ABSTRACT

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2014

SESSION III: FUNCTIONS OF FAMILY SOCIAL NETWORKS

Donatella BRAMANTI, The Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, Italy
Matteo MOSCATELLI, The Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, Italy

YOUNG COUPLES’ RELATIONAL NETWORKS AND MARRIAGE CHOICES PATHS: MEMBERSHIP AND INFLUENCE

Keywords: relational studies, social network analysis, marriage, young couples, membership

The research is about the social networks of young Italians who are organizing their life as a couple. In Italy, next to the weakening/fading of marriages (Bramanti, 2013), some configurations are spreading, such as cohabitation and LAT (Live Apart Together), in which young people experience new relational codes in a context that enhances the reversibility of choices and privatization of behaviors. These configurations profoundly affect the way we conceive the role/identity of the family in the society and trigger a series of knock-on effects on the generations.

Many studies confirm the importance of the networks (whether ascribed, ie. relatives, or acquired, ie. friends) to ensuring the well-being of individuals and families.

From the pioneering analysis of Bott (1957) on the network as an intervening variable in the couple's life up to the years 2000, the influence and impact that multi-faceted social networks play on intimate relationships (Felmlee, 2001) gained momentum. The role of the social context in which couples are incorporated, for example, seemingly has an effect on the phase of falling in love and forming opinions about cohabitation of the partners (Manning, Cohen, Smock, 2011) but also on the possible break-ups (Martijn, Hogerbrugge, Aafke, 2013).

The methods of analysis of couples’ network are nowadays more sophisticated thanks to a longitudinal perspective that follows the life course (Kalmijn, 2003) and the analysis of the structural characteristics of the contemporary family contexts, as well as the relational network that goes beyond domestic boundaries (Widmer, 2010).
The purpose of this research is to observe what is transmitted and/or exchanged within the networks of the young couples in terms of values, support, belonging and influence. The aim of this study is to describe the effects of the networks in relation to different aspects, attributes, and modes of formation of the couple. In reference to the relationship with the community and intergenerational relationships, the study also aims to collect proxy information of the concept of social generativity (Bramanti 2012; Rossi, Scabini, 2006).

In particular, through the analysis of concrete support instrumental (Van der Poel, 1993) and expressive networks (seeing each other during free time) we wanted to know the level of shared values with the others (alters) and the presence of a network “membership”. Symbolic ties, which outline a scenario of shared values, common belonging, affiliation and orientation (Tronca, 2013) were taken into consideration. We also wanted to analyze whether the network influence the choices of the couple to assess the young couple’s extent of dependency (in terms of power) on the previous generation / community.

In summary, the questions that we tried to answer are the following:

- Is it possible to reconstruct morphologies of different network patterns for the various forms of coupled life?
- Do networks convey supports and frames? Do they also influence life projects?
- Is active involvement/engagement within the local community related with the decision to be couple in one way rather than another?

From these questions and guided by the relational approach (Donati, 2010) we constructed the following research hypothesis:

1. We can imagine the existence of different morphological structures among the couples we surveyed, like family-centered / friendship-centered networks;
2. It can be assumed a greater openness and therefore a more public orientation in the couples who have mostly friendship-centered networks;
3. The intergenerational transmission of values influence young couples’ life projects.

The exploratory research reached 150 young people (18-40 years) being partners in 75 couples. among them, 53 couples are young people who have recently participated in initiatives in preparation of their marriage and will get married within one year (35 with religious ritual, 18 in a civil ceremony). Twenty-two couples choose not to marry (and are not planning to get married in the next three years) and are experiencing a LAT or cohabitation.

Relational data were recorded through a structured questionnaire (composed of 20 questions), including items on socio-demographic characteristics of the partners and questions about their life (previous experience, parents’ marital status, presence of children, housing arrangement). Data were collected on the couples’ value orientations and generativity (GENCO scale).

The tool used for data collection is able to gather information on the couples’ relationships by asking them to account for relational networks: a) the tangible support instrumental network, and b) the expressive networks (seeing each other during free time). The SNA method (with UCINET and EGONET software) was used to investigate the size of the network, the structures of the subsamples, the density of relations, centrality and polarity.

The data show that the young people’s tangible support networks are made up of about 6 network resources for each partner (average value), while people you enjoy spending your free time instead compose a bit less extensive network (about 5 network resources). Females and couples preparing for religious marriage have slightly larger networks.

---

1 For network’s resources we intend the people that compose the the network
**Freeware Egonet Tools**

In the expressive networks, male and female network resources are basically equal and there is a good match between the EGO’s age and network resources’ age (about 60% of people aged 25-35 years). As expected, most of the resources included in this network are friends (66% in the total sample). The partner, close family members (parents and siblings) and other relatives compose the rest. In 80% of cases the people who the surveyed sample hang around with in their free time have similar values (membership/latency), but did not affect significantly any decision regarding coupled life (only in approximately 20% of the cases). There are some differences between the “soon-to-be spouses” and the “no marital choice” sample: the latter seem to be more influenced by their network of friends in their coupling path.

In the young couples’ tangible support instrumental networks, female network resources are slightly more numerous. The majority of the resources (over 50%) are older than EGO (over 40). About a quarter of the resources of the support network is made up of parents, another quarter of friends, then other relatives and siblings. The similarity in terms of values is very high for the tangible support network (85% of resources are close to EGO’s values). The influence exerted in the choices of the couples is stronger than in the expressive network: almost one third of the network resources have an effect on the young people (even if the LAT subsample is less influenced with a percentage of influence that drops to one fifth of the total, around 20%). However, even in this case the majority of the people in this network, 68.3% did not have any kind of influence on the choices of the couples.

The cluster analysis performed on a number of variables of the EGO and the networks shows a correlation between couples who get married religiously and engagement in voluntary organizations / in the community), while those with a private conception of the couple do not.

**References**


