Family Configurations from the Male Perspective: Exploring Diversity over the Life Course

Karin Wall, Sofia Aboim and Sofia Marinho

Introduction

Published in 1957, Young and Willmott's classic study (1987 [1957]) represents an important theoretical shift within sociology of the family by going beyond the focus on the conjugal family which was then predominant. From the 1950's onwards, other studies on kinship relationships, as well as changes in family organization and individual life styles, also encouraged new outlooks. Contrary to the thesis of the nuclear family's isolation predicted by Parsons (Parsons and Bales, 1955), couples were found to be well embedded in wider networks of kinship ties providing financial, material and emotional support as well as day to day sociability.[1] The conjugal dyad emerged as a small, albeit fundamental, part of a larger *primary social unit* (Pina-Cabral, 1991), making it difficult to capture interpersonal relationships by looking at the household unit. On the other hand, demographic, gender and family changes underlined the vulnerability of the conjugal bond as an institution. As divorce, remarriage, cohabitation and gay or lesbian family arrangements increased, they helped to draw attention to the pluralisation of family forms and the fluidity of relationships, as against the ideas of rigid, codified and unbreakable family ties.

Approaches focusing on family change have therefore emphasized the plurality of family life in advanced modernity, also stressing the new individualism operating in relationship formation and connectedness to others. However, the search for self-fulfilment and individual autonomy does not necessarily lead to infinite possibilities for family forms and relationships. Even though individualization is a strong trend, as Elias (1993) emphasizes, its definition points

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1   For a brief review of literature on this subject, see, in particular, Wall *et al.* (2001), Kellerhals *et al.* (1995), Widmer (2006).

to the pluralisation of social circles, very much in accordance with Simmel's (1989) perspective, but without eroding structural constraints and the sharing of social practices and meanings. The truth is that class and gender differentiations persist and that individuals' networks are most commonly structured by a limited number of overlapping ties in which kinship plays an important role. Similarly, conjugal families still represent a large majority of households in most countries, thereby encouraging us to carry out a careful reading of individualistic interpretations, yet without falling back into institutionalism.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this chapter is to understand the family configurations of men living in conjugal dyads with children. Drawing on the approach set out in this book as a major building block of our analysis, we will explore the diversity of these men's close relationships. Our analytical framework raises three important issues, which have theoretical and methodological implications. The first refers to the focus on the individual, as the vertex of the configuration; the second to linkages between configuration and network approaches; and the third to the relevance of analysing configurations from a life course perspective.

Strongly focused on the processes of individualization and their influence on family relationships, the perception of families as configurations involves a complex linkage between the individual and others. From a methodological point of view, the starting point is the individual and the main aim is to map his or her connections of personal interdependency with significant others, beyond "institutionalized" or "set" bonds. The individual focus is thus particularly well suited to portraying configurations associated with divorce, widowhood and family blending. In contrast, the analysis of the relational webs of individuals living in conjugal families implies additional complexity as the relationships in set dyads interweave with those which shape the whole configuration. In this study, we believe it is important to capture the fluidity of relationships from an individual standpoint, without forgetting the context in which they are built up. In nuclear family settings, conjugal and parental ties are relevant to shaping the individual's relationships, and it is therefore essential to analyse the "overlap" between the individual's and the dyad's close relationships.

On the other hand, in order to grasp family configurations we have to analyse some specific criteria in order to reveal the interconnections between the individual and significant others. The configurational approach has already pointed to the importance of focusing on practices and personal narratives

in order to understand individuals' *relationality*. The importance given to "subjective bonds" allows for malleability and empirical adequacy. However, the "material" side of close relationships should not be forgotten, regardless of its subjective importance in individual discourse. In this line of reasoning, the concepts widely used to analyse networks may be of some help. The kind of "goods" and support exchanged between members are vital elements in fully understanding a configuration. Beyond their subjective boundaries, configurations have a "materiality" that is achieved through specific forms of *networking*.

The third and last issue concerns the importance of adopting a life course perspective in order to understand the impact of past bonding on present configurations. Connectedness to others is influenced by life course events – such as family conflict, marriage, migration or death – which may foster, stabilize or destroy relationships. Life course "narratives" are therefore a fundamental tool for capturing the individual's relational legacies, including the main turning points and events which make up a trajectory of connectedness.

This chapter will explore three main hypotheses. The first is that men living in a similar type of household – first partnership couples with dependent children – will have different family configurations, thus revealing the complex linkages between set "dyads" and close relationships. The second is that diversity is likely to be linked to men's relational trajectories: these men have built up kin and friendship relationships during childhood and young adulthood that may still underlie present bonds, thereby influencing their family configurations. The third is that these webs of relationships may also be influenced by the type of conjugal functioning. We can expect low density, weakly overlapping configurations to be linked to autonomy-based interactions, and highly connected, overlapping configurations to be associated with fusional types of conjugal functioning. We are also anticipating that autonomy-based, "associative" interactions will allow for more diverse male configurations than fusional conjugal functioning.

