Families on the Move.
Insights on Family Configurations
of Individuals Undergoing Psychotherapy

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Family contexts of individuals undergoing psychotherapy are usually considered an anomaly by sociological research. Their variety, complexity, and instability are not well served by standard sociological approaches of the family using survey designs and random sampling or in-depth qualitative interviewing. The strong link existing between psychological health and family relationships was falsely interpreted as a sign that these relationships only responded to psychological causes and processes and therefore that they belonged to another research field, namely clinical psychology. This chapter takes the opposite stand and affirms that studying those family contexts from a sociological perspective will lead to new insights on their functioning, which may help family psychology to move forward by taking a more varied set of dimensions into account. As for sociology, those family contexts belong to a variety of family experiences which are especially revealing of the changing nature of the family in post-modernity.

The configurational approach considers families open systems characterized by complex and often indirect sets of interdependencies (See Introduction). This approach may be especially suited for studying the moving family contexts of individuals who are undergoing psychotherapy. Sadly enough, the definition of family contexts is generally considered a trivial issue by family researchers. In most cases, it is set by using the limit of the household as unproblematic criteria (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1999; Levin, 1993; Widmer, 1999). Since the seventies, however, some scholars have underlined the idea that family as a concept is subject to distinct interpretations and extends well beyond the nuclear family. Firth and colleagues in their classical study on kinship in East London (Firth, Hubert & Forge, 1970) underlined that the concept of family is used in at least four ways: (a) The term "family" is employed

for kin, with a variety of practices, which includes ascendants, descendants, collaterals, and affines; (b) A second usage is associated with large sibling groups in adulthood; and (c) a third way is with the most intimate family ties, self, spouse and children, respectively; (d) A fourth usage is extremely general, including under this denomination kinship ties as well as non-kinship ties. Despite the importance of examining how individuals undergoing psychotherapy define their family configurations, almost no research has been done in the last decade that tackles this issue empirically.

This issue might be especially important, as there is an interrelation between the composition of family configurations and the relational resources they provide to individuals. In recent publications (Widmer, 2006; Widmer, 2007), we emphasized that family configurations lead to two distinct types of social capital. In dense family configurations, most, if not all individuals, are interconnected. This situation enhances expectations, claims, obligations, and trust among members because of the increase of the collective nature of normative control (Coleman, 1988). If any family member fails to conform to the group's expectations at one point, then he or she is likely to have several other configuration members jointly react against this situation. Dense family configurations also facilitate communication by multiplying the number of information channels and reducing the number of intermediaries between any two configuration members (Baker, 1984). Finally, in dense family configurations, support has a collective nature, as several individuals are likely to coordinate their efforts when helping another. On the other hand, family configurations characterized by fewer connections between subgroups provide brokerage opportunities (Burt, 1995, 2001). Fewer connections between subgroups of a family configuration create "holes" in the structure, which provide some persons – brokers – with opportunities to mediate the flow of information between family members and, hence, control the projects that bring them together (Burt, 2001).

These results suggest that individuals in psychotherapy may have access to distinct relational resources partly depending on the composition of their family configurations. Rather than considering families as nuclear by principle, starting from lay definitions of significant family contexts may help psychologists and sociologists to understand better the family dynamics in which individuals are embedded and how they change through time. This chapter describes the family configurations of a sample of individuals who are undergoing psychotherapy and the relational resources that these configurations provide to them. Then, it discusses ways in which family configurations

may change through time. It intends to reveal some of the long-term as well as short-term logics behind changes affecting families of individuals facing psychological frailty.

Data and Instrument

The overall sample includes 61 individuals, all of whom are undergoing psychotherapy in a practice set in the French area of Switzerland[1]. On average, respondents are in their mid-forties. Their average age is 43 with a standard deviation of 10.5 and 74% are women. They present a variety of severe psychological disorders, such as borderline trouble, psychosis, bipolar trouble, and anxiety or mood disorders. Individuals with a low level of education are overrepresented in this sample. About half of the respondents have already been institutionalized in a psychiatric facility at one point in their life.

Respondents had to fill out the *family network method*, an egocentric network method that permits the collection of systematic data on family configurations (Widmer, 1999; Widmer & La Farga, 2000; Widmer, Chevalier, & Dumas, 2005). It is based first on a free listing of family members by respondents who are asked to define their family configurations. Respondents are later asked to estimate all relationships of support, conflict, and influence that exist within their family configuration, not only between themselves and their family members but also among their family members. They did it every two to three months during the period of a year and one half. Forty-two patients over 61 participated in the five waves of interviews. Dropouts were due mostly to individuals quitting the therapy.

The Composition of Family Configurations

Based on the *Family Network Method*, we followed a procedure that was similar in set up to another research project on young adults without clinical background (Widmer, 2006). We applied cluster analysis on the free listing of family members that was done by the 61 individuals who were included in

the study. A total of 251 family configurations were included in the analysis, as up to five waves per individual were possible. This analysis has led to the constitution of five clusters, which are described in Table 1.

Cluster one (18% of family configurations) focuses on the *nuclear family* that includes a large number of children and, in almost all cases, a part-ner. Other categories are systematically underrepresented. The average size of those configurations is small with only 5.7 members. Cluster two (26% of configurations) includes a large number of relatives from the *kinship network*. Mother, father, and sister are overrepresented as well as their partners. Cousins and the partner's relatives are also included. In comparing the two clusters, members of the nuclear family are under-represented: Partners and children less often show up than in the nuclear family. The residual category includes 1.78 members, which is almost all relatives by blood or marriage. Overall, this configuration is the largest with 8.1 members cited. Cluster three (22% of configurations) is labeled "*Family of Orientation*" and is kinship oriented although with a much smaller size (4.4 instead of 8.1). It is focused on close blood ties from the family of orientation (parents and siblings) and excludes all relatives by marriage or partnership, unlike the previous cluster. Children from the respondents only are cited rarely in this family configuration. Clus-ter four represents *Post-divorce Configurations* (19% of configurations) and is characterized by the overrepresentation of the previous partner (cited in half of the cases) and the underrepresentation of a current partner in the presence of children. Relatives by blood or marriage are underrepresented, and the family configuration does not include a nucleus that is constituted by one's partner and children. This family configuration is rather large and includes a great number of relationships in the residual category (1.74 other categories), of which most are associated with divorce and remarriage. Cluster five (16%) includes configurations that focus on friends and care professionals. In this cluster, *friends* represent as many as 2.5 persons, whereas blood relatives, in-laws, and steps are almost absent. The categories of the nuclear family, both partner and children, are also underrepresented.

