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TITLE

A mixed-method social networks study design for research on transnational families

Research paper

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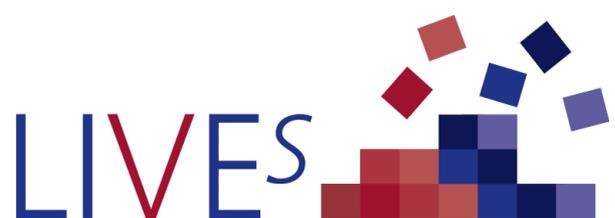
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Abstract

This paper advocates for mixed-method networks research design to describe and analyse ego-centered social networks in transnational family research. Drawing on the experience of the "Social networks' influences on family formation", we show how the combined use of network generator tools and open ended interviews produces unique data on family configurations and their impact on life course choices. A mixed-methods network approach presents specific advantages research on children in transnational families: quantitative analyses reconstruct the potential and actual relational support available to children in a context where kin interactions may be hindered by temporary and prolonged period of separation; qualitative analyses address families strategies to maintain relationships across legal borders and geographical distance, and the implications for children well-being.

Keywords

Children | Family Relationships | Fertility Intentions| Methodology| Qualitative| Social Support

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1. Introduction

The empirical gap in knowledge on transnational family life on children well-being because usually families are predominantly conceived of as living together. Yet, easier transportation and advanced technologies have transformed not only the way in which family members communicate and exchange resources, but also the modes and frequency at which they circulate members between sending and receiving countries. Family researchers and policy makers need to take into account the spatial distribution of families and what effects distance between family members has. International migration affects the lives of family members who migrate as well as those who remain behind and has important consequences for kinship ties, living arrangements and children's outcomes.

Transnational families are by definition spread across geographical and legal borders, where transnationalism is conceptualized as "a set of sustained long-distance, border-crossing connections" (Vertovec, 2004, p.3) or "practices and relationships that link migrants and their children with the home country, where such practices have significant meaning and are regularly observed" (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007, p. 132). As Mazzucato and Schans (2008) observe in this issue, studies on the way in which children's care and children's socialization are organized in transnational families are just beginning to go beyond the analysis of mother-children and parents-children bonds to look at families as relational subsystems (Cowan C.P, Cowan, P.A., Herring, G., & Miller, N.B. 1991). Often based on qualitative case studies, these researches establish the importance of social networks as providers of affective environment, practical support, and identity providers. They also nuance in informative way the ambiguity circulating between parents and children experiencing transnational migration: while the formers see it as enhancing the chances of social mobility and a better life for their children, the children may feel abandoned or neglected by their parents with opposite effects on their behavioral outcomes.

However, these studies focus almost exclusively, or disproportionately, on children living in receiving countries and on networks located there. In addition, information is generally retrospective or relative to one point in time. Last, qualitative information often does not allow for a systematic appreciation of children's own social networks across different family configurations and living arrangements. Overcoming the limitations of current research on the issue shall reinforce our understanding of the social context in which children in transnational family arrangements grow up and develop. We suggest that in order to understand the role of social networks of support and influence on children well-being, we need systematic and longitudinal data to estimate children's social networks structure and composition. In other words, we need to adopt a systematic social networks approach to measure the structural properties of the patterned interactions of children in their social environment. Similarly, a comparative research design, which would allow contrasting children's social networks in different living arrangements, would allow separating the specific effects of social networks in the experiences of transnational childhoods.

The following Section 2 introduces the specific contribution of social network analysis in research on family relationships. Section 3 illustrates a mixed-method approach to reconstruct ego-centred networks by bringing the case of an empirical study on family formation of in eastern and western Germany. The specific data collection instruments in this study are thought to generate the list of relevant network members, evaluate their relationship with Ego, Alters' reciprocal relationships, and the way in which social support and social influence is distributed within these networks. Section 4 discusses the suitability of such instruments and approach for research on children in transnational families.

