FAMILIES AND PERSONAL NETWORKS

AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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An International Comparative
Perspective

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This book is dedicated to all our colleagues from Portugal, Switzerland and Lithuania that have collaborated and worked together over the last 20 years on families, social networks and the life course.
We give special thanks to the founder of this scientific network, Jean Kellerhals, who encouraged collaborative research between sociologists of the family in these countries, particularly on families and family networks.
Thanks also to all the interviewees who participated in the three national surveys on family trajectories and social networks.

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Introduction

**Eric D. Widmer, Jacques-Antoine Gauthier,
Karin Wall, Vida Česnuitytė, and Rita Gouveia**

This book presents original research findings on personal networks and
life trajectories in three European countries in the early twenty-first cen-
tury: Portugal, Lithuania, and Switzerland. Its underlying argument is
that personal ties, at first sight private and explained by lifestyle prefer-
ences or personality, depend on a series of social conditions which shape

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them beyond the volition of individuals. Personal networks go hand in hand, the book stresses, with individual trajectories within a system constrained by the opportunity structures and normative orientations of each society. Such structures and orientations are the product of national histories, the roots of which go deep into the past. Within countries, classical stratification principles such as those associated with gender and social class, but also with the life cycle and generations, embedded within life course experiences, are expected to make a significant difference to personal networks.

Why do some individuals develop relationships with friends and have no or very few significant family members? Why does the sociability of others concentrate on family members and kin? Why do some have only one or two significant *alters* while others have large personal networks? Why are some networks highly connected and others more sparsely organized? What kinds of relational resources or *social capital* do they provide? To understand how a variety of social conditions play out in shaping personal networks, the book draws on data from the national surveys *Life Trajectories and Social Networks* conducted between 2009 and 2010 in Portugal, in 2011 in Switzerland, and in 2012 in Lithuania.

Setting the Scene: Portugal, Lithuania, and Switzerland

Portugal, Lithuania, and Switzerland do not come to mind as obvious choices for a comparative book. Most comparative studies examine European nations which are more powerful and central. Personal connections of the researchers involved go some way to explaining this selection of countries, and it would be untrue to stress some master theoretical basis for it. In the three countries, a window of opportunities existed for a short period of time, between 2009 and 2012, for funding large data collections on personal networks. Due to the economic crisis and the consequent budgetary cuts to the social sciences, this endeavour could not have taken place later on, at least in two of the three participating countries.

Gathering systematic information on personal networks in these three countries has nonetheless had some advantages. In recent decades

the upper and upper middle classes in Europe have developed a new normative model of relationships, broadly corresponding to the ideal type of the pure relationship (Giddens 1991): relationships focused on individual self-development, promoting equality between autonomous men and women (but also, to some extent, between parents and children), secured through negotiation and temporary contracts which can be ended at any time if they fail to provide personal satisfaction. A large number of studies shows the pervasive influence of such a normative model on discourses and the lay understanding of what personal relationships should be, although an equivalent number of research projects stress the difficulties people have in actually matching the expectations that this model entails in their everyday life (Bühlmann et al. 2009; de Beer and Koster 2009).

The European Union, as an emerging supranational entity wishing to mobilize large segments of its middle and upper classes into its project, has sought to promote a common culture, by seeking to foster exchange and a joint identity between individuals of all participating countries (Favell and Guiraudon 2011). Equality of men and women, as well as the personal autonomy of all adults, are cardinal values of the EU, even though they are expected to be implemented in distinct ways according to national context: some countries emphasize the importance of participation in the labour market, others of state guarantees and state provisions. But in all cases, the promotion of a society of individuals (Elias 1991) rather than a society of groups is at the forefront of the European societal project. The development of a joint culture stressing individual rights and personal development in family and other intimate relationships makes sense within a project of political and economic unification across a continent.

The idea stressed in this book, however, is that personal relationships in Portugal, Lithuania, and Switzerland follow this normative model in different ways, because of the structural conditions characterizing these countries (Musial 2013). Such conditions are the products of separate national histories which cannot be altered in a few years or even in a few decades. For pure relationships to become a reality, several conditions of social development are needed, and these are unequally present in the three countries.

First, the collective realization of pure relationships is only possible if the society has achieved a certain level of economic development and wealth, as it entails additional costs compared to more classical understandings of personal relationships. Portugal and Lithuania are amongst the poorer nations of Europe and were strongly affected by the economic crisis, whereas Switzerland stands among the richest, making their comparison especially compelling.

