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**THE SHIFT OF PERSONAL NETWORKS DURING THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD: A GENDERED PROCESS?**

**Keywords:** Personal networks, social capital, transition to parenthood, kinship, gender

**Theoretical framework**

The transition to parenthood has been frequently designated as a period of great transformation of close relationships, and this particularly for women. However, little is known about the structural changes of personal networks associated with gender effects during this transition. Following the insights of Elisabeth Bott (1971) about the importance of the composition and of the relational properties of personal networks for the gendered division of labor in couples, this paper addresses these changes and their contribution to the gendered life course. Research showed an increase in contacts with kin during the transition to parenthood (for example, Belsky & Rovine, 1984; McCannel, 1988; Bost et al., 2002). Changes in composition are expected to have an impact on relational dimensions such as density and reciprocity of relationships. Several studies have indeed demonstrated that closely related relatives (parents, siblings and, adult children) develop stronger, more reciprocal and denser relationships (Wellman & Worthley, 1990), useful for coordinating aids and mobilizing resource in case of need. However, this reinforcement of bonding social capital might be made to the detriment of bridging social capital (Campbell, 1988; Smith-Lovin & McPerson, 1993), limiting individual autonomy and access to diversified resources which are particularly beneficial for occupational trajectories (Granovetter, 1973).

**Research questions**

This contribution examines the changes of composition and of relational properties in personal networks of individuals in the transition to parenthood. First, we hypothesize that the emphasis on kinship members, in contrast to friends or colleagues, increase in personal networks during the
transition to parenthood, with, as a consequence, an increase of density and reciprocity of relationships. Two alternatives are possible about the duration of the changes. First, changes are only temporary, ties being activated in the network only close to the birth of the child, the most demanding stage of the transition, while getting back to “normal” later on. Alternatively, they may become permanent, once the new model of relationships is set. Importantly, we expect that gender has an impact on the process of change. The transition to parenthood may have more relational consequences for females than for males, as females face the most changes in work participation, which is a central place in which personal networks built up.

Methods

The data come from a longitudinal study on the transition to parenthood in the French speaking part of Switzerland. The overall sample includes 235 couples, all of whom were expecting their first child in the between 2006 and 2007. A total of 470 individuals have taken part in the three waves Kinship methods survey conducted by the Center for Life course Studies PaVie (University of Lausanne and Geneva). Women and men of each couple were interviewed at three stages of the transition to parenthood: first at 3 to 7 months of pregnancy, then at 3 to 6 months after the child’s birth, and finally, when the child was old of 18 to 24 months.

Respondents filled out an egocentric personal network questionnaire - inspired by the Family Network Method (Widmer, Aeby, & Sapin, 2013) - that permits the collection of systematic data on personal networks. In order to make networks comparable, the partner was included in all cases at wave 1 and the partner and the child at wave 2 and 3. Respondents not only had to estimate their own support relationships with the members of their personal network, but also the support relationships existing among all the members.

To identify the composition of personal networks, we applied cluster analysis on the free listing of personal members that was done by the 470 individuals, either males or females, who were included in the study. A total of 1149 personal networks were included in the analysis, as up to three waves per individual in each couple were possible. In order to test the hypothesis that there was a shift towards kinship in the transition to parenthood and to identify the development of personal networks during the transition to parenthood, we traced their profile of continuity and changes from wave 1 to wave 3 using again a hierarchical cluster analysis. The hypothesis of the interrelation between the composition of personal networks and the relational resources that they provide to individuals was tested by variance analyses for repeated measures.

Results

We found that three clusters adequately describe the personal networks of individuals during the transition to parenthood. The first type was named “Mixed” as it included a large number of friends, coworkers but also a large number of relatives. It featured three parallel investments in the realms of kins (related by blood), friendship and work. The cluster “Friendship” (29.7%) included only a small number of relatives as where the number of friends and coworkers was high. The cluster “Kinship” (27.2%) focused on both blood ties from the family of orientation (parents and siblings) and relatives by marriage or partnership, while the friends and co-workers held a secondary importance.

The analysis of the profiles of continuity and changes from wave 1 to wave 3 identified five patterns of development during the transition to parenthood for personal networks. Three types involved individuals who did not change the composition of their personal networks during the transition: 1) some individuals remained in a Mixed configuration at the three measurement times (22.3%); 2) others in a Friendship personal networks (30%), and 3) others in a Kinship personal network (17%). However, there were two types in which individuals greatly changed their personal networks during the transition to parenthood (30%), by two different processes of kinshiping: some individuals in a Mixed personal network before the birth of the child changed their configuration to a Kinship configuration (18%), by including in-laws in their personal network after the birth; and,
other individuals being in a Friendship personal network before the birth changed their configuration to a Mixed network (12%), by including their father and mother, as well as, in some cases, their siblings.

Overall, women are overrepresented within Mixed networks, while men are overrepresented among individuals embedded in Kinship networks. Friendship personal networks are equally shared by men and women. The two processes of change in personal networks were unequally distributed according to gender. The kinshipping transformation from Mixed personal networks to kinship personal networks was more often made by men; while it was more often women who went from a Friendship network to a mixed one. In relation with those changes of composition, the data also showed interesting results about changes in density, reciprocity and other structural features of personal networks.

Discussion
The transition to parenthood initiated a process of transformation in the organization of personal ties of women and men. Personal networks become more kinship oriented and less oriented towards friendship and work ties. The changes are the strongest in the months following the birth of the child, which represent the most engaging period of the transition. Alterns supporting the new parents are strongly involved in the most demanding period, while when this period is finished, mobilization and collective support decrease, giving way to more punctual support of diverse nature.

The transformation of the composition of personal networks in the transition to parenthood has implication for the social capital of individuals. A kinship orientation increases the density of personal networks, and therefore promotes a bonding type of social capital, particularly in the first months after birth. The shift from a Friendship orientation to a Mixed orientation, and from a Mixed orientation to a Kinship orientation, concerns both men and women. Interestingly, the greater move towards the inclusion of in-laws in personal networks is made by men. Indeed, they much more often cited their parents in law as belonging to their personal networks when they became parents than women did. As a matter of fact, maintaining relationships between kinship members remains the responsibility of women, notwithstanding their increasing role in economy or in the occupational sphere. The inclusion of in-laws by men is the expression of this matrilineal orientation of kinship relationships. The transition to parenthood is a key moment inducing this matrilineal orientation of relationships in personal networks.

References