2. Social networks perspective and transnational families

The network perspective stresses the notion that individuals are not acting in isolation, but that they are 'embedded' (Granovetter, 1985) in a network of social relations. Individual actors (Egos) in interaction with their network partners (Alters), usually are engaged in exchanges of information, material and immaterial goods, and services. Resources bound in social networks build the 'social capital' of individuals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Individuals also learn, transmit, negotiate and challenge social norms in social interactions (Mitchell, 1973). Network structure and composition strongly shape the availability of access to resources as well as the intensity of social control exerted to enforce social norms (Freeman, 1979; Granovetter, 1973). Social networks are key elements in structuring individuals' expectations of the future, and therefore in restricting and/or enabling individuals' choices (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Social network analysis, focusing on the structure and composition of networks, enable social researchers to understand the social boundaries within which individual agency operates.

Social network research distinguishes two major types of relationships: strong ties and weak ties (Burt, 1987, Friedkin, 1982,; Marsden & Friedkin, 1993). Family and friends correspond usually to the strong ties of an individual, while colleagues, neighbours and acquaintances are considered weak ties. The definition of tie strength depends on four dimensions: the duration of a relationship, its emotional intensity, the degree of intimacy, and the amount of reciprocal services (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). *Strong ties* therefore can be represented by Alters who are engaged in long term and frequent contact with Ego, are emotionally close, and help each other on a regular basis. Strong ties often constitute cohesive networks, or dense networks, in which information is transmitted quickly and trustfully. Dense networks also tend to produce homogenous evaluations and normative pressure (Bott, 1957; Friedkin, 1982,). In contrast, *weak ties* are emotionally distant from Ego, may be short term and context specific, and reciprocity is not necessarily expected in exchanges. Weak ties do not have a direct sanctioning power, but they can be excellent sources of innovative information (Granovetter, 1973).

Tie strength is not relevant *per se* however, but rather because of the way in which ties are culturally and socially constructed. Its effects on individuals' intentions and behavior strongly depend on the context. For instance, while Granovetter (1973) argued that weak ties are the main source of information for getting a new job, Wegener showed that weak ties are relevant for specific groups only, namely persons from higher social strata. Persons from lower social strata rather employ strong ties in order to find a new job (Wegener, 1991). Tie strength does not affect similarly all subgroups in a society. The meaning and the impact of personal relations in social networks depend very much on personal characteristics, the individual and the cultural context, and also the kind of life domain the researcher is interested in. The cultural context is important because it provides social norms that may vary between but also within societies. Additionally the cultural context gives meaning to social ties and the resources and information exchanged in social interactions. It defines who is interaction with whom, how often and what are the expectations of reciprocity in exchanges with specific individuals. Social network and social support research have proved to be crucial for understanding processes of family interactions and social support enhancing couple and children well being. In particular, this research has been instrumental to understand marital success in long-term couple relationships to examine couple's family changes after the transition to parenthood (Bryant & Conger, 1999, Bost, Cox, & Payne 2002), and to evaluate children's family configurations after parental divorce. Research on children's social networks shows that differential in children's emotional, health, and school outcomes by gender and age are partially explained, by the characteristics of their own social networks. The larger family and relational environment contributes to the children well being, to the extent of practical

support available, and to their affective and identity equilibrium. Like in the case of parents' separation and divorce, discontinuities in the proximity and the availability of some members of the social network do not need to translate necessarily in disadvantages, but certainly they constitute a different relational universe than the one present in less fluid living arrangements.

These examples in union dissolution studies tell that by means of a social networks approach, families can be analysed as configurations of relationships that go beyond shared housing, residential proximity, legal memberships, as well as national and cultural borders. Such an approach is particularly well suited to study transnational families' practices and the non-economic effects of migration on family members not living together, or living-apart-together, including children. Relationships and roles in transnational families have to cope with geographical separation, often involuntary separation, which is likely to have emotional, psychological and health consequences for children. Partners, parents and children, but also more generally all relatives and peers networks are reconfigured by transnational life courses.