Data and Method

To analyse men's relational configurations, we will begin by taking into account two main aspects of configurations: structure and networking (see Table 1). The first refers to the design of the configuration, examining its *size, composition, connectivity* and *focus,* as well as the existence of *individualized components* (relationships which only concern the individual, in this case the man) and *intimate bonds* (persons with whom the individual has an especially close bond). The "networking" aspect measures the *functionality* of relationships (uni- vs. multi-functional) and the *amount of support* received and given. Finally, we propose a third aspect which explores the connections between the marital dyad and the relational configuration. We want to understand the *place of conjugality* in men's configurations: if there is a significant overlap between this nuclear dyad and the whole relational web, we will have a highly conjugal configuration; if not, the configuration will be more individualized, with close relationships branching out from the individual rather than the couple.

The two main external variables – relationships across the life course and family functioning – will be analysed as follows. Men's *relational trajectories* will focus on the turning points and events which influenced connectedness to significant others over the life course. *Family functioning* will be examined by looking at the degree of fusion, which designates the extent to which individual resources such as time, money, ideas, or feelings are pooled by partners, and the degree of openness, which designates the extent to which contacts and exchanges take place between the couple and the outside world. It will also take into account the gendered divisions of paid and unpaid labour.[2]

Analysis will draw on data from a qualitative study on *"Family Life from the Male Perspective"* in Portuguese society. In-depth interviews were carried out with sixty men belonging to different social classes and three types of family households: couples with children, lone fathers, blended families. In this chapter we will use one segment of the sample which covers interviews with men living in first partnership couples with children (24 interviews[3]).

2   For an overview of diversity in family functioning see Wall, Aboim and Marinho (2007).
3   The men interviewed were between age 31 and 48, with children below age 18, and belonging to varied socio-professional and educational groups: 7 had 4 to 6 years of schooling, 5 had 9 years, 5 had secondary school and 7 had a university degree or more.

All interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, conducted in homes and offices, and took an average of 3 hours[4]. The length of the interview is related to the methodological approach adopted in this study, combining both deductive and inductive procedures. On the one hand, the interviews were structured around a certain number of topics linked to analytical dimensions of interest identified *a priori* (such as: orientation to family and professional life, daily practices, gender differentiation, support networks, conjugal and parental functioning). On the other hand, the adoption of a narrative method, eliciting descriptions of experiences and events over the life course, allowed for the emergence of a personal perspective wrapping up the individual's understanding of his place in family life and relationships. It was on the basis of these narratives that we were able to identify connectedness to significant others over the life course and the overall design, built up during childhood and adulthood, of men's family configurations.

Men's Family Configurations: A Diversity of Patterns

The qualitative study revealed considerable diversity in the family configurations of men living in first partnerships with children. Table 1 shows the main features of the seven patterns identified. Overall, considering the limited number of interviews, we must regard this patterning as an exploratory, emerging classification of case-types. In describing each pattern we will also observe how our external variables contribute to shaping men's family configurations at present.

Siblings

Men in this configuration are embedded in medium-sized, very dense family relationships, giving them a strong sense of family-based identity. The key protagonists of the configuration are close relatives: parents, parents-in-law, siblings, siblings-in-law, cousins, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces. Friends are absent, even if some men mention male acquaintances whom they see on

4   All interviews were recorded and later transctibed verbatim by the members of the research team. Due to the length of the interview, some interviews were carried out in two sessions.

Table 1. Family Configuration Patterns

Patterns Dimensions	Siblings	Intertwined	Friendship	Dual	Concentric	Communitarian	Conjugal bridging
Configuration of ego							
Structure							
Size	Average (10–15 individuals)	Average (10–15 individuals)	Average (10–15 individuals)	Average (10–15 individuals)	Large (> 15 individuals)	Large (> 15 individuals)	Small (5–6 individuals)
Composition	Siblings, brothers and sisters in-law, cousins, parents and parents in-law	Parents and parents in-law, siblings, brothers and sisters in-law; close friends	Close friends, parents and parents in-law	Parents and/or parents in-law; siblings, male friends	Parents, in-laws, close friends adolescence, other friends, close neighbours	Parents and parents in-law, siblings, brothers and sisters in-law, family friends, personal friends	Ex-partners, a few in-laws
Connectivity	High density	Dual density: high within kin and high within friends, but low between the two	High density within friends	Dual density: high within kin and high within friends, but low between the two	Fragmented connectivity: dense within each circle, low overall	High density within family community, otherwise low	Low
Individualized components	None or one family member	None or one family member	None	Personal male friends	Personal friends	Personal friends, namely work colleagues	Ex-partners
Focus	Family gatherings; sociability with siblings; family support	Family gatherings, sociability with friends, family support	Sociability and support from friends	Sociability and sport activities with male friends; family support and daily activities	Diverse types of focus in varied friendship circles (gatherings, support, leisure, sport), family support	Family gatherings and sociability, family support, leisure and support with work friends	Emotional support from ex-partners, some sociability with in-laws

