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978-0-521-44586-3 - Extending Families: The Social Networks of Parents and their Children
Moncrieff Cochran, Mary Larner, David Riley, Lars Gunnarsson, and Charles R. Henderson
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Part I Ideas and themes

In this initial chapter, Moncrieff Cochran sets the stage for the ideas and findings discussed in the rest of the book. He grounds the current conceptualization of personal social networks in the early work of a small group of British social anthropologists, and more recent studies carried out by sociologists and psychologists. Explicit attention is given to how the work reported here is related to the thinking of Urie Bronfenbrenner, as articulated in his landmark book, *The Ecology of Human Development*.

Cochran then reviews the considerable amount of research and other writing on personal networks and development that has appeared in the ten years that have passed since publication of his influential article in *Child Development* (with Jane Brassard) entitled “Child development and personal social networks,” which was originally written to establish conceptual parameters for the networks research to be included in the Comparative Ecology of Human Development Project. That review, framed as a critical analysis of the original paper, provides a revised set of ideas and themes that serves as a backdrop for the exciting new group of studies that comprise the body of this book.

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1 Personal networks in the ecology of human development

Moncrieff Cochran

Early in the 1970s, I became interested in finding ways to understand the impacts of different kinds of “communities” on the development of young children.¹ With time this interest became centered upon the notion of “informal support systems” as they might affect both children and their parents. Efforts to move this vague idea beyond abstraction led me to the research and writings of British social anthropologists J. A. Barnes, Elizabeth Bott, and J. Clyde Mitchell,² and the concept of the personal social network.

I was attracted to the concept of the personal network for several reasons. First, it seemed to be well located topologically – anchored to the person but extending, through primary and secondary links, well beyond the social range of the individual as an independent organism.³ Second, the concept was solidly grounded in empirical reality. Personal networks had been mapped, their structural and relational dimensions distinguished, and their parameters specified. Third, and closely related to the second, was the fact that the concept was in accord with my own personal experience; I could identify cousins, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and other friends in my own childhood who seemed to have influenced what I became as an adult.

When Urie Bronfenbrenner invited me to join him in 1975 as co-principal investigator on a major cross-national study of family stresses and supports,⁴ he brought to the study a very attractive, and still evolving, model of the child at the center of a set of nested systems of “structures,” each with its own distinct characteristics and all interacting to affect the child’s development.⁵ Those early formulations by Bronfenbrenner were extremely useful to my own thinking. They forced me to specify more carefully the ways in which the social ties maintained by parents and children served, on the one hand, as lines of transmission to and from more formally organized social systems (schools, churches, worksites, public services, etc.), and on the other as sources of influence upon the developing human being. I became increasingly identified with the general orientation now referred to by psychologists as the ecology of human develop-

David Riley, Mary Larner, Lars Gunnarsson and Urie Bronfenbrenner provided suggestions for revisions of this chapter that significantly affected the final version.

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ment,⁶ and continue to view my own work as contributing to that general framework.

Mesosystems and personal social networks

In 1979, Urie Bronfenbrenner brought all of his thinking about development in context together in his book *The Ecology of Human Development*, which included a chapter on what he called the “mesosystem.” That same year Jane Brassard and I published a paper entitled “Child development and personal social networks.”⁷ Although the Bronfenbrennerian mesosystem and our personal social network were similarly situated in the ecological terrain occupied by the developing person, the systems themselves were surprisingly dissimilar, both in their contemporaneous characteristics and in their origins in the history of social science. It is important to articulate some of the differences between the two systems, because they provide theorists, researchers, and practitioners with alternatives – two different ways of approaching the part of the human environment that connects the developing individual with the major institutions of community and society (schools, workplaces, churches, public services, etc.).

