

# **Family diversity in a configurational perspective**

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draft versions

## **Abstract**

This paper stresses the contributions of a configurational approach to rethinking family diversity. Family diversity is associated by scholars with heterogeneity of family structures, as well as with the unequal distribution of family practices across ethnic groups, gender, social classes and again, family structures. Following the configurational perspective emphasis on families as networks of positive and negative interdependencies, we propose to conceptualize family diversity as heterogeneity of definition of family boundaries, and the diversity of chains of interdependencies linking family members. We provide examples and insights about this perspective's usefulness.

This article stresses the contributions of a configurational approach to the understanding of family diversity. Family diversity touches upon the heterogeneity of families in contemporary western societies. Scholarly work considers the heterogeneity of family structures as the main dimension of family diversity. Until the nineteen seventies, most researchers defined family units as nuclear by focusing on groups composed of two heterosexual parents and their biological offspring living under the same roof ([Parsons & Bales, 1955b]). Beginning in the 1970s with research on stepfamilies and kinship, scholars have challenged the assumption that the nuclear family was by definition the one and only significant family unit ([Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994]). However, researchers have continued for the most part to identify significant family units by referring to the composition of households: stepfamilies are those in which both biological parents of a child do not live together and where the custodian parent of the child had a new coresident partner. Likewise single or lone parent families are defined as as household where one parent lives with her children. Same sex families, accordingly, have been defined as those where two adults of the same sex have a sexual relationship while taking care of one of the partners' biological children. Likewise, children born by non-married parents are considered an indicator of family diversity, as well as the number of children born in homosexual parents (Patterson & Hastings, 2002). A long list of situations can be formulated which suggest that indeed there is a strong family diversity in current social settings: couples ending in a divorce, or the proportion of never married person.

Another related approach of family diversity focuses on the extent to which family practices vary according to ethnicity, gender and social class. Research stressed for instance that results about the effect of parenting styles on child and adolescent adjustment obtained for middle-class white american may not be true for minority groups or economically disadvantaged groups (Amato & Fowler, 2002). Likewise,

the impact of divorce and remarriage might be different in various social groups. Other scholars stressed that ethnicity makes a difference for marriage organization and the division of household labor. Overall, this approach of family diversity emphasized the need to question results and trends found by research focusing on white middle class North American married couples with children.

Overall, family diversity was used in two interrelated ways. First, as a mean to account for demographic changes related with household composition and official criteria dealing with birth, couple formation and separation; second as a label for stressing the importance of including ethnicity, but also gender and socioeconomic statuses as variation factors when accounting for family processes and practices.

## **Compositional diversity of family configurations**

We propose that household structures and other official demographic indicators are insufficient to adequately measure family diversity in that they put too much emphasis on institutional/formal criteria for defining emerging family units and too little on how various interdependent individuals do family. In other words, using household composition and demographic indicators disregards family processes and family practices in favor of institutional criteria.

Research on family diversity in a configurational perspective starts from the view point that what makes family in the inclusion of individuals in a “we” (Castren & Widmer, 2015; Elias, 1994). Accordingly, a series of configurational studies ask focal individuals to define their significant family members. In a study of middle age mothers, participants first listed all significant family members using their first name or initials. They were then asked to provide a detailed description of their tie with each family member. For instance, respondents were told that grandmother was not a precise enough description and that “mother’s mother”

or “father’s mother” should be used instead. Similar precision was requested for all other terms (mother’s sister rather than aunt, father’s brother’s son rather than cousin, etc.). Regarding their significant family members, respondents mentioned a total of 154 different family terms. Almost all respondents (98%) included their children as significant family members (Table 1). Current partners were also prominent, as they were cited by 96% of respondents. Mothers of respondents were the second most frequently cited, as 76% referred to their mothers as significant family members. Fathers and siblings of respondents were also well represented. Blood ties were included first in the list of significant family members, right after partners. In-laws came after blood relatives. In 37% of cases, mothers-in-law were cited, while, in 22% of cases, fathers-in-law were cited. In addition to blood and in-law connections, female friends were commonly cited as family members (29%). Overall, females represented a larger share of family members than males did. Former partners (i.e., fathers of the target child) were mentioned by 21% of respondents. Given that only half of the sample could actually mention them, this equated to 42% for respondents in a stepfamily structure.

Friend configurations focused on individuals who were considered to be family members while being related neither by blood nor by marriage or partnership, as respondents in this cluster included as many as 2.78 female friends and 0.64 male friends in their family configurations. In-law configurations had a strong orientation toward the partner and the in-laws. Partners and the mothers of the partners were overrepresented, as well as other in-law relationships. Brother and Sister configurations included the respondent’s siblings and their children and current partners. Kinship configurations included a variety of individuals related by blood and marriage, such as partners, parents, children, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, cousins, and grandparents. Beanpole configurations referred to families in which several generations co-exist, with only a few family members in each of them

(Bengtson, Rosenthal & Burton, 1996). They focused on blood relatives, with the inclusion of members of various generations, particularly grandparents from the mother's and the father's sides. They were vertically, rather than horizontally oriented, contrary to the Brother and Sister configurations. Nuclear configurations were almost exclusively centered on the partner and the children. They corresponded to a definition of the family as a co-residential unit. Without partner and Post-divorce configurations were only found in the stepfamily structure. Respondents in Without partner configurations did not include the present partner as a significant family member, although he lived, as in all other cases, within the same household as the respondent and her child. In contrast to Without partner configurations, Post-divorce configurations had two orientations: one toward the former partner and his relatives and the other toward the new partner and his relatives (including, when applicable, his children and, in some cases, his own ex-partner).