Despite the potential wealth of insights that a focus on transnational social networks promise to bring to the field, only rarely have researchers described what transnational networks look like. With the exception of the few studies which have given attention to the urban elites and to the mobile professionals of developed countries (Kennedy, 2004; Ó Rian, 2000), even basic social network analysis measures like strong and weak ties are left out of transnational families research. Such a research gap leaves room for important questions about the functioning of such families in the long term. One question concerns the vulnerability of kin ties over distance. The literature on social capital argues that geographical distance leads to a reduction of connectivity, trust, and commitment among community members (Cresswell, 2002; Hammerton, 2004; Larsen J.; J. Urry, & K. Axhausen, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Are kin relationships scattered across borders subject to the same weakening mechanisms? On the one hand family members who have migrated may loosen their ties with those who stayed behind in favour of the ties created in the new environment because of the exposure to different institutions or the need to integrate themselves locally. On the other hand contacts between family members may intensify and their social capital increase because of the new opportunities offered by migration

Help requests may increase in both directions fuelled by the availability of easy and cheap communication and travelling opportunities: unsuccessful migrants may ask for support back home and family members who stayed behind may multiply their request for economic support. Official remittances and economic transfers among family members, the only exchange of goods, which has been systematically described and quantified so far, are only part of the story. The pool of resources circulating through transnational ties are made not only financial goods but also, and for a large part, material goods, emotional support, knowledge and information, and symbolic identity. Therefore, in order to appreciate to which extent transnational family members are connected and how the circulation of people across borders affect families functioning, it is particularly important to quantify and qualify transnational social networks by measuring some of their basic characteristics. Who is connected to whom? How distant are nodes from each other? How long do they keep in touch for and with which frequency? What goods do they exchange? Such information helps answering more specific questions related to children outcomes in transnational families. What kinds of relationships are central for children living in transnational families? What is specific of social networks of and social support of children "left behind" in the sending country and being cared for by relatives other than their parents for most of their childhood? What are the difference with the social networks and support of children who instead circulate across borders, following their parents' fluid migratory paths? And with that of children issued from more stable and definitive migratory patterns (second generation migrants), but who nevertheless feel a "transnational way of belonging" (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2005)? Is the degree of overlap between

parents and children networks substantially reduced in transnational families in comparison of that of parents and children living together most of the time? Are transnational social networks more instable over time since they are likely to depend on geographical residence of the child or of their parents? What kind of support do social networks of transnational children provide to them and to what extent do they exert normative influence on them? One shall ask also what is specific in the ways in which such networks are constructed, used, and maintained (Mazzuccato, 2009).

The next section describes the methodological aspects of an empirical study focusing on social networks and their influence on families. The targeted networks rotate around a different population than children (young men and women in their late 20s- early 30s), and the central interest is not health or educational outcomes but rather childbearing behaviour. However, the study design was conceived to answer very similar questions that one would want to answer in studying the social networks of children living in transnational families: network composition, network structure, tie strength, and type of exchanges among network members.

3. Methods

Increasingly, researchers recognize the importance of the role of social interaction in the dynamics of fertility preferences. The hypothesis is that the family behaviour of relatives and peers has a certain degree of interdependence due to social mechanisms (Bernardi, 2003; Kohler, 2001; Rossier & Bernardi, *forthcoming*). Empirical papers focus on social mechanisms (social support, social learning, social pressure) and on the variation in the composition of the networks of informal relationships. The major problems encountered in collecting appropriate empirical evidence to test theoretical propositions and social interaction effects are usually represented by the correct identification of informal relationships salient in fertility decision-making and by the comparability of social networks across population subgroups.

The research project Social Influence on Fertility, carried out by the Independent Research Group on the Culture of Reproduction at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research between 2004 - 2005, aimed at identifying the consequences of social interaction on family formation. The project wanted to understand whether and how social mechanisms occurring in informal social networks, such as social learning and social influence, affect individual childbearing expectations, attitudes, preferences, and ultimately behaviour. We regarded a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches as best suited to tackle the two problems, given the different strengths that mixed methods have and given the nature of the social process we were interested in. Qualitative methods are best suited to explore the meaning of parenthood but also to identify the relationships salient for contributing to the construction of this meaning and for their translation into intentions and behaviour related to family formation. Quantitative methods are best suited to compare networks and tie characteristics across subgroups of individuals. The integrated nature of a mixed methods research designs in addition aims at capturing the tight relation between social structure and individual agency (social action) implied in the process of interest, social influence on family formation (Kelle, 2001).