Bronfenbrenner defines the mesosystem as “a set of interrelations between two or more settings in which the developing person becomes an active participant.”⁸ The emphasis is on interrelations among *settings*. He goes on to state that a “first order” social network exists when the same person engages in activities in more than one setting.⁹ A person who knows people from two different setting who do not themselves know each other is called an “indirect linkage.” But again the link is thought of as being between settings, rather than between people.

In contrast with the *settings* emphasis of the mesosystem concept, the personal network consists of relations among *people*. J. Clyde Mitchell defined a social network as “a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons,” adding that “the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behavior of the persons involved.”¹⁰ The linkages to which Mitchell and others refer have generally been thought of as determined by kinship, friendship, and neighborhood. The networks of interest to us are *personal*, that is, anchored by a specific individual. The most *salient* members of the personal network typically have meaning for the anchoring person that *transcends* the significance of the settings with which they may be customarily associated. Thus the emphasis is not on the individual as a bridge between settings, but on the qualities of relationships in their own right. Unlike the mesosystem, the individual’s mere participation in two settings is not enough

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to establish a personal network; for that to occur, the person must develop relationships with one or more people in each of the settings.

The capacity of a network member to provide a relationship transcending a given setting has particular significance for the development of the person anchoring the network. Such a member will have proportionately more influence than one with whom the relationship is setting-specific. For instance, a friend in the neighborhood who is also a school friend is likely to be more influential than a friend known only at school. Another example involves the social bond that endures after involvement with the setting ends – for instance, the friend at work who remains important even after one shifts to another place of employment.

There is evidence in Bronfenbrenner's book that he himself views the meso-system as something quite different from the personal social network. Especially noteworthy is the lack of reference in the chapter on mesosystems to the substantial network literatures in either social anthropology or sociology. This omission is not due to unfamiliarity with those literatures; earlier in the book there is footnote reference to both Bott and Mitchell.¹¹

When Jane Brassard and I linked the network concept to developmental psychology in 1979, we had several purposes in mind. Our primary aim was to apply the framework as a means of assessing the effects of the social ecology of parent and child on child development. At a more pragmatic level, I wanted to establish conceptual parameters for the networks research to be included in the Comparative Ecology of Human Development Project, then underway at Cornell and universities in four other countries. Ten years have passed since publication of "Child development and personal social networks." A considerable amount of research and other writing on personal networks and development has appeared in the interim. A review of that more recent literature provides the opportunity for a reassessment of the proposals made by Brassard and myself back in 1979. That review follows, framed as a critical analysis of the original paper. The revised set of ideas and themes generated by that reassessment will serve as a backdrop for the exciting new set of studies that make up the body of this book.

Networks, families, and development

In "Child development and personal social networks," Dr. Brassard and I set out, perhaps presumptuously, to "chart a new course in the study of child development by utilizing the framework of network analysis to assess the social ecology of the parent and child in relation to its possible effects upon child development."¹² We began by defining the personal social networks of interest to us, and locating them within the overall parameters provided by the ecology

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of human development. After identifying the parent as a primary conduit for the transmission of network influences to the child, we considered the ways in which personal networks might influence parents and children, both directly and indirectly. Attention then shifted to the child as a developing person, with the introduction of the concept of “network-building skills” and detailed consideration of the possible developmental outcomes that might be affected by differential access to network resources.

A substantial section in the article was devoted to spelling out the structural and relational characteristics of personal networks, in the interest of encouraging researchers to move from gross, global conceptions to more dynamic and differentiated operationalizations. This introduction to network dimensions led to presentation of a model linking those dimensions to key aspects of the immediate settings containing the child (home, day care center, school classroom), and to child outcomes.¹³ We concluded the article with proposals for future research, stressing the need for studies that examined the effects of family, institutional, and socioeconomic structures on networks as well as those examining the conceptual links between networks and development.

