

Social Isolation or Relational Instability? Family Configurations of Women at Risk of Child Abandonment

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A prominent tenet of life-course research holds that ill-timed and unexpected events, non-normative transitions, and disorderly status sequences have profound and lasting consequences for an individual's success in later life. Young and unmarried mothers have played a prominent role in a debate that has been raging for years in the U.S. Facing social isolation and economic hardship, these young mothers have been first considered by some scholars as paramount of fully determined life trajectories. For instance, in a classical paper, the social demographer Arthur Campbell wrote in 1968, "The girl who has an illegitimate child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90% of her life's script written for her. She will probably drop out of school ... not be able to find a steady job ... she may feel impelled to marry someone she might not have otherwise chosen. Her life choices are few and most of them are bad" (1968, 238). More recent work has emphasized that there are several occasions in which teenage mothers can compensate the cumulative disadvantage processes in which they are embedded by developing various strategies within their social context, including with their families. Paraphrasing Campbell's assertion and underlying the selection biases of studies showing the catastrophic impact of teen childbearing on future life chances, Furstenberg (2005) stressed that "if a woman is poor, coming from an ethnic minority, and has been a low achiever in school, 70 percent of the life script may be written for her – whether or not she has a child as a teenager or in her early twenties" (161). With his collaborators, he highlighted that the level of resources and support offered by families (Furstenberg et al., 1987) in the way of time, money, guidance, etc., is a crucial factor to recovery from non-normative events like teen childbearing. Families are also unequally embedded in neighborhood and communities with different access to resources helping one cope with the transition to motherhood. Only

few studies, however, exist on how family ties and life trajectories of young unwed and poor mothers intermingle in a configurational perspective.

Countries from Eastern Europe might be especially interesting in this regard, as they have faced a tremendous period of social change with much normative and institutional uncertainty about family roles and family solidarity (Ghergel, 2005; Blum, 2003) expressed notably by the increase of single parenthood and adolescent childrearing (UNICEF, 1999). This is the case in Romania, where the control of families was an instrument for the creation of a new social order during the communist period. The Code of the Family, established in 1953, laid the foundation of the so-called “socialist family model,” whose aim was to weaken family solidarity and replace it by a social solidarity controlled by the government. In the seventies, coercive pro-birth policies, established under the Ceaucescu’s government, had important consequences for family life; by decreasing living standards and health of the population, and by aggravating asymmetric relationships between spouses – women’s overload of work in a patriarchal social context was common. The pronatalistic policy by the suspension of divorce and abortion brought about an important number of unwanted, neglected, abandoned, and institutionalized children (Ghergel, 2005 and 2006; Gal & Kligman, 2000a and 200b). The puritan conception of the family’s advocating sexuality for the sole purpose of biological reproduction, combined with the lack of contraceptive methods, led women to be valued for their fertility potential only, and conjugality became an instrument at the service of the State (Ghergel, 2005; Baban, 2000). Nevertheless, family solidarity did not disappear because of its function of resistance against state directives. Today, the family is a central point of reference in Romania and is often the only support for individuals (Marginean, 2004, 45).

Everyone still remembers the unbearable pictures from Romanian orphanages just after the fall of Ceaucescu. While the care of orphans has changed dramatically since then, the situation remains today very problematic in Romania, where 80,000 children live in institutions or with adoptive families¹. Maternal centers have been created on a large scale to prevent child abandonment; in these centers, mothers and their children are taken care off for periods of time extending up to six months. Those centers have not, however, resolved many of the problems associated with outside-of-wedlock pregnancy and child

1 http://www.unicef.org/french/infobycountry/romania_background.html

birth in Romania, as the resources that they make available to mothers are scarce and limited in time in a social situation characterized by increasing mass poverty, where children are particularly at risk (Gherghel, 2006; Duma et al., 2005). Many women in contemporary Romania still resort today to child abandonment.

Why is that so? Beyond the harshness of the social context as a whole, what characterizes the life trajectories and the social integration of those women? According to the theory of the convoy (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Antonucci, & Akiyama, 1995), a rather stable set of close relationships accompanies individuals along their life, providing them with the necessary support to deal with key transitions such as the transition to parenthood. This chapter shows that family configurations and the resources provided by them are the results of long-term relational histories that are characterized by instability rather than by permanent social exclusion. Relational resources have a significant impact on women's self-worth and life projects and, indirectly, on the mother-child bond. The first sections provide information about the sample and the study design. The chapter then proceeds to examining the composition of family configurations and the social capital that they provide to unwed women at risk of child abandonment, in comparison with a matched sample of mainstream married Romanian mothers. It then exemplifies the instability of life trajectories and their impact on family resources that they make available by including two case studies of young and unwed women at risk of child abandonment.

Data

*Children Action*² is a Swiss charitable foundation, which set up a service unit called Kairos in Bucharest, to prevent mothers facing social and psychological hardship from abandoning their children. This unit assists young women in their maternal role, in helping them to reintegrate the larger society both socially and professionally, and when possible, in restoring relationships with their family of origin. Underlying this project is the idea that if the mother is

2 See <http://www.childrenaction.org>

allowed to stay with her baby during the first few months after the delivery, the resulting bond will prevent her from abandoning her child.