Patterns Dimensions	Siblings	Intertwined	Friendship	Dual	Concentric	Communitarian	Conjugal bridging
Intimate bonds	Partner, male cousin	Partner	Partner	Partner and male elective relative	Close friends, partner, daughter	Partner, male close friend	Partner, ex-partner
Networking							
Functionality	*Multi-functional* with family: childcare, material and emotional support, sociability	*Multi-functional* with family: childcare, material and emotional support, sociability; *Uni-functional* with friends: sociability	*Multi-functional* with close friends: sociability, childcare, material and emotional support	*Multi-functional* with family: childcare, material and emotional support, sociability; *Uni-functional* with friends: sport sociability	*Multi-functional* with parents and close friends: childcare, emotional support and sociability; *Uni-functional* with friends: sociability (leisure/sports)	*Multi-functional* with family and family friends: childcare, material support and sociability; *Multi-functional* with close friends: sociability and emotional support	*Uni-functional*: sociability with relatives; emotional support from ex-partners
Amount of support	Strong	Average	Average	Strong	Variable amount depending on groups	Strong	Low
Place of conjugality within relational configuration							
Degree of overlapping	Strong, total overlap	Strong, total overlap	Strong, total overlap	Strong Partial overlap (with kin)	Weak Varied overlap	Strong but partial overlap (with family community)	Weak overlap
n = 24	4	4	3	7	2	2	2

a regular basis. Instead, men closely connect to their siblings, siblings-in-law and cousins as well as to their parents and parents-in-law. Inter-generational relationships are of vital importance when it comes to exchanges related to small services, financial help and childcare (strong support, on a daily basis, given by parents or parents-in-law), but it is within intra-generational bonds that sociabilities are built up and that men tend to find emotional support.

António (44, head salesman in a warehouse, two children, a "helping hand" in housework and caring, wife employed full-time as a receptionist) describes his close relationships as follows: "Friends no, just family. My brothers and sisters in-law ... I feel close to my in-laws. And my cousin also ... I'm eight years older than he and I raised him when he was little ... there's something that strongly binds us together, even if I don't see him very often". And he adds further on: "Friends don't matter. Friends, they fall apart with time." A.'s close relationships are embedded in his wife's family configuration, with the couple interacting on a daily basis with her three sisters and their families. Outside this configuration there is an almost total absence of close bonds, be it with friends or neighbours. Occasionally A. visits his parents who live in his home village in the centre of Portugal. These visits are important for A., even if emotional bonds have become distant due to geographical separation and his departure from home early on in life. A. was an only child born in a small peasant family. As a young child he went to school and helped on the farm, but his parents also expected him to move up in life, so they sent him to Lisbon at the age of 14 to live with his aunt and uncle (and young cousin) and complete his secondary education. He maintains a close relationship with the young cousin he helped to "raise", the main individualized bond he holds on to outside the "sibling" family web. However, even this close bond is nurtured mainly through phone contacts. In other words, the strong overlap between the conjugal dyad and sibling relationships, coupled with geographical distance, makes it difficult for other bonds to be linked to day to day sociability.

Close kinship relations, encouraged by geographical proximity, thus provide a privileged and almost unique focus for connecting with others, with the configuration's density hardly allowing for more individualized, intimate relationships. When they exist, they also involve siblings and first degree cousins, and are often rooted in the past sharing of childhood and life experiences.

Over the life course, marriage and the formation of a nuclear family, guided by the ideals of conjugal fusionality and closure, have also bound male relationships to close kin, reinforcing men's familistic view of significant ties.

These men see the family as a closed world, a private refuge in which the family as a group comes first and close kin relationships are the main source of identity for both members of the couple. Sometimes there are siblings on both sides. At other times there are no siblings on the man's side (see António), and marriage has fostered the building up of a configuration composed of siblings and parents on the wife's side. In fact, siblings and co-lateral kin have made a strong mark on the lives of all these men: they grew up among brothers, sisters and cousins, they still connect mainly to them and they pass this relational pattern on to their children by encouraging frequent contact between cousins. The group protects its boundaries, is closed off and therefore reveals strong family-based transitivity. The nearly total overlap between conjugality and the configuration, whereby both members of the couple interact within the same family circle, thus seems to be strongly linked to the fusional functioning of the couple.

Intertwined

Close kinship ties, within an average-sized, geographically near and highly connected configuration, are also important in this pattern. However, they intertwine and may even overlap with close friendship ties that are brought into the nuclear family and merge over time into a cluster of family and friendship relationships. Conjugal functioning in this setting is more of a "companionship" type, fusional but also opening out to include the individual's childhood or more recent friendships from work into the conjugal network of relationships. Overlap between the individual's and the dyad's close relationships is thus considerable. As Sérgio, a computer engineer (33, married to T., 34, marketing director, children aged 10 and 8) puts it: "my wife knows all my friends ... I know all her friends. They were all drawn into the couple, they are our friends now".

