IP.8 Critical events and family configurations

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Objective

The research module “critical events and family configurations” intends to uncover how different broad family contexts react to critical life events and what is the impact of those family contexts on conjugal and parent-child vulnerability. The de-standardization of the life course associated with the risk society (Beck, 1992) creates many opportunities for critical events to impact on the organization of families. The strategies set up by families to face unemployment and precariousness, economic insecurity, downward social mobility, health problems, family breakups, or frequent spatial mobility, should be addressed using large and longitudinal datasets which do not only consider relationships within households but also other relationships such as those between grandparents and grandchildren, divorced parents, stepfamily members, uncles/aunts and nephews, godparents, etc. Are families facing hardship due to the so called “new risks” successful in maintaining sound levels of conjugal satisfaction, in pursuing their parental projects (Bernardi et al. 2008), in providing enough support to children, and to promote education styles which enable them to follow a successful education (Kellerhals & Montandon, 1993; Modak et al., 2009)? How are relationships between partners, parents and children, as well as other family relationships, modified in order to adapt to family-work conflict and employment instability? How social inequalities by gender, generation, and social class arise from such reorganization?

We tackle on the impact of non-normative events on the accumulation of disadvantages/advantages during the life course within family configurations. We focus on the mediation of family configurations on such accumulation process. We hypothesize that family configurations constitute an important mediator between critical events and the ability of couples and parents to cope with adversity, thus providing a larger and swifter adjustment to non-normative events created by the de-standardization of life courses. The main data source is the panel “Social Stratification, Cohesion and Conflict in Contemporary Families”, collected in 1999 by Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy (Widmer et al., 2003), including data from 1534 couples residing in Switzerland (first wave at the end of the nineties; second wave in 2004). We intend to continue the panel by adding two waves of interviews with all individuals (either still in couple or separated/divorced/widowed). The focal themes will be the critical events occurred in the previous decade and the current configuration of family interdependencies. The module will therefore use the full strength of the fifteen year longitudinal assessment of family life which will be reconstructed through the 4-wave panel.

Keywords: Critical events, family configurations, cumulative disadvantages, life transitions, social and gender inequalities, life trajectories, time use.

1. State of the art

The life-course paradigm insists upon the importance of non-normative events in the structuring of individual lives (Levy et al., 2005). Vulnerability often stems from an accumulation of non-normative events, such as falling out of employment, falling into depression, experiencing acute or chronic sickneses, infertility, poverty, early death of the partner, etc. (Sapin, Spini, & Widmer, 2007). Cumulative processes of non-normative events and situations across the life
course contributes to explain social inequalities and social exclusion in highly complex and differentiated societies such as contemporary Switzerland (Dannefer, 2003; 1988). Individuals’ ability to compensate the losses associated with such an accumulation depends to a large extent on their relational resources. Research shows that couples and parents who benefit from kinship and friendship support, do better than others on a variety of outcomes such as a reduced likelihood of experiencing conjugal conflict and divorce or parent-child conflicts and developmental problems of children (for instance, Widmer, 2004; Widmer et al., 2007; Bernardi and Di Giulio 2006, Bernardi and Oppo 2008, Widmer et al., 2009). The buffering hypothesis states that family support mediates the impact of non-normative events (Cohen & Wills, 1985). A large body of research supports this hypothesis that nevertheless needs additional work. Indeed, the structural components that played out in family configurations are rather unexplored at the time being (Widmer et al., 2009). Conflicts and ambivalence associated with family support are also not empirically well-known, despite considerable warnings about their importance (see, Lüscher, 2002).

The conjugal dyad is one of the primary support systems of individuals. In order to understand how conjugal dyads participate to cumulative dis/advantage processes, one needs to take their logic into account. In that respect, the literature emphasized the importance of three distinct sociological dimensions of conjugal interactions: gendered division of work, family closure, and the trend towards individualism (Hochschild, 1989; Birtchell, 1986; Olson, 2000; Popenoe, 1996; Reiss, 1971; Kellerhals et al., 2004; Widmer et al., 2003). Various typologies of family functioning have been proposed in order to explain conjugal conflict (Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Olson, 2000; Reiss, 1971; Birtchell, 1986; Wall, 2005). In a previous wave of this study, five styles were empirically identified, associated with sharply varied frequency levels of problems, either conjugal or personal, and open conflict (Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2006a; Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2006b). Prevalent problems coincide with a strong tendency for spouse or partner autonomy, gendered roles, and couple self-enclosure. These results were largely due to the differential effect of the conflict/problems-management modes inherent in the various interaction styles, which are in turn influenced by couples’ social characteristics and position. Also, the effect of conjugal support is likely to be domain-specific.