Within the framework of this project, twenty mothers aged 16 through 38 (average age = 24.4 years old, standard deviation = 5.5) were interviewed between 2005 and 2007. Mothers coming from disadvantaged social classes were overrepresented. Indeed, six of these women grew up in a family with no formal education, very instable housing facilities, and very little or no money available. Nine come from a lower social class background, their parents having low school achievement, dilapidated but secured housing, and low incomes but just enough for living. Five come from the middle class, with three of them presenting a story of precariousness starting during adolescence or at the beginning of adulthood due to loss of a job or money by their parents after the 1989 revolution. Overall, the educational level of the sample is low. In Romania, people from the middle class usually finish their formal education with a diploma, which allows them to find a legal job. Only five of the twenty women achieved a formal education. In almost all cases, women supervised by the Kairos center gave up schooling rather early to work on the black market to earn a low income, suffering frequent changes of employers and temporary to regular unemployment. It is also notable that six women are Roma or partners of Roma men, a national minority in Romania, which has been ostracized for centuries.

At the beginning of the follow up, two women were pregnant, while the others had a child aged between one and twenty-two months (average age = six months). Nine women were single parents, as their partners ran away when they were told about the pregnancies; seven women had a partner, and two of those were married; one was divorced and had a new partner. One single mother had a partner who is not the father of her child. If we consider the twenty children, only three of them have been legally recognized. In five cases, the partner recognized his child, but not legally. Except for two cases of older women, all the pregnancies were unplanned; in half of the cases, the pregnancy was discovered by the mother after the legal deadline for an abortion. All women fell into precarious life situations during pregnancy or after the birth of the child, although the level of precariousness varies. Several women had extremely low income and lived by themselves in damaged housing, while others went back to their parents' housing. Four of them are on the street without money to buy regular food for their children. None of women has ever worked legally. Except for one, all of them lost their unregistered work during

their pregnancy. In addition, without a work card³, they could not benefit from the parenthood allowance of two years, although they received a small allowance for the child, but the amount was far insufficient for their living.

A comparison sample made of 15 mothers with a middle class background in Romania was added to the original sample in order to estimate the extent to which women at risk of child abandonment are at odds with middle class living. Each mother from the comparison sample was paired with a mother in the sample of the women at risk according to age, sex, and birth rank of the child. All mothers from the comparison sample are married or live with a regular partner, unlike mothers from the at-risk group.

Every four to six months during a period of three years, those 20 mothers filled out the *Family Network Method*, a network method that collects systematic data on family configurations (Widmer, 1999, Widmer & La Farga, 1999 and 2000) using first a free listing of the family members to define the family configurations. They were asked then to estimate all relationships of support, conflict, and influence existing within their family configurations. Individuals from the two paired samples are first compared according to the composition of their family configuration in order to know if women at risk of child abandonment cite the same family members as mothers from the comparison sample. Are their family configurations characterized by a scarcity of significant family members? Composition of family configuration is an important dimension because it influences the relational resources available to their members (Widmer, 2006). In order to assess those resources, four measures were commonly used (Widmer et al., 2008; Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Scott, 2000; Borgatti, Jones, & Everett, 1998), including size, density, connectivity, and the respondent's betweenness centrality (see chapter Widmer & Sapin for a description).

These indices were computed first for the sub-group of family members for whom the interviewed woman was a source of emotional support, conflict, or influence (i.e. the family members perceived by the respondent as receiving support from her).⁴ For instance in Figure 4, the respondent is a resource for

3 Unregistered work is longstanding and widespread in Romania because of high taxes paid by employers to the state. Only registered work gives right to parenthood allowance.

4 In a social network perspective, family members for whom respondents are a source of support, conflict, or influence, correspond to respondent's *in-neighborhood*, and family members who are a source of support define the respondent's *out-neighborhood*.

son and mother (arrows point to her). They were then computed for the subgroup of family members perceived by the respondent as providing her with emotional support (in Figure 4, the arrows start from the respondent and point to her mother and her half-brother); and finally, for the family configuration as a whole, which includes all significant family members, be they or not directly connected to the respondent.

The Composition of Family Configurations

How did mothers describe the composition of their family configurations? Mothers at risk of child abandonment referred to 50 types of relations, while mothers from the comparison group mentioned 27 different types. This result points out that a family configurations' composition is far more various in the case of mothers at risk. Table 1 shows the most cited family relationships. All women from the comparison group mention their partners, and in almost all cases, they cite them first on their list of family members, while partners are far less cited in the group of women at risk, with a higher order of citation. After partners, mothers are the most frequently cited: women at risk also mentioned them less often, compared to mothers from the matched sample. A similar result is found for fathers. Note, however, that the size of family configurations is not different between both groups: on average, women cite approximately nine significant family members. Mothers at risk of child abandonment compensate the lack of citation of partners and biological parents by including blood relatives or in-laws. Their family configurations are indeed far more diverse in their composition; more grand-parents, great-uncles, and great-aunts are included in their case.

