Book Chapter

Actively generating one's family: How elders shape their family configurations

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Abstract

This study explores the ways by which family weness is shaped in later life, and how it relates to social capital, conflict and ambivalence. Data were derived from a sub-sample of 578 elders (aged 65 and older) from the Vivre/Leben/Vivere (VLV) study, a large survey addressing family life and health conditions of older people in Switzerland. We identified six family configurations: 'Conjugal', 'Son', 'Daughter', 'Sibling', 'Kinship', and 'Sparse'. These were associated with different key life course factors and gave rise to different types of social capital and to distinct patterns of ambivalence. With the pluralization of life courses, individuals develop various ways of creating their family weness which has indeed an impact on family resources in later life.

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ACTIVELY GENERATING ONE'S FAMILY: HOW ELDERS SHAPE THEIR FAMILY CONFIGURATIONS*

1. *Introduction*

The pluralization of the life course has increased the diversity of family trajectories of one birth cohort after the other from the nineteen sixties onwards (Kohli, 2007; Widmer - Ritschard, 2009). Until now, as each cohort reaches old age, it has presented more diverse family contexts than the previous one. Although interest for the diversity of family contexts in old age has developed in gerontology (Silverstein - Giarrusso, 2010), few studies have focused on family contexts as defined by individuals. Families are usually assumed to be rather standard in old age, with a focus on spouses and children. This contribution challenges this assumption, as life courses have become more complex, with likely consequences for configurations of family relationships.

The Family ''we'' or ''weness'' may actually be much more diverse in old age than it is usually assumed. For Cooley (1929 [1909]), identification to a ''we'' is critical for human beings in giving rise to moral ideas indispensable for group maintenance and development. This is obviously also the case for family weness, which plays a key role in the structuration of family interactions and identity of family members (Kellerhals - Widmer - Levy, 2004). Accordingly, family is hypothesized to be actively generated by individuals. However, as in all human processes, in building family ''we-ness'', individuals are constrained by their interdependences and subjected to a balance of social tensions existing in their personal networks (Castrén - Widmer, 2015). Based on this stance, we propose to study the

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families of individuals in old age by starting with individuals' own definition of their family rather than by imposing preconceived definitions of family based on institutional or normative criteria.

Individuals' agency is however constrained by the superseding logic of their memberships in family configurations (Widmer, 2010). Elias (1994) defined configurations as "structures of mutually oriented and dependent people" (p. 214). Individuals, Elias (1994) proposed, are interdependent in a configuration because each one fulfils some of the others' needs for social recognition, power, emotional proximity, financial and practical resources, or other socially defined needs (Quintaneiro, 2005). As such, configurations have to deal with power issues: Resources are scarce, and individuals while cooperating, also compete for them within groups. Cooperation and competition create tensions and conflicts, which are beyond individual control. The patterns of interdependences that characterize any family configuration, therefore, are largely unintended (Widmer - Giudici - Le Goff - Pollien, 2009). They, in turn, shape the cooperation strategies and the conflicts that occur in each dyad belonging to it (Widmer, 2010). On the basis of this theoretical stance, the configurational perspective on families posits that family relationships such as conjugal processes or intergenerational solidarity must be referred to their larger relational context and its power balance (Widmer - Jallinoja, 2008). It stresses, on one hand, that individual projects about their family relationships are shaped by the larger networks of interdependences with relatives, friends, and others in which they are embedded. On the other hand, family configurations stem from the correspondence or disjunction of various individual life courses and their related agency. This contribution holds that as individuals now reaching old age and the family members to whom they are related have experienced destandardization processes in their life courses, the constitution of their family weness is likely to have followed a variety of paths, with consequences for the organization of interdependences, both negative and positive. The next sections provide a series of empirical findings and interpretations related with this claim.