3.1 The context of the study

The case studies were conducted in two neighbouring cities in contemporary eastern Germany (the former German Democratic Republic or GDR) and in western Germany (the former, democratic Federal Republic of Germany or FRG) characterized by different patterns, or *regimes*, of family formation in the second half of the XX century (Bernardi Klärner, & von der Lippe 2008). Social policies in the GDR were designed to favor women's labor force participation to enhance a positive image of working mothers; they were geared to minimize job interruptions after childbirth with generous supplies of inexpensive childcare. The state guaranteed re-entry into the labor market at

the pre-job absence level of qualification and offered special support to single mothers (Trappe, 1995). It is not surprising, then, that women's labor-force participation in 1989 was 82 % in the GDR - mostly full-time jobs - compared to 56 % in the FRG (Hülser, 1996, p. 47). In the West German states, state support for parents was instead oriented towards an "employment-motherhood sequence", with mothers who had small children experiencing long interruptions and employed part-time. The consequences of the different family policies survived the post-unification policy changes, possibly owing to the transmission of consolidated differences in values and perspectives from one generation to the next. At present, for the cohorts who started their reproductive career after unification, parity progressions to first birth are faster in eastern Germany; childbearing is closely linked to formal marriage in western Germany only (Konietzka & Kreyenfeld, 2005).

The two parts of Germany presented also very specific forms of informal social interaction structure. All the few systematic comparative studies on this topic find fundamental differences in size, composition, and functions of social networks between the socialist GDR and the democratic FRG. Studies by Völker (1995), Völker and Flap (1995, 2001), and Schmelzer (2005) find that GDR networks of friends, acquaintances, and families were typically small and their composition heterogeneous. There was a double rationale behind the network features: in small networks it was easier to keep control over the trustworthiness of the interaction partners (denunciation was a widespread and serious issue in the GDR), and heterogeneous networks ensured maximal provision of goods to compensate for the scarce availability of these goods on the market. Also, the social networks of eastern Germans consisted of a higher share of kin compared to the share of friends (Uhlendorff, 2004). In the FRG, by contrast, the networks have always been weaker, larger, and more homogeneous. The strength of the weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) mainly consisted in being a source of information. It is still not clear, however, whether these difference have persisted throughout the entire 15 years following unification or what potential changes have occurred. On the one hand Nauck and Schwenk (2001) find that network characteristics, such as the composition of the network or the frequency of contacts, changed considerably in both parts of Germany in the 1990 to 1996 time span, and they advise not to overstate the pre-unification differences. On the other hand Völker and Flap (1995) find signs of network disintegration in eastern Germany, until 1995 indicated by a (further) reduction in size and density and the loss of function of many network members. Moreover, there are "no signs that the citizens of the former GDR made up for the loss of social capital by intensifying the relationships they were left with" (Völker & Flap, 1995, p. 105).

In this context, our study aimed at exploring the meaning and relevance of family formation and enlargement; exploring the mechanisms of social influence affecting the individuals' decision-making; identifying the informal relationships salient in fertility decision-making; analyzing how the mechanisms of influence and structural properties of the social networks are related. In order to answer these questions our attention turned to the structural properties of the networks, like their size density and composition, but also to the flows of emotional and material exchanges taking place among network members, and the meaning attributed to relationships and exchanges by the individuals involved in them.

3.2 Sampling

In order to meet the contrasting demands of a sample that would be as various as possible in terms of family formation experiences and a sample which would allow for comparability, we decided for an a priori quota sampling strategy. The quota sampling strategy consisted in selecting 35 focal individuals (Egos), and up to three of their network partners (Alters), who were partners or friends of the Egos. The focal respondents were men and women between 28 and 32 years. We chose this age group, because the median age of first births for women lies in this age span.

Therefore we assumed that at this age family formation was a salient topic. Our focal respondents had grown up in the same town in the northwest of Germany; most of them had attended the same school class, either at a secondary school or a high school. We chose respondents with secondary or higher education because in Germany it is the fertility behavior of the middle- and higher-educated, which has changed most strongly in recent years. The interviews were collected in the frame of a mixed-methods research study on social networks and social influences on family formation (Bernardi, Keim, & von der Lippe. 2006, 2007). Most of our respondents were childless; some had one and very rarely also two children

3.3 Data collection instruments

We used four different types of instruments of data collection: a semi-structured interview, a network chart, and a network grid.