Social Capital and Family Configurations

One of the most important features of family configurations is their role of providing emotional support, care, and acceptance (Fehr & Perlman, 1985; Pierce et al., 1996; Widmer, 2004). In this respect, research on social networks underlines the distinction between two kinds of social capital: binding social capital (Coleman, 1988) is associated with dense and highly connected

Table 1. The Most Frequently Cited Family Terms

Terms	Women at risk		Comparison group	
	Percentage of citation	Mean rank	Percentage of citation	Mean rank
Partner	0.60	1.42	1.00	1.13
Mother	0.70	3.36	0.87	3.31
Father	0.55	3.64	0.73	4.55
Son	0.55	2.18	0.53	3.13
Daughter	0.35	4.29	0.27	5.00
Brother	0.55	4.36	0.33	4.80
Sister	0.20	4.00	0.40	4.00
Partner's mother	0.40	4.63	0.60	5.67
Partner's father	0.15	4.67	0.40	5.67
Partner's brother	0.20	5.75	0.07	4.00
Partner's sister	0.20	7.00	-	-
Female friend	0.10	6.00	0.27	7.00
Male friend	0.05	5.00	0.07	5.00

networks in which strong and transitive ties are dominant, with a low centrality of respondents that lack structural autonomy but at the same time, benefit from trust and collective support. On the other hand, bridging social capital (Burt, 1995 and 2001), based on weak ties and intransitivity, provides structural autonomy to central members, as they can be brokers and mediate the flow of information between group members. Do mothers facing a risk of child abandonment in Romania come from family configurations that provide them with less social capital of either a binding or bridging type?

Although size of family configuration is similar, women at risk of child abandonment less often cite a partner, a mother, or a father than the comparison group. Does this difference of composition influence the type of social capital available? The comparison of indices for emotional support presented in Table 2, although based on a small number of cases, shows that women at risk of child abandonment do indeed differ on most indicators of social capital from the mothers of the matched sample. They have a higher number

Table 2. Indices of Social Capital for Emotional Support/Mean by Groups/ Mothers at Risk of Child Abandonment (n = 20) vs. Mothers from Comparison Sample (n = 15)⁵

Emotional support	Mothers at risk (mean)	Comparison sample (mean)	T-test (t-scores)	Mann-Withney (Z-score)	R ²
<i>Family members for whom respondents are source of support</i>					
Size	3.80	5.13	-1.48	-1.37	0.08
Density	29.68	32.39	-.25	-.40	0
Proportion of components	61.01	46.38	1.24	-1.18	0.03
Normalized respondents' betweenness	24.34	41.01	-1.69*	-1.98**	0.10
<i>Family members who are source of support for respondents</i>					
Size	1.75	4.20	-2.95**	-2.55**	0.31
Density	23.71	32.19	-.57	-.93	0
Proportion of components	70.75	61.76	6.37	-.59	0
Normalized respondents' betweenness	40.06	57.37	-1.12	-1.20	0.02
<i>Full family networks of respondents</i>					
Size	9.20	8.46	.619	-.76	0
Density	26.9	36.49	-1.19	-2.46	0.02
Variation in the number of components with respondents removed	3.15	2.73	.61	-.97	0
Normalized respondents' betweenness	8.67	31.25	-3.45***	-2.92***	0.44

* sig (2-tailed) at <.10; ** sig (2-tailed) at <.05; *** sig (2-tailed) at <.01

- 5 The following question was asked about each family member, including the respondent: Among these persons, who would give emotional support to X in case of small problems (for instance when X is sad or has had a bad day, who can help X and console him or her)? All indices were computed with the software Ucinet 6 (Borgatti et al., 2002).

of components in their family configuration, which means that many family members are disconnected. Their family configurations are less dense. Finally, women at risk of child abandonment are less central in their family configurations than are other mothers. To summarize, women at risk of child abandonment are part of a family configuration that provides them with less social capital of either a bridging or a binding type.

Emotional support is an important relational dimension of family configurations; however, conflict and power are also part of family dynamics (Elias, 1978; Sprey, 1999). Power and influence presuppose a form or another of interdependency between members. While power implies control and coercion, influence is distinguished by the use of persuasion (Hollander, 1985) without clash of interests (Skinovacs, 1987). To measure family dynamics of influence, respondents had to answer for all family members, including themselves, the question: "In your opinion, who would be able to change the mind of X [for instance, on his or her dressing choice or on the choice of daily activities]?" The difference between women at risk of child abandonment and other mothers is even more striking for influence than for emotional support (Table 3). Family configuration of women at risk shows a low density of influence with many isolated members. They have fewer family members as influence providers. In comparison of mothers from the comparison group, they are far less central in their family configuration for influence. In many cases, their family configurations show no ties of influence at all. If emotional support and influence are distinct between the two groups of women, conflict ties are similar. Indeed, indicators of size, density, connectivity, and betweenness centrality for conflict display no statistically significant differences⁶. Nevertheless, an index measuring the ratio of density of support over the density of conflict shows that women at risk of child abandonment have support relationships that are, on average, significantly more conflict prone than those found in middle class family configurations⁷.