2. *Who are significant family members in old age?*

In recent decades, a series of demographic trends has changed the face of the family in old age. Increased life expectancy and the decrease in fertility have shaped "the beanpole family" with a complex mix of family generations (Bengtson - Rosenthal - Burton, 1990). Living longer, older peo-

ple have a greater likelihood of facing the death of family members of their own cohort, such as their partner, siblings or distant kin, with some individuals even outliving their own children (Bickel - Girardin, 2008). Low fertility as well as delayed parenthood have contributed to the development of childlessness among different aging cohorts (Schnettler - Wöhler, 2014). In addition, new family forms such as step-families have become more frequent since the 1960s, bringing with them the consequence of an increased diversity of pools of relatives in old age (Silverstein - Giarrusso, 2010).

Scholars should also pay attention to the gap existing between available relatives and significant family members. Although distinct pools of relatives offer different alternatives for the development of significant family ties, the presence of such pools does not in itself guarantee that meaningful family relationships are developed (Connidis, 2010). Individuals in old age develop significant relationships with specific relatives rather than with all of them. Indeed, scholars have for instance emphasized the unequal intimacy linking individuals with their siblings in old age, and consequently with their nephews/nieces (Connidis, 2010), but also in parent-adult child relationships (Bengtson, 2001). Divorce earlier in life, which may have disrupted parent-child relationships, is likely to explain some of the variations in the meaningfulness of intergenerational relationships (Shapiro - Cooney, 2007). As a result, some individuals might disengage from relationships with their children and grandchildren, and compensate by considering emotionally-invested friends as belonging to their family realm (van Tilburg - Thomése, 2010). These trends suggest that there may be a variety of ways of defining significant family members in old age, and that therefore, family weness should not be considered as a mirror of family demography.

In order to better grasp family weness in old age and see how it relates with patterns of interdependences, we use the Geneva subsample of the VLV (Vivre/Leben/Vivere) study. VLV is a large, interdisciplinary survey on the life and health conditions of people aged 65 and above in Switzerland (see Oris et al., 2016). The VLV survey was conducted in five Swiss cantons with a total of 3,635 participants who either reside in community dwellings or in institutions. Stratified by sex and age, and randomly selected, the overall sample is representative of the studied population. Our analyses focused on 578 individuals living in Geneva at home or in institutions, all of whom were able to answer the questions themselves (mean age =78 years, age range from 65 to 101, 49% are female, 61% have a partner, co-resident or not, 82% have at least one living child, 68% have living sib-

lings, 40% live alone, 25% have difficulties in performing on or more of eight activities of daily living (ADLs), and 7% live in institution).

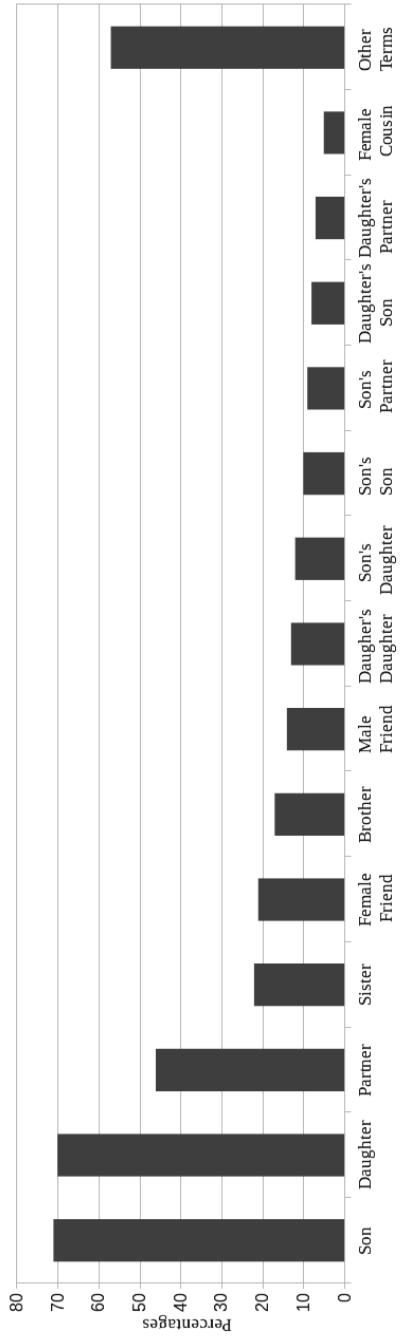
A free listing technique was used to identify all individuals the respondents considered to be significant family members at the time of the interview in order to find out what types of family weness are present in old age (see Widmer - Aeby - Sapin, 2013). Respondents were limited to listing a maximum of five significant family members because of time constraint due to the multifaceted VLV survey. The term ''family'' was deliberately left undefined in order to elicit the personal definitions of the family. Participants were instructed that the term ''significant'' referred to people in their family who have played a role, either positive or negative, in their life during the past year. Participants first listed all significant family members using their first names or initials. Then, they were asked to provide a detailed description of their tie with each family member and the sociodemographic profile of each of them. Figure 1 shows the distribution of family terms, i.e., the percentage of respondents who cited each term.