Overall, strong evidence shows a positive effect of kinship and friendship support on conjugal and parental outcomes. Empirical research however suggests that effects of support are curvilinear (Holman, 1981), as family relationships may in some cases compete with each other (Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Julien, Markman, Leveille, Chartrand & Begin, 1994; Widmer et al., 2009). The use of support as a resource has a cost both in terms of threatening the individual’s sense of competence, obligating to reciprocity, or creating anxiety of being dependant on a third person. Developing relationships creates anxiety in social networks because time and energy devoted to other relationships are challenged. Thus, parents or siblings may try to hold or regain some influence on individuals by interfering couple decision-making, like in the case of childbearing timing (Bernardi 2003), and more in general in his or her conjugal relationships. In this perspective, strong family ties may not buffer the effects of non-normative events on conjugal and parent-child relationships but rather amplify them, because the emergence of problems opens doors to further interference from the family members in the couple’s relationships or in the educational process (Widmer et al., 2006a and 2006b; Widmer et al., 2009). Investigating ambivalence in family relationships (Lüscher, 2002) is a necessary step towards the understanding of the mediation of relational resources vis-à-vis non-normative events.

This line of inquiry may be furthered to take a large arrays of relationships and family situations into account when dealing with the impact of critical events. A recent collective book gathering a large number of contributions from various countries (Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008)
revealed for instance that cousins, uncles, and aunts may be crucial at one point or another in life. In case of divorce, aunts and uncles may play a role of parent surrogates for some time, in addition to the more important role of grandparents, especially on the maternal side (Coenen-Huther et al., 1994). The inequality between husbands and wives about paid and domestic work creates distortions in kinship, which has further consequences for ties between mother–son or mother–daughter, which are either weakened or strengthened in adulthood. The inequality between husbands and wives is particularly acute in case of divorce (Modak & Palazzo, 2006). Divorce has a collective nature. In post-divorce families, two models emerge: the conjugal tie, which is the relation of primary importance in the model based on serial nuclear families, and the tie between the parent and the child, which is constitutive of a model based on the extended reconstituted family. Family care for the elderly is not a dyadic relationship either. Care provided to the elderly has important consequences for a large array of relationships and contribute to gender and social inequalities.

These few examples support the statement that central family dyads such as the conjugal or the parent-child dyads must be referred to the larger family configuration in which they are embedded (Widmer et al., 2009; Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008). Instead of focusing on the amount of support individuals derive from the ties from their household members, the configurational perspective stresses the complex patterns of interdependencies, both positive and negative, that link individuals with partners, grandparents, adult children, previous partners, friends considered as family members and others. The present research explores the ways in which various family ties organized in configurations of interdependent individuals may buffer or mediate the impact of non-normative events on couples and parents. The research project participates to a greater understanding of the strengths present in contemporary families beyond households and the factors allowing them to overcome the problems associated with the accumulation of disadvantages stemming from the destandardization of the life course.

Time use as an indicator of social integration: Time Use is both an indicator of social integration and of individual agency. As such it is a powerful tool to consider the embedded nature of individual autonomy within family configurations and the capacity to cope with critical events and situations. It has been used to analyze the trends of the basic social times (paid work, care work and leisure (Dumontier et al 2002), and to address the balance between work and leisure (Gershuny 2000). It is also recognized as a keen way to measure domestic work and caring tasks, and their share among partners, and thus evaluate women contributions to the family wellbeing (as for Switzerland, e.g. Baumgartner 2006, Schön-Bühlmann 2006). In her pioneer work, Oppong (1980) went beyond the distinction between paid and domestic work and suggested to consider, through time use, the multiple roles of women. Yet, time use studies remained long limited to a mere description of tasks (Grossin 1998). Recently, with the development of an important corpus of national-wide surveys, efforts of harmonization and emergence of a structured community of researchers within the International association of time use research (IATUR), time use studies have considerably widen the range of topics considered1. In particular, a series of work through notions such as "time poverty" or "time crunch" consider time as a resource which can be used as an alternative measure of well-being2. However time use is also an indicator of individual agency, i.e. the way people cope with their multiple tasks. It is thus a

