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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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To our parents –
Betsy and Monny
Hugh and Dorothy
Herb and Bea
Aina and Gösta
Charles and Marian –
and to Jill Lewis

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Extending families

The social networks of parents and their children

MONCRIEFF COCHRAN, MARY LARNER,
DAVID RILEY, LARS GUNNARSSON, and
CHARLES R. HENDERSON, JR.



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Foreword

Urie Bronfenbrenner

This volume may well mark the beginning of a new stage in the study of social networks as field forces shaping behavior, belief, and development in human beings. Not since the classic studies of Barnes (1954), Bott (1971), and Mitchell (1969), now more than two decades ago, has there been an integrated, systematic exposition of the nature, variety, and function of the social ties that bind human beings together both within and across more formal organizational structures. Two distinctive features of the volume have made this integration possible. The first is a common focus on the family not only as the principal beneficiary but also as a master builder of network structures. The second is the unifying theoretical conception developed over the past decade by the first author, Moncrieff Cochran, and presented here in comprehensive form in chapters at both the beginning and the end of the volume.

It is that conception that provides the framework for a new approach to the scientific study of social networks and their implications for policy and practice. At the most general level, what distinguishes the conception is its ecological perspective. From such a perspective, social networks are viewed not as static, structural universals but as dynamic processes-in-context that vary systematically in their nature and effect as a joint function of the characteristics not only of the environment but of the person living in that environment.

The main body of the book translates this conception into reality through illuminating analyses of longitudinal data obtained from families and their children living in contrasting ecological niches as defined by culture, ethnicity, social class, neighborhood, and family structure. Finally, the investigators compare participants versus controls in an experiment designed to test the feasibility of enhancing family functioning and children's development through creating and strengthening supportive social networks between families.

After setting the stage in terms of concepts and methods, the authors marshal their data to reveal a complex pattern first of static and then of dynamic relationships. Our earliest, macroscopic view is the differential distribution of family social networks across the dimensions of culture, race, ethnicity, and family structure. Thus we are able to see the contrasting role of social ties of married

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mothers in Wales and West Germany, on the one hand, and in the United States and Sweden, on the other. Whereas in the two former settings, such networks are overwhelmingly female and provide support for the traditional mother role, in the latter societies the pattern depicts “a woman’s role extending beyond the home and the children to include the workplace and personal leisure-time activities,” with the result that networks are significantly larger, and more diversified in function. Yet, what distinguishes American mothers from all the others is the prominence of kin in the *primary* network, composed of those persons described by a mother as “especially important” – a phenomenon that the authors trace to the greater functional significance of kin ties among ethnic Americans.

Equally instructive are the striking differences in network structure and function within cultures. For example, contrary to some popular beliefs, in all four societies networks are more highly developed among white-collar families than in the lower socioeconomic strata. In a separate chapter comparing single-parent families in the United States and Sweden, Cochran and Gunnarsson show that networks are also consistently smaller for one-parent homes than for those with both parents present, particularly with respect to support from relatives. Class-related differences in the networks of single mothers, however, are much greater for the United States than for Sweden, a contrast which the authors attribute to the critical role of the husband in providing the economic base of the American family. The authors’ discussion in this regard ends with a paradoxically powerful understatement: “There is no evidence in our data that an extended set of nonkin compensates economically for the absence of a spouse/partner.”

Especially revealing is William Cross’s chapter comparing network structures among white and black families in the United States. In particular, a number of his findings introduce new dimensions meriting both scientific and social attention. For example, Cross ingeniously utilizes network data to establish support for the general thesis that, in contrast to the white majority, black mothers “depict the world as biracial and thus appear to be advocating bicultural competence.”

Cross documents an important contrast in the black mother’s view of her family vis-à-vis the external world, especially in comparison with whites. In his words:

For the people and events over which they had more control . . . blacks had more positive perceptions than did either of the groups of white mothers [single-parent and two-parent]. But in the external spheres of influence black perceptions were more unfavorable. African-Americans were more critical of their neighborhood and housing conditions: they seemed to be hassled more by organizations and agencies, and they depicted their financial situations in a more negative light. . . .

Perhaps the biggest surprise was the very positive perceptions two-parent black mothers had toward their internal circumstances. Although they had the smallest functional

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networks, these women had the most positive perceptions on every category of the internal domain. They felt positive about housework arrangements, and held the most positive attitudes toward themselves as parents, their children, their spouses, and close relatives.

Clearly, Cross's perceptive analysis not only indicates how little we know about black families in America, but also points the way to promising avenues of investigation.