At present S. lives in an enlarged family entourage, with his parents-in-law and sister-in-law living in the same building. His wife is very close to her family, especially her parents, and has always wanted to live near them, this proximity also ensuring daily contact and available support for childcare. S. also feels close to them and refers to his parents-in-law and siblings-in-law as "good friends". On his side, however, close kinship ties have been severed through migration, divorce and family conflicts. S. was born in Angola, a former Portuguese colony, and had one brother and two sisters. He recalls

his childhood and specially his adolescence as a period when family relations were difficult and emotionally distant. He puts this down to his parents' marriage (which ended in divorce some years later), leading S. to become quite detached for many years from the members of his family of origin. Recently he has rebuilt his relationship with his father, a bond which is in fact the only individualized component of his family configuration. His connections to his siblings are distant and not part of his life. For S. it is more important to engage in regular contacts with his in-laws and with the couple's friends and their children (also friends of S.'s children), not only through the sharing of meals and outings but also through holidays spent together. The fusional framework of family life, emphasizing conjugal togetherness and mutual support tightly knit around the needs of children, is thus reaffirmed both through friendship and close kin sociabilities.

Friendship

The friendship configuration is a medium-sized one, composed predominantly of a peer group network built up during adolescence and early adulthood. Men in this configuration grew up with these friends, as they went to the same schools, used to get together in the same places or in each other's houses, and also shared the same leisure activities. Dating within the group or bringing girlfriends, boyfriends or new acquaintances into it, was quite frequent and has tended to shape the "peer transitivity" of the network up to the present day. These men married within the network and throughout their lives have kept up close relationships with some of the other couples also formed in it. In their married lives and in parenthood they have been a source of support for one another, by providing childcare, some emotional or material help in difficult times, and also by being the leisure companions of choice at week-ends and on holidays. Their children are also best friends and are always present in group gatherings, this being one of the motives for joint activities.

This configuration of friendship relationships leads to overlapping between conjugality, fatherhood and the network. It is a conjugal-centred configuration promoted both by the fusional functioning of these couples and a long-standing common network. Some close family relationships (parents, parents in law, siblings) are also present in this configuration, but contacts are not frequent and support is weak.

The story of Miguel, a 32 year old electrician, with nine years of schooling and two children, illustrates this type of configuration. He was born and raised in one of Lisbon's working-class neighbourhoods and has two siblings. At the age of eighteen he left his parents' home due to severe conflicts with his father, and went to live with his present wife. The difficult relationship with his father during young adulthood has made M. attach more emotional importance to his group of adolescent friends, who have always been present in his life, than to kin. And even though he grew up in an enlarged family entourage, with seven uncles and aunts and 20 cousins, he drew away from these connections in favour of friendship links. His early marriage to Ana, also a member of the same group of friends, has generated a strong togetherness within the couple, the sharing of childcare and household tasks, as well as the sharing of a dense network of friends. This strong conjugal fusion leaves little space for individualized relationships (intimate bonding is almost exclusively built up within the couple, with Ana referred to as his best friend and confidant). However, the couple is also quite open to the outside world. They often entertain or visit friends, and go out a lot either alone or with friends, but always together. Their group of friends is made up of couples with children, some of them living in the same neighbourhood. It is strongly focused on leisure activities, but also provides emotional and material support such as babysitting, exchanging confidences and advice, financial help and small services.

Dual

A primary issue in this configuration is the dual character of men's relational dynamics, which differs from the fusional density observed in the former cases. Their web of ties mirrors two types of divisions, strongly embedded in men's daily lives: marked gender differentiation in family life and the separation of family ties and male friendships. In spite of geographical proximity and some interconnectivity of relationships built up within a local neighbourhood, these practical and symbolical divisions are the main markers of the family configuration. Individuals' highly gendered trajectories, linked to traditional male breadwinner families and gendered support networks (strongly resembling those described by Bott (1979) fifty years ago), have a far-reaching explanatory role in the building up of this type of configuration.

Men in the "dual" configuration were born into working class families and were raised in local neighbourhoods in the city where they have also settled.

The scenario for every stage of these men's life course was the same geographical setting. They grew up, went to school, made friends, married and had children within the neighbourhood. From early childhood to young adulthood, they developed mating relationships in the street, where they played and spent much of their free time. These gendered interactions among men who grew up together are still a key element in their social identities as men today. The focus of male relationships may have changed, but its membership remains very much the same. From street games to schooling together these men have built more organized encounters in space and time, engaging for example in the local sports association and meeting to have a drink. The responsibilities of adulthood related to work and family duties has encouraged a sort of ritualization of male gatherings at the association. Daily outings to the café after dinner and sports activities during the week-end, more than a lifelong habit, are considered as a male refuge outside work and family.

On the other hand, their wives are in many cases women from the vicinity. Therefore, in spite of gender differentiation in social relations, there is a thin but widespread connectivity between all the members of the configuration. Yet, while men engage in male sociability, women are usually left in charge of the instrumental, female side of networking such as helping each other out with domestic chores and caring for young children. At week-ends, when household tasks do not keep them at home, women sometimes join their husbands at the club; however they normally embrace the female side of the configuration. While men drink and watch football matches or play cards, women chat with their women friends and look after the children.