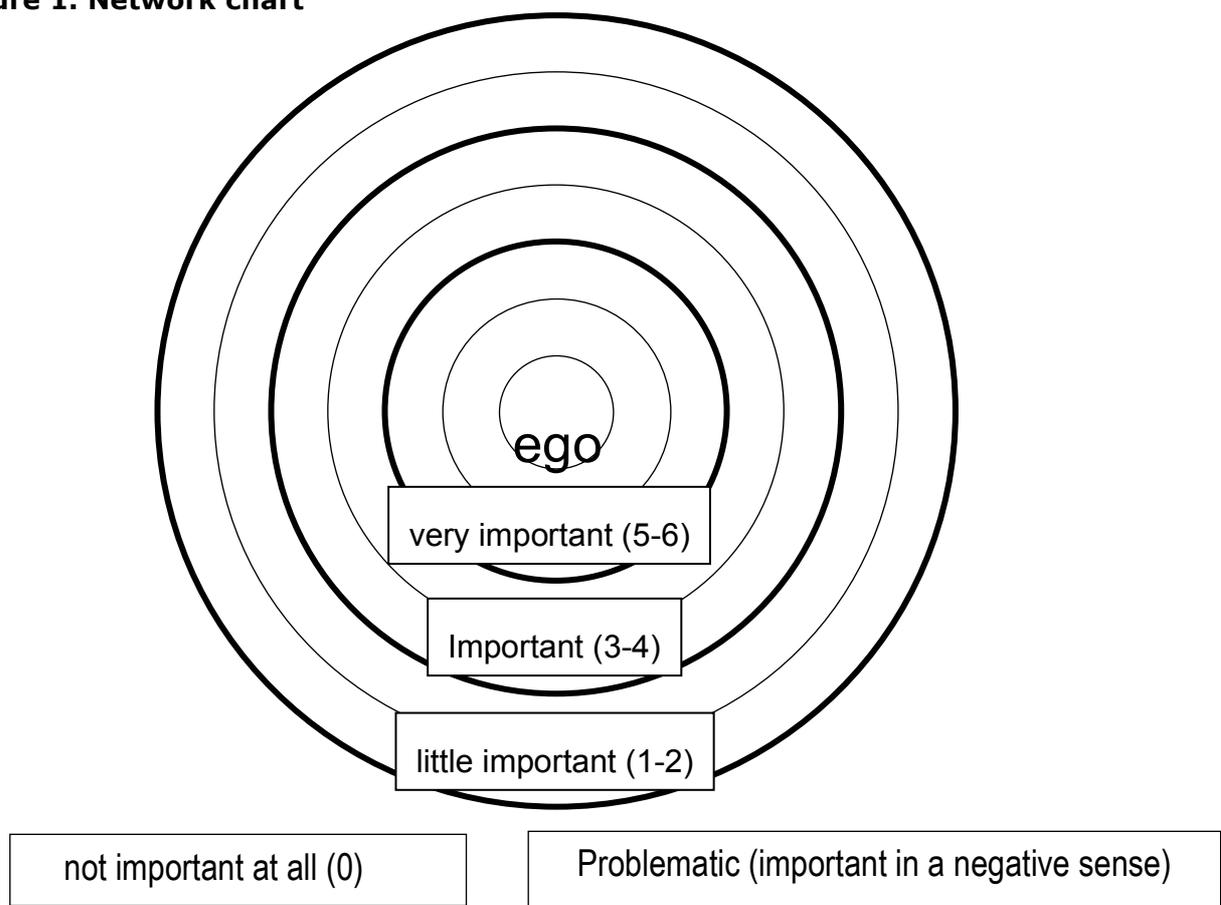
The semi-structured interview: The interviews cover educational and professional trajectories, partnership history, intentions to have a (further) child and experiences with becoming a parent, as well as general information on family related attitudes, general values and life goals. Most important for our purpose here, the interviews explore the respondent's social relations in-depth and collect information on kin, friends and other persons our respondents are in contact with. The research questions demands an instrument of data collection that allows being open but also allows having a focus on the research topic. This combination is found in demi-structured interviews as the problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 1985, 2000). The problem-centered interview stands in the traditions of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and it as an adequate method for combining deductive (theoretically pre-structured) and inductive (open) elements. It aims at the respondents' subjective perspective by using narrative incentives. In our case these narrative incentives allow a detailed exploration of the respondents' ideas and desired concerning having children as well as on their personal relations as well as on processes of social influence. These data provides us with rich information on biographic events after graduation, ranging from school, the partnership history, the current partner, orientations, meanings, and expectations concerning childbearing, interaction with the partner on the topic, the characteristics of informal social relations, and interaction related to family formation, the life course goals, and expectations (see Bernardi, 2007, Bernardi et al.,2008; Bernardi & Keim 2007,). The qualitative component of our study relies partially on the systematic analysis of this part of the interview through theoretical and thematic coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We are not developing further on the specific results and remind the interested reader to the quoted publications. The in-depth interview was followed by a short socio demographic questionnaire on: (a) first, Ego's socio-demographic characteristics: Age, place of living, educational status, occupation, income, working hours per week, number and age of children, religion; (b) second, The socio-demographic characteristics of Ego's current partner: Age, educational status, occupation, working hours per week, number and age of children, religion; (c) third, Important characteristics of the partnership: duration of the relationship, duration of cohabitation, division of tasks in the partnership; d) Socio-demographic characteristics on Ego's parents, siblings and four closest friends: age, place of living, duration of friendship, educational status, marital status, number and age of their children.