Overall, we found similar family configurations in the sample of individu-als followed in psychotherapy as in a sample of young adults (Widmer, 2006). There were some distinct features because of the life stage that they are in and their status as clients in psychotherapy. For instance, the large number of individuals citing a psychiatrist or a social worker as a family member was not found in the sample of young adults.

Table 1. Composition of the Five Types of Family Configurations
of Individuals Undergoing Psychotherapy
(average number of citations per family term)

	Nuclear	Family of orientation	Kinship	Post-divorce	Friendship	Significance
Number and percentage	46 (18%)	54 (22%)	65 (26%)	47 (19%)	39 (16%)	
Mother	.26	.63	.82	.43	.33	13.4**
Sister	.48	.50	.88	.36	.26	5.7**
Partner	.93	.15	.55	.21	.38	25.3**
Father	.17	.5	.43	.23	.31	4.4**
Brother	.26	.61	.28	.15	.44	6.1**
Children	2.09	.11	.8	1.85	.51	37.3**
Female friend	.13	.06	.35	.43	1.56	20.9**
Previous partner	.04	.02	.06	.55	0	24.3**
Male friend	.15	.17	.08	.19	1	16.5**
Therapist	0	.04	.03	.06	.46	9.4**
Brother's partner	0	.02	.03	.02	.08	10.4**
Sister's partner	.02	.06	.40	.02	0	10.9**
Partner's mother	0	.04	.23	0	0	10.9**
Sister's daughter	.07	.02	.29	.06	0	4**
Mother's partner	0	.02	.18	.04	.03	6**
Mother's mother	.02	.13	.11	0	0	3.6**
Mother's sister	0	0	.15	.09	.03	3.6**
Sister's son	0	.04	.34	0	0	4**
Partner's father	0	.02	.14	0	0	6.1**
Pet	.02	.04	.06	.02	15	2.4*
Previous partner's mother	.04	0	0	.15	0	6.3**
Brother's daughter	0	.11	.03	0	.03	2.6*
Other categories	.91	.8	1.78	1.74	1.31	3.6**
Size of configuration	5.7	4.4	8.1	7	7	11.4**

Social Capital and Family Configurations

In order to test the hypothesis of an effect of family configurations on relational resources, we refer to measures commonly used to investigate social capital (Burt, 1995; Wasserman & Faust, 1994) and apply them to answers made by respondents about the emotional support in their family configurations. These measures were computed for three different sets of family members, using 'UCINET 6' (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002; Widmer, 2006). A first set concerns only family members perceived by each respondent as receiving support from her[2]. These are the family members who have an arrow pointing towards the respondent (see Figure 1 below for an example). A second set concerns family members perceived by each respondent as providing support[3]. In that case, the arrows point away from the respondent. These two sets of family members do not necessarily overlap. Finally, the last set includes all family members.

Four measures are applied on those three sets of family members. First, *size* indicates the number of family members supported by respondents, or supporting them, or the number of family members overall. *Density* is then computed as the number of activated connections divided by the number of pairs possible relationships based on the size of the family configuration. Density is the first and most commonly used indicator of network closure and social cohesion. A third measure concerns *components* present in family configurations. A component is defined as a "maximal connected sub graph" (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Inside a component, all individuals can reach each other either directly or indirectly throughout their connections with intermediaries. Two persons who are connected neither directly nor indirectly do not belong to the same component. The more components there are in a configuration, the less connected it is. The more components there are in the respondent's circles of supported or supportive family members, the more central the respondent is. Concerning the family configuration as a whole, we computed the change in the number of components when the respondent is removed from the family configuration. If the number of components greatly increases when a respondent is removed from her family configura-

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2   It is technically known as a respondent's *in-neighborhood*,
3   It is defined as a respondent's *out-neighborhood*,

tion, her position as an intermediary is high, as her removal makes the family configuration significantly less connected (Widmer, 2006).

Finally, a measure of respondents' *betweenness centrality* captures the proportion of connections for which they are in a position of intermediary. In Figure 1c) for instance the respondent has a high betweeness centrality (both in terms of supportive and supported family members) as many members of her family configuration do not have direct connections with each other but have to use the respondent as an intermediary in order to be connected. This is not the case in the family configuration of Figure 1b in which a large majority of family members have direct connections with each other, and therefore do not have to use the respondent as an intermediary.

