

Meet the Author Sessions

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Comments by Dr. Karin Wall, ISCTE, University of Lisbon

Introduction

Eric's CV and career:

Let me just say a few words about the author, his research interests and his research agenda over the last 20 years, so that you understand how this book and the Configurational Approach emerges.

Professor of sociology in the University of Geneva, before this based at the University of Lausanne, and, at the beginning of his career he also spent several years in the States, at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California at Irvine. This important period in the States, put him in contact with a diversity of theoretical perspectives and methodologies and also exposed him to the interactionist perspective in family research and also to the idea, to which I think he reacted, that the decline in marriage and the nuclear family was questioning family ties altogether.

Eric has lectured intensively and his courses cover a great diversity of topics – from basic sociology courses (Introduction to Sociology, methods in sociology, sociology of social regulation) to more specific topics related to his research interests (such family sociology and research, social networks and computer analysis of networks and relationships, concepts and methods of the lifecourse approach, the dynamics of small groups...)

I could say that Eric is “a sociologist of the Family...” since his research interests have always gravitated around families and family relationships, and the main questions/issues which drive his research (and the book on the Configurational Approach) are: what is a family in late modern society? In the context of growing pluralisation and individualization, does the family still matter to individuals? Does the family still have a function of social integration, or has this disappeared with the decline of the nuclear family and conjugal break-up? And, another driver question – what are family relationships about: support, emotions, intimacy but also tensions and conflict and how do these combine and impact on the quality of family life?

Eric Widmer is a very special sociologist of the family. Most of you are probably familiar with Eric's first books and articles on couples and conjugal functioning

(*Couples contemporains: cohesion, regulation and conflicts* (with Jean Kellerhals and René Levy, edited in 2003), after his first book edited in 1993 on mate selection in 19th century in Geneva.

Therefore, we might say, that Eric Widmer focuses on the inside of couples and the nuclear family (interactions, functions, conflict, quality). However, from the start, his approach to the family was much wider, in two important ways :

- First from the start he was looking for something that would take him beyond the conjugal bond and beyond the nuclear family. To make sense of the family, it had to be examined as a whole, including different ties (close blood, partnership, extended kinship ties, etc.). His first major research was in fact on siblings (*the sibling relationships of adolescents*, 1999). Gradually this focus on other relevant family relationships would lead to a central focus on the family as a Network.
- Secondly, (following major trends in Swiss/European sociology) the family is also seen in the context of social, historical and lifecourse constraints: social inequalities, historical change, social networks and their change across the lifecourse. Here he was strongly influenced by a number of sociological theories: the sociological theory of Norbert Elias in particular, Bourdieu on the different forms of capital, the developmental and life-cycle perspective from Duvall.

In summary, Eric Widmer is a very special sociologist of the family who combines different sociological theories and traditions.

And this was why I wanted to tell you a little bit about Eric's personal pathway in sociology, because it is important to understanding the major strengths of this book as they may not always be obvious to the reader.

A first major strength of the book is that this is the work of an author that has been working intensively on these issues for two decades – so the book represents a synthesis of research findings and of the author's thinking on the Late Modern Family. In this sense it is the product of maturity, it is a focal point, a marker, of his pathway and also of sociology of the family as a discipline with European sociology.

A second strong point of the book that I would like to mention is that family relationships are placed systematically within the broader context of social, generational and biographical change. We are not only trying to see if and in what ways individuals identify and build up a network of significant family relationships, we are also trying to see how they go about it in the context of larger social constraints and biographical pathways, in the context of life events and social markers that touched the family lives of individuals in different and relevant, sometimes dramatic, ways: becoming a parent, losing relatives,

migrating, breaking up a partnership, going through mental disorder problems etc..

All this accumulated knowledge on families and individuals, all these insights, have been drawn very carefully into the book.

Organization of the book

After this introduction, I would also like to give you a brief idea of what's in the book - how it is organized, what are the main objectives and research issues. I will organize my comments around two main points:

- a) What is the structure of the book and what are the main underlying issues?
- b) Second, in order to open up the discussion, I would like to ask the author a few questions

Three main issues organize the book:

A first and central issue is to address the fruitfulness of the configurational approach as a heuristic analytic tool to develop a new understanding of family relationships in late modernity. The book proposes an analysis of how interdependencies between partners, children and other individuals, such as relatives and friends, shape and are shaped by diverse family configurations.

