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## CHAPTER 10

# How Family and Other Close Ties Shape Vulnerability Processes

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the effects of *close interpersonal relations* on vulnerability processes. Close relations—family and friends—affect vulnerability processes in three ways (Spini et al. 2017, Bernardi et al. 2019). First, they correspond to differential individual investments in varying life domains. These investments are highly gendered, as women invest more in close relations than men, especially in the family domain. Second, close

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relations act as meso-level resources, providing emotional or instrumental support (of varying quality) and economic transfers that individuals use to advance towards their life goals. In times of shock, such resources act as buffers. Close relations also shape individuals' life goals, acting as meso-level normative references. Third, close relations accompany individuals throughout the life course (Spini & Vacchiano 2021) and constitute long-term investments or lasting constraints.

Close relations include both intimate family members and close friends. Together, these relations constitute the *personal networks* of significant others; however, *family ties* have specific properties. Family configurations of ties, as stressed by anthropologists, are created through filiation and conjugality (Sahlins 2013). Kinship shrinks or expands following diverse demographic events (birth, cohabitation, marriage, departure of children, union disruption, death). Moreover, rights and obligations are institutionalised within family ties, notably through laws, albeit sometimes informally (i.e., cohabiting unions and step relationships). Exchanges within family ties can be non-reciprocal, which is not the case with elective ties. Finally, family ties that do not enter *personal networks* are not dissolved as easily as friendship ties.

Family ties are thus likely to affect vulnerability processes differently from other close ties. First, the transmission of socioeconomic privileges (pensions, heritage, shared consumption, loans, investments) remains confined within families, especially well-endowed ones (Pitrou, 1992; Coenen-Huther et al., 1994; Künemund et al., 2005). Other close relations only occasionally provide useful information or bypasses. Second, family-transmitted roles and values are incorporated during childhood, thereby triggering stronger emotional reactions later (La Rossa & Reitzes, 2009). Moreover, poor relational style during childhood and trauma powerfully shape individuals' psychosocial skills and their capacity to create ties later. Third, and because of the aforementioned aspects, emotional and instrumental support is still mainly assumed by family members, especially when needs are high, although other close relations can also provide it. This limitation can have negative implications if family ties are of poor quality (Bengston et al., 2002). By contrast, purely elective ties are undone more quickly when conflict arises and are thus of better quality. The upside of the durability of family ties is that non-close family ties constitute a reservoir of close relations on which individuals can draw to create new close relations in times of need.

In what follows, we examine these hypothesised differences in how close family and close friends affect vulnerability processes by using three longitudinal datasets collected within LIVES, *Social Stratification, Cohesion and Conflict in Contemporary Couples*, *The multiple paths of lone parenthood*<sup>1</sup>, *Vivre/Leben/Vivere*<sup>2</sup>, and a stream of work leading to the construction of the network module of the *International Social Survey Programme 2017*<sup>3</sup>. The first three studies focused on the role played by family and other close relations over time for long-term couples, lone parents, and ageing individuals in their fight to overcome difficult events or maintain their level of well-being. The fourth stream of work examined the role played by conflict and support in personal networks (friends and family) of adults facing life events. In what follows, we examine the results of this last study before proceeding to the three longitudinal studies.

#### CONFLICT AND SUPPORT IN PERSONAL NETWORKS AFTER LIFE EVENTS

One of the first task within LIVES was to explore the active changes in network composition which take place during life transitions or when facing vulnerabilizing events, as a way to secure sufficient relational resources (Sapin, 2014). Some individuals exclude extended family members from their personal networks and refocus on the nuclear family. In contrast, other individuals recompose their networks by including more distant family members (blood, alliance) with whom they have an affinity. Some individuals with fewer or poor quality family links nevertheless receive support from close relations by pluralizing their personal networks with the inclusion of friends and colleagues as well as health professionals, who provide links to resources in other groups (Widmer, Kempf, Sapin, & Galli Carminati, 2013). In general, the more diverse (nuclear family, extended family, friends, colleagues, health professionals) the personal network is, the more efficient the support. For instance, new parents heavily mobilise their personal network during the most demanding and stressful months following the birth of a child, when tremendous psychological and concrete adjustments are needed (Sapin & Widmer, 2016). In addition to the direct positive effect of diverse personal network compositions, such

<sup>1</sup><https://www.lives-nccr.ch/en/page/multiple-paths-lone-parenthood-n3912>

<sup>2</sup><https://cigev.unige.ch/vlv/>

<sup>3</sup><http://w.issp.org/menu-top/home/>

diversity also increases network density, which bolsters the safety net of emotional and instrumental support. However, individuals who add their extended family as members in their personal networks, such as parents and parents-in-law, see a particular elevation of network density. After this first period, parents return to a more stable role organisation; the mobilisation of family and friends and their collective support tends to diminish. Larger and less dense personal networks (with links to other groups) then prove especially useful by providing more punctual and diverse assistance.