Table 2 presents the means calculated for each cluster, as well as the results of the F-Test and Kruskal-Wallis test, with their levels of significance and the proportion of variance explained (R^2). Almost all relational indices significantly vary according to the composition of family configurations. In nuclear family configurations, there are a low number of supportive family members with a relatively high density of connections. It is the same in the family of orientation configurations that also put an emphasis on binding social capital. In these family configurations, individuals are embedded in a dense set of connections and have a relatively low centrality in their families. Many connections among their family members do not depend on respondents, and their family configurations are resistant to their own removal. Figure 1b exemplifies such family configurations.
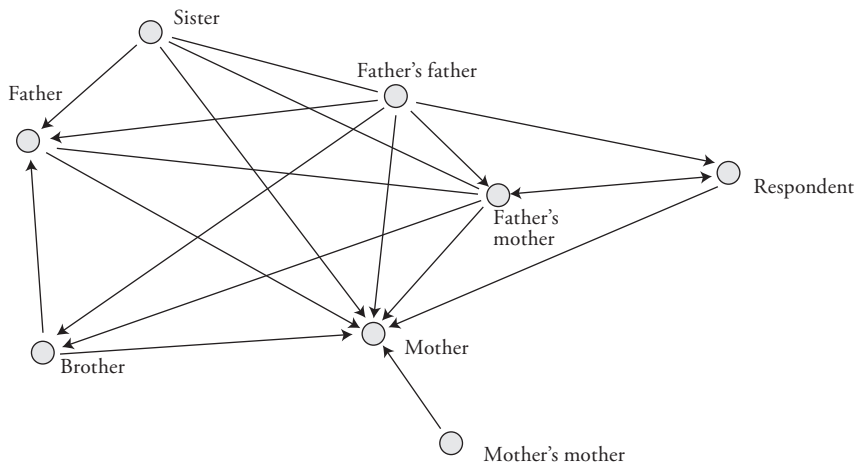
By comparison, kinship family configurations provide a greater number of helpers and help seekers who are less often connected to each other. Overall, kinship family configurations are associated with a binding type of social capital but within a larger and more pluralistic family context than the nuclear and the family of orientation configurations. The friendship family configurations are markedly different (See Figure 1c.) and include a large number of friends and care professionals who are considered family members. Bridging social capital is dominant, as friends and blood relatives are often kept separate in several non-overlapping circles This implies respondents benefit from a large degree of structural autonomy. Post-divorce family configurations (See Figure 1d for an illustration.) present an intermediary case: Density and connectivity are lower than in nuclear, kinship, and orientation family configurations. Respondents in post-divorce families, however, do not have the same centrality as respondents embedded in friendship family configurations. Therefore, as suggested by

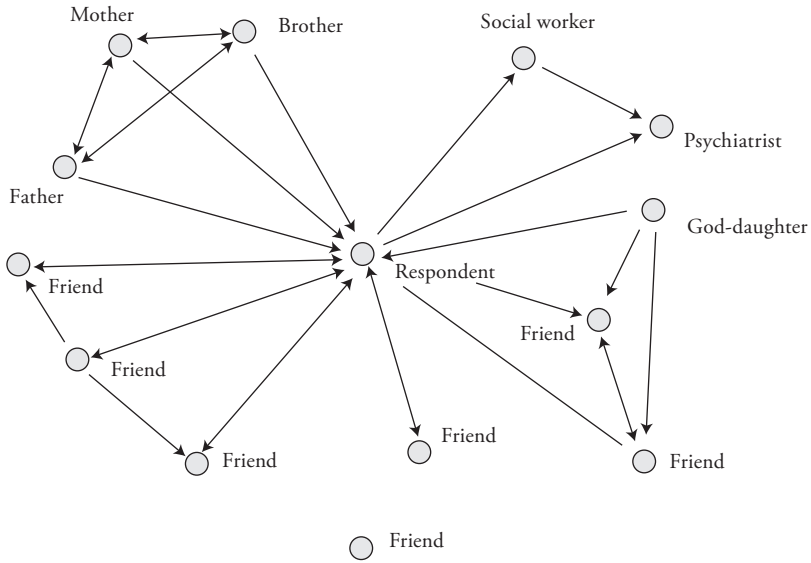*Figure 1.* Types of Family Configurations
(Illustration for Emotional Support).

a) A Nuclear Family Configuration
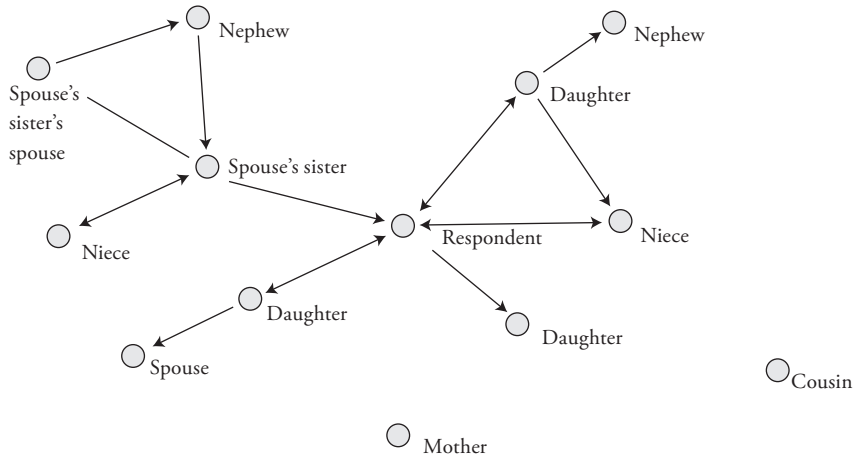
b) An Orientation Family Configuration

c) A Friendship Family Configuration
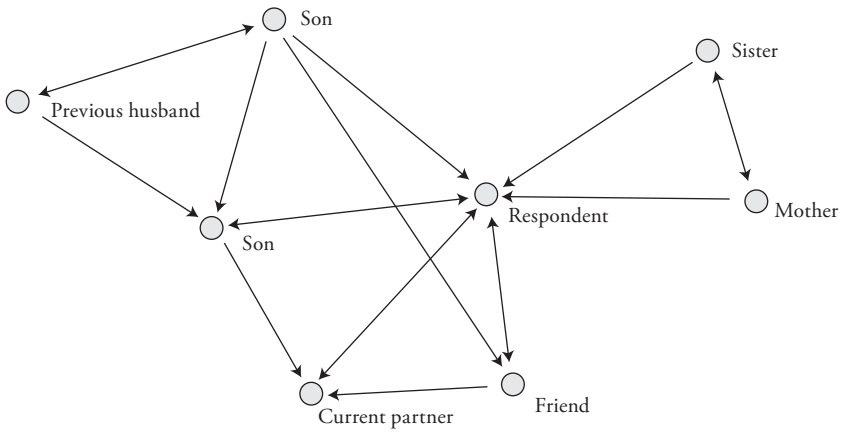

d) A Post-Divorce Family Configuration

Table 2. Indices of Social Capital. Mean by Types of Family Configurations (n = 251)