- 6 Respondents answered, again for themselves and for each member of their family configuration, to the question: In your opinion, who makes X angry (who get on X's nerves or annoys X)?
- 7 Being embedded in a network with more individuals who are a source of both support and conflict is associated with more psychological symptoms (Barrera, 1981; Sandler & Barrera, 1984). Likewise, having a larger number of persons as sources of support may be beneficial for parenting experience and behaviour, but only if the individuals providing (→)

Table 3. Indices of Family Dynamics for Influence/Mean by Groups/ Mothers at Risk (n = 20) vs. Mothers from Comparison Sample

Influence	mothers at risk (mean)	Comparison sample (mean)	T-test (t-scores)	Mann-Withney (Z-score)	R ²
<i>Family members for whom respondents are source of support (respondents' in-neighborhood)</i>					
Size	1.53	4.13	-3.54***	-3.43***	0.41
Density	6.94	25.95	-3.32***	-2.78**	0.40
Proportion of components	51.31	52.45	-.90	-.28	0
Normalized respondents' betweenness	12.60	36.33	-2.67**	-2.35**	0.32
<i>Family members who are source of support for respondents (respondents' out-neighborhood)</i>					
Size	1.00	2.53	-4.31***	-3.77***	0.51
Density	11.45	36.66	1.95*	-1.74*	0.18
Proportion of components	68.75	71.00	-.18	-.18	0
Normalized respondents' betweenness	8.33	55.27	-4.00***	-2.76**	0.55
<i>Full family networks of respondents</i>					
Size	9.20	8.46	.61	-.76	0
Density	14.05	27.71	-2.59**	-2.93***	0.27
Variation in the number of components with respondents removed	9	4.93	.814	-1.30	0
Normalized respondents' betweenness	8.77	20.93	-1.18*	-2.99***	0.11

* sig (2-tailed) at <.10; ** sig (2-tailed) at <.05; *** sig (2-tailed) at <.01

the source of support are not also a source of conflict (Voight et al., 1996). Results show that not only do the mothers at risk have a limited number of family members as sources of emotional support, but also they must be providers for many family members. Excessive social demands are also associated with psychological distress among low-income women (Durden et al., 2007).

To summarize, differences between women at risk of child abandonment supervised by the Kairos center and mainstream middle class mothers do not concern the size of family configurations, as both groups have quite large family configurations. Their composition and their relational features are, however, distinct. The lack of partners and of supportive mothers is overwhelming in the case of young women at risk of child abandonment. Both are the main persons who usually supply emotional support during the transition to motherhood, with significant effect on personal adjustment to the transition and psychological well-being (Fisher, 1983; Voight et al., 1996; McDonald et al., 1992; Hobfoll & Lieberman, 1987; Dunkel-Schetter, et al., 1996). As for relational features associated with social capital, mothers at risk of child abandonment are part of sparse and disconnected family configurations in which they have no centrality and which do not provide them with much emotional support and influence, while imposing a similar frequency of conflict relationships as in the comparison group.

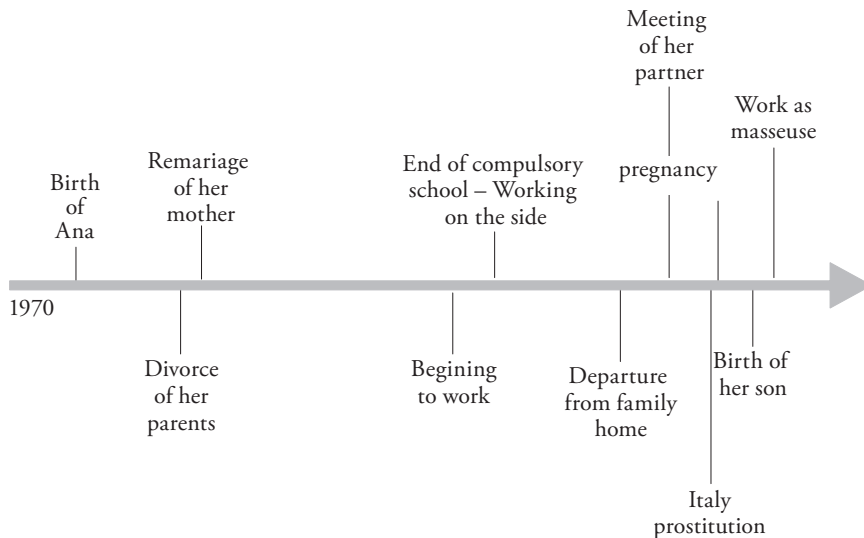
Compensatory Effects: The Life Course of Ana

According to the theory of the convoy (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995), stemming from lifespan developmental approaches, a rather stable set of close relationships goes together with individuals throughout their lives, providing them with the necessary support to deal with key life transitions and events (either normative or non-normative). In previous work, we hypothesized that family configurations and personal networks are the result of a history of relationships starting early in life, with attachment styles and parent-child relationships in childhood and early adolescence (Sapin et al., 2007). In a previous chapter (Widmer & Sapin, in this volume), we hypothesize a family configuration's current status depends both on long-term life trajectories and on life events that occur from month to month in family life. The case of Ana⁸, a woman who is 28 years old with a son aged of two months, is representative of the overall patterns of life courses we found in the sample of mothers at risk of child abandonment.

8 All names are fictitious, and several biographical elements have been concealed or modified to maintain anonymity.

As we can see in Figure 1, Ana was born at the end of the seventies into a low social background. Her mother already had a son from a previous marriage. When Ana was seven years old, her parents divorced. Her half-brother returned to live with his father. Ana and her mother fell into a state of high precariousness. Then her mother met a new man and they quickly got married; three other sons were born from this partnership. The economic situation of the family was hard. At sixteen, Ana decided to work to help her family; she was still attending school. She finished compulsory schooling without a degree, and continued to work as a salesperson, without an official work card. At 24, she left her mother and half-brothers to live by herself. Two years later, she met a partner. After nine months together, Ana went to work in Italy in order to earn money for her family; a few years before, the government had actively encouraged Romanians to work abroad to bring money back to the country. In Italy, Ana was abducted and forced to prostitute herself. She quickly realized that she was pregnant. Being by herself, abroad, and eight months pregnant, she decided to come back to Romania by bus.