We also showed that families and personal networks can yield stressful and negative interactions among their members that contribute, in their own way, to poor psychological health, a negative impact which is exacerbated during life crises. We found that it is the overall 'feel and look' of such networks that matters, that is, the interdependent patterns of support and conflict, more than the amount of conflict (Sapin, 2014). Vulnerable individuals (showing higher levels of psychological distress) are embedded within networks in which family support triggers an overload situation; the individual often holds a central position in the family networks from the perspective of conflict (Sapin, Iglesias, & Widmer, 2016). Strains and conflict develop due to the increasing pressure exerted by life crises, not only on vulnerable individuals but also on members of their family or personal networks (Sapin, 2014; Widmer, Girardin & Ludwig, 2018). The limited resources circulating in these personal networks increase the competition between their members and do not allow them to fulfil members' daily needs, especially when stressful events or transitions occur (Sapin, 2014; Sapin, Widmer, & Radulescu, 2008). Individuals in such vulnerable situations not only cope less well with stressful events but also perceive events to be more frequently stressful and have a lower level of social support in their personal networks while also not having the economic or cultural resources that might compensate for such challenges. The pressures of their life contexts are high, while their relational and other reserves are low or even, sometimes, absent. Such a situation makes them unable to navigate their life trajectories and to cope with the requirements and goals of each life domain.

To explore some of these patterns across national contexts, we developed a module to collect innovative data on personal networks and social resources for the *International Social Survey Programme* (ISSP) under LIVES leadership and expertise (Sapin, Joye, Wolf, et al. 2020; Joye, Sapin, & Wolf, 2019). Preliminary analyses of these data show that in high-income countries, support and socioeconomic resources that matter

for well-being more often come from the family, while in middle- and low-income countries, the resources have a more mixed origin; conflict has everywhere the strongest relation to well-being (Brule, Sapin, Rossier, 2020).

### THE PERSONAL NETWORKS OF CONJUGAL PARTNERS

Previous research has long shown that partners with larger and more overlapping networks, on average, perform better throughout their life together on a variety of outcomes associated with well-being than those with smaller and less overlapping networks (Kearns & Leonard 2004, Widmer, 2004). LIVES conducted the longitudinal *Social Stratification, Cohesion and Conflict in Contemporary Couples* study (Widmer et al., 2017) to explore the lesser-known influence of life course factors on couples' personal and family networks. Vesela (2017) showed that distinct types of conjugal networks are developed, from the least to the most supportive, with an unequal presence of friends and family members from both partners. Supportive networks decreased the likelihood of experiencing later low conjugal quality, hence confirming the overall positive impact of network support on couples. However, when a nonnormative event occurred, such as falling into unemployment, couples who were part of supportive networks were more likely than others to develop conjugal dissatisfaction and instability. These findings suggest a counterintuitive vulnerabilizing effect of supportive networks when couples are confronted with some important nonnormative stressful events. Altogether, the empirical results suggest that a small rather than large reserve of family members and friends and low levels of contact and support may better buffer stress associated with experiencing socially frowned-upon events, whereas supportive networks may in such circumstances create further stress that weakens couples because of their interference (Julien et al., 1994).

The personal and family networks of conjugal partners are impacted not only by nonnormative events but also by expected and positively defined life transitions. Our data underlined the overall stability of interaction models between partners throughout the years (Widmer, Kellerhals, Levy, Gouveia, 2017, Schika, 2015). However, change can be noticed in partners' personal networks. Because partnerships occupy a central position in the social lives of individuals and their self-concepts, they provide a strong impetus for couples to merge their respective personal networks of

close family and friends into a larger, shared social network in the early stages of family life (Kalmijn, 2003). Spouses whose households experienced empty nesting and retirement were more likely to report shared networks and shared personal contacts with their partner than those who did not experience such transitions (Cohn-Schwarz, Roth and Widmer, 2021). In other words, both transitions were associated with increasingly shared social interactions and friendship networks between spouses. The results are congruent with a series of mechanisms that account for the continuity of self-identity and well-being in later adulthood across life transitions and role losses. Because partners belong to each other's convoy of significant relationships (Antonucci et al., 2013), their network members tend to become closer (their network tends to overlap increasingly) as partners separate from peripheral ties when constraints associated with work and children dissipate. Because the transition to an empty nest and retirement entail disconnections from central face-to-face activities associated with paid work and raising children, more importance is placed on the partnership as a dimension of life continuity. Consequently, the time freed by role losses appears to be spent socializing with the partner and the couple's associates. Such changes in the shared personal networks of partners have beneficial effects for partners and lead to improvements in the spousal relationship (Kearns & Leonard 2004, Cornwell, 2012).