The Network Chart: In order to collect comparable and quantifiable data on the structure of respondents' social networks we collected information about those networks with a network chart (Antonucci, 1986; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) and a grid to measure the strength of alter-alter relations and the relational density of the ten most important network members. In our name-generating question we asked respondents to name the persons they are in contact with and to place those according to their 'importance' in the network chart. In this chart individuals were placed in six concentric circles corresponding to different degrees of importance, i.e. the two

innermost circles were labelled 'very important', the two medium circles 'important' and the two outer circles 'of little importance'. The space outside the chart was labelled 'not important', and one corner was preserved for persons who are perceived as 'problematic'. The term 'importance' is not specified further with the aim of exploring the borders of this dimension from the point of view of the respondents. With a think-aloud technique we asked the respondents to specify in what ways they interpreted the term 'importance' each time.

For further exploration several questions on the network-partners' age, profession, residence, frequency of contact, duration and quality of the relationship, partnership-status, parity, attitudes towards having children, were asked during the interview. The network chart is beneficial for respondents as well as for the interviewer. For the respondent the use of the network chart brings cognitive ease when trying to recall and to describe their personal relations in the interview situation. Especially respondents with large networks can easier keep track of whom they have already mentioned. Also for the interviewer the network chart helps collecting network data in a systematic way and to be able to ask specific questions on each person mentioned, e.g. on how they feel about having children. Recently, in occasion of the Sunbelt Annual Meeting of the International Social Networks Association of 2009, a German team from Trier introduced a software package, Vennmaker (<http://www.vennmaker.com/>), which reproduce ego-centered network, charts like the one described here. With the digitalization of the data collection and the standard network measures included in the package, considerable time is saved from the data input and descriptive phases.

Figure 1. Network chart



The systematic and structured form of data collection with a network chart promises better comparability of social relations than a qualitative interview alone. Additionally, it can provide quantifiable measures on the network structure. But at this point also a serious problem of this form of network generation becomes evident: the validity of the network chart is largely unclear (Hollstein, 2002). Depending on the respondent, the network generator and the instructions the interviewer provides there are various ways to present the social network. For example it is difficult to judge, if all respondents have the same understanding of the term „very important“. An additional problem is concerned with the fact that little is known on how the network-generating question does collect the network-partners that are relevant for a certain research question.