Figure 1. Summary of Ana's Life Course



Upon her arrival in Romania, her biological mother told her that she could live at home but without her child, strongly pushing for her to abandon her child. Ana's partner refused to acknowledge his paternity; therefore, their relationship ended. Her partner's mother was the only one who did not reject her. However, Ana had the money from her work in Italy. Right after the delivery, Ana did not want to meet her son, as she had decided not to keep him, knowing that the separation would be very difficult afterwards. But her biological mother convinced her to keep in touch with him – while he was being taken care of by the maternity – in order to know if the child was healthy. However, she did nothing to help her daughter with him. Because a bond was created between Ana and her son, when she left the maternity, she went to live with him in the two rooms belonging to her ex-partner's mother. But soon, she was again short of money and she had to accept a job as a masseuse.

Ana's biography is directly connected with her family configuration at the first interview. At that time, she wanted to give her child to public assistance. Her previous partner did not acknowledge the paternity of her child, and their relationship had ended some months before. She worked as a masseuse 10–12 hours per day in a bar in Bucharest, while the previous partner's mother was taking care of the infant. Ana financially supported the entire household comprised of her previous partner's mother and siblings with whom she and her child lived.

As family members, Ana cited her son and the members of her household. Her biological parents and siblings were not cited as significant family members. Figure 2⁹ displays the relational dynamics of her family configuration in terms of emotional support. One can see that the family configuration is extremely poor. The density is close to zero; it is much disconnected, and Ana plays no significant role in it.

The situation is different when conflict is considered. As one can see from Figure 3, the density of conflict is high. There is a large component that connects all members except the infant. Ana and her ex-partner's mother share the central position for conflicts. All members (except the child) are sources of tension and conflict for Ana. From the point of view of influence, there is no connection. In summary, Ana's family configuration presents no emotional

9 All visual representations of family configurations were made with the software Pajek (Batagelj & Mrvar, 1998).

Figure 2. The Dynamics of Emotional Support within Ana's Family Configuration

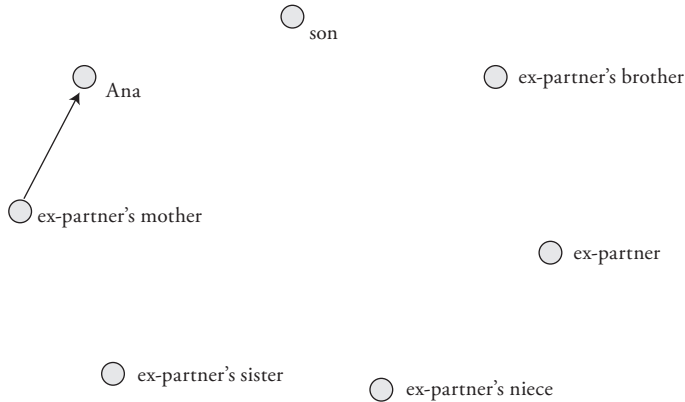
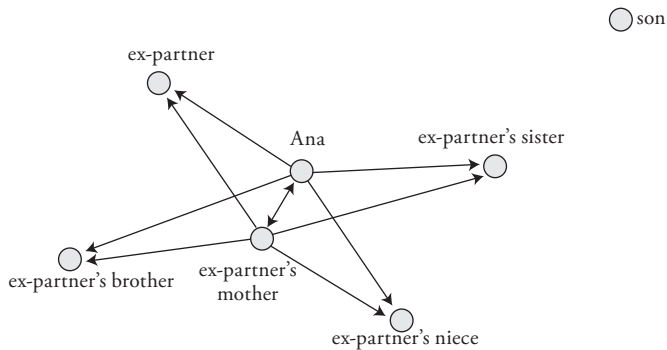


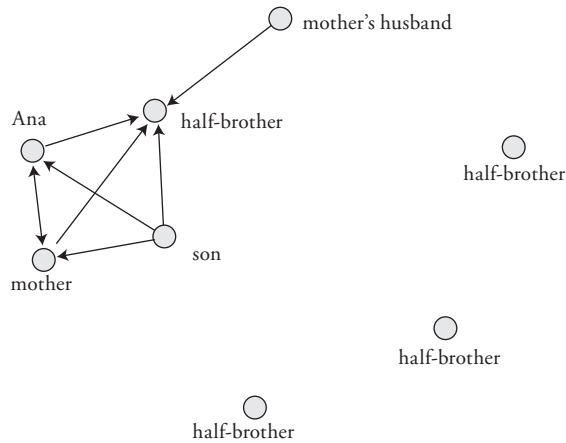
Figure 3. The Dynamics of Conflict within Ana's Family Configuration



support, no influence, and frequent conflicts. Only conflict links Ana to the members of her family. Ana has no connection of any kind with her child.