A second issue addresses the contribution of families to social integration. The study takes on board the classic network analysis concept of social capital to look at family based social capital. Bonding and bridging social capital are its main components, and one of the objectives of the book is to understand if the functions of support and social integration filled by families are still central in contemporary societies. Overall the book shows that the diversification of family forms has not weakened people's commitments to each other, which are now mainly expressed through emotional and cognitive interdependencies - even though the material ones have not disappeared - that shape the diversity and complexity of family configurations structures.

A third central issue discusses the connections between family configurations and the long term dynamics of life trajectories, as well as with the various life events that take place in individuals' daily life in the short term. A central assumption is that family configurations are not static and that life trajectories offer many opportunities for new interdependencies to shape them. On the other hand, events like marriages, births, sickness, residential moves, work shifts, divorces or deaths of family members at the same time destroy and create family interdependencies.

Book structure

The book has 8 chapters but they may be divided into 4 main parts.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 addresses the main theoretical and methodological aims and assumptions of the configurational approach, explaining the main underlying issues, assumptions and how it may be applied to the study of complex and diverse family relationships. Relevant (old and new) concepts related to social network analysis are also examined: concepts such as configuration, interdependencies, social capital, and focus points (of the lifecourse) are considered as central.

What then is a family configuration?

Family configurations are defined as “sets of directly or indirectly interdependent persons sharing feelings of family belonging and connectedness” and the concept derives of course directly from Norbert Elias’ definition of configurations as “structures of mutually oriented and dependent people”. Individuals are interdependent in a configuration because each one fulfills some of the others’ needs for power, emotional proximity, financial and practical resources, sexuality or other socially defined needs.

Based on this theoretical stance, the configurational approach posits that couple and parent-child relationships are embedded in and shaped by the larger networks of interdependencies with relatives, friends and others. Families are thus seen as large, open and personal configurations rather than as small, closed and collectively organized groups.

Therefore, according to the author, the aim of the family configurations perspective is to study the complex patterns of interdependent personal relationships that define families in late modernity

The perspective is seen to be based on 3 key ideas or assumptions:

- 1) Family relationships that matter are not defined by institutional criteria such as being married or belonging to the same household. It is essential to go beyond these criteria and focus on the actual relationships that matter to individuals. Family interdependencies, what we need others for, and the tensions and conflicts that they set up, are given prime importance. As a result, one of the distinctive features of the family configurations method is that it focuses on all significant members of the family, rather than on only family members who provide support.

2) The configurational perspective rejects the assumption that family dyads can be analyzed as independent and separate entities each with their own logic. Instead, it focuses on the influence of the larger network of interdependencies in which each dyad is embedded.

3) The temporal and spatial nature of family configurations must be taken in account. The Configurational Approach to the family measures change and stability in family relationships across the life course and across historical and generational time.

Chapters 2 to 6

Chapters 2 to 6 make up the empirical hard core of the book on the diversity and functions of family configurations

In Chapter 2, on “Who are my family members”, the author gives us several examples, taken from both qualitative and quantitative research carried out in the States and in Switzerland, of the different types of family configurations and how they go beyond the nuclear family.

For example: The case study of Betty, an American woman who has experienced both divorce and remarriage is used to exemplify how a family configuration can correspond to a widespread open network. Betty’s family configuration is based on 9 core members who are directly or indirectly interdependent and includes children, ex-spouses, ex-mother-in-law, friends co-workers, siblings and their partners. Even though some family members are obviously shared by several individuals, every individual has to a large extent a family configuration of his own.

One of the main conclusions, however, is also that this plurality in the composition of family configurations is a bounded plurality or diversity. Overall, the author stresses (and he illustrates this throughout the different chapters), that there are a limited number of configurations that emerge. His research findings point to 7 main or more frequent types of family configurations (p27): the *beanpole* configuration (which focuses on blood relatives form 3 generations, bi-lateral), the *kinship configuration* (which may be mother- or father oriented), the *conjugal* configuration (focusing on partners and their parents), the *friendship configuration* (including a large number of friends), the *post divorce* configuration (large number of of step-relatives), and the *sibling* configuration (centred on the siblings of the respondents and their partners and offspring).

Another important conclusion is that the various types of family configurations reveal the existence of a certain number of informal principles which account for

the inclusion of individuals in family configurations. Blood continues to be a major criterion used to identify significant family members. Partnership is a second major criterion, and the development of Families by choice is a third criterion for defining family members, with friends making up a high proportion of significant family relationships. A 4th criterion is the community of siblings.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 is entitled “Family Social Capital” and focuses on the effects of family configurations on social capital. Family configuration composition and variations have a strong impact on the social capital that they make available to individuals. Individuals have unequal access to family relational resources that are meaningful for mastering key dimensions of life such as conjugal or parent-child relationships or avoiding depression or other psychological problems. Family based social capital can take two main forms: bonding and bridging.