Emotional support	Nuclear	Kinship	orient-ation	post-divorce	Friend-ship	T-test	Kruskall-Wallis	Adjusted R²
Family members for whom respondents are source of emotional support								
Size	3.59	4.65	1.80	4.11	3.87	9.43***	39.05***	.12
Density	29.32	26.23	33.49	15.80	14.98	3.30**	10.07**	.04
Proportion of components	50.61	48.77	64.56	65.59	72.34	4.13***	16.30***	.05
Normalized respondents' betweenness	31.38	34.53	18.39	37.10	57.71	7.92***	16.30***	.12
Family members who are source of emotional support for respondents								
Size	2.09	3.06	2.39	2.83	3.10	2.55**	9.93**	.02
Density	17.79	31.51	20.24	30.99	19.50	1.98*	8.72*	.02
Proportion of components	71.12	63.74	69.12	64.47	68.21	.41	2.27	0
Normalized respondents' betweenness	49.51	40.57	37.10	43.97	49.17	.80	3.17	0
Family configuration as a whole								
Size	5.67	8.09	4.39	6.98	7.00	11.37***	40.32***	.14
Density	0.34	0.32	0.35	0.22	0.28	3.66***	17.44***	.04
Variation in the number of components with respondents removed	2.78	2.54	2.00	4.11	4.38	13.47***	44.52***	.16
Normalized respondents' betweenness	20.77	22.02	10.90	18.07	34.38	6.78***	27.47***	.09

*** sig (2-tailed) at <.01; ** sig (2-tailed) at <.05; * sig (2-tailed) at <.10

a prior study on young adults (Widmer, 2006; Widmer, 2007), they do not benefit from the same amount of either bridging or binding social capital as individuals embedded in other family configurations.

These results shed some light on the effects of family configurations on the amount and types of social capital available to patients undergoing psychotherapy. Family configurations vary in the extent to which they include friends or care professionals, children, parents, siblings, and other relatives. These variations have an impact on the social capital that they make available to individuals. In regard to binding social capital, orientation and nuclear family configurations are optimal. However, some scholars have stressed that the burdens associated with family closure, concepts of family interference (Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Widmer et al., 2004) or family overcare (Pyke & Bengston, 1996) suggest that a binding social capital within families has some detrimental effects, which a bridging social capital may escape. As for bridging social capital, friendship family configurations might have a decisive advantage. Moreover, the social and psychological costs associated with the maintenance of such complex and disconnected family configurations might counterbalance the obvious autonomy they provide.

Family Configurations and Foci

Results presented above are static: They describe the resources provided by family configurations of individuals in psychotherapy overall, without asking how passing time intervenes. Including time in the analysis is necessary, as one assumption of the configurational approach is that family contexts constantly adapt and change (See Introduction). In this regard, one mechanism that explains change in family configurations is provided by the North-American sociologist, Feld (1981), with the concept of *focus point* or *focus*. Feld asserts that social relations come in bundles. As a matter fact, joint activities among individuals are organized around specific meeting points such as workplaces, hobbies, hangouts, roles, etc. "As a consequence of interactions associated with their joint activities, individuals whose activities are organized around the same focus will tend to become interpersonally tied and form a cluster" (Feld, 1981, 1016). A focus is defined as "a social, psychological, legal, or physical entity around which joint activities are organized" (Feld, 1981, 1015). Family

configurations come into being and evolve because individuals care for similar persons and share activities related to family members. In other words, individuals become interdependent with each other in a family configuration because they share some concern for each other or for third parties.

In this respect, life trajectories provide many opportunities for new foci to show up in family configurations. For instance, moving together in a household creates a focus called "home." Having a child creates a new bundle of activities among parents but also grandparents. If one family member has cancer, he might become a new focus for a whole set of previously only loosely connected family members. Alternatively, divorce may destroy a home focus and may create two distinct home foci. Two fully connected kinship or orientation family configurations may become less connected when one key family member divorces. Marriage, birth, disease, residential move, divorce, or the death of family members is associated with the destruction of foci and the appearance of new ones.

Let us first exemplify this process with a follow-up done on the family configuration of Joanna, a woman aged 40 with two children from two distinct marriages. Joanna was interviewed once each month over the period of a year, using the *Family network method (FNM)* while in psychotherapy (Widmer, 1999; Widmer, Chevalier, Dumas, 2005). The pictures of Figure 2 are a selection of the twelve interviews that she took during the year. In month one, Joanna is institutionalized in a psychiatric facility. She does not have the custody of her two children. She feels extremely lonely and only cites a limited number of family members as significant, whom she considers as not connected with each other. Month two, which is not presented, shows a similar configuration with month one. Between months two and three, Joanna's grandmother is hospitalized for an emergency. This event creates a family focus on the grandmother, which brings Joanna, her children, father, sister, and mother together. The organization of collective help towards the grandmother serves as the occasion for introducing Joanna's new partner to her parents, and significant interactions develop among her children, her partner, and her parents. This is an illustration of the fact that an illness, because it creates a new family focus, may dramatically change one's perception of the composition and dynamics of one's family configuration.

The graphs of the following months confirm the tendency of Joanna to rebuild family ties. From month to month, the family configuration becomes more connected and dense, although the process is temporarily stopped when

news comes to Joanna that her sister has cancer, and this event creates a new focus on her sister. This focus endangers the connection with Joanna's father who becomes much more concerned about his other daughter's health. Nevertheless, on month six (Figure 2d), Joanna cites 15 persons in her family configuration with many connections among them, in comparison to only five on month one. Progressively, Joanna is given an increase in her responsibilities by the care professionals of her children. She is able to reconstruct a relationship with them with the support of professionals whom she also considers as family members. In summary, the family configuration of Joanna evolved through a series of important changes throughout the year of observation. Critical life events, such as the hospitalization of Joanna's grandmother or the news of the cancer of Joanna's sister, have changed the foci on which her family configuration is organized.