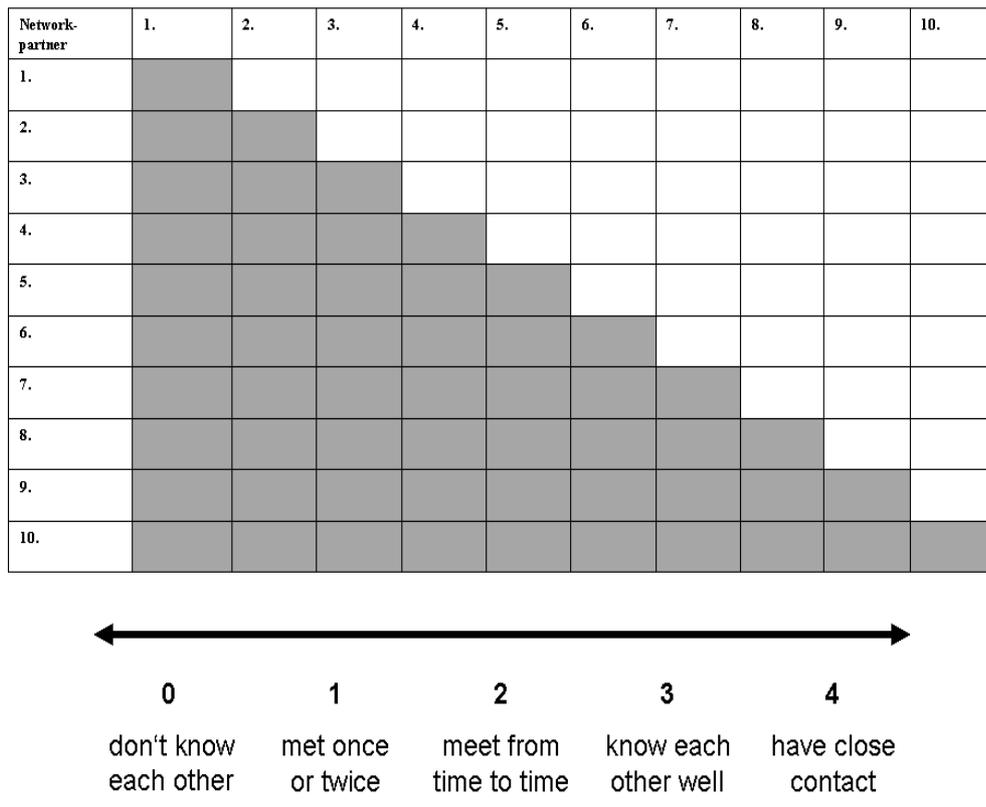
We addressed these problematic issues by embedding the network chart into the qualitative interview and by including narrative incentives and questions on the relationships, as well as by asking concretely, how the respondents define certain terms, e.g. „importance“. This procedure leads to a very extensive, precise and subtle view on the respondents' social networks. The network chart allows measuring the strength of the relationship between Ego and her/his Alters and the network size. Using this chart provides us with on the one hand comparable network data, due to its structured and standardized approach, but also the meanings of certain relationships and the composition and structure of the network as a whole can be evaluated more deeply within the interview. The network we generate with the network chart shows the relationships between our respondents (Ego) and their network partners (Alter), this is called the *first order star*. The relations among these network partners (the first order zone) are not included. Therefore we have added as third instrument of data collection a network grid.

The network grid: The network grid was used to learn the extent to which network partners are in contact with each other. Given that is very time intense to collect the ties among all network partners, especially in large networks, we used a network grid that focuses only on the ten most highly rated persons in the chart. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each person mentioned was acquainted or befriended with any other in the grid, ranked on a five-grade scale ranging from 0 (do not know at all) to 4 (are in close contact). This scale allows collecting the frequency of contact and the closeness. It becomes problematic for persons that are close but do not meet often or for persons that know each other well, but currently are in conflict and therefore have stopped seeing each other. Here the data collection profited from being embedded in a qualitative interview, where doubts could be easily expressed and discussed.