The discussion that follows is organized to reconsider the major themes introduced in the original article from two vantage points: the work of those with explicit interest in hypotheses proposed by us, and networks-related writings not associated by their authors with the ecology of parent or child development, which nevertheless provide insights pertinent to our concerns.¹⁴

Issues of definition

In our 1979 article, Dr. Brassard and I defined the network of interest to us as consisting of “those people outside the household who engage in activities and exchanges of an affective and/or material nature with the members of the immediate family.”¹⁵ We specifically excluded spouse and child siblings from the personal network of interest, as long as they lived together with the parent or child anchoring the network.

Our decision to exclude household members from the personal network has been controversial. Most recently, Brenda Bryant, examining sources of support in middle childhood, defined the network as including “family members in the child’s household (Lewis and Weintraub, 1976), and this precludes the more restrictive definition of Cochran and Brassard (1979), who do not include family members in one’s household.”¹⁶

Deborah Belle, in her influential earlier study of the social network as source of stress and support for low-income mothers, had attempted to apply a definition of membership similar to that used later by Bryant, and had encountered some difficulty. Belle had not excluded household members when she asked

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women who was most important to them.¹⁷ Mothers with husbands listed them, and most mothers also listed their children. She went on to say, however: “We believed that women decided whether or not to list their children for reasons connected to the interpretations of the instructions, rather than for any substantive reason, and therefore . . . we excluded the respondent’s children from consideration as part of the network.” Keith Crnic and his colleagues measured “available support – sources at three ecological levels: (1) intimate relationships (spouse/partner), (2) friendships, and (3) neighborhood or community support.”¹⁸ These authors then distinguished the spouse/partner from the friendship network throughout their analyses, and concluded that this differentiation was essential to an understanding of support as a multidimensional concept. Susan Crockenberg used the general term “social support” in reference to the impacts of the broader social context on the security of infant–mother attachment.¹⁹ She, too, distinguished among three sources of social support – father, older children in the family, and others (extended family, neighbors, friends, professionals) – but reported no attempts to separate the influences of the three sources upon mother–child relationships.

From a conceptual standpoint, the important distinction here is between the nuclear family and the personal network. Elizabeth Bott, in her classic networks study *Family and Social Network*, emphasized the distinction in her attempt to show that the definition of roles in a marital relationship is a function, in part, of the structure of the personal networks that each person brings to the new family. In so doing, she carefully distinguished membership in the nuclear family from membership in the networks of husband and wife.

Study of nuclear families has a long tradition in sociology and anthropology, and the subdiscipline of family sociology has become well established during the past half-century. Family historians and others conceive of the family as “an emotional entity resting on sentimental ties between husband and wife and parents and children,” and as a social unit with economic significance.²⁰ There are large and growing literatures addressing family dynamics and family structure, concerned both with the causes of variations in process and structure and with the consequences of such variations for the development of family members. Within this literature Douglas Powell is one of very few developmentally oriented social scientists who has distinguished between the nuclear family and the personal social network in an overall system of family–environment relations.²¹

In preparing our 1979 article, Jane Brassard and I were heavily influenced by the work in family sociology, and so assumed that spousal and parent–child relations were qualitatively different from those maintained by parents or children with people living outside the household.²² The findings of Crnic et al. and Belle indicate that this distinction has empirical validity.²³ More recently,

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Brassard applied it a priori in the design of her own study of mother-child interaction and personal social networks, by comparing stress and support in one- and two-parent families and measuring the contributions of the father separately from those of other kin and nonkin.²⁴ She found, in single-parent families, that the effects of a supportive father on mother-child relations were quite different from the effects of a supportive network.

A second definitional issue involves the distinction between social support and social networks. Of the researchers just discussed, Belle, Crnic and colleagues, and Crockenberg have an explicit interest in social support, whereas Bryant has the personal social network as her reference point. Most of those using the concept of social support refer to the work of Sidney Cobb, who defined such support as information that leads an individual to believe that he or she is cared for and loved, valued, and a member of a network of mutual obligation.²⁵ The personal social network is defined most generally as a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons, with the content of those linkages ranging from information of various kinds (where to find work, how to rear one's child, which day care arrangement to choose) to emotional and material assistance and access to role models.²⁶ Thus the social support concept focuses primarily on the psychological state of the receiving individual (cared for and loved, valued), whereas with the personal network system the emphasis is both on the characteristics of the set of linkages (structure) and on a broader range of types of exchanges between the anchoring individual and members of the network (content).