Can the case study of Joanna be further generalized? That is, to what extent do individuals in psychotherapy go through similar changes in their family configurations? Overall, there is a large turnover of family members in the sample of individuals who were followed in psychotherapy: Only 50% of them stay in the same cluster between waves one and two, which is much less than what we found in a sample of students[4]. Individuals in psychotherapy are, of course, under some institutional pressure from psychotherapists to change their relationships and definitions of their family configurations. But this pressure might not be the only cause of change, as individuals in psychotherapy experience a variety of life events during the clinical follow-up to which they are sensitive. Those events often have major consequences on their family configurations. Five processes account for the cases characterized by significant changes between the first and the last waves of interviews:

1) *Nuclearizing:* The family configuration tends to become nuclear, that is, focused on children and a partner and to exclude relatives, friends, and other connections. This pertains to approximately 23% of the sample.

2) *Kinshipping:* The kinship network becomes prominent with the inclusion of a large number of both blood and affine kinship ties (12% of the cases).
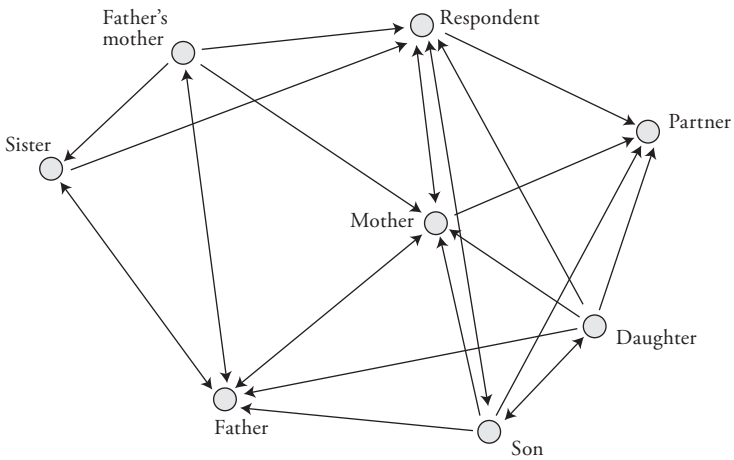
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4   In that sample, more than 80% of respondents stay in the same cluster between wave 1 and wave 2.

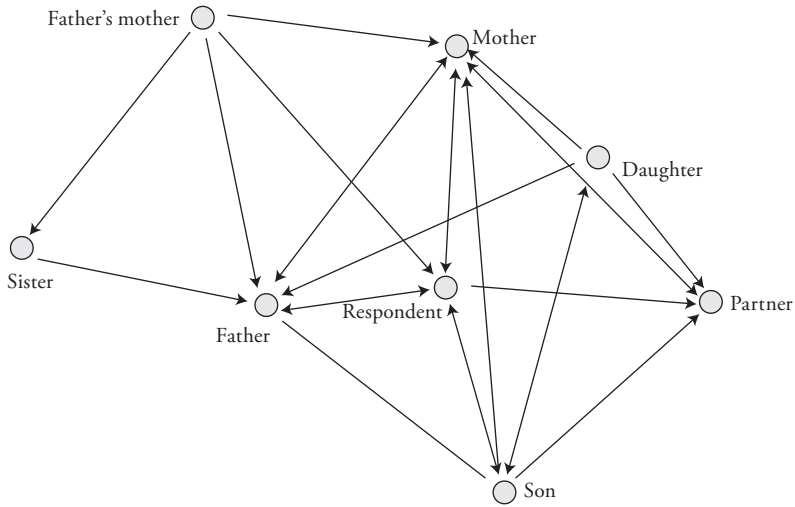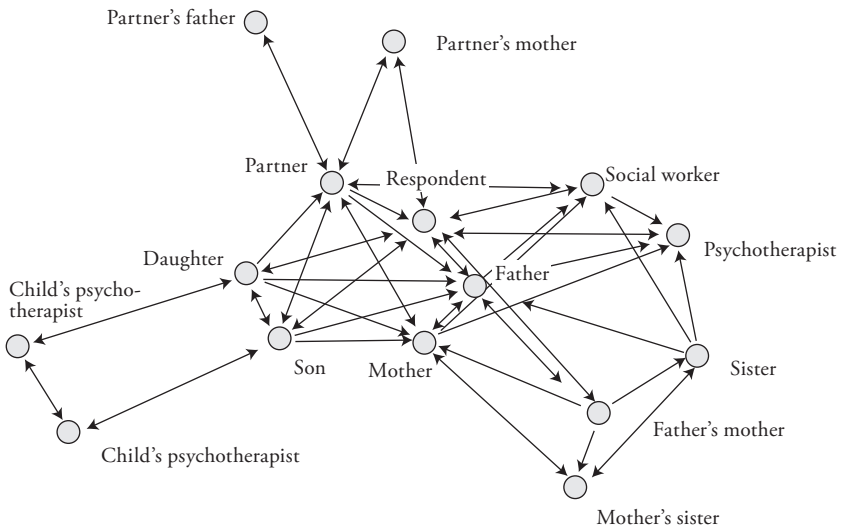*Figure 2*. Follow-Up of Joanna (Emotional Support).

a) Month 1
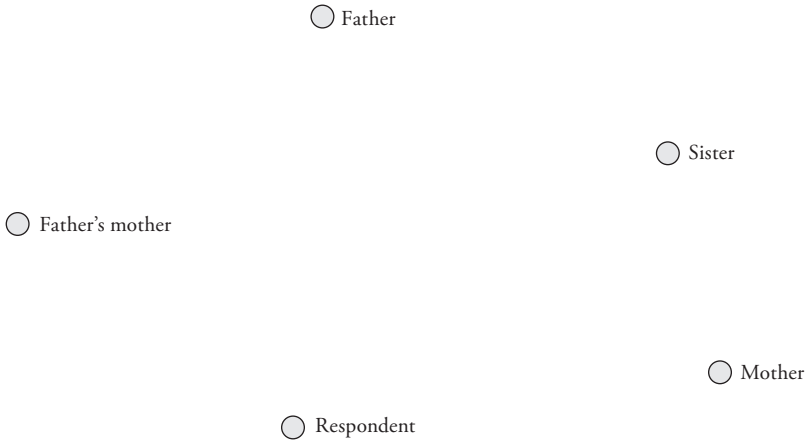
b) Month 3

c) Month 4

d) Month 6

3) *Back to family of orientation (or childing)*: The family of orientation becomes prominent, with father, mother, and siblings constituting most of the family configuration. Individuals, in a structural sense, become children again (10% of the cases).