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1 See for instance the programs of the annual IATUR conferences : http:// www.smu.ca/partners/iatur/ )

2 Which is also used now by international organizations such as UNDP (in the Human development report) or the OECD (in its global program in measuring progress).
capability in A. Sen's meaning: the ability of individuals to use their personal resources and those from the context to develop their life project. In this orientation, Goodin et al. (2008) have developed a measure of "Time autonomy" - i.e. the capacity to make choices about how to spend time left after fulfilling basic needs in income, domestic work and personal care. In former work, we have shown that residual time, i.e. activities during the days not spent at the work place, can be taken as a valuable proxy for "time autonomy", or what we have referred to as "time to be" in contrast with "time to do" (Sauvain-Dugerdil et Ritschard 2005 and In Press; Sauvain-Dugerdil 2009).

The array of individual autonomy expressed in time use is closely linked to stages of the family life, the relationships among the family members, the status and personal characteristics of the person; it can therefore only be understood in its connections with the way the closest members of the family spend their time. We therefore analyze the joint time of respondents and their network members (including partners or spouses) as a measure of existing interdependencies among them in large configurations of family ties (Widmer, Giudici et al., 2009). Time use is considered as a resource and a constraint, both for the person and for family members, which interact with the ways in which non-normative events or situations impact on individuals and family relationships. The organization of daily life, with whom and where activities take place, its interdependency with the time of close others, as well as how the person evaluate his/her time autonomy and his/her degree of satisfaction, provides another dimension of family interdependencies, complementary to the network and conjugal perspective developed above, on how family reacts to critical events and situations in a gendered way.

2. Research Questions

Based on the literature review, we expect that family configurations beyond households mediate the impact of non-normative events on conjugal functioning and parenting. IP 8 focuses on the following questions: (a) How family support mediates the impact of non-normative events on conjugal and parental vulnerability? We expect that couples and parents with more supportive interdependencies with relatives and other family members report higher resistance to vulnerability than those with less supportive interdependencies. We also expect that not only the amount of support will be significant for conjugal and parent-child relationships, but also its structures (density of the family configurations, centrality of the targeted individuals, etc.; (b) How family interference, family conflict and family ambivalence mediate the impact of non-normative events on couples and parents? We expect that couples and parents who face control attempts by their relatives and friends and a large amount of ambivalence in their family configuration to report lower adaptability to critical events and thus develop poorer educational styles and conjugal relationships than others; (c) How non-normative events impact on family configurations? We expect that family configurations change following the occurrence of non-normative events by recomposing their interdependencies according to the new balance of resources available to their members. Family configurations of individuals facing non-normative events are more likely than others to host conflict or ambivalence, which contributes to their accumulation of disadvantages and their transmission to their children. Some of them, however, are able to develop compensation strategies that we wish to uncover. To test our hypotheses, we control for the effect of several variables associated with vulnerability and family configurations, such as position in the family’s life cycle, family structure (first-time versus stepfamilies), level of education of individuals and family income.
3. Data and Methods

Data for this project come from the study “Social Stratification, Cohesion and Conflict in Contemporary Families,” a large and representative two-wave panel survey of married and unmarried heterosexual couples living in Switzerland (Widmer et al., 2003). The first wave of data collection was conducted in 1999, the second in 2004. The study’s primary goal was to examine how conjugal functioning is embedded in social statuses and life stages. The sample was drawn randomly using a non-proportional stratified design based on the three major linguistic areas of Switzerland (German, French, and Italian, which are all national languages and represent three main regions with cultural differences). The questionnaire was administered via a computer-assisted telephone survey. To be included in the sample, respondents had to be residing in Switzerland and cohabiting for at least one year; the youngest partner had to be at least 20 years old, and the oldest partner had to be less than 70 years old. Responses were weighted by the population size of each linguistic region. In Wave 1, the total number of couples surveyed was 1,534, for a total number of 3,068 interviews (see Widmer et al., 2003 and Widmer et al., 2006a). Wave 2 took place in 2004 with 1,089 women of the original couples (71% of wave 1). Due to financial constraints, in wave 2 we interviewed a the module on conjugal conflict and demographic characteristics was asked to women only. Waves 1 and 2 included a detailed assessment of conjugal functioning and parent-child relationships, conjugal networks and non-normative events which occurred in the recent past.