Secondly, the model of pure relationships is easier to adopt when higher education has gained prominence. In Giddens' view, it indeed demands a high level of self-reflexivity, which often comes with an increase in schooling. Lithuania has a large proportion of people with a university degree, whereas in Switzerland this number is low, Portugal lying in between.

Thirdly, people should be well disposed towards the values of modernity and the European social model focusing on welfare provision, educational expansion, a knowledge society, and formal equality, if they are to fulfil the EU's normative project. Portugal and Lithuania have only a short history as fully fledged democratic European countries, both having recent experience of dictatorship. In a not so distant past, the family was regarded in Lithuania as a stronghold against the intrusion of the communist state. In Portugal, family was sanctified by the fascist dictatorship as a major institution of social control and support. In Switzerland, family has been considered something mostly private, to which the State should not pay too much attention, either in terms of support or of regulation (Sapin et al. 2007). Those distinct relationships between State and Family, which are rooted in the countries' political and social histories, may have led to quite distinct attitudes to the principles of blood and alliance and to the value of individual autonomy in the organization of personal relationships. These distinct orientations towards the family and individualization may have been strengthened by the orientation developed within each country towards the EU. In Portugal, large segments of the population have seen progressive integration in Europe as a decisive way of cutting ties with a somewhat depressing traditionalism in society, while ensuring access to the benefits of fully fledged modernity. In Lithuania, EU membership has been valued for the protection it affords against interference from its great eastern neighbour as well as for access

to Western markets. In both countries, the models put forward by the European elites are regarded as social markers which clearly distinguish pre-democratic times and the present. In Switzerland, such a distinction is not prevalent, as the country did not experience dictatorship in the twentieth century. In addition, Switzerland rejected EU membership in a referendum in the early 1990s, and the EU project has been regarded with a sceptical eye by a large number of its citizens. In other words, the orientation of the Swiss towards the EU and its normative models is one of concern, and the EU is in no way seen as the sole pathway towards a modern future. In Switzerland, one may therefore reject normative models such as the pure relationship model without being suspected of longing for authoritarian conservative social or political models of the past. Based on this set of highly distinct historical pathways, structural conditions, and collective orientations of the three countries, we may expect personal networks to vary across them, with major consequences for the social capital available to the residents of each country.

The selection of these three countries, due to their specific historical, social, and economic pathways, as well as their shared small size and peripheral position in the EU, therefore gives us a chance to better understand how distinct collective experiences at the country level shape personal networks. It is to be expected that their particular national histories, as well as the specific interdependencies between them and the more central and powerful countries in Europe, will partly account for the ways in which people organize their personal networks. Chapter 2 offers a multidimensional contextualization of the three countries, highlighting the main historical and political transitions and landmarks in each country, as well as the structural context, normative orientations, and life course regimes.

Personal Networks

What is exactly meant by personal networks? Personal networks refer to a set of people who are considered meaningful or important in some regard by an individual, usually referred to as *ego* or the *focal person* (Widmer 2010). Personal networks are related to the social, emotional, and symbolic significance of network members (hereafter we will refer to

them as *alters*) for that focal person. Such significance may or may not be associated with regular interactions, either face to face or by technical means of communication. Connections with family members may often survive without being sustained by daily or weekly contacts. Personal networks are therefore not necessarily interactive networks. Empirical research on personal networks has developed since the 1990s, in our view for two reasons. First, various scholars stressed the need to go beyond the nuclear family in order to understand family functioning and personal life. They rediscovered the importance of a variety of kinship ties. The importance of family networks was stressed because of the need to go beyond the conceptualization of families as small groups with clear boundaries and well-defined roles, in particular in the context of divorce, non-marital cohabitation, and other trends which have de-standardized the life course (Levy and Widmer 2013). Another stream of research has stressed the importance of personal communities for understanding how social ties are created and maintained (Wellman and Potter 1999), revisiting social integration issues beyond the participation of individuals at work, in formal groups or associations. The importance of personal ties for the strength of communities and the well-being of individuals has been underlined by a large number of studies and scholars, in line with social capital theories.