#### LONE PARENTHOOD: VULNERABILITY AND SUPPORT

Focusing also on less normative family configurations, LIVES documented the trajectories of lone parents and their close relations as well as the interplay between this micro relational dimension and the macro dimension of institutional support. Lacking a partner to share economic and parental burdens, lone parents—and lone mothers in particular—are often poorer and more vulnerable in terms of health and income and are, on average, more socially isolated (Bernardi et al. 2018; Struffolino & Bernardi 2017). A few studies have examined the changing personal networks of mothers during the two years following divorce and found that despite women experiencing a significant decrease in network size and social support, the primary and most supportive members of their networks—family and friends—remained stable (Duffy 1993). Research that has focused on the agency and coping competencies of lone mothers and the role of support from family and friends has shown that lone mothers are rarely fully isolated (Niepel 1994; Lumino et al., 2016). Bernardi and Mortelmans

(2018) investigated the personal network of the most economically vulnerable lone mothers—those who were unemployed or receiving social assistance—as well as the ways in which the web of relations they were embedded in contributed to their well-being (Keim 2018). The findings showed a large variation in the number and composition of personal contacts and identified four kinds of networks: networks dominated by the family of origin, networks centred on a couple relationship, extended networks, and very restricted networks. Different types of networks were related to well-being in complex ways. Network composition was both a condition for support but also a consequence of the lone mothers' strains. Diverse larger networks, displaying the woman's own or her partner's family of origin or more heterogeneous and multiplex relations, were associated with higher well-being than other configurations. However, in most cases, the association was mediated by the lone mother's perception of the relational qualities of the single ties: only the absence of conflictual ties and the presence of adequate support fostered well-being (Keim 2018).

The most salient relationships for lone parents, besides that with their children, are the relationships with the children's biological father and that with a new partner. The relationship with the father of the children, when there is a relationship at all, can be legally, emotionally, and socially sustained by child maintenance and custody arrangements, emotional exchanges or the common social ties of the previous couple. A new romantic partnership, if started, may represent a further family transition (towards step and blended families) that brings about a role reconfiguration for the lone parent and their children. We examined the relationship between the biological father and the lone mother in its interaction with family policies and legal regulations in Switzerland (Larenza 2019). Overall, the conclusions stressed that lone mothers facing financial and custodial neglect from children's fathers do not always make full use of their rights. Some lone parents integrate their ex-partners' financial hardship into the negotiations on maintenance payments or do not react to violations of maintenance agreements already established to avoid repercussions to the father-children relationship. The relationship between repartnering and lone parents' health has also been a matter of empirical investigation. A new union formation could foster wellbeing because couples will possibly share and pool at least some resources, such as income and social ties (conjugal resource model: Williams, Sassler, & Nicholson, 2008), and, particularly for lone mothers, potentially partially share parental care responsibilities. In contrast, repartnering could also challenge wellbeing because it



represents a change in the relational status quo, thereby potentially creating stress even if temporary (crisis model: Amato, 2010). Repartnering may be particularly stressful if it deteriorates the relationship with the children's biological father (Berger, Cancian, & Meyer, 2012). Drawing on the resources and crisis models and on the comparative dataset of the Harmonized Histories, Recksiedler and Bernardi (2019) examined the relationship between lone mothers' repartnering and health in three welfare contexts in Europe, according to type of family policy: the dual-earner (family policy supporting gender equity and women's work), market-oriented (domestic and parental work outsourced to the economic market), and general family policy model and support for lone parents (less gender progressive family policy). They uncovered six distinct repartnering trajectories that varied regarding the timing, type, and stability of higher-order unions for different cohorts of lone mothers. The policy support context is related both to the shape of the repartnering trajectories and to the association of such trajectories with mental health. Unstable repartnering was more frequent in market-oriented contexts, while contexts with more comprehensive family support fostered more stable repartnering. Possibly, the lack of public family support induces lone mothers to quicker transition into a new union. Since a more dynamic union trajectory is also more common in market-oriented societies than elsewhere, mothers experiencing unstable repartnering reported enjoying better health if living in these policy contexts rather than in general or dual-earner contexts. Altogether, the findings suggest that even if higher financial needs and less generous welfare may translate into more unstable repartnering histories, they seem to have positive spillover effects on mothers' health.