4) *Recomposing:* The family configuration tends to include ex-partners or exclude partners when children are present. It is, therefore, associated with the process of either recomposition (first case) or divorce (second case), which are the two options that cluster analysis does not differentiate at the chosen level of analysis. Of the sample of family trajectories, 6% belongs to this case.

5) *Pluralizing:* The family configuration includes friends, coworkers, or therapists. The definition of the family, on the basis of blood or conjugal ties, is alleviated (6% of the cases).

The most frequent processes of change in this sample are nuclearizing and kinshiping. Nuclearizing actually presupposes the destruction of ties, in particular those associating respondents with their previous partners. In some cases, it may mean a construction of ties, for instance by citing a new partner. It is closely followed by an emphasis on the kinship network (kinshiping or childing). Recomposing and pluralizing are more marginal processes of change in this sample. Each of the five types of family configurations defined above is associated with specific patterns of change, as shown by a correspondence analysis that associates family configurations of the first wave of interviews with types of change (Figure 3). Nuclear family configurations lead to recomposing, as attending therapy may result in questioning the conjugal ties and seeking divorce. The two configurations associated with relatives, kinship and orientation family configurations, have a high tendency toward structural stability, as the process of change concerns their size rather than their composition. Post-divorce family configurations tend to nuclearize, for instance in discarding the previous partner from the family configuration or in adding a new partner to the nucleus constituted by the respondent and the children. They also promote kinshiping more often than others. Friendship families present the most varied set of processes of change, as they may lead to either nuclearizing, kinshiping, or recomposing.

Qualitative enquiries show that changes in family configurations closely match important life events that have occurred between the waves in addition to work done in psychotherapy. As exemplified by the case of Joanna,

Figure 3. Family Configurations and Processes of Change on the Short Term. Results from Correspondence Analysis (Axes One and Two).
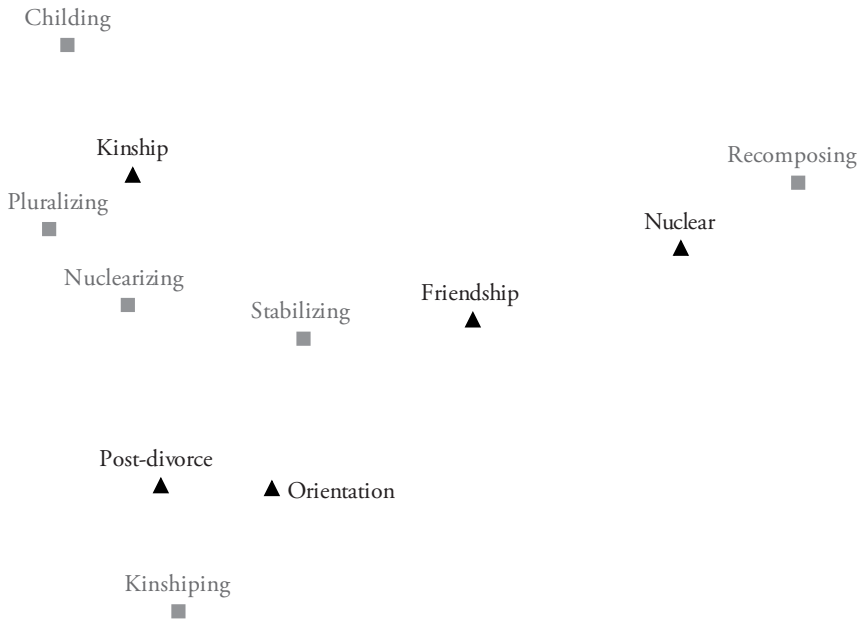
specific events, such as a birth, a death, a residential move, somebody being injured or becoming ill, a divorce, or a wedding, may change the shape of the family configuration by imposing new foci to family life. They concern a wide range of individuals from the respondents' family configuration; therefore, the potential for change in family configurations is great. For instance, nuclearization may be caused by a former spouse remarrying another person, thus becoming less significant and thereby dropped from the respondent's family configuration. On the contrary, the respondent may become involved in a new intimate relationship and thus may rebuild a nuclear focus. Kinshiping is often associated with the rediscovery of ties that go back to childhood and are reactivated due to some special circumstances, bad or good, such as an illness, a birth, a wedding, or a divorce. Post-modern life provides many opportunities for change in family configurations by the creation and destruction of life foci.

Family Structures and Life Trajectories

There are stabilizing factors for family configurations. Aside from life events and their direct impact on family configurations through short-term changes of foci, the long-term logic of life trajectories has an impact on family configurations. Family configurations are largely based on family structures. In order to cite a spouse or a child as a member of one's family configuration, one needs to have a spouse or a child, and these members are acquired throughout one's life trajectory. Therefore, there might be a strong relationship between one's family trajectory and one's family configuration.