The author shows that there are significant differences in the structures of social capital provided by family configurations according to their composition. For instance, family configurations based on blood ties and intergenerational relationships provide a bonding type of social capital, with much collective support and trust, but little individual autonomy, as more support implies more control. Quite distinctly, family configurations based on friends provide bridging social capital by which family life opens up to a variety of ties, but more individual relational work is needed, as the individual has an intermediary position in the configuration. The development of bridging social capital is emphasized as one of the changing features of family life in late modernity, as support imposed by dense family configurations based on rights of birth or marriage is being replaced by relational structures, in which individualized relational resources play an important role.

Chapter 4 -“Family Conflicts”

In chapter 4 one can see that not only family support, but also family conflict creates interdependencies between individuals and their family members. As a matter of fact they can coexist in family configurations, creating ambivalent commitments and relationships.

The analysis shows that conflict and ambivalence are structural. In general, they are the consequence of emotional closeness and the interference associated with it. On the other hand, conflict and ambivalence are more likely to occur in dense family configurations, because individuals are bound to others in transitive relational dyads, from which they cannot escape.

Therefore, the beanpole family configuration has the highest rate of ambivalence, while the friendship one has the lowest. Family configurations

based on intergenerational ties produce at the same time a high level of support and a high level of conflict in relationships, which makes them highly ambivalent.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus more in depth on specific family configurations

Chapter 5 is on “Post divorce families” and Chapter 6 is on the family configurations of Individuals with psychiatric problems

This chapter shows that family configurations stemming from divorce and remarriage are diverse in their composition and interdependencies (as they include many step-relatives). Having parents who went through divorce and remarriage is associated with a deficit of blood relationships and an over-representation of alliance relationships. As a result the centrality of the individual in the family configuration is higher, and the number of family members directly connected with the respondent by supportive interdependencies is small. Overall, children have an intermediary position in the family configuration both for conflict and support, as family members do not provide access to dense interdependencies, but rather individualized ones-that the author refers to as divorce or remarriage chains.

But findings also point to a second very interesting conclusion: the fact that the transition to divorce in many cases does not lead to the post divorce configuration focusing on step relatives and ex-spouses. Only a small proportion of individuals who went through divorce and remarriage belong to a post-divorce family configuration, as many developed other sets of interdependencies, with their new in-laws or with their blood relatives, which twist their family configuration into other directions. Many also invest on the development of horizontal ties with siblings, friends or on reinventing a nuclear family. In this sense, labeling a family situation as “intact”, “divorced” or “blended” does not show us the complexity and diversity of interdependencies among family members.

What we could describe as part 3 of the book (chapters 7 and 8) focuses on the relation between time and family configurations.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 focuses on “short term changes in families”, by stressing the development of focus points as a key mechanism to understand how family interdependencies evolve in the short term. In this perspective, family interdependencies come into being because some individuals are led by the circumstances to care for the same persons or activities, in other words, because they share a focus point. Therefore, family configurations change

because individuals and their family members shift personal concerns for persons, activities and things, which become the main organizing principle of their family life. Marriage, birth, health problems, residential moves, divorces, or the death of family members are associated with the destruction/or reactivation of older focus points and the development of new ones, and thus to the addition or drop out of family members from family configurations.

Individuals with psychological problems experience a distinct type of family change in the short-term, as many of them develop a high turn-over rate in their family relationships. A variety of non-normative events, that happen to them or to their family members, modify their family interdependencies.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 explores the influence of life trajectories on change and diversity in family configurations. Findings point to two interesting conclusions.

First, that family configurations are made up of several layers of people associated with the various stages of individual lives: parents and siblings come early on and they often survive as meaningful family members in older adulthood, as well as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. In young adulthood another layer of family members develops, as with partnerships a new series of relatives are acquired. The transition to parenthood involves a change of focus for intimate relationships, with friends dropping in significance. Divorce and remarriage reorganize family interdependencies again, while creating another layer of family members.

A second important conclusion is that life trajectories have become more heterogeneous during the last 40 years and this means that a greater variety of configurations have emerged, since additional sediments provide the ground for additional focus points. However, the chapter shows that the diversification of life trajectories is not synonymous of lower constraints on individuals. On the contrary, individuals have to deal with a variety of constraining situations that highly structure the development of family interdependencies.

Chapter 9

Finally in the last chapter (“Individualized families”) the author discusses his main conclusions.