Overall, 70% of respondents cited children as significant family members. Current partners were cited by 46% of respondents. Siblings and grandchildren were also well represented. A minority of respondents extended their significant family configuration to distant relatives by including cousins. In-laws were largely mentioned: Daughters-in-law were cited in 9% of the cases and sons-in-law, in 7% of cases. Surprisingly, 21% of respondents cited female friends as significant family members and 14% cited male friends. By these counts, significant family members extended well beyond the partner and the children.

In order to capture the various logics behind citations of specific family members as significant, we constructed a typology based on clustering procedures (Girardin - Widmer, 2015). In the first cluster, the 'Conjugal' family configuration, respondents were centered on their partner and their children, whereas other blood relatives were almost absent. The second cluster – the ''Son'' family configuration – focused on the son, the son's partner, and his children. Respondents' partner was under-cited. In ''Daughter'' family configurations, daughters and daughters' daughters were largely cited as significant family members whereas the inclusion of respondents' partner was once again quite rare. Furthermore, daughters' partners were less often cited than were sons' partners in ''Son'' family configurations. Therefore, the ''Daughter'' family configuration was largely centered on female family members.

The fourth cluster, ''Sibling'', included respondents who mainly cited their siblings as significant family members. Sisters were more often cit-

Figure 1 - *Family weness stemming from individual definitions*



ed than brothers. Siblings' partner and siblings' children were rarely mentioned. The fifth cluster, ''Kinship'', showed a strong orientation toward the category 'other terms'. This cluster featured a great diversity of family members with a variety of relatives, either related by blood or marriage such as in-laws, cousins, or nephews/nieces, but also stepchildren, godchildren or friends considered to be family members. Finally, the sixth cluster, ''Sparse'', included mostly respondents who either named nobody as significant family members or primarily mentioned very few friends. In terms of the number of cases, Conjugal family configurations came first (39%), followed by Sparse (19%), Sibling (15%), Daughter (11%), Son (8%) and Kinship (8%) family configurations.

Overall, family weness is constructed in distinct ways by individuals in old age, some focusing on their partner and children, others on children only. Some develop significant relationships with their siblings and do not include either a partner or children; others yet invest in their cousins or friends, as where a significant minority do not have significant family connections at all.

3. *Family weness and life trajectories*

We now turn to the shaping factors of family weness associated with the life course. The constitution of family weness has much to do with the ways by which individuals have constructed their life trajectories (Widmer, 2010; De Carlo - Aeby - Widmer, 2014). Indeed, family weness is the result of a long-term cumulative process, in which various decisions concerning marriage, fertility, death, separation and divorce, but also migration, health and job orientations play out. Widowhood, separation, and divorce are associated with a reorganization of family ties by individuals (Silverstein - Giarrusso, 2010). Having gained more autonomy, widowed and divorced people have a larger proportion of extended kin and friends than married people (Cornwell, 2011). Widowed individuals are more likely than married individuals not only to develop relationships with siblings and make new friends, but also to receive support from them (Ha, 2008). Therefore, their personal networks are more heterogeneous, which might directly translate into the composition of their family configurations and their family weness. Particularly at risk of losing significant ties with their children, divorced men sometimes seek to compensate such losses by investing in other ties, such as in siblings or friendship (Campbell - Connidis - Davies, 1999). Childless individuals also invest in alternative family ties

such as with siblings, diverse extended kin or friends who, consequently, are perceived as family members because they possess important emotional support potential (Schnettler - Wöhler, 2014).