As might be anticipated, there is a disconnection between the man's configuration and conjugality, a feature which emerges as strongly linked to a "parallel" type of conjugal functioning, based on some individual autonomy within quite separate and differentiated gender roles. Rather than a fusional model of family interactions based on joint activities and the "presence" of male partners in family life, men focus on the principles of the male breadwinner model and of gender-differentiated autonomy. Having a family and children is essential to male identity but it is linked here to the idea of the husband as main provider and "head" of the family. Emphasis on gender differentiation and on the ideology of separate spheres is strong: the woman does all the housework and caring (supported by other women if necessary), the man has separate timetables, interests and hobbies.

Marcelo, 38 years old, an optician with a 12-hour workday, married to F., 38, a saleswoman in a clothes shop, children aged 8 and 3, is a good example of a dual configuration. In daily life, he invests first and foremost in his professional life and then in his favourite hobby (deputy director of a sports' club). He sees himself as the family breadwinner and is not involved in day-to-day family activities. During the week he arrives home too late to be with his children; during the weekend he spends a lot of time at the club, sometimes taking his children along while his wife shops, cleans and irons (supported by his mother).

To Marcelo and other interviewees, family support has always been very important. His mother's helping out with domestic tasks and the children is essential to the female management of work and family, as it fills in the gaps generated by M.'s absence. On the other hand, M. is giving his parents some financial support at present. Giving and receiving is in fact quite frequent and fosters bonds of strong solidarity between the generations.

On the other hand, it is within the group of long-time close male friends that free time is spent. However, relationships focus more on male socializing or even on some material support when help is needed (in renovating a house, for example) rather than on intimacy. Personal problems are hardly ever discussed with mates, who are mostly companions who emphasize traditional forms of masculinity. Marcelo, for example, keeps up a more intimate bond with his older brother, who shares with his wife the role of confidant. Dualism also exists then in this division between public and private matters. Problems are to be shared within close family relations, thus preserving mates from intimacy.

Concentric

The fifth type of configuration is made up of several independent groups of close relationships. Concentricity, applied to a relational configuration pattern, suggests a visual metaphor which helps us to imagine several autonomous circles tied to the same vertex: in this case, the male individual.

Men in this configuration value autonomy and openness to the world and to new relationships, and they tend to have a large number of connections: family, friends and even acquaintances are highly valued social relations. Beyond a solid and permanent block of intimate connections, either with close relatives or long-life friends, other relationships have been systematically incorporated

into the configuration throughout the life course. Each circle has a role of its own in men's lives, as the focus on support, intimacy and leisure-based interactions varies from one group of close ties to another. As in other configurations, support depends more on kinship, while intimacy is developed within long-life intra-generational connections (with friends from adolescence, for instance) and leisure is more widely shared in several circles of interaction with different kinds of focus: the sharing of the same hobby, joint activities with children's friends and their parents, leisure time with neighbouring families or work colleagues, all ties that may gradually be drawn into the close relational web serving particular purposes in specific times and spaces. Relational openness is thus greatly prized as a source of self-fulfilment and as a means to protect individual autonomy. The effort to foster closeness towards relatives (namely parents) and early life friends is, so to say, the other side of the coin, giving men a sense of primary belonging and identity related to others. More than the linkages to nuclear dyads, self-definition throughout the various stages of life seems to depend on the fostering of these close, albeit plural, ties of mutual recognition. Let us recall the story of Patrício, which will help us to illustrate our line of thought.

P., an economist, is the only child of two economists, both former higher civil servants. P. now has his own private firm while his wife, trained in management and marketing, is director of a multinational firm. P. left his parents' home at age 24 to work in Brussels and shortly afterwards, back in Lisbon, he married at 27. Three years later the couple had their only daughter, today an adolescent aged 15. P. has always had a large web of relationships. However, his "relational turning point" happened when he was 12 and met his lifelong friends. It was at that time that his parents bought a seaside house where he started spending summers all by himself, even if under the watchful eye of his neighbouring friends' parents. From that moment on, his friends from adolescence, four men and one woman, all successful professionals, became a constant feature in his life, which he clearly stresses by saying: "I have a strong and constant group of friends since my childhood that stays together against all odds, no matter what".