The family configuration of Ana can be explained by those biographical elements. When she came back pregnant from Italy, her biological mother and the rest of her biological family rejected her and the child, even though she had gone to Italy to save money for them. Therefore, Ana considered that they were her family no more. In addition, the relationship with her partner

Figure 4. The Dynamics of Emotional Support within Ana's Family Configuration in Wave 2

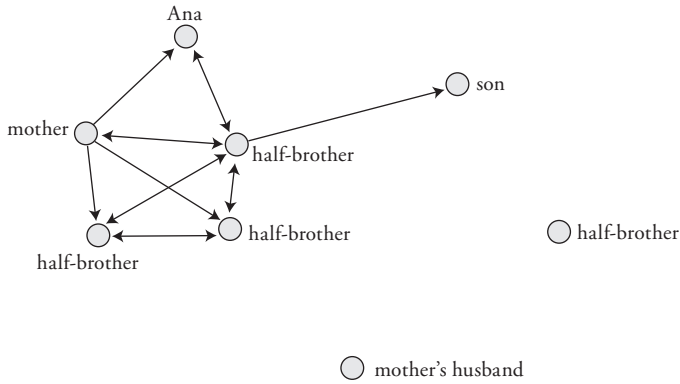


ended because of the paternity issue. Therefore, she was left with her previous partner's mother with whom she lived at that time. This family resource was actually an ambivalent one, as she secured the rent of this household and much of its daily living with her savings from Italy and her current work.

A second interview was completed six months after the first one. At this time, the composition of her family configuration had completely changed. Except for her son, she cites no individuals previously included in her family configuration. The in-laws stemming from her previous partner were replaced by her mother, her half-brother (from the first marriage of her mother), three of her other half-brothers, and her mother's husband. This is due to the fact that Ana had moved away from her in-laws and settled again with her mother and brothers. This change of residence coincided with a change of work: she quit her masseuse job and worked as a house cleaner six hours a day – she wanted to spend more time with her son. As a consequence, her relational integration had changed tremendously.

As shown in Figures 4 and 5, the relational dynamics of Ana's family configuration had been modified by the change of composition; the density and connectivity of support and influence are low, the conflict is important, but the situation is much better than six months before. Results from the third wave confirmed the evolution: the composition of the family configuration

Figure 5. The Dynamics of Conflict within Ana's Family Configuration in Wave 2



remains the same as in wave 2, and the relational structures as dense and as connected as in wave 2. Moreover, dyads are more mutual than in wave 2 for support, and the density of conflict is lower. At this time, the child is a source of conflict for no one. The new life situation of Ana and her child explains this relational change. She has obtained a social measure of protection of the child–mother couple and she now lives in a maternal center¹⁰. She regularly visits the family with her child during the weekend. Living somewhere else, the screams of the child no longer wake Ana's brothers up and there are two fewer mouths to feed. This social measure has permitted Ana to find a good relational distance with her family members. In wave 4, Ana additionally cites her father as a significant family member. She wants to present her son to his grandfather and uses this occasion to try to restore her relationship with her father. The main life project of Ana, during this period, is to begin the steps to obtain a subsidized housing, because she wants a stable place in which she and her son may live¹¹.

10 The main purpose of a maternal center is to prevent abandonment and all determining phenomenon, which makes insecure the dyad of mother–child. The centers' missions consist of providing housing, strengthening familial bonds, and helping families to assume the responsibilities for the children (Popa, 2006).

11 It is generally a long path to acquire aid, and the steps for receiving social security are complex. Because of regular changes of laws, even well-informed individuals have (→)

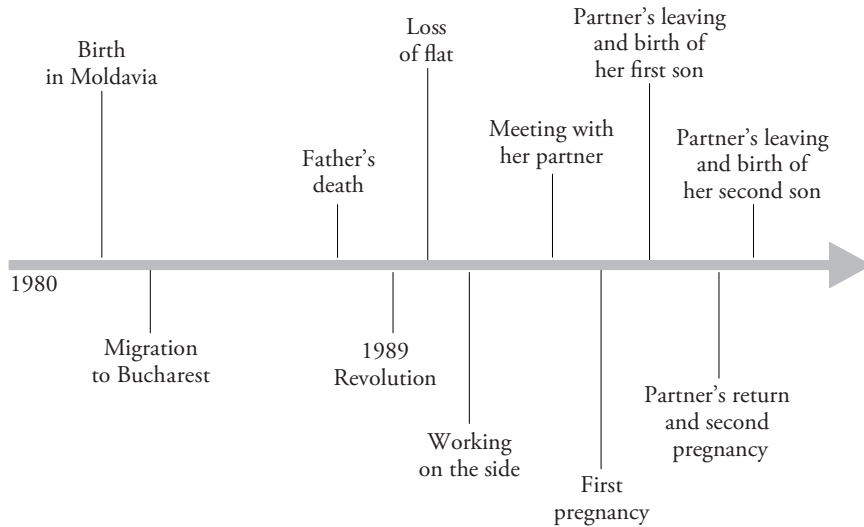
The follow-up of Ana illustrates a quite positive evolution: she has restored the relationships with her family members and now maintains a good distance with them. She assumes her mother's role and the associated responsibilities well. After one year of follow-up, her family configuration shows a kind of stability, which is an important dimension of personal well-being and of good parenting practices.