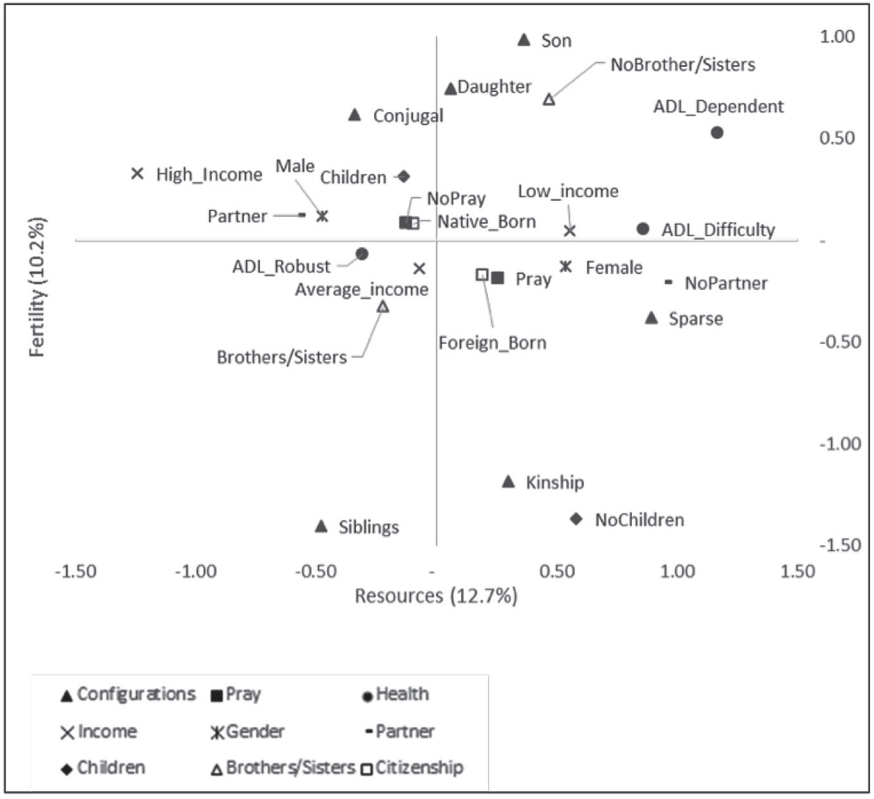
In order to explore the relationship between family configurations, pool of available relatives and social positions stemming from life course experiences, we applied a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA). MCA is a non-linear multivariate analysis method for representing underlying structures in a set of observations described by a set of categorical variables (Avolio et al., 2013). This descriptive method allows for a better understanding of how response categories are interrelated (Abdi - Valentin, 2007). Decomposing a matrix into its basic structure, MCA provides two main dimensions that are usually sufficient to synthesize the most important information contained in contingency tables (Desbois, 2008). All response categories can be plotted along the two dimensions created by MCA (axes in the plot). The interpretation of results is based upon proximities and distances between response categories in the plot, as those that are close to one another present similar patterns of responses and those that are distant have dissimilar patterns (Abdi - Valentin, 2007; Desbois, 2008; Avolio et al., 2013).