P.'s family configuration is quite different from his wife's. The strong sense of individual autonomy and of gender equality both in professional and family life has allowed for quite individualized relational dynamics. These men are highly qualified individuals who see themselves and their partners as strongly and equally committed to professional life, within a relationship based on

principles of equality, autonomy and careful management of family time and individual time ("associative" family functioning). In P.'s case, he describes himself as very respectful of his wife's preferences and personality. Compared to him, she is rather a closed person and, for that reason, much more dependent on him for support and intimacy. On the other hand, she did not have the same opportunities as her husband for developing many close relationships, as her parents lived in Zaire for 40 years and moved around a lot between Africa and Portugal. Consequently, J. nevet had the chance of building up her own web of close relationships. This is the main reason why P. thinks his wife's close bonds are more focused on him and their daughter. In contrast, he has always divided his sense of closeness with others. For him, relationships with others are vital, not only the ones fostered since adolescence, but also those he has developed during his adult life (some of which are partially shared with his wife and daughter). At present, he is engaged in leisure time activities with his friends from adolescence, with a group of friends with whom he goes hunting, with work colleagues and a large number of neighbourhood friends who visit him or the couple for drinks and barbecues. P.'s relational configuration reveals some transitivity, even though in a segmented form. Friends of friends are often drawn into the group of relationships, which is flexible and open. However, these new connections are nurtured within the borders of the group, to which they belong to, rarely crossing its boundaries.

Communitarian

In contrast with the previous pattern, "communitarian" configuration patterns relate to men whose bonds, albeit diverse and multi-focused, overlap strongly with an enlarged kinship network. The use of such a term sweeps us into one of the most compelling debates in the social sciences, which has focused on the idea that "community life" would fade with modernization. Close and localized interconnections between people would be undermined and give way to more individualized relationships, far from wider kinship and neighbourhood ties. The theory of community decline has been present since the beginning of sociology, as a result of its founding fathers' concern with the impact of modernity on social ties. The subject was enshrined in Tönnies' (1957) famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), and in Durkheim's (1978) distinction between 'mechanical' and 'organic' solidarity. The latter, more optimistic than the

former, believed that new forms of solidarity would develop within modern societies.

Emerging from this primordial debate, a configurational analysis may add knowledge to it, as is argued in this book. If, in some cases, individualization encourages the building up of multi-group and loose relationships (see the previous "concentric" configuration), the present example shows how individuality may also establish linkages with community-type groups, by combining individualization with a strong sense of familistic cohesion and belonging. Moreover, rather than closed and self-centred, these modern communitarian dynamics are of a strongly open kind. As one interviewee stated when speaking of his parents' house: "We always adopted anyone who came into our home and had difficulties in life [...]". Men in communitarian configurations are deeply embedded in wider kinship relations that tend to incorporate a large set of "others" into the family group: adoptive children, friends, friends of friends, neighbours and even employees become "close family". They take part in the group and are allowed to bring others along, thus producing strong community transitivity rooted in ideals of solidarity and inclusion. Nonetheless, members of this communitarian configuration have their individuality respected and protected. As the same man adds, "there was no such thing as just being 'the son of': each one of us (he is referring to his six brothers) was first and foremost an individual person". Notions of difference and personal achievement are well fitted into the relational code by which relationships are built up. In fact, the "individuality" and the personal "story" of each new membet is seen as "adding" to the cultural and relational richness of the "community".

This multi-functional and overlapping configuration is linked to men born and raised in large families, in general financially and academically well-off and of Catholic upbringing. In some cases, the experience of migration and decolonization may have helped to strengthen the notion of being part of a family community that cannot be lost. Francisco, the youngest son of a business director, came with his parents from Mozambique in 1982, at age 12, to join his older brothers who were already in Lisbon. As he tecalls it, his parents' main motivation was to reunite the whole family: the seven biological children and the two they had adopted in Africa. In the meantime, the family has made an effort to recreate the kind of communitarian life they had in Africa. F. describes his relationship with his family very eloquently: "It is a very big family and very close [...] my life with my brothers and with my

family, it is a daily thing, we are together because we are part of each others' lives and it also feels good, it's not only a matter of conviviality. And marital life has all those things within it ... Week-ends are family." In fact, his parents and siblings are a constant presence and support in his life at present. His two children (aged 5 and 6) go to his parents' house every day after school and regular gatherings bring together not only his parents and siblings but also family friends and their children. In F.'s opinion, this is the ideal environment for his kids to grow up in, replicating his own upbringing (lots of people, lots of children in and out of the household). Interestingly, he describes the existing ties of closeness very much as communitarian bonds. According to him, there are no particular relationships of intimacy, which is important for the feeling of being a group: "People are not close to someone in particular; they are just with one another".

Besides his family and family friends, F. has one or two close bonds with work colleagues. He plays football with them and even confides in them when he has a problem. This is a part of his personal autonomy as well. However, F. establishes a clear distinction, almost hierarchical in terms of impottance, between family friends, i.e. those who in some sense belong to the family community, and friends from work.

