

Configuration approach : A new perspective to study family ties in old age

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1. Backgrounds

Majority of work in gerontology has for long years defined a priori **family as « nuclear »**, i.e. an entity composed of biological relations with obvious boundaries and focused on **social support and its positive impact** on health and well-being.
It is only recently (this last decade) that diversity in family structures and complexity in emotional relations have received more attention in gerontology. But adequate conceptual and methodological tools to approach family diversity and complexity are still missing.

New perspectives are needed!

2. Family Configuration Approach

The configurational approach considers that:

- Family relationships are **organized as complex patterns of interdependencies** between **significant members of family** who form the configuration.
- These interdependencies are built up on the **exchanges of various resources** (emotional, practical, etc) which are **meaningful for individuals' identity**.
- These interdependencies are **organised differently according to the particular structure of each configuration**.

Family Network Method

- Asking the respondents to list the people in their family **who they consider to be significant**.
- Collecting information about the **composition of family configurations**.
- Collecting information about **interdependencies (support, influence, conflicts) between family members**.

3. Benefits

1. Going beyond the nuclear family to capture diversity

- By defining families as complex patterns of interdependencies among family members, **diversity of new forms of family can be taken into account**.

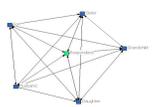
2. Defining families that matter for the respondents

- By using affective and practical interdependencies rather than institutionalised family roles and status, **significant family ties are better defined**.

3. Measuring social capital

- In considering families as configurations, **a range of measurements in social network analysis can be used to measure social capital** (defined as individual resources generated by the interdependencies within configurations).
- **The way in which interdependencies are organized – varying according to the structure of the configurations – produces different types of social capital as bonding vs bridging social capital types.**
- These latter may have **different effects on individuals' well-being**.

Types of Social Capital :



Bonding social capital :
-High density of connections.
-Low individual centrality.

VS



Bridging social capital :
-Low density of connections.
-High individual centrality.

4. Research Objectives

1. Identification of the most frequent family configurations in old age by considering their size and composition.

2. Highlighting individual and collective conditions explaining diversity of family configurations (as socio-demographic characteristics and life-courses).

3. Explaining properties of the interdependencies underlying these diverse family configurations (centrality, density, etc) in order to :

• **Determine the type of resources** that they generate (social capital) ;

• **Detect their potential for conflict** (tension, control, interference, etc).

4. Analysing positive and negative influences of these properties on the ability of elderly individuals to adapt in the face of their growing frailty.

5. Sample

Geneva sub-sample of the VLV study: 579 individuals aged 65 years and above, living at home or in institutions, and able to answer the questions by themselves.

Table 1 : Distribution of the number of significant family members listed by the respondents

	N	%
0	61	10.8
1	42	7.4
2	54	9.6
3	90	16.0
4	90	16.0
5 ¹	227	40.2
Total	564	100

¹ Respondents in VLV study were limited to list a maximum of five significant family members.

Table 1 :

Majority of respondents (56%) have listed more than 3 significant family members. However a significant share (10%) have cited none of them. The average number of significant family members is 3.4 (SD=1,73).

Table 2 :

The 503 respondents provided 1904 citations. Table 2 presents 86% of all terms cited. This table shows that 70% cites their children as significant family members. But friends are also largely considered as significant family members.

Table 2 : Distribution of terms of citation

		% of all terms cited (N=1904)	% of respondents citing the term (N=503)
Son	353	19	70
Daughter	349	18	70
Partner	236	12	47
Granddaughter	126	7	25
Sister	105	6	21
Female Friend	102	5	20
Grandson	88	5	18
Brother	83	4	17
Male Friend	69	4	14
Daughter-in-law	45	2	9
Sister-in-law	37	2	7
Nephew	33	2	7

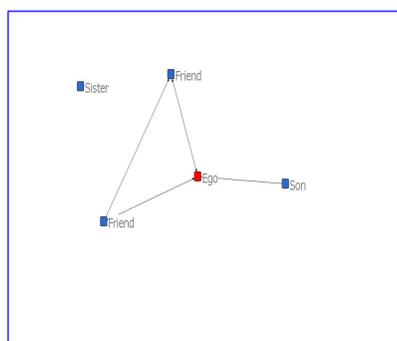
Examples of Family Configurations

Woman, 68 years old, divorced, 2 children, 0 grandchildren, 2 sisters/brothers

Significant family members :

1. Son
2. Sister
3. Male friend
4. Female friend

Exchanged resource: Emotional support.

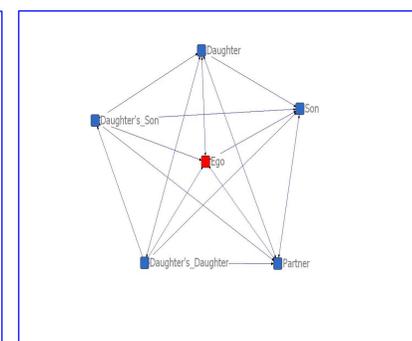


Man, 87 years old, married, 2 children, 4 grandchildren, 2 great-grandchildren 1 sister or brother

Significant family members :

1. Daughter
2. Son
3. Daughter's Son
4. Partner
5. Daughter's Daughter

Exchanged resource: Emotional support.



Conclusion :

The family configuration approach has never been considered in gerontology to study family ties. However it is a good alternative to approach the diversity in family structures and the complexity in emotional relationships, and also to assess the complex links between family relationships and well-being in old age.