Figure 2 shows how family configuration types and their explanatory factors are positioned along the first two dimensions produced by MCA. The first dimension (horizontal axis) differentiated individuals based on the availability of various resources. Response categories that measured an advantageous position in society (average-high income, male, native born), availability of a pool of relatives (partner, brothers/sisters, children) and good functional health (ADL-robust) were located on the left side of the horizontal axis, while those reflecting a low social position (low income, female, foreign born), a small pool of available relatives (no partner, no brothers/sisters, no child), and poor functional health (ADL-with Difficulty and ADL-dependent) were positioned on the right side of the horizontal axis. This horizontal axis labelled ''Resources'' explained 13% of the total variance. The second dimension (vertical axis) discriminated individuals who had children (upper part of the graph) from those who did not have any (lower part). This second dimension, which referred to the existence of children, was labelled 'Fertility' and accounted for 10% of the total variance.

Regarding the six family configurations, they were projected on different areas of the graph. The Conjugal family configuration was located on the left side of the horizontal axis (''having resources'') and the upper side of the vertical axis (''having children''). According to its position on the

graph, this type of family configuration was associated with being a male, native born, in a good functional health, having a good income, having a partner and children. As positioned on the left side of the horizontal axis (‘‘having resources’’) and on the lower side of the vertical axis (‘‘having no children’’), the Sibling family configuration was related to being a male, native born, being in a good functional health, having a good income, having a partner, having siblings, but no children.

Figure 2 - *Projection of the first two dimensions of the MCA, after rotation*



Daughter and Son family configurations were located on the right side of the horizontal (‘‘having no resources’’) and on the upper side of the axis (‘‘having children’’). These types of family configurations were correlated with being a female, foreign born, being in a poor functional health, having a low income, having no siblings, no partner, but having children.

Finally, according to their position on the graph, Kinship and Sparse family configurations were related to a lack of children, of partner, and of siblings, being a female, foreign born, being in a poor functional health and having a low income. Interestingly, older adults who prayed at least once a week where also located in that part of the graph, while praying seldom or never was associated with having developed a conjugal family, being a male, having high income, having a partner and children and being native born.

Because of gender differences in life expectancy, older men are more likely to have a current partner than older women, and consequently being part of Conjugal or of Sibling family configuration. However, when men and women have no partner (single, divorced and widowed), there are strong gender differences. Additional analyses stress that being unmarried – either single, divorced or widowed – is more likely to be related to ''Sparse'' family configurations for men than for women. Especially divorced men have a higher likelihood of being embedded within a ''Sparse'' family configuration. Having no partner – mostly through divorce – is associated only for men with a higher risk of disengagement from different kinds of relatives.

Overall, the active creation of family configurations by individuals in old age is bounded by a set of structural factors stemming from the life paths that they took. In some respects, the differences made by gender, income, health status and, above all, demographic outcomes, participate to processes of cumulation of advantages and disadvantages (Dannefer, 1987) that lead to the creation of distinct family configurations.

4. *Family weness and social capital*

Let us focus now on the relational consequences of the various lay definitions of family members. The configurational perspective on families indeed stresses the importance of family ties as resources responding to individual needs (Widmer, 2010). One main concern about families is the ability of their members to develop supportive relationships, as family relationships constitute social capital (Furstenberg - Kaplan, 2004; Donati, 2007). Social capital was defined as individual resources - such as companionship, love, affection and support - stemming from the possession of a durable network of acquaintance or recognition (Bourdieu, 1986) that can be accessed and/or mobilized in case of need (Moren-Cross - Lin, 2006).

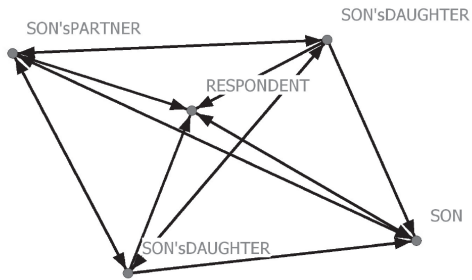
The structural characteristics of interrelations among configuration