Conjugal Bridging

The last pattern is linked to the process of "remarriage chaining" (see introductory chapter), whereby close relationships are built up within a sequence of conjugal separations and blending arrangements over the life course. From the individual's point of view, break-ups affect their entire relational world, not only conjugal or parent-child relationships. Every time a couple separates, relatives, friends and acquaintances are changed, their configuration shifting more rapidly than in other periods of life. However, rather than a shift to new bonds, the important aspect in "conjugal bridging" is precisely what we may see as the reverse of anticipated changes: broken partnerships become the new framework for men's relationships, with ex-partners turning into close and supportive friends. In the case of Pedro (aged 41, researcher, one child), who has had several partnerships, we can observe how ties from the past mingle with the present conjugal relationship and create what we have called conjugal bridging: a very small and loose configuration where the binding elements are shaped by the connections men maintain to their former partners. Centredness

on conjugality in the past and present reveals itself in a very partner-based web, in which other relationships, be it with kin or friends, are secondary. Unstable family trajectories, with close relatives becoming distant figures, and strong geographical mobility promoting superficial and ephemeral relationships are also the basis of this type of configuration.

Pedro's story is a good example of conjugal bridging. Pedro himself was raised in a blended family with a history of conjugal break-up and remarriage, as both his parents had previous marriages and children. P. was an only child but had two brothers on his father's side and three on the mother's side. When his father died at age 46, his mother remarried and went to live and work in Lisbon, far from P.'s hometown in the south. This led to his isolation as a young boy: older than him, his brother and sisters left home and Pedro started living by himself at 14, seeing his mother only at week-ends. Separation from his family increased shortly after, when Pedro emigrated at age 16, to study in a foreign country for several years (and where he had his first two cohabiting relationships). A few years later he returned to Portugal to work in Lisbon and got involved in other partnerships. One of them lasted 10 years in a system of LAT (living apart together). Before marrying, P. therefore recalls seven important conjugal experiences, and the close relationships built up through these dyads are still vital to him: he feels close to several of his ex-partners and one of them is his best friend. As he says "some of my ex's have remained good friends, but with this one I have a particularly close relationship … there are things I talk about only to her, no one else". Along these lines of reasoning he describes his fortieth birthday party as a sort of a "convention of ex-partners". Moreover, he met his wife through an ex-partner, an event which illustrates the transitivity of conjugal bridging.

After his marriage to M. (aged 38, secondary level of education, working full-time in the administrative sector of a town council) and the birth of the couple's child, P. has strengthened his tendency to focus on the nuclear family as his main source of relationality. At present, P. and his wife live quite an isolated life. They have occasional contacts with his wife's parents and aunts but they do not receive support from family or friends in their daily life. The lack of support in childcare, for instance, often creates problems: when something unexpected happens it is difficult to find someone to take care of their five year old daughter. Another striking example of the weakness of kinship ties also has to do with their daughter. P. and M. have made a will to ensure that their child is taken care of if something happens to them. In the event of death, parental custody will be given to the female partner of his wife's aunt, as they feel that none of his or her parents or siblings are reliable or will wish to take care of the child.

At present P.'s contacts with others, besides the intimate and strong connections he has with his wife and ex-partners, arise through his professional activity. As a researcher, fieldwork and travelling are good ways of fostering acquaintanceship: "one of my pleasures in life is my profession, because it allows me to get to know a lot of new people [...]". In fact, in contrast with day-to-day life, P. defines himself as a person who enjoys meeting others. But he adds "I have never had many friends … and I don't have as many friends as all that. There are a few people whom I have to remember to call – if we meet casually that's fine, but we don't make arrangements [...]". He cultivates acquaintanceship but not closeness or support, and being alone with his nuclear family does not weigh on him: "I don't feel the weight of being alone just with my family". P.'s early independence, combined with the many changes in his relational trajectory, have made him prize his autonomy above everything. At the same time, responsibility for others, namely his wife and daughter, is very important. He sees himself as the main provider and "manager" of his family (P. shops and cooks as well as being the main caregiver and educator).

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored interpersonal relationships from the male perspective, focusing on men in conjugal dyads with children. Seven patterns of family configurations were identified. The first three – *siblings, intertwined* and *friendship* – emerge within average-sized but very dense, multifunctional configurations, with extensive overlapping between the conjugal dyad and wider bonds and networks. Interpersonal relationships may favour close relatives, in particular siblings and siblings-in-law and their children *(siblings)*, both close relatives and friends *(intertwined)* or mainly close friends *(friendship)*. *Dual* configurations emerge within the framework of strong gender differentiation both in the configuration and in conjugal functioning. Men's close relationships are linked, on the one hand, to male friendship interactions (with no overlap) and, on the other hand, to very dense, multifunctional family bonds that overlap with conjugality and are highly gendered in terms of focus and

practices. The last three types of configuration are linked to men living in "associative" type families who put more emphasis on individual autonomy. A *concentric* configuration is composed of several different groups of close relationships (with varied foci and often uni-functional) tied to the same vertex (the man); overall connectivity and transitivity are low but exist to some extent within each group of close ties; overlap is occasional and selective rather than being systematically built into all relationships as in the first three patterns described above. The *communitarian* configuration has very distinctive features. Men's close relationships are mainly associated with an enlarged, very open and very varied family-friendship entourage, revealing strong connectivity and transitivity; this "community" is perceived as an extended, multifunctional family but it is made up of friends, relatives, adopted children, needy persons, friends of friends. Finally, men's close relationships in the *conjugal bridging* configuration tend to be linked to former partnerships: rather than close relatives or friends, it is through remarriage chains that they have built up close bonds.

