially when such members are linked by anger and conflict, but having two or three of such members makes it already possible to go deeper in the understanding of family weness and interdependencies. An alternative to individual interviews is to conduct focus groups on a predefined list of dilemmas. This was done when dealing with the definition of *family* by asking members of family configurations to talk about their understanding of such dilemmas in front of the other (Castren & Widmer, 2015).

It is worth noting that unfolding family interdependencies can also be achieved to some extent by understanding family practices. *Doing family* (Morgan, 2011) is an inherent part of

configurational processes. Outstanding research has been done on such practices, especially in the United Kingdom, which is relevant for the configurational perspective (Finch, 2008; Jamieson, 2004; Mason et al., 2007; Smart, 2007; Smart and Shipman, 2004). Morgan and colleagues indeed stress the importance of studying family practices, that is what family members do together in terms of sociability, meals, family work and other regular activities, in relation with the biographies of family members and their social position in terms of gender and social class. Many functional interdependencies indeed unfold in daily activities: when people do things together they become interdependent. Interestingly, "families we live by", i.e., individuals' conceptions of the right ways to be a family (Gillis, 1997; Gillis, 2015), are yardsticks by which actual family practices are understood. By developing family narratives, individuals link their family experiences with more general patterns of social meanings about relationships. In that sense, paying attention to how family members narrate "family" is key to the "doing family perspective" (Morgan, 2011) and resonates with the configurational perspective and its focus on patterns of interdependencies, which also focus on the ways in which individuals foster connections with others through the construction of shared symbols and meanings (Elias, 1989). Of course, such narratives usually provoke ambivalences and dilemmas, due to the conflicting norms or contradicting family experiences that individuals have to accommodate (Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Finch & Mason, 1993; Lüscher, 2002; Mason et al., 2007). In contrast to the family practice approach, the configurational approach has developed a focus on the complex networks of functional interdependencies and the balance of power and tension within which such family practices and experiences unfold.

The nuclear family as a *leitbild*

In general, individuals belonging to social classes or groups that experience threats of losing prestige and power tend to develop alternative representations of reality that position them in a higher status (Elias, 2013). By contrast, individuals from well-established groups tend to secure their positions by reinforcing norms and values re-presenting them as better or morally superior to outsiders. This process, as stressed by Elias (2013) and Elias and Scotson (1994b), may concern the family in relation to a variety of situations. Indeed, research has stressed the importance of the nuclear family as a *leitbild* or guiding image; that is, the socially ideal way of being a family, including its gender and intergenerational order (Pfau-Effinger 2004). Lück,

Diabaté, and Ruckdeschel (2017) further stress that *leitbild* expresses an idea or conception of how things in a certain context should be, work, or appear. It can have the character of a role model to emulate or of an ideal or a vision for which to strive. Accordingly, in configurational terms, *leitbild* can be seen as patterns of idealized interdependencies that exert a strong normative influence.

Defining the family *leitbild* in Germany, Lück and colleagues stated, "*People may envision that a 'normal' family consists of three to five people, including a man and a woman, both being married to each other, with the man being two to four years older and around 10 cm taller than his wife, including also one to three children, all common biological children of the couple, all about 30 years younger than their parents and about two years apart from each other*". This normative definition of a "true" family matters because it creates tensions and ambivalences in the way individuals experience their family practices (Finch, 2008), which eventually contribute in unexpected ways to the shaping of their family configurations by downgrading some family situations or twisting in specific ways the perceptions and understandings that individuals have of their family reality.