Waves 3 and 4 are going to trace all individuals interviewed on the preceding waves and interview them separately. The variety of personal situations will be greater than in the first wave, as a significant proportion of interviewees will be either separated/divorced/remarried or widowed. The impact of non-normative events that occurred during the last ten years are going to be estimated by using the tools described in the methodological IP. Modules about family interaction styles, coping modes, family problems (both between partners, parents and children, and siblings), family configurations already have produced valuable research results (see Widmer et al., 2003 for a full description of the study). Individuals are asked to describe their family configurations by the use of a sociometric questionnaire which allows them to freely define who belong to their family configuration (Widmer, 2006) as well as to provide detailed assessments of their conjugal tie and their relationship with their children (Widmer et al., 2003). In addition, a detailed module about non-normative events having occurred between waves 2 and 3, with a precise chronology (event history calendar), will be added together with data on ideational dimensions (subjective values and norms related to family and professional choices). A series of questions containing both factual data and opinions on time use will be added:- Diaries of both members of the couple (or of Ego and the person most important for her/him) during the two same "free" days, i.e. "normal" days (not during vacation, illness, travel or with special event) when both are not at their work place. Activities are recorded, as well the place and with whom they occur. - Questions about average weekly time in different activities, satisfaction of their time use will allow to analyses the impact of the critical events occurred in the recent past on changes in individuals and couples’ time use. The data collection, as for the two previous waves of the Panel, will be taken care of by an experienced survey institute in social science research.

In addition, a follow-up qualitative design will investigate specific family configurations over a period of 8 years in order to grasp the meaning and strategies underlying the quantitative results. Family configurations subject to qualitative inquiry will be selected on the basis of their responses of the quantitative questionnaire of wave 3. Qualitative interviews will be conducted with 80 individuals from 40 couples, either still together or separated/divorced. Interviews will be done separately with each individual and will be repeated two times (waves 3 and 4). The interview will focus on family configurations and their responses to family, occupational and
health non normative events. Qualitative data will be analyzed using the TAMS analyzer, an open source software designed for use in ethnographic and discourse research.

4. Research schedule

Year one: Preparation of the survey, test of the questionnaire, construction of the interview grid for the qualitative interview. Quantitative field work done by the Survey institute in collaboration with the research team. Qualitative interviews will be done by the research team.

Year 2 Interviews+Data analysis

Year 3 Data analysis / Writing of the research results.

Year 4. Preparation of the fourth wave (survey + qualitative interviews). They will take place in Year five).

In order to be able to fund the two additional waves, a budget of 250'000 Swiss frics per wave is necessary. This budget covers interviews with the two partners of each couple, - for a total of about 1800 interviews - within the three main linguistic areas of Switzerland. In addition to the funds for data collection, three doctoral students trained in sociology or other social sciences will work on the project over a period of four years.

Expected contributions to the NCCR proposal

The proposed project intends to understand how family configurations participate, or to the contrary, weaken circles of cumulative disadvantages for individual and contribute to compensate or precipitate vulnerable states. Based on a definition of families as large set of interdependencies beyond the nuclear family, it focuses on relational resources and strains in family life, in relation with other life domains, especially health and paid work, using an approach of families as configurations which permits to take the diversity and complexity of contemporary families into account when dealing with vulnerability.

The project has synergies with other IPs of the NCCR. The IP 1 (Spini et al) shares the focus on a dynamic relation between critical events and psycho-social resources in shaping vulnerability as a process of cumulative disadvantages. For health, we dialogue with IP 11 (Favez et al.) looking at breast cancer effects on partner interaction and on partners’ reciprocal support as moderator between cancer diagnosis and the quality of life; with the IP 12 (Perrig et al) focusing on the adaptation to the partner’s loss, with the IP 10 (Burton) which add the health dimension to the relationship to the job and family trajectories.

For paid work, there is a large literature on how family support interact with employment, with some authors for Switzerland stressing its moderating impact on work-family conflict by promoting practical solutions to couples with young children, while others emphasizing its effects on psycho-emotional adaptation impact to gendered inequalities (Seiger and Wiese, 2009; Ernst et al., 2009). Interactions will be sought with the IP 6 (LeFeuvre et al) and the IP 2 (Bolzmann) interested in the gender and ethnic differences in the way in which employment and family careers interact.