members were said to shape the flow of resources, which defines the access of each member to social capital (Moren-Cross - Lin, 2006). Two types of social capital were distinguished in literature. *Bonding social capital* is present in personal networks in which most members are tightly interconnected through strong, long-lasting, intimate, multitask ties with a high frequency of contacts. Bonding social capital enhances expectations, claims, obligations, and trust among members because of the increase in the collective nature of normative control and support (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Highly interconnected, network members may coordinate themselves to provide the necessary resources and organize caregiving duties in cases of need – a situation shown to be beneficial in old age. However, bonding social capital, which characterizes dense networks, may also present obstacles to autonomy, a freedom highly valued by many older adults who face a growing dependency towards their alters (Cornwell, 2011). *Bridging social capital*, on the other hand, stems from an intermediary position between various weakly-connected subgroups in personal networks (Burt, 2001). Weak connections between subgroups of a personal network create holes that provide individuals – by being intermediaries between otherwise unconnected members – opportunities to mediate and control the resources that make their network members interdependent. Bridging social capital allows individuals to access more diverse and alternative resources that can be activated under different circumstances and with a greater level of autonomy (Cornwell, 2011).

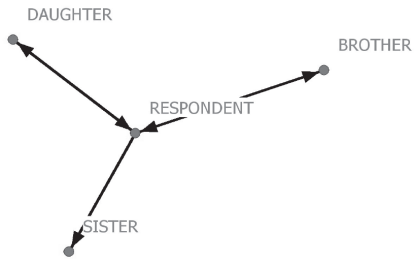
Figure 3 exemplifies bonding, bridging, low and no social capital by four cases taken from the dataset. In the first case on the upper left (3a), everybody is connected to everybody else in the family configuration by a supportive tie. Support is almost always reciprocal, i.e. individuals provide as well as receive support. The respondent has no centrality in the family configuration as others play an active role in support provision. As such, support has a collective nature. Quite, distinctly, the second case (3b) features bridging social capital, with a less dense supportive network and a central position of the respondent in support provision. In that case, the respondent indeed bridges separated parts of his family configuration. The two cases on the lower part of Figure 3 show situations where neither bonding nor bridging social capital are provided. Supportive ties are only few (3c) or do not show up (3d), density is null, and respondents are not at all central in their own family configurations.

What may account for the development of such distinct types of relational resources in families? Our empirical research on family configurations in old age (Girardin - Widmer, 2015) shows that bonding social

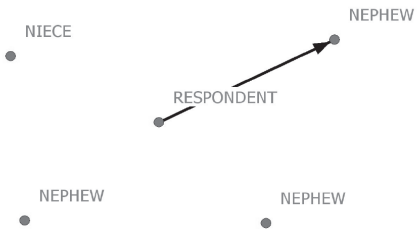
Figure 3 - *Types of social capital (Illustrations)*



3a) A sample of *Bonding* social capital (Son family configuration)



3b) A sample of *Bridging* social capital (Sibling family configuration)



3c) A sample of *low* social capital (Kinship family configuration)

3d) A sample of *no* social capital (Sparse family configuration)

capital and bridging social capital are unequally distributed according to the composition of family configurations. Conjugal and Son family configurations feature strong bonding social capital but no or very little bridging social capital, whereas Sibling family configurations provide strong bridging social capital but only little bonding social capital[1]. Daughter and Kinship family configurations provide low bonding and bridging social capital. Sparse family configurations provide neither bonding nor bridging social capital. Overall the constitution of "weness" has large consequences for the provision of social capital in families. It is the conjunction of several significant family members that accounts for the development of bridging or bonding social capital, rather than the mere presence of such or such category of kin. For instance, the presence of children is conducive of bonding social capital only when a partner – essentially the respondent's partner in the Conjugal family configuration or the Son's partner in the Son family configuration – is also present. Siblings and friends constitute bridging social capital only when children and partners are not included in the family configuration. In that sense, family configurations go beyond relationships in specific dyads, as relational resources available to the elderly, or given by them, depend on the overall organization of their primary group, including their interdependences.

