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CHANGING FAMILY, KINSHIP AND SOCIAL BONDS IN THREE STAGES OF FAMILY FORMATION

**Keywords:** family and kinship, relationality, qualitative analysis, weddings

The paper introduces my ongoing PhD study and presents first results and empirical and methodological considerations raised by preliminary analysis of the data. The research aims at studying family and kinship ties and other significant social bonds during the early years of marriage by focusing on three stages of the family formation process. The study contributes to the discussion about the communality and social support of the families with little children by examining the mechanisms through which social bonds, including family ties, are formed, maintained or possibly dissolved. The paper contributes to the sociological discussion about family and intimate relationships by focusing on change in family, kinship and other social bonds in the early years of family life as married couple and new parents.

Public debate in Finland has recently stressed phenomena that threat the well-being of families with children. It has been argued that parents experience great pressures when trying to combine the care and upbringing of children and the employment. It has also been shown that the poverty of families with little children has increased and the services for families have been reduced. In consequence of these developments, the inadequacy of the service system of welfare society and the marginalization of young parents have been seen as growing problems. The recent debate around these issues raises, firstly, a question about the significant relationships: who are the people that offer support and help and who function as a peer group to parents of young children? And secondly: how is the sense of community and belonging formed between individuals? What kind of path leads to an individual having several significant social bonds and a vast network of relationships while others end up having no significant relationships and in some cases even marginalize? My PhD study aims to answer these questions by examining the formation of social bonds in three different stages of
forming a family: planning a marriage, taking care of a baby on family leave and balancing work and family life after return to work.

The first years of marriage are of crucial importance for forming a network of social bonds as a family, and I examine the evolving of relationships in three specific stages in this process. First, getting married has historically been a turning point in individual’s life course and a celebration that gathers together the community and reproduces social bonds both within family and kin and among couple's peers (Etzioni 2004). Second, the transition to parenthood is often a life stage in which the ‘function’ of family and kin – sharing intimacy, security, and emotional as well as material support – becomes evident and concrete. Do the social bonds that new parents already have provide support or is it sought for instance from a peer group of new mothers, a nurse at the maternity health care clinic or a neighbor with children? Third, as I have pointed out in my previous research (Luotonen 2013), combining employment and family life after return to work from family leave is often characterized by multiple and sometimes contradictory responsibilities and preferences and social bonds can be a significant resource in this life stage.

Exploring social bonds and interaction during early years of marriage provides an opportunity to observe how changes in social bonds are connected to life stages on one hand, and on individual choices and preferences on the other.

Theoretical framework and research questions

My research is based on two central points concerning family and social bonds. The first is the change in the concept and meaning of ‘family’. Many sociologist studying family and intimate relationships, e.g. Carol Smart (2007) have recently emphasized that intimacy and closeness are received and given more and more in relationships other that family and kinship ties. Possibilities of individual negotiation and choice have grown at the expense of traditional communality. E. g. Eric Widmer et al. (2008) point out that the constellations of social bonds are of changing nature and their definition requires sociological enquiry. Therefore, my research is based on the idea that it is of great significance to examine family relations as part of a wider constellation of social bonds.

The second starting point of my research is based on the division made by British historian John Gillis who has studied extensively the historical changes of family. Gillis (1997) makes a distinction between the ‘imagined family’ and ‘lived family’. The imagined family consists of the ideal of an unchanged and stable family. The ‘lived family’ means a constellation of relationships that is negotiated, changed and disrupted in daily life. Gillis’ distinction means that the constellations of family and kinship ties and other social bonds exist, first, in people’s thoughts and talk, and second, in the lived daily life. I will examine social bonds from this twofold approach.

Family relations and other significant social bonds have also been approached from a configurational perspective that takes into account the significance that relationships have to an individual, on the one hand, and their attachment to social networks and the structures of place and time on the other (Widmer et al. 2008). In my research, the concept of configuration functions as a tool for analyzing how individual circumstances, collective norms as well as life stage are connected to forming, reproducing and dissolving social bonds.

To sum, my PhD study aims to explore the development of family, kinship and other social bonds in three different phases in the (nuclear) family formation process. What is expected from family and people in the close social network in different stages of life? What kind of logic can be found in the ways that people keep in touch with their family, kin and friends? Who is considered as part of family or of network of close friends? The objective of my study is to find the rules according to which social bonds are formed. By rules I mean the logic behind how relationality is built in family and other social relations (see Jallinoja & Widmer 2011) in three stages of family formation: when getting married, after having a child and when balancing work and family life with young children.
My research asks, more specifically: What kind of logic can be found behind the ways in which relationality and sense of belonging are built in family, kinship and other social ties in three stages of family formation?

**Data and methods**

The research is carried out by using mixed methods approach with the aim of revealing different perspectives on the formation of social bonds. The majority of data has already been gathered. Formation of social bonds when planning a wedding will be approached by analyzing couple interview data and systematic information on social bonds gathered by adjunct professor Anna-Maija Castrén in 2006–2011. Individual interviews with the same men and women will be carried out and a new questionnaire data gathered in spring 2014 by myself and Castrén. Another kind of perspective to the formation of social bonds is offered by a data of group discussions with mothers on family leave that I gathered in 2009 in a research project financed by the Academy of Finland. To sum, the data of the study consists of following parts:

- 19 interviews of couples who are about to get married, have already been gathered
- questionnaires mapping the social networks of couples, have already been gathered
- a new round of interviews with individuals, to be done in spring 2014
- a new round of social network questionnaires, to be done in spring 2014
- 12 group discussions (tot. 45 participants), have already been gathered by myself

The analysis of the qualitative data will be carried out by using relevant methods, e.g. approaches of discourse analysis and grounded theory. I will give special attention to the interactional character of the couple interview data and the group discussion data. In addition, the questionnaire data will be analyzed applying appropriate methods.

**The current stage of the research**

My PhD study is in its initial phase but a large part of the data has already been gathered and all of the data is planned to be collected by September 2014. The paper presents the outline of the study and focuses on empirical and methodological considerations based on the second round of data collecting and the preliminary analysis.

**References**