The network grid allows measuring the tie strength between the ten most important Alters as well as the network density, which shall be explained in detail in section 2.5 on the analyzing procedure. Network chart and grid are central tools in the interview. We use it as a mixed data collection tool in itself as it is conceived to gain in-depth information to be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

On the one hand, it provides rich descriptions of the ongoing social influence within the network; on the other hand it records the structural characteristics of the ego-centered networks (density, size, closeness, and tie strength). We deliberately chose to collect data from the same cases in the qualitative and quantitative part of the study. The main reason for this is a theoretical one: working with separate samples in the study of social influence on family formation would artificially create an analytical barrier between two processes that are tightly linked to each other. In order to have valid data on the social interaction *embedded in the* social network structure, we need to collect complete and complex information, including subjective meanings and norms, narratives on interaction, and information on the structure of the network. The network grid collects in a standardized the extent to which network partners are in contact among each other.

Figure 2. Network grid



Describing the results of the German study goes beyond the scope of this paper. It is just worth mentioning that the qualitative analyses revealed considerable differences between eastern and western German respondents concerning the perception, experiences and dealing with economic uncertainty, its effects on family formation, ideas on how to organize family life and paid work within the couple (Bernardi *et al.*, 2007, Bernardi & Keim, 2006). Such differences could be easily reported to the very different experience of the previous generation and of the social environment in the two contexts. The combined analysis of qualitative and quantitative data has focused on friendship dyads (Keim et al . 2008) at the relational models of the enlarged family (Keim, 2008) identifying specific ties or family configurations that influence Ego in his family formation attitudes and behaviour.

4. Discussion

A systematic knowledge of children’s social networks composition discriminates situations in which being left behind results in net gains or losses for children’s educational and health outcomes. With the growing feminization of migration flows the phenomenon of children left behind is growing in importance. Research shows that often children left behind suffer from a lack of discipline, presumably because they have hard time to recognize the authority of other carers than parents or because they feel “abandoned” by the latter. Bringing children along can be a n alternative choice, especially when chances of returning are delayed or endangered. However, there are parents, who believe that their children’s migration is rather problematic. Bledsoe, in this volume, argues that this is the case for West African parents, who believe that the children raised in Europe lack fundamental qualities in their socialization, like proper discipline and respect for parents.

Social network analysis can establish whether certain interaction characteristics is more likely to produce negative outcomes (dense networks and multiple carers are related).

A second issue is related to children's health. Mother's social networks characteristics (size, proximity and interaction) and the kind and amount of support the child receive have been often found to be associated with health (Donato in this collection). Social network measures are suited to investigate whether children's own networks in transnational families are different from those of their parents in the first place. In transnational living arrangements these networks are likely to differ. Differentiating parents and children networks means acknowledging the simple fact that if children spend time between parents' home (in Europe for instance) and grandparents' home (back home), their networks are not necessarily overlapping with those of their.

The situation is similar under certain aspects to that of children of divorced parents living in "trans-household" spaces, moving between father and mother's families (see Nobles). In the case of transnational children it would be as pertinent to examine the extent to which care is shared between carers.

Transnational social networks have also distinctive features, which should be given attention when developing measurement to appreciate their characteristics. Networks' members are spread across a multidimensional space: geographical, but also legal, and symbolic spaces. Networks members may be perceived as very close in terms of identity even when far in terms of geographical distance. Similarly, they can be geographically close to each other but separated by a legal frontier impossible to cross. Closeness should be measured according to all these different dimensions in order to evaluate its composite effects on support and well-being.

Multidimensionality should be coupled with multi-temporality. Social networks are dynamics contexts for individuals in general and even more so for children living in transnational families. Changing distributions of network members or relative changes of their roles over time may make some networks surer environment than others for children on the one hand. On the other hand, more volatile networks may mean higher flexibility in the kind of support and better opportunities for social learning. Only a longitudinal design, in which networks are measured at different point in time would provide adequate data to evaluate the relationship between social networks characteristics and children's outcomes.

Describing and understanding the structure and the composition of children's social environment and identifying strong and weak ties in the network is a great tool to identify vulnerabilities and strength of transnational families as context for childrearing. When migration experiences become "liquid", to paraphrase the idea of liquid modernity (Baumann 2000), where children are separated at least part of the time from one or the two parents, uncles, uncles, siblings, cousins, and relevant others are likely to cover important roles in their development and well-being.

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