Researchers interested only in support have tended to map the networks of their respondents with the use of probes that are oriented explicitly to support; for example: "Please give me the names of all the people who provide you with emotional support." These particular defining characteristics lead to identification of a partial network, excluding all of those people in a person's life who are not thought of primarily in terms of support. These other people are more likely to be included in response to an orienting question such as "Please give me the names of all the people who make a difference to you in one way or another." This more inclusive approach is the one we have adopted in the studies described later in this book (see Chapter 3).

Bearing in mind the research and commentary that has followed publication of our 1979 paper, it is appropriate to expand upon our original definition of the personal social network by acknowledging first that, in the broadest sense, spouse (or parent) and other children (or siblings) *are* a part of the social network of the parent (or child). But all networks researchers are interested in partial rather than complete networks.²⁷ My own focus is on that portion of the total network that I believe can best help us expand our understanding of human development. Furthermore, I give credence to the nuclear family as a concept

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that has meaning in the real world and significance for the development of the individual, separate from the impacts of other kin, associates, and friends. I continue to be convinced, for instance, that it is essential to distinguish the influence of the husband on the married mother's development and behavior from the influence of her own mother and her best friends. Therefore, I urge others to maintain the distinction between members of the nuclear family and the rest of the personal network, in theory, in research, and in practice.

It is also important to recognize the difference between personal networks and social support. Both concepts are valuable. The distinction can be maintained, in part, by acknowledging that network relations are stressful as well as supportive and that network members can influence development in ways that extend well beyond those included in the "support" concept.²⁸ In our original article, we suggested at several points that network ties could make demands upon the parent or the child. In her study of low-income mothers with young children, Deborah Belle was interested in the costs as well as the benefits of social ties, and concluded that "one cannot receive support without also risking the costs of rejection, betrayal, burdensome dependence, and vicarious pain."²⁹ Barry Wellman has written an entire chapter on the application of network analysis to the study of support, in which he articulates the various ways in which the concept of social support can oversimplify the nature of social networks.

Its focus on a simple "support/nosupport" dichotomy de-emphasizes the multifaceted, often contradictory nature of social ties. Its assumption that supportive ties form a separate system isolates them from a person's overall network of interpersonal ties. Its assumption that all of these supportive ties are connected to each other in one integrated system goes against empirical reality and creates the dubious expectation that solidary systems are invariably more desirable. Its assumption that there are no conflicts of interest between "supporters" invokes the false premise of a common good.³⁰

Personal networks and larger social systems

Toward the end of his chapter, Wellman reminds the reader that personal networks operate within and must be influenced by the attributes of larger social systems. He refers, in that regard, to the social and spatial division of labor, the ways in which bureaucracies are organized, and the social classes to which respondents belong. I am reminded of an exchange with Melvin Kohn, who served as a discussant in the symposium at which the first draft of the Cochran and Brassard paper was presented. Kohn predicted that personal networks would prove to have no influence upon individual behavior and development beyond that of social class, and especially class as defined by the amount of responsibility and autonomy contained in the work done by the parents in a given family.³¹ He argued, in effect, that the structure and content of a person's personal

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network were completely determined by the position of that person in the social order, and the attitudes, values, and skills associated with that position. We responded to that challenge in the published version of the paper by recommending, as first priority in “directions for future research,” studies that address the relationships between personal network characteristics and factors like family income, parents’ educational level, and race of the respondent.