The state of personal ties is part of one central debate about our times. The issue of individualization as a corollary of the *second wave of modernization* was identified as a key dimension for the understanding of late modernity, notably by authors such as Beck (1986), Giddens (1992, 1994), Beck et al. (1994), and more generally by postmodern theorists (for example, Bauman 1992). In the same vein, some authors (for example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) stipulate that the process of individualization of the life course has been taking place for several decades, as a corollary of the decline of the standardization process. From the point of view of personal networks, such de-standardization and pluralization trends might translate into a decline of personal ties so pervasive that some have forecast a near future society made up of eremites (Beck 1986), while others have predicted a general disappearance of family ties in favour of less committed relationships (Popenoe 1988). Although small in comparison with fully fledged networks, personal net-

works feature many structural properties of interest related to the decline or pluralization hypotheses (Widmer et al. 2013). One first dimension relates to their composition (Widmer 2010). In this regard, a crucial distinction was made between family members and other members such as friends, co-workers, or neighbours. Family ties have a longer life span and are associated with stronger solidarity norms than other ties. The more voluntary nature of friendship, as compared to family relationships, has also been stressed. Quantitative evidence on the share of friends versus family in personal networks is still limited. It is therefore crucial to estimate their importance in personal networks, as the balance between family members and friends gives a distinct twist to the type of social integration achieved by individuals through their personal networks. One related hypothesis stresses that friends have to a large extent replaced family members in personal networks, following individualization trends. Chapter 3 investigates the extent to which such trends have variously shaped the construction of personal relationships in the three national contexts. It will compare the composition of personal networks across the three countries with reference to the salience of kin/non-kin, co-residence, acquaintanceship, and gender homophily. Focusing on close ties considered as family, Chapter 4 investigates the pluralization of family meanings within personal networks. This chapter will show how processes of suffusion between friends and kinship ties occur in the three countries, but in quite different directions. Chapter 5 addresses the extent of pluralization of personal networks across the three national contexts by mapping the main types of configurations of ties through the combination of close or distant kin, ascendant or descendant relatives, friends, and co-workers. In addition to the country level, this chapter also underlines the role of other shaping factors such as family transitions, the demographic reservoir, and structural positions associated with cohort, gender, and social class. Overall, those three chapters show that national contexts, structural factors, and family–biographical circumstances strongly impact personal relationships and family meanings.

A second crucial dimension of personal networks considered in this book is the organization of their internal relationships. Personal networks provide resources. Information flow among network members, and emotional as well as instrumental support given by network mem-

bers, are key for a variety of self-development issues, such as finding a job (Granovetter 1973), maintaining good psychological health, and dealing with unexpected life events and complicated situations. Much research has been done on the functional dimension of support, which stresses the importance of benefiting from a high level of support from significant *alters* and frequent interactions with them. In contrast, the sociometric approach to personal networks (Widmer et al. 2013) focuses on the structural dimension of such support rather than its functional dimension: Do relationships of personal networks form different patterns which make the social integration of focal persons distinct? Chapter 6 examines the production of distinct types of social capital within personal networks. By stressing the importance of an open or bridging type of social capital, as opposed to a closed or bonding type of social capital, this chapter will bring us back to the issue of the pluralization of personal lives in the present time.

Personal Networks in a Life Course Perspective

Individuals described in this book are Portuguese, Swiss, or Lithuanian, but they also differ according to gender, social class, and age group. Such social statuses are likely to shape their personal networks, as they are incorporated into distinct life courses made up of a series of stages, transitions, and events (Georges 1993). It is indeed the contribution of the life course perspective to have stressed that such social statuses are not external forces, the effects of which remain constant throughout life, but rather active principles which institutions and individuals use to shape their actions through time in interaction with others (Kruger and Levy 2001).

The life course perspective has stressed the trend, since the 1960s, towards what some scholars have called a *bounded pluralization* of life trajectories (Levy and Widmer 2013). There is ample evidence, indeed, that a greater variability of family and professional trajectories has emerged in the last 50 years, leading researchers to coin the term *pluralization*. This pluralization was however said to be bounded, as the number of alternative family or occupational trajectories was limited. It was

also shown that the emerging types were strongly associated with social statuses such as gender and social class, but also with countries, and in particular with their welfare state dimension.