5. *The negative side of family configurations: conflict and ambivalence*

Family research often focuses on the positive dimensions of family relationships associated with family solidarity and social capital. In the configurational perspective, social capital produced by families is one side of the coin only, as the normativity of family support in conjunction with the relative lack of the corresponding necessary resources to live up to it, trigger various forms of tensions and conflicts, which were encapsulated under the concept of ambivalence by gerontologists. Following Kurt Lüscher's typology on intergenerational ambivalence (2000, 2002, 2005; Lüscher - Hoff, 2013), we proposed to study ambivalence in family configurations by referring to four patterns of conflict and support – *Emancipation*, *Solidarity*, *Captivation* and *Atomization* (Girardin et al., submitted).

Solidarity is characterised by dense supportive ties, with low density of

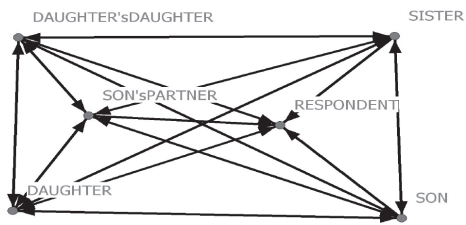
[1] For an explanation about the interesting difference between Son family configurations, which create bonding social capital, and Daughter family configurations, which are conducive of low social capital (see Girardin - Widmer, 2015).

conflicting ties; in that first case, family support is actively promoted by family members while tension and conflict are avoided resulting in a relatively low degree of ambivalence. *Captivation* is characterised by a high density of conflict and a low density of support; family members may feel forced to remain together due to strong family obligations and/or lack of their own resources, and this makes them highly dependent on their family network. *Captivation* presents a rather low degree of ambivalence because family ties are burdened by tensions and conflict, with limited support. *Atomization* is characterised by a low density of both support and conflict; this pattern is associated with a low degree of ambivalence. This type arises in family configurations in which family members are not interconnected. Therefore, support peters out faster over the long term and tensions are resolved by emotional disengagement and separation, putting older adults at a potential risk of loneliness. Finally, *Emancipation* mixes high density of support with high density of conflict; tensions may arise when family members have to negotiate their autonomy in dense, supportive and possibly oppressive family configurations.

Figure 4 provides an illustration of the *Solidarity* and *Captivation* patterns by using cases taken from the dataset. In the first case on the upper side of the graph, everybody is connected to everybody else in the family configuration by a supportive tie (4a), as where only very few or no conflict relationships are present in the family configuration (4b). Quite, distinctly, the second case (lower part of Figure 4) features family *Captivation*, because the low density of support (4c) is in that case associated with quite a number of conflict ties as well (4d).

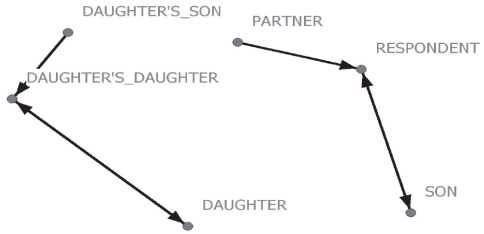
In the Geneva subsample of the VLV study, 31% of respondents were embedded in the Solidarity pattern, 23% in the Emancipation pattern, 9% in the Captivation pattern, and 37% in the Atomization pattern. *Emancipation* and *Solidarity* were more likely to develop when resources, such as income, health, and partnership, are available, while *Captivation* and *Atomization* occurred more often when such resources were lacking. This result is consistent with previous findings stressing that the availability of resources contributes to sustaining support within family configurations, whereas their scarcity challenges the balance of support exchanges within family networks (Connidis, 2003; Hillcoat-Nallétamby - Phillips, 2011; Offer, 2012). Fewer resources mean being less able to sustain reciprocity in family ties, especially when coupled with support needs. This creates strain on family members who feel that they have to fulfil their family obligations (Lüscher - Pillemer, 1998; Connidis - McMullin, 2002; Willson - Shuey - Elder - Wickrama, 2006). Such situations lead to tensions and

Figure 4 - *Patterns of conflict and support "solidarity" and "captivation" (Illustrations)*

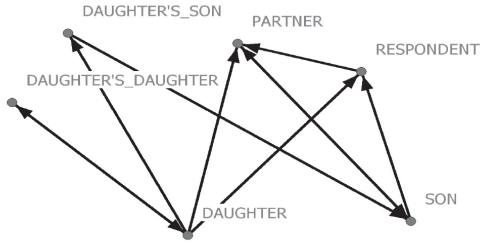


4a) *Solidarity* in a Son family configuration: Support

4b) *Solidarity:* Conflict



4c) *Captivation* in a Daughter family configuration: Support



4d) *Captivation:* Conflict

conflict throughout family configurations and, sometimes, to disengagement and isolation in cases of severely limited resources (Offer, 2012).