In first-time families, Beanpole configurations came first (25.3%), followed by Friend (15.3%), Nuclear (14.7%) and In-law (13.3%) configurations. In stepfamilies, Post-divorce configurations came first (29.3%), followed by Beanpole (18%), Sister (10%) and simultaneously Friend (8.7%) and Without partner (8.7%) configurations. Brother configurations (2.7%) were rare in contrast to Sister configurations (10%) in stepfamilies, whereas both types of configurations were well represented in first-time families. Note that overall, sixty-two percent of respondents in stepfamilies shared configurations similar to those found in first-time families.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As shown by Table 1, other studies replicated these results for old age and young adults. In all age groups, a limited set of types capture distinct ways of defining the family "we" and family boundaries, with distinct logics of inclusivity shaping those boundaries. Criteria of sexual partnerships, blood relatedness, marriage or law-

like relationships, or friendship constitute the backbones of the existing definition of significant family contexts. Significant family contexts remain structured by a large series of. In some cases, households were used as an implicit criteria, but this logic only concerns a minority of individuals. Therefore, overall, significant family contexts, although influenced by family structures, do not overlap with them. Although family structures show a large diversity, family configurations are limited in number. Overall, family diversity, when the definition of family by respondents is used as a criteria, is much smaller than expected by referring to family structures and remain structured by a set of well know kinship principles.

## **Patterns of interdependencies embedded in social space**

A second major feature of the family diversity issue in a configurational perspective is associated with the heterogeneity of family processes and practices across social class, gender and ethnicity groups. Family processes, relationships and practices are conceptualized as interdependencies by the configurational perspective. The concept of interdependence has existed for a long time and was for instance used in Berschied's theory about social exchanges. It makes researchers primarily focus on relationships or practices by which a person fulfills some vital function for another one. This is not the case of all family relationships and practices, as many have a rather transient meaning. If all interdependences are relationships and are entrenched in practices, family relationships and practices are not necessarily interdependences..

Interdependence also means that both individuals to some extent have power on the other in a relationship. This is not to say that they are equal in this respect. One may have more power on the other. The dependence of the first person toward the second may concern a different function than the dependence of the second on the first. Power is always at the core of family relationships, even though it may be concealed

or negated by the main protagonists of family life. Two interdependent individuals always have to negotiate something. When authority is present, there is no need to negotiate because one has already won: one is more dependent on the other than the other is dependent on the one. Interdependence does not mean equality in power. Due to the pluralization of life courses, aims, project, identity where authority plays out become more rare. Children do not obey their parents because they are their parents.

In that regard, the focus on family structures to measure family diversity disregards the variety of interdependences to be found in similar family structures, and stresses non-existing differences in interdependences among families formally dissimilar in household composition.

The configurational perspective states that families are constituted by chains of interdependences among individuals who are competing for scarce resources while also benefiting from each other's support and assistance. Negative and positive interdependencies among various individuals in ever changing chains of interdependences with a power dimension shape families. Those interdependencies fulfill the needs of individuals in terms of self identity and development. Family configurations build as adaptive solutions to current constraints pending on a history of relationships, or family sediments. Family sediments are composed by remnants of the past, that form a slowly changeable structure which one usually takes into account when constructing new interdependencies.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of the configurational perspective, structural family diversity is only apparent. Family configurations build as adaptative solutions to current constraints pending on a history of relationships, or family sediments. Family sediments are composed by remnants of the past, that form a slowly changeable structure which one

usually takes into account when constructing new interdependencies. The diversity of models of interdependences is relevant for all family situations.

Models of families where blood and law ties are central. Stepties are also present, although in modest proportion. Family configurations depend on life course of individuals. They are slowly shaped by decisions taken by various interdependent individuals.

Complemented by other family ties, call it voluntary or fictive, which are rather improper term. Give a new understanding of family pluralization in last thirty years. Rather than seeing family pluralization as as product of personal goals, they are unintended consequences of the shaping of personal lives. Rather as seeing it as the decline of the family as an institution (which family never was). Expression of the shifting set of resources that individuals invest in family ties. Some people, despite a lot of change and turmoils in their life actually maintain bounded close knight family configurations, with a high level of traditionalism. Those who do not have fundamental ties, try to seek them elsewhere, by instantiating friends or remote kin as significant family members. Others do not have a family configuration, and construct their meaningful social context elsewhere or not at all. Mechanisms of defense against the increasing vulnerability of personal life in late modernity.

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