In that respect, Zartler's (2014) seminal paper stressed the way parents and children individually deal with the representation of the so-called "right family" in Austria. A normative script was inherent in the accounts of children and parents she interviewed, irrespective of their family structure. When describing nuclear families, respondents referred to them as "normal" and "functional", in sharp contrast to other family forms classified as below standard. Complementarity in the care for children between parents was regarded as the most prominent benefit connected with nuclear families, and alternatives were considered to lack this crucial feature (Zartler, 2014). According to Zartler, missing complementarity between father and mother was described as a source of feeling socially excluded. Single parents and their children were confronted with negative connotations and therefore ascribed deficiency to themselves and their family situation. Alternatively, as Zartler pointed out, individuals in post-divorce configurations developed imitation strategies that aimed at minimizing visible differences between lone parents and nuclear families, with individuals trying to conceal the specifics of their family interdependences. A third set of strategies aimed at compensation and were based on efforts to integrate "missing" attributes of family, whereas a fourth set of strategies, according to Zartler, aimed at drawing boundaries between single-parent and nuclear families. Interestingly,

parents and children of the same family configuration might not develop the same strategy, creating tensions that become part of the process shaping their family configuration: the use of different strategies by children and parents provided the basis for inconsistencies or incompatibilities. Overall, the idealization of the nuclear family is an expression of the exclusion of non-nuclear family configurations from the realm of normality in line with the family *leitbild*. Castren and Widmer (2015) confirmed this trend. In a qualitative study on family weness in Switzerland, they found strong evidence of attempts by a large share of divorced mothers to recreate a nuclear family with a new partner by emphasizing the current household as the natural family unit and disregarding interdependencies to their previous partnership as irrelevant or below normative standards.

Zartler (2014) used a qualitative approach focused on specific questions for both children and parents that address who is part of the family, what they like and do not like about their family, and how they spend their time during the week and on weekends. In all cases, Zartler's methodology has similarities with the methodology of the Family Network Method and its extensions (Widmer, 2010). The in-depth interviews made it possible to delineate strategies underlying some of the answers regularly given in response to quantitative surveys. Providing responses that go beyond the nuclear definition of family is indeed often associated with a social cost to be paid. The nuclear family *leitbild* is not an artefact from the past, destined to disappear, but an institutionalized norm ranking families and therefore individuals embedded in them from closest to furthest away from the ideal. Indeed, the nuclear family *leitbild* has not lost its power of exclusion and status ranking in late modernity. Marriage continues to signal social status throughout Western societies (Cherlin, 2010), which may explain its long-lasting popularity. Such a type of "family display" (Finch, 2007) may be more easily studied over time than other dimensions of family configurations because they can be found in artefacts such as drawings, diaries or letters available for various historical periods. These data sources make it possible to develop process-oriented analysis through historical time of family as a symbol (Elias, 1989).

Away from social expectations

The configurational perspective has developed methodological approaches to estimate how similar a family configuration is to *leitbilder*. In many cases, a family configuration creates a sense of being "out of the ordinary" (Widmer, 2019). First, such configurations are called

extraordinary because they do not include a person whose status is defined by social norms as outside the nuclear family or the ties normatively defined as close family. In the sample of older individuals (Girardin & Widmer, 2015; Oris et al., 2016), 33% of those who had a partner did not include the partner on the list of their most significant family members, and 20% of individuals who had a child did not include children on the list (Girardin & Widmer, 2015). Even the closest family connections are dependent on "doing family" (Morgan, 2011) in family configurations rather than fully depending on family normative obligations. Second, they may be "extraordinary" because they include individuals who are usually family outsiders (Elias & Scotson, 1994). For instance, if the inclusion of a partner or children is commonplace, the inclusion of an aunt or uncle in the circle of significant family members is something that happens much less often. Consider the case where a respondent indicates her family includes the following members: *Partner, Daughter, Daughter, Father, Brother, Partner's sister, Partner's sister, Partner's father, Partner's mother, Partner's sister's partner, Partner's sister's partner, Partner's sister's daughter, Partner's sister's son, Partner's sister's son.* Much of the emphasis is on the partner's relatives, which is quite unusual, because a partner's siblings are seldom included as significant family members, and their children even less so. It reveals an unexpected orientation of family weness towards ties created by partnership, whereas blood ties become of secondary importance. Another situation is one in which no one is considered a significant family member. Overall, individuals in many situations develop family configurations that do not correspond to the nuclear family *leitbild*. They do so for a variety of reasons, mostly associated with the unfolding of their life courses (Widmer, 2010). Studying family lists such as the one above is a straightforward way of appreciating the extent to which family configurations as defined by respondents are in tension with the nuclear family model. Qualitative inquiries about the reasons given by respondents for inclusion or exclusion of specific family members are fruitful methods for further understanding the ways family configurations are shaped.