The composition of family configurations again played a key role for the development of ambivalence patterns in old age (Girardin et al., submitted). The presence of children, which implies strong family obligations, was associated with a high level of conflict. Family configurations focused on children were associated with two distinct patterns of conflict and support according to the availability of older adults' resources. *Emancipation* occurred when sufficient resources – such as good functional health, high income and partnership – are available to sustain support exchanges and better share care responsibilities within the family network. *Captivation* developed when resources were lacking, leading to strong tensions and weak support. In such cases, the scarcity of resources made support obligations between older parents and adult children difficult to fulfil (Offer, 2012). Conversely, the absence of children was related to low levels of conflict in family configurations, as it implies a possibility for more elective involvement in one's family (Campbell - Connidis - Davies, 1999; Schnettler - Wöhler, 2014). In such family configurations, older adults maintain mostly satisfying and supportive ties, while disengaging from tense ones, resulting in two different patterns of conflict and support depending upon the availability of resources. *Solidarity* occurs *w*hen health, economic (income) and demographic (partnership) resources are sufficient to foster support exchanges while *Atomization* develops when resources are insufficient. In such situations, family ties are disengaged as they are not sustained by strong support obligations associated with intergenerational ties.

Family social capital therefore often comes with a cost, as those family configurations focused on intergenerational ties without the support of a partner or of siblings are associated with high levels of stress and conflicts, especially when financial resources are weak and functional health of the elderly is poor. Men and women are distinct in these regards. Women are more likely than men to experience *Captivation* or *Atomization* because they have a higher risk of facing diminishing resources in later life due to widowhood, decrease in income, and decline in functional health. Thus, gender inequality in later life results from the accumulation of dis/advantages in terms of health, economic (income) and demographic (partnership) resources over the life course related to their differential position in society and their longer life expectancy (see Moen, 1996; Arber - Davidson - Ginn, 2003; Dannefer, 2003; Wanner - Sauvain-Dugerdil - Guilley - Hussy, 2005; Willson - Shuey - Helder - Wickrama, 2006).

6. *Conclusion*

Configurations of significant family members are various in old age. Like individuals in other age groups (Widmer, 2010), older adults develop a diversity of family configurations and family weness. Individuals of that age group actively generate their family contexts by stressing unequally partners, children, siblings, friends and holders of other family statuses, as significant family members. In this regard, the constitution of family configurations has an obvious dimension of agency and activity. Indeed, individuals may choose to disregard some relatives while strongly investing in others. When older adults, during an open-ended interview such as the one proposed in the VLV study, chose to include a friend as a significant family member, while disregarding an existing sibling or even a child, they indeed stressed to themselves and to the interviewer that they were able to make choices and to hierachize or prioritize people of their personal networks as significant family members. The social processes behind these choices may not be easy and painless ones, but they nevertheless happen in daily life of many individuals, who, facing diminishing resources, choose to be more selective while growing older (Carstensen, 1992).

Actively generating family contexts fosters in turn distinct types of social capital and different patterns of ambivalence. Developing a Conjugal or a Sibling family configuration means getting an access to distinct types of social capital, whose consequences in terms of conflict and ambivalence strongly vary. The likelihood of experiencing one's family environment as supportive and/or tense to a great extent depends on the family statuses of the persons who contribute to it. The active creation of family weness by the elderly is however constrained by the position in society that they achieved during their life course. Therefore, family weness, as defined by each individual, constitutes a key factor of cumulative advantages or disadvantages in old age (Dannefer, 2003).

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