According to our initial hypotheses, results suggest that the meanings and patterns of family configurations are framed by the life course, social and historical time, as well as the ideals and practices of family functioning.

On the one hand, results show that the plurality of configurations can only be understood in a life course perspective. The nature and the building up of close bonds has its starting point far back in the past, in the story of the family of orientation and in the interpersonal relationships fostered during childhood and young adulthood. Being an only child, being born and raised in a working-class neighbourhood or in a large family, having a migration trajectory, experiencing separations or family blending trajectories are factors which strongly shape male configurations today. To understand why men's webs of relationships become more focused on close friendships ties or on friendships with ex-partners (rather than on close kin, for example), it is essential to take into account the residential, professional and relational trajectories of individuals over the life course.

On the other hand, our findings also demonstrate that conjugality plays a key role in explaining men's family configurations, depending on whether couples favour fusion or autonomy, openness or closure. Intetestingly, one first important finding which emetged from our analysis is that the type of overlap between the conjugal dyad and other close relationships produces a considerable diversity of configurations (e.g., Stein et al., 1992). Extensive

overlap appears to be linked to dense, multifunctional, and weakly individualized configurations. These are usually fusional couples in which the conjugal bond and togetherness are much more vital as binding principles of relational dynamics. In contrast, lack of overlap or more partial overlapping between the conjugal dyad and the configuration are associated with relational configurations which bring in more varied groups of close ties, more varied foci and looser forms of connectivity.

However, results also point to the complexity of the linkages between life course variables and conjugal functioning, underlining the need to understand how personal and conjugal histories are interwoven across time. The plurality of family configurations is highly dependent on these complex connections, as we will illustrate by summarizing the three broad trends identified in this chapter.

First, fusional ideals and practices in conjugality are closely linked to configuration patterns which emphasize binding forms of social capital and are built up through close kinship ties. Rather than favouring individual bonds, relationships are woven around the tight connectivity of the group. The configurations which strongly overlap with conjugality ("siblings", "intertwined" and "friendship") present three slightly different strategies in the building up of the family web, but have an important feature in common: in all the cases, conjugality has reinforced the key role of interconnected close relations in men's lives. In the first two patterns, conjugality counterbalanced the relative isolation some men suffered due to their migration trajectories, which caused some breaking down of their childhood webs. Even when there were ho major turning points in men's lives, marriage always represented an entry into a new world of kinship ties, which gained supremacy over other relationships (with work colleagues or acquaintances, for example). In the friendship configuration, family closeness is also valued, even though friends occupy the position traditionally reserved for close kin. Family conflicts over the life course usually explain emotional distance from parents or siblings and their replacement by friends shared by the two members of the couple since early adolescence.

Secondly, we observed the association between "dual" configurations and "parallel" conjugal functioning, in contexts of strong gender segregation of relationships. Once again, however, relational history is an essential explanatory factor. Many of these men are of working class origin, as in the siblings' pattern, but it is rather by looking at family relations across time that we may best understand the most important aspects of this particular configuration as

well as the reasons for its singular nature. Continuity in mating groups built up within the neighbourhood since adolescence accounts for the relevance of male friendship and peer relations. Family is also important as a source of closeness and support, but it is women who are the main actors of kin connections and who interact daily with mothers and parents-in-law. Moreover, as members of the neighbourhood and having frequently grown up in same gendered environments, they also have their own female relational web.

A third significant trend shows, as anticipated, that associative functioning and individual autonomy may be linked to very different forms of building up close relationships. Generally, the lack of overlap between the conjugal dyad and the configuration depends to a great extent on the existence of significant close others who are in a position to compete with the conjugal bond. Openness to alternative bonds, be it through closeness to many types of relatives or to many types of friends (childhood or adolescent friends, work colleagues, ex-partners, etc.) seems to be a key component of the building up of more individualized dynamics, whatever their form. Evidently, strong ideals of personal autonomy have also promoted these individualized relationships over time. In the case of "concentric" or "communitarian" configurations, men have fostered individualized bonds both with kin and with friends. In spite of emphasizing different relational strategies (one more based on multiple relational circles, the other favouring closeness with a large familistic network of relatives and friends), men's autonomy is produced and supported by those large networks of ties.

However, autonomy within the couple may not always tie in with large configurations, as in the conjugal bridging pattern. When kin networks or early life friendships were eroded by disrupting events, such as migration trajectories, difficult divorces and remarriages, death or other losses, strategies that allow individuals to rebuild their ties may follow a different pathway. "Conjugal bridging", centred on closeness to partners and ex-partners, is a striking example of the contemporary forms through which men may find individualized relational closeness and social support. More importantly, the conjugal bridging pattern points to a double trend. On the one hand, it is linked to some life course events, such as divorce and remarriage, which are more and more frequent today; on the other, it shows how unclear are the frontiers between kinship ties and affinity ties.

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