Conclusion

The configurational approach sees families in the light of other configurations constituting societies (Elias, 1978). Rather than stressing families as solidarity groups or sets of personal practices and interactions, it defines families as process-driven networks of functionally interdependent individuals. Overall, this chapter makes several suggestions to researchers who

wish to study families as configurations. One critical methodological suggestion relates to the choice of key dilemmas shaping families. Identifying situations where tension exists between hard-to-reconcile functional interdependencies is crucial for the understanding of family configurations. For instance, tensions among individuals concerning group membership versus personal autonomy and between *leitbild* and everyday practices provide key information on the processes shaping families. Focusing on such dilemmas enables researchers to understand the balance of tensions and power in family configurations.

Research methods drawn from social network analysis are critical for configurational studies. Such methods are indeed adjusted to the empirical assessment of chains of functional interdependencies and their corresponding balance of power and tensions. They should be used to look for patterns of interdependencies beyond dyads and the household. Indeed, dilemmas and ambivalence are understandable only when several colliding social forces are considered together rather than independently from each other. Formal methods of data collection enabling quantitative research designs to study family configurations are now available, making it possible to implement the configurational perspective in large representative surveys. However, qualitative research has unique contributions to make to configurational analysis of family, because it can go deeper into personal understandings of dilemmas than formal quantitative methods can. Interdependencies and the tensions they generate are revealed by the comparison of a variety of individual interviews stemming from the same family configuration, as well as by differences between descriptions provided by respondents in a variety of interview settings. In all cases, because the configurational perspective seeks to uncover the balance of tensions and power that structure families, a fully inductive process of quantitative or qualitative research is not advisable. Indeed, respondents may not be eager to talk voluntarily about the dilemmas and ambivalence present in their family lives. In addition, unfolding patterns of interdependencies turns out to be easier for researchers who use prior conceptual models and typologies, sometimes coming from outside family sociology. Therefore, it is preferable to use a kind of semi-deductive analysis in close connection with the fundamental issues raised by the configurational perspective on families.

The configurational perspective considers social relationships as functional interdependencies. It is to note however that this perspective is critical to the

structural-functional understanding of families (Widmer, 2016). Such understanding assumed that a predefined set of functions such as the one presented in the AGIL model (Parsons, & Bales, 1955).), plays out across so called "family sub-systems". It also claims that the family as an institution functions for the good of all its members and of society. In a configurational perspective, functions performed by family members for each other cannot be defined a priori using abstract conceptualizations and hence should be uncovered empirically; functional interdependences do not connect cohesive subsystems, but individuals with their own, and possibly contradicting, orientations; they do not necessarily unfold for the common good of all family members and society but rather translate into power fights and the domination of some family members on others; the dominance of one institutional model of family at the societal level, such as the nuclear family, is not seen as proof of its functional superiority but rather as the result of the balance of power and tensions characterizing social groups located in time and place.

Many limitations are obviously associated with the current state of configurational studies on families. Because they are still few, they offer very limited results about the interplay between family configurations and crucial social structures such as social class, ethnicity, citizenship and gender, not to mention state intervention. In other words, existing studies have only marginally been able to address the importance of such factors. Such limitations might be overcome by future large surveys designed using a configurational perspective if enough methodological expertise, institutional motivation and financial resources are available to conduct them internationally, which remains to be seen.

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