In order to explore this issue, we use *optimal matching*, a computational technique stemming from bioinformatics, which makes it possible to find clusters of life trajectories that are distinct in their features (Gauthier, Widmer, Bücher, & Notredame, 2008). To illustrate, we focus on the trajectories of intimate relationships of the 42 respondents who went up to the fifth wave and were given a retrospective questionnaire to fill out. Intimate trajectories are presented in Figure 4. A first cluster includes all individuals who, throughout their adult life from age 16 onwards, had only one partner whether married or not and whether cohabiting or living apart. These are rare occurrences, as only four individuals over 42 exhibit this pattern. A second trajectory involves three to four partners in an ordered way, without many gaps between them. This concerns ten individuals over 42. A third pattern of intimate trajectories includes individuals who have had many more partners on average, but more gaps between partners. Their intimate trajectories are more "disordered." Finally, a fourth model (n=10) includes all individuals who have not yet had any intimate experience in their life. Intimate trajectories lead to specific family configurations. A correspondence analysis, the results of which are not reported, shows that intimate trajectories including a single partner lead to a nuclear family configuration. Unstable intimate trajectories lead to post-divorce or kinship family trajectories. Intimate trajectories characterized by a succession of a limited number of partners are associated with family configurations in which friends and therapists or relatives from the kinship network are central. Intimate trajectories characterized by loneliness lead to a family configuration in which the family of orientation is dominant. These results suggest that family configurations depend on life trajectories. The composition of one's family configuration stems from one's intimate life. Not only do recent

events have an influence, but also the overall focus of one's intimate life has as well. Individuals who have gone through several intimate relationships in their adult life are unlikely to be included in a nuclear family configuration because from their previous relationships, they hold children and former partners as significant. Individuals without intimate partnership have a trajectory that is unlikely to build a nuclear family configuration, which implies they are more likely to stay embedded in their family of orientation.

The impact of one's life on family configuration is multidimensional. Of concern are not only intimate trajectories but also occupational trajectories, among other dimensions. As shown by correspondence analysis, life trajectories associated with a regular work activity go along with a nuclear family configuration. Individuals who have never worked their entire lives are overrepresented in an orientation family configuration, which takes care of them for the main dimensions of their lives, including money. Individuals who vary in their occupational trajectory, those dropping out of work or acquiring a new job, etc., are more likely to be included in a kinship family configuration. Individuals who, at one point in their life, interrupted their occupational trajectory are overrepresented in friendship family configurations. Note that instability in the trajectory of intimacy is strongly associated with instability in the occupational trajectory. In this sample, individuals who change jobs often or become unemployed are more likely to have had many short-term intimate relationships.

Overall, life trajectories impose long-term foci to individuals for the construction of their family configurations: Their children, one spouse, or their single life, being out of work, or alternating from work to unemployment, become the organizing principles of their lives. At the same time, life events impose short-term foci that structure family configurations. Three examples further illustrate the connection that exists among life trajectories, family configurations, and processes of change in psychotherapy.

Michel, a man in his sixties, moved to Switzerland from Southern Europe in his early adulthood. He comes from a disadvantaged family and had no formal education. In Switzerland, he was hired as an unskilled laborer and has remained so for the past 40 years. At age 20, he met his wife in a community in Switzerland. They had two children and have remained married. He manages his various phases of depression by taking short interruptions from his work, but he maintains great continuity in his family life, since he has always remained focused on his nuclear family. By contrast, Gabriel, a man in his

Figure 4. Intimate Trajectories of Respondents from Age 16 to 49 (n = 42).
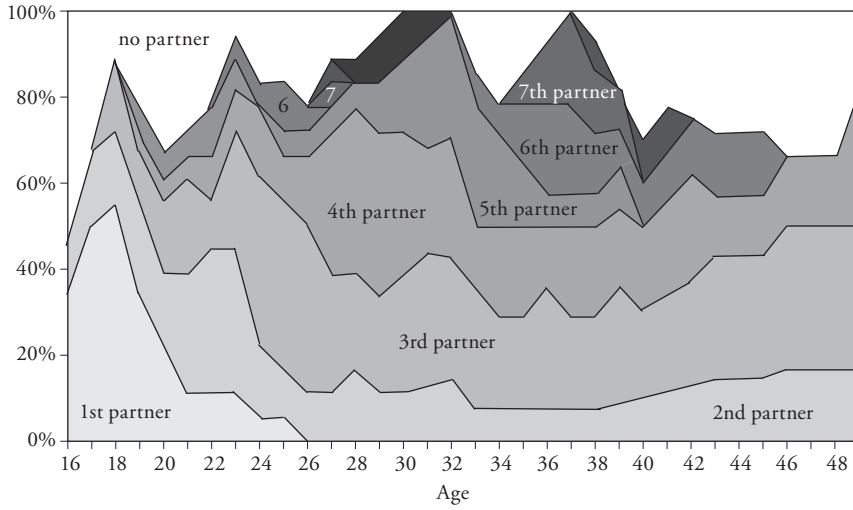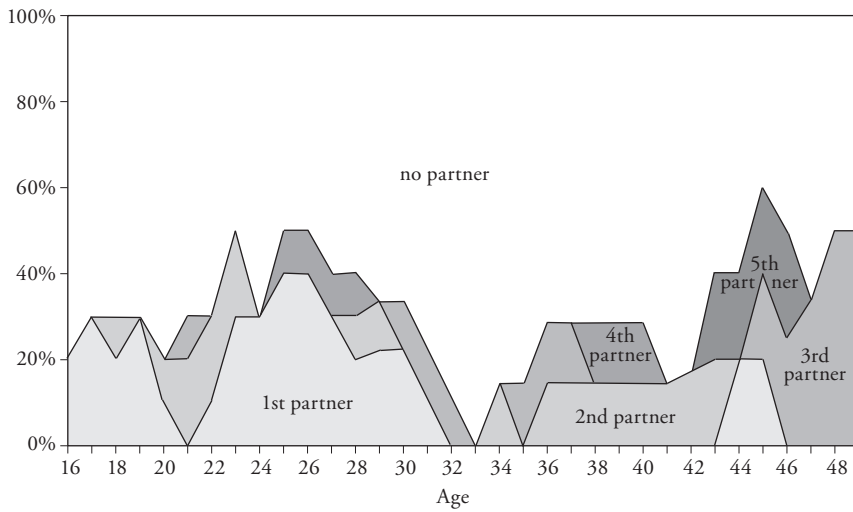
Conjugal monopoly (n = 4)
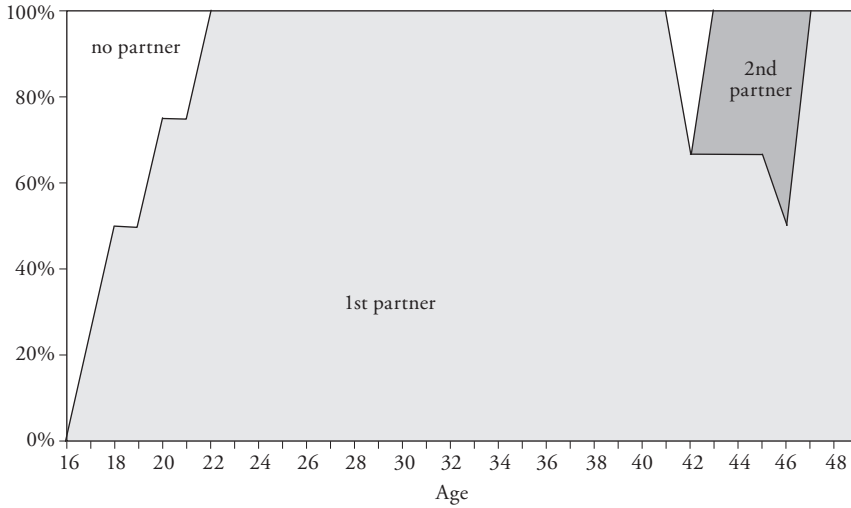
Ordered succession of 3 to 4 partners (n = 10)
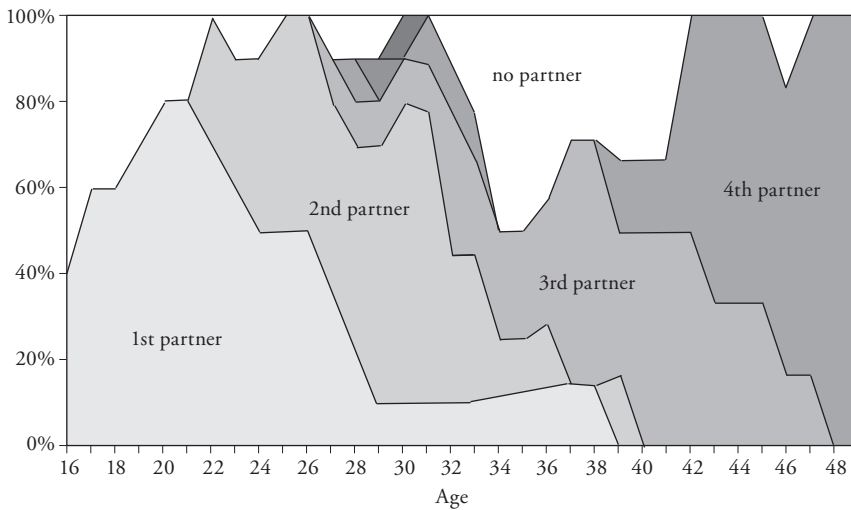
Intimate instability (n = 18)