Another response to Kohn’s challenge would have been to give the possible influences of social–structural forces on network relations a more central place in our 1979 article. We could, for instance, have included race, gender, and class in the conceptual model provided in the paper (in its Figure 1), which instead was limited to portrayal of hypothesized relations among network characteristics, the child’s microsystem, and developmental outcomes. By not including links to social structure, we were, perhaps, continuing a historical tradition, for it was dissatisfaction among anthropologists with what Noble called “standardization of behavior patterns through cultural conditioning,” and the desire for an orientation that “enables one to take into account personal choice and possible manipulation of relations in the interest of self,” that led to development of the network concept in the first place.³²

Because the British anthropologists were so busy resisting the structural–functional approach to understanding the social behavior of the human organism, they did not spend much time attempting to sort out the extent to which the structural forces in a complex society determine, or at least constrain, the network relations developed and maintained by individuals. This task is, in some ways, better suited to the theories and methods of sociologists. One such scientist, Claude S. Fischer, has made a major contribution to our understanding of the relationships between social structure and personal networks with his book *To Dwell Among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City*. Fischer’s team interviewed just over 1,000 people in a 20-county area around San Francisco about their personal social networks. These people were all English-speaking, at least 18 years old, and permanent residents. They reflected rather well the diversity in educational, occupational, economic, gender, and life-cycle characteristics of that part of California. It is these variations that are of particular importance to us, because Fischer is able to consider the extent to which various aspects of the personal networks described by the people in his study are associated with such social structural factors. Of these factors, Fischer found that educational level had the most consistent effect upon the personal networks. He says:

Other things being equal, the more educational credentials respondents had, the more socially active they were, the larger their networks, the more companionship they reported, the more intimate their relations, and the wider the geographic range of their

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ties. In general, *education by itself meant broader, deeper, and richer networks*³³ (my emphasis).

Fischer also found that household income made a sizable difference in the networks reported, even with education held constant. People with more income included more nonkin in their networks, and were more likely to report adequate amounts of companionship and practical support than were the poor. In considering the meaning of these relationships between socioeconomic factors and network ties, Fischer offers three, not necessarily contradictory, possibilities, which reflect the original concerns of the British anthropologists. Perhaps, he suggests, certain kinds of personalities result in both higher socioeconomic status and greater sociability.³⁴ This possibility corresponds with earlier concern, expressed by Noble, for a theory that could take into account “personal choice” and “relations in the interest of self.” Another explanation offered by Fischer, and the one he seems to prefer, emphasizes the social skills and concrete resources that come with more education and income, and the ways in which these skills and resources can be used to build and maintain network ties. The third explanation, which he thinks of as operating “in a straightforward structural manner,”³⁵ is one in which schooling is viewed as providing the direct opportunity to meet and make friends with people of like mind.

Fischer’s work also provides insight into the impacts of life-cycle stage and gender on personal networks. Married people named more relatives and neighbors than did those who were unmarried, whereas single people were more involved with nonkin. Children restricted the social involvement of their parents, and especially of their mothers. “Women with children at home had fewer friends and associates, engaged in fewer social activities, had less reliable social support, and had more localized networks than did otherwise similar women without children.”³⁶ From the gender perspective, women tended to be more involved with kinfolk and to report more intimate ties than did men.

Differences in family structure, involving structural variations within the family, may have broader consequences for resource distribution, depending on how a given society views different kinds of family constellations and childrearing arrangements. Within the networks literature Nancy Colletta was one of the earliest researchers to compare the amount and nature of social support available to married and single mothers.³⁷ Colletta, interviewing women with moderate incomes, found that married mothers received higher levels of network support than did divorced women. Deborah Belle, studying low-income mothers, found no differences between single women and those in couples.³⁸ In Sweden, where single mothers receive far more formal supports than in the United States, Anne Tietjen found that those women were receiving more instrumental and personal support from their networks than were married mothers.³⁹ The single mothers receiving the highest levels of support were employed full-time, had fewer