#### PROGRESS AND INEQUALITIES IN THE EVOLUTION OF FRIENDSHIP IN OLD AGE

Finally, we examined the role of friendship as a resource in ageing to tackle vulnerabilities, which various studies show has important effects, for instance, in its impact on older adults' wellbeing (Ihle et al. 2018). In this context, we were more particularly interested in the structural factors of friendships (Baeriswyl & Oris, 2022), a dimension that is still under-documented in the older-age friendship literature. Because of the individualised characteristics (elective and flexible ties) of friendships,

researchers have tended to forget that friends are not distributed evenly across socioeconomic groups, nor are the resources required for the maintenance of these ties (Stevens & Van Tilburg, 2010; Suanet et al., 2013).

From a macro sociocultural perspective, we confirmed that the prevalence of friendship, a type of tie that theoretically meets the ever-increasing need for the expression of individuality that is a feature of our modern societies, has increased among individuals 65 years and older in Switzerland from the late 1970s until the end of the first decade of the new millennium (1979-2011) (see also Baeriswyl, 2017). Moreover, our analyses showed that a close friendship increase is part of a broader lifestyle change after retirement (the trend towards active ageing), with increasing social ties and engagements outside the family, in which close friendship can arise and be maintained.

However, at the individual level, it appears that close friendship is not equally distributed among the older population. In particular, having a close friend remained, in 2011, less likely among less educated people. In addition, because over these three decades the number of older adults with limited educational resources fell from a clear majority to a minority, the latter became even more marginalised compared with the rest of the population, who have taken advantage of the considerable progress that has occurred since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in access to education and in health conditions. Moreover, better-educated older adults have generally benefited from the increase in a more socially active lifestyle outside the household after retirement. This observation stresses the accumulation of advantages in which friendship resources are involved. However, our comparison across recent historical time of the structural determinants of friendship also showed a growing differentiation between men and women, with increases that benefited women more, which is not in line with the idea of an accumulation of dis/advantages. Older women are usually seen as more vulnerable because they tend to have fewer resources in terms of health or income and are at greater risk of residential isolation (which has been confirmed through our own data; see Baeriswyl, 2018; Oris et al., 2017). Nonetheless, they have a greater chance to benefit from this important socioemotional resource of friendship. This finding is in line with results in other Western countries (Arber et al., 2003; Chambers, 2018) stressing older women's advantages in terms of social relationships and some rewards of investing in this life domain.

These results highlight the various aspects of close friendship inequalities, whatever indicator we use to measure friendship, for example, the

visiting of friends or acquaintances (Baeriswyl, 2017; Baeriswyl & Oris, 2021). Moreover, we can contrast these results with those for family participation (visiting of family members): while both participation types are significantly linked to the satisfaction with life of individuals 65 years and older in Switzerland, family participation does not appear to be stratified in terms of gender or socioeconomic status. On the one hand, these results confirm the importance of involvement in close ties—kin and non-kin—for subjective well-being in older age, but on the other hand, they stress the particularly unequal dimension of friendship: As outlined above, socially better-off individuals are more prone to have elective friendships.

Overall, the various results obtained within LIVES stress the tension between progress and inequalities in friendship evolution in old age. While an increasing number of older adults can benefit from friendship, its availability is not equally distributed (by socioeconomic status and gender), notably in contrast with other close ties that are family ties. In this context, and in parallel with a more general evolution towards a post-retirement lifestyle that is more participative and open to the outside world, friendship integrates a trend involving increasing distance between wealthy and healthy older adults and those who have not benefited from the progress of recent decades and, on the contrary, have accumulated penalties across their life courses. However, our results underline the complexity of the inequalities linked to this relational resource regarding the dis/advantages accumulation hypothesis, in which socioeconomic inequalities are not combined with gender inequalities since women are more likely to develop elective friendships than men. This complexity highlights the importance of examining the issue of intersectionality in more depth in future work.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we discussed the distinct role of two types of close relations on vulnerability processes: family ties versus friends. The research discussed in this chapter has shown that the ambivalent and sometimes negative (i.e., resource depletion) aspects of family relationships emerge, in particular, in situations in which other key resources (including friendship ties) are missing, typically with the occurrence of stressful life events. Conversely, negative family events are more quickly overcome when sufficient resources (including friends) are available. Interestingly, some negative life events, such as job loss, are better dealt with through sparser

personal networks. By contrast, normative life events act as densifiers or enlargers of both elective and family networks.

LIVES 'vulnerability life course' framework enabled us to uncover some of the conditions in which family relations become negative/remain positive during the life course process, and some of the situations in which friendship relations contribute to well-being and help overcome life's hurdles. On the whole, the results obtained show that poor quality family relations and friendships deficits tend to reflect and amplify socioeconomic and structural inequalities, although there are exceptions. Further research could focus on the numerous functions still assumed by close families ties today -despite the de-institutionalizing of conjugality, the diversity of family trajectories, and the greater mobility and digitalization of society-, on the key role played by friendships in promoting supportive family links, and on the ways public policies could help individuals create resilient family and personal ties.

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