It is therefore to be expected that family trajectories will reveal a limited number of types, rooted in gender, education, cohorts, and countries. They may also be expected to have significant effects on personal networks. Whom you live with throughout your life, but also whom you work with, as well as the transitions you have experienced (becoming a parent, getting a divorce, getting a job or retiring), all represent reservoirs of potential network members from which significant *alters* will be drawn. Recognizing the importance of past and present co-residence as a mechanism of relational proximity and assuming the pluralization of family trajectories in the three national contexts, Chapter 7 examines the cumulative effects of household trajectories on the composition of personal networks. Interestingly, we will see that while all types of family and occupational trajectories are present in the three national contexts, some are more likely to appear in one country than in the others.

We will describe life trajectories, first for their ability to help us understand something about personal networks, but also for their own interest. Optimal matching analyses presented in this book are holistic tools which allow us to show and understand a series of social mechanisms in an integrated way. We will use these tools to help us trace the social conditions from which personal networks emerge. This perspective has a cost: whereas it enables researchers to capture the interactions between a series of social conditions deemed important, it is unable to provide a precise computation of the causal effects of one specific variable (for instance, the number of jobs or having experienced divorce) on personal networks. We believe however that there is some kind of false precision in models that focus on decomposing the causal effects of specific variables associated with the life course, as most of the time social conditions associated with personal trajectories come in bundles, with reverse causation between so-called *dependent* and *independent variables*, and high multicollinearity among independent variables, always present (Abbott 2001; Gauthier et al. 2010). It will not escape the eyes of the watchful observer that regression analysis is used in several chapters of this book, which at first sight contradicts this reluctance to estimate causal models. In our use of such statistical tech-

niques, however, we promote an associative language rather than a causal one. We do not attribute precise meaning to the estimates by comparing the size of the effects, but rather consider them as proof of interrelationships between different dimensions of individuals' life experiences.

Research Design and Sample

The book draws on data from the survey *Life Trajectories and Social Networks* that was replicated in Portugal (2009–2010), Switzerland (2011), and Lithuania (2012). The survey used national representative samples of men and women belonging to two birth cohorts: people born between 1950–1955 and 1970–1975. The total sample brings together 2852 individuals (Portugal n = 1049, Switzerland n = 803, Lithuania n = 1000). The design of the survey was carried out from beginning to end in close collaboration between the research teams from the three countries. In Portugal and Lithuania, data collection drew on paper and pencil interview (PAPI), while in Switzerland data was collected through the computer assisted personal interviewing modus (CAPI). The questionnaires contained two main instruments. The first was a retrospective calendar aiming to reconstruct the life trajectories of individuals in various domains (living arrangements, occupation, couple relationships) and identifying adverse life events (illness, unemployment, addiction, precariousness). The second one was a name generator that allowed us to identify the composition and structure of the respondent's personal network. Additionally, the questionnaire included questions on the level of investment in various life domains, on attitudes and values regarding, for example, gender equality and individualization, as well as standard socio-demographic indicators. As the survey had to be funded separately in each country, the three national questionnaires were not strictly identical. However, the instruments they used were so similar that it was possible to create and bring together in a single dataset all the indicators used in this book.

Why focus on personal networks? Comparisons across countries regarding sociological issues most of the time use large international surveys which focus on the distribution of a small set of questions about values, norms, or standard behaviours. Investing in a detailed assessment

of personal networks across countries makes it possible, in our view, to see the social structures of such countries from a different perspective, closer to the actual emotional and relational experiences that individuals develop throughout their life in connection with the overall framing of their society (Widmer 2016). To examine the composition and the structure of the personal networks of the respondents, we used a name generator, based on a free-listing technique tested in several studies (Widmer et al. 2013). To this end, respondents were asked in a first step to list the significant *alters* in their current lives by answering the question: *Who are the individuals who, over the past year, have been very important to you, even if you do not get along well with them?* Importance was attributed to people who had played a significant role in the respondent's life. The question also emphasized both positive and negative roles, on the assumption that personal relationships include feelings of not only love and support but also conflict and tension. For each *alter* mentioned, information concerning her/his sex, age, educational attainment, precise relation to ego, and duration of the relationship was gathered. At the end of this characterization, respondents were asked whether they consider each of the *alters* as family, and whether they have ever lived in the same household with each *alter*. This block of questions enabled us to describe the composition of personal network by identifying various types of kin and non-kin ties. In a second step, respondents were asked to estimate the frequency of contact with the significant *alters* of their personal network, both face to face and by other means. Where applicable, they had to specify whether the corresponding relationship entailed emotional support and/or conflict, also enabling us to understand whether each type of relation was univocal or reciprocal. Structural properties of the personal networks were then inferred from this data: for instance, through indicators such as network *density*, which captures the proportion of connections between network members compared to the total possible number of contacts, and network *centrality*, which estimates and compares the number of a specific individual's connections to or from other members of the network.