An Accumulation of Disadvantages: The Life Course of Gabriella

However, other evolutions are more unfortunate, as the life story of Gabriella shows. Gabriella is a woman who was 20 years old at the time of the first interview. She was born in Moldavia, the seventh of ten children of a Roma family. When she was three years old, Gabriella's parents had to leave their community and migrate to Bucharest (see Figure 6). During the Communist period, the government forced Roma gypsies to settle in urban areas in order to join the industrial labor market. Many social houses were built to host them; Roma children were compelled to go to school. Two years before the Revolution, Gabriella's father died; Gabriella was still a child. As her mother had a job as a cleaning woman, the living conditions were slight, but the housing was secured. Two years after the Revolution, the family lost its flat due to corruption and misappropriation of funds by speculators. The salary of Gabriella's mother turned out to be insufficient, and shortly after, she fell seriously ill and lost her job. At age 12, as did her sisters and brothers, Gabriella began to work on the black market. Therefore, she never finished her compulsory schooling. Time passed, and her older sisters and brothers moved away from their mother's house to search for a better life; the younger children were left alone with Gabriella's mother.

difficulties finding their way through the paperwork and regulations. The priority of the Romanian Minister of Work, of Social Solidarity, and of Family (MMSSF) in 2006 was to set up an information center for individuals in need of social security and social measures (Popa, 2006). Although social protection measures have been carried since the mid-1990s, it is only since the beginning of this century that the Romanian government has developed a real family policy (Ghergel, 2005).

Figure 6. Summary of Gabriella's Life Course



When she was 16, Gabriella met a partner and she quickly found herself pregnant. The partner, frightened by the responsibilities that he was facing, disappeared. Gabriella gave birth to her first son. Her partner came back when the child was one year old. She quickly became pregnant again, and, for the second time, her partner disappeared. So before her twentieth birthday, Gabriella was alone, taking care of two sons. Her mother has helped her, however, during the past eight years, while taking care of the four children of Gabriella's older sister, who abandoned her children.

Figure 7 shows that Gabriella cited as family members the persons living in her household and an additional sister (the mother of her nephews and nieces living with her). The family configuration of Gabriella was highly connected for emotional support, although the density of support was low. Her mother occupied a central position: she kept all family members connected. Gabriella was a source of support for her sons, her mother, her sisters, and her brother. Her two sons were well integrated in the family configuration. They indeed received support from their mother, their grandmother, and an aunt. In regard to conflict, the density was extremely low, and many family members were disconnected. The relational dynamics of influence showed similar patterns of

Figure 7. The Dynamics of Emotional Support within Gabriella's Family Configuration

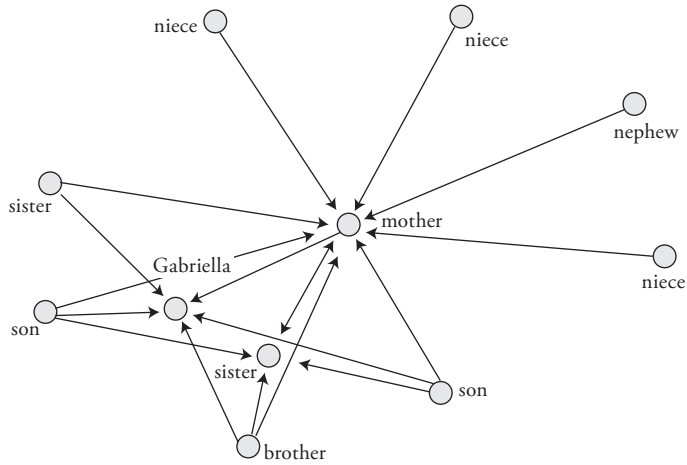
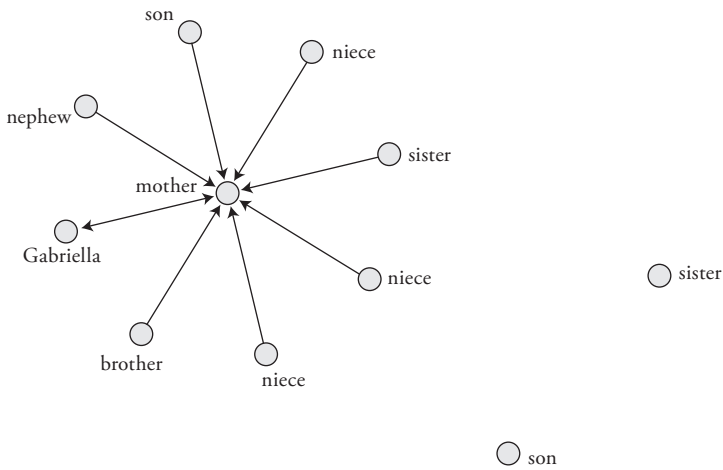


Figure 8. The Dynamics of Influence within Gabriella's Family Configuration



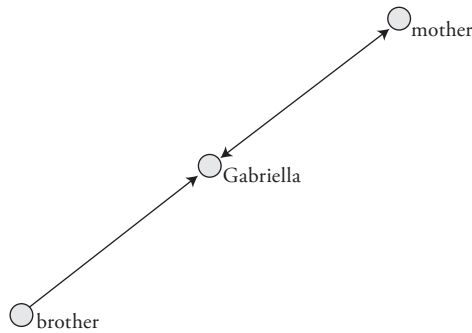
emotional support (see Figure 7); the density was low, and as for the support, Gabriella's mother was central, connecting each member except her youngest grandchild and her daughter, who lived elsewhere.