Loneliness (n = 10)

fifties, has had a highly unstable trajectory for both work and intimacy. He has changed jobs and partners every five years, while keeping in touch, emotionally and socially, with many of his former partners, especially when they are the mothers of his children. Therefore he is included in a post-divorce family configuration on wave one. He has since transited through a friendship family configuration to end up in a kinship family configuration on wave five. Those changes are associated with the sudden death of one of his ex-partners, the mother of his youngest child. After this death occurred, he had to turn to his kinship network to resolve the problems associated with his orphan child, and thus, his family configuration changed. To summarize, Gabriel's family configuration is the expression of a great rate of instability that has characterized his life trajectories for both work and intimacy. Finally, the case of Bernard, a young man in his thirties, is characteristic of a trajectory of social exclusion. Although he has a formal education that includes some university classes and comes from a privileged family, he has never been able to find a job and a partner because of a severe psychotic episode in his early twenties. Therefore, he has bonded with his family of orientation ever since, without any change during the five waves of observation.

Conclusion

Individuals undergoing psychotherapy define their family configurations in a variety of ways. They vary to the extent by which they include spouses or partners, friends or care professionals, children, parents, siblings, and other relatives. Some build their family configurations on a nucleus constituted by their partner and biological children. Most of them, however, focus on either kinship or friendship. Others also include care professionals as family members. In some cases, especially those associated with divorce, several nuclei intermingle or the nucleus is missing. Overall, our results straightforwardly show that the researchers and therapists who adhere to the classical definition of the family unit, one that is constituted by married parents and their biological offspring within a single household, are unable to understand the complex family settings of individuals who are undergoing psychotherapy. The configurational approach alleviates many of the constraints associated with the classical definition of family, as it considers families as open systems

with undefined boundaries and complex sets of interdependencies. It also demonstrates that types of family configurations are associated with unequal levels of relational resources or "social capital," which may prove important for psychological health. Further research is needed in this regard.

This chapter aimed to uncover some of the logic behind family changes in the short and long term. The composition of family configurations depends on life trajectories. Individuals with and enduring experience of stability in work and intimate relationships tend to define their family configuration as nuclear. Less stable intimate and work trajectories are associated with post-divorce and kinship trajectories. Notable are individuals with such trajectories who have not built a stable partnership that functions as the basis of a family nucleus. The relational features of their family configurations are therefore different. Other individuals have never made it through the classical steps of the transition to adulthood, namely getting a job and creating a stable partnership that may eventually lead to parenthood. They focus on their parents and siblings as their sole family members. Overall, there is great continuity between family configurations and life trajectories. Stability in both life areas goes along with a focus on the current partner and children. Loneliness and joblessness impose a focus on parents and siblings. By contrast, intimate instability and job instability increase the likelihood of building a recomposed family configuration.

To summarize, even though family configurations are diverse and complex in post-modernity, they remain embedded in life trajectories. Of course, there are many occasions for short-term changes of family configurations, as these also depend on life events that occur month after month in quite unpredictable ways. In this regard, family configurations have a high potential for change. Neither fully predictable nor random, family configurations are patterned responses to the complex set of sociological and psychological constraints stemming from post-modern life. Even though individuals in psychotherapy obviously constitute a specific social category, the patterns and processes presented in this chapter may offer a tentative categorization of family configurations and their change through time. Research in these areas should be further developed.

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