Several reasons account for the focus on "important persons". First, this focus makes respondents rely on their definition of the symbolic and emotional significance of *alters* rather than on actual helping or interaction behaviours. In this regard, the name generator taps into the concepts

of orientational others (Kuhn 1964; Widmer 1997) or psychological networks (Surra and Milardo 1991), which stress the importance of specific persons of reference, with whom regular relationships may not necessarily occur. This name-generator was adapted from the Family Network Method (FNM), a social network instrument that has been used over the last 20 years to study the composition and structure of family configurations (Widmer et al. 2013). This name generator has been proved to provide reliable information on both composition and structure of personal and family networks in various contexts (step-families, individuals with psychiatric disorders, etc.). An important advantage of using such an approach is that it enables us to compute network measures and visual representations of relationships widely used in social network analysis, which can be successfully included in a standardized questionnaire such as the one developed for this research.

We are aware of other valuable methodological options to examine personal networks though they did not reflect our theoretical concerns, nor were suitable to our survey design. We disregarded the *resource-generator* approach (Fisher 1982) as this strategy, although quite useful to measure individuals' access to a variety of resources, often elicits weak ties which might only be activated in specific situations and are not necessarily close to the individual. Therefore, we believe that the resource-generator neglects those who are emotionally or symbolically close. Instead, we decided to map the resources in a second step, by asking the respondents to list the exchange of resources between the network members who were considered as important. We also excluded the *position-generator* approach (Lin et al. 2001). This type of approach is more commonly used to examine social stratification processes as respondents are asked whether they know alters belonging to different prestigious socio-professional categories. Although this approach presents unquestionable advantages from the point of view of social mobility processes, we found that it did not meet the relational focus we wished to stress in this research. Another empirical line that is closer to our approach draws on the notion of personal communities and relies on the concentric circle technique (Chua et al. 2011; Pahl and Spencer 2004; Morgan 2009). This approach is based on the level of closeness attributed to ties, which is convergent with our theoretical and empirical concerns. However,

while the concentric circles technique is useful to capture the meanings and nature of relationships, commitment, and closeness, it is in our view more suitable to in-depth case study analysis and was rather difficult to apply to such a large survey based on representative samples with an international comparative design.

Regarding the life trajectories, two types of trajectories were constructed using a retrospective life history calendar: occupational trajectories (Chapter 2) and co-residence trajectories (Chapter 7). We therefore recorded the dates of all occupational activities and co-residence changes of each respondent from birth until the year of the interview. Two different approaches were used to build up these trajectories: occupational trajectories are *age-based*, while co-residence trajectories are based on *historical time* (1990–2010).

The analysis of occupational trajectories covers the period from ages 16 to 40. This age-based time frame makes it possible to compare the trajectories of individuals belonging to different cohorts (how similar were occupational trajectories of individuals born in 1950–1955 and individuals born in 1970–1975, when they were 16–40?). Differences found in the trajectories are thus mainly related to contextual and generational changes, controlling for age effects. For all respondents, a single occupational status was attributed to each of the years between the ages of 16 and 40. We retained ten different statuses according to both their statistical distribution and their sociological relevance: (1) *education*, (2) *low part-time*, (3) *high part-time*, (4) *full-time*, (5) *unemployment*, (6) *military*, (7) *at home*, (8) *sabbatical*, (9) *illness/invalidity*, (10) *other*.

The co-residence trajectories focus on the timeframe corresponding to the last 20 years before the survey (1990–2010). This approach provides an exact match between the end of the life trajectories and the time of the interviews (which is when personal networks were measured). In which type of households were individuals living over the 20 years before the survey? As we have individuals born in two different cohorts, this analysis provides an overview of the transitions they were facing in the years preceding the survey, which may account for differences in the characteristics of personal networks.

For all respondents, a single co-residence status was attributed to each of the 20 years under consideration. We retained ten different statuses