The family configuration of Gabriella is in great part explained by her life trajectory. With the death of her father and the loss of the flat, the family fell into a state of high precariousness. The migration to Bucharest left Gabriella's mother without any link with her own sisters and brothers. Therefore, her children began to work early without qualifications. They left their mother's house early and thus participated in the family disintegration. Gabriella had felt very angry towards her sister for years because she had had to take care of her sister's children in addition to her own in a situation in which resources were scarce. This explains why her sister is central from the point of view of conflict.

What has been the evolution of the Gabriella's family configuration over a year? At the second interview, Gabriella cited only two family members as significant: her mother and her younger, seventeen-year-old brother (see Figure 9). She no longer mentioned her children and those of her sister. In regard to emotional support, Gabriella gives support to her mother and to her brother; she receives support from her mother only. The dynamics of influence is similar to that of emotional support.

Life events and life situations explain in part the changes that occurred in Gabriella's family configuration. Gabriella's younger sister brutally died a few months after the first interview. This sudden death was difficult to manage for Gabriella, who was close to her. In addition to the loss of income, the economic situation in the household became worse. Gabriella worked here and there to find money in order to feed all the children of the household, but her earnings were not sufficient. In the fall of 2006, leaving her sons under her mother's care, she went in the surrounding countryside to work in the fields. This made it possible for her to save some money and to provide her family with food. However, there was no more work when the winter came. Gabriella was more and more depressed; she missed her sister and the weight of all those children to feed was very heavy. Those biographical elements partly explain the new definition of her family. She does not cite her children, nephews, or nieces as significant family members. Her life's project at that time was first to leave the ghetto, and second, to find a stable legal employment. Two months after having filled out this questionnaire, she went to Spain with a tourist visa in order to save money for her children and her mother.

Figure 9. The Dynamics of Emotional Support within Ana's Family Configuration One Year Later



Conclusion

Family configurations of women at risk of child abandonment are less dense and more disconnected than those of middle class, married, Romanian mothers. Supportive ties are on average more closely associated with conflict in their case. Therefore, on average, women at risk of child abandonment have a disadvantage compared with mainstream mothers in terms of family resources, which cumulate along with their other disadvantages such as lack of formal education, being a migrant, and, for some, belonging (as Roma) to an ostracized minority. In this regard, the quality of the mother–child bond, as well as the mothers' self-worth and life projects, cannot be understood without taking into account the overall family configuration in which they are embedded. Severe family conflicts created by the non-acceptance of these women's children by their own parents, as well as the virtual absence of their partners or ex-partners as fathers, create extremely stressful situations for them. They experience a lack of emotional support (as well as other types of support such as financial and domestic) for dealing with their pregnancies and their motherhood. The overall lack of ties in their family configurations, especially when influence is concerned, makes a difference in the likelihood of having several family members provide collective support to them in the difficult time that they are facing. In most cases, family configurations are not connected enough to compensate for the absence of significant conjugal support.

That said, these women's trajectories are characterized by relational instability rather than by long-term social exclusion. They have faced, more than once, social isolation in their lives. They are not, however, representative of predetermined life trajectories of social exclusion, as their family configurations are mobile and may at times provide important resources that help them go on with their lives. Family configurations and the resources provided by them are the results of long-term relational, educational, and institutional life histories, which are hard, but not impossible, to overcome. As shown by Ana's and Gabriella's cases, these family configurations stem from life trajectories characterized by severe disruptions such as sexual abuse, physical disease, unplanned or forced migration, alcoholism, family violence, serial conjugal breakups, and psychological troubles transmitted across generations. This suggests that, in their cases, the concept of convoy (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995) is inappropriate, as their relational history is characterized by extreme instability. Their convoys may be similar to a kind of public transportation device in which people come and go at every stop, being there for a little while and leaving thereafter.

Both Ana's and Gabriella's case studies illustrate a strong pattern of family disruption and negative life events, which are found for almost all women supervised by the Kairos Center. Family disruptions are the most critical elements leading to individual vulnerability because of a weakening of family configurations. Indeed, seventeen out of the twenty women experienced their parents' divorce or the death of one or both parents. Two of the women were abandoned a few months after birth. Other negative life events have contributed to the deterioration of their life chances. The weakening of family configurations is part of a multidimensional cumulative process of disadvantages including work, migration, psychological well-being, and health (Sapin et al., 2006). As expressed above, family disruptions often lead to a withdrawal from school, and therefore early and unqualified work in the black market, which leads to a loss of benefit entitlements. Unemployment and irregular employment preclude a rational planning of life, which is a necessary condition of adaptation to an industrial economy (Bourdieu, 1964; Wilson, 1991). The professional and economic frailty is further aggravated by a weakening of the conjugal bond, which suffers from the job instability and is associated with absence of life prospects of both partners. Overall, those processes lead to problems of self-esteem and perception of self by those women. This perception is correlated with psychological distress, poor parental skills, and a

poor quality relationship with their children (Ruehlman & Wolchick, 1988; Hurlbut et al., 1997; Crnic et al., 1983), who are hard to care for in such an unsteady situation. Raising a child in such unstable family configurations and unpredictable life courses is certainly not an easy task, and the help provided by governmental and non-governmental agencies, such as the Kairos center, is certainly necessary.

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