Having described the differential distribution of the mother's social networks across various domains of social structure, Cochran and his colleagues begin their advance from the static to the dynamic. Moreover, in keeping with their developmental orientation, they investigate not only their consequences but their antecedents and growth over time. For example, Mary Lerner provides persuasive evidence for the counterintuitive conclusion that local residential mobility is not a major inhibitor or disrupter of social networks, at least in the short term. In her words:

The damage done by local moves is limited partly because such moves primarily affect neighborhood relationships, and evidence from this study shows that the neighborhood plays a relatively insignificant role in the lives of today's urban families. In contrast with divorce, for instance, which threatens a mother's most intense relationships, when local moves disrupt neighborhood ties they are affecting only a small segment of the family's network. Because this segment contains its most casual and substitutable social ties, the disruption caused is a uniquely manageable type of social upheaval.

In another chapter, Lerner explodes a second myth, but with a paradoxical twist. The myth: "Social networks have been consistently portrayed as static, unchanging structures." The reality: "The United States is a mobile society, and many of our relationships to the people we live near and work with are short-lived indeed." The paradox: Over time, the distribution of different types of network participants (kin, friends, neighbors, formal ties) remains rather constant; "though the names and faces of network members change, the even exchange does not alter the composition of the network." Thus the network's size, supportiveness, and role composition are likely to remain relatively stable. The finding invites the question, likely to be pursued in this group's future work, of the possibly differential effects on family function of stability of network forms versus the instability of network relationships.

Equally generative of future research possibilities is David Riley's pioneering study of the differential forces that shape the social networks for fathers toward or (today still more powerfully) away from involvement in family life and childrearing. Riley's chapter provides a natural transition to the analysis of the next dynamic phase – the impact of external ties on family functioning and child outcomes.

True to their conceptual scheme, the investigators seek, and find, the intervening link still within the network domain – namely, in an analysis of the

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social networks of six-year-old children. The two outcome measures were both related to early school performance. The first was the child's grade-point average, the second a scale filled out by the teacher assessing the level of attention and effort shown in the classroom. The child's social network was analyzed not only for its size and composition, but also for the functions that network members performed.

Although all of the above elements were relevant, it was the last that proved especially critical; namely, the strongest predictor turned out to be "the number of relatives with whom the child engaged in task-oriented interactions (e.g., gardening, washing the car, shopping)." As the authors of this chapter, Cochran and Riley, perceptively note, this finding is nicely in accord with Vygotsky's theory of cognitive growth, specifically his thesis that development occurs as a function of engagement in joint activities with significant persons in the child's life.

What Vygotsky did not predict, however, and what is not likely to have been discovered without Cochran's conceptual framework, was the finding that this constructive process worked only for adult relatives, and not for unrelated adults. A similar exclusive effect is reported in Cochran and Henderson's analysis of network influences on a single-parent mother's positive evaluation of her child; only relatives made a difference.

In seeking an explanation for this differential effectiveness of kin versus nonkin support, the authors speculate that "these mothers may well not see their unrelated friends as having very much salience for their parenting role, whereas for kin this salience is likely to be much higher." One wonders also about possible differences between the two groups in degree of emotional commitment and continuity of relationships over time. It is in raising issues of this kind, which have both theoretical and practical implications, that Cochran and his colleagues make one of their more significant contributions.

Another example of such scientifically and socially generative findings also appears in the investigators' analysis of network influences on single-parent families and their children. For this group, the number of adult relatives who took the child on outings was a significant predictor of school outcomes. Further analysis revealed, however, that this effect was significant only for boys taken on outings by male adults. A parallel analysis for two-parent families, however, showed no such network influence, but instead a measure of "father involvement was positively related to report card score for these boys." On the basis of these complementary findings, the authors suggest that "the one important way in which boys from both family types appeared similar was that the active involvement of *some* adult male in their lives was crucial to early school success."

Perhaps the most theoretically and socially significant findings reported in

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this volume appear in the authors' conceptually complex and methodologically sophisticated analyses of processes and outcomes in "Family Matters," the experimental program designed to test the feasibility of enhancing family functioning and children's development through creating and strengthening supportive social networks between families. Although the effects of this two-year intervention were modest, they were far from negligible. Moreover, they had their most powerful impact on those families and children who were at greatest risk. Specifically, in the experimental group, school performance improved more for children of parents with less education, from single-parent families, and especially for black youngsters living in each of these contexts.

No less important than the evidence of program effects is the knowledge gained about the processes through which these effects were achieved, especially for those in greatest need of network support: single-parent families. These processes turned out to be somewhat different for white and black mothers. In the authors' words:

The network appears to be a key transmission center for white unmarried mothers, primarily through the nonkin sector, the growth of which is positively associated with perception of self as parent and the child's performance in school. Black unmarried mothers involved in the program also showed substantial growth in the network, with kin linked to increases in parent-child activities and nonkin to improved performance by the child in school.

One can already hear a silent but forceful challenge from the reader: "But wasn't one of the main findings that support from nonkin was ineffectual?" True enough, but one must also recall the authors' interpretation that, in general and prior to involvement in the program, families did not view nonkin in the network as likely sources of help in "family matters." It was one of the aims of the field experiment to change that view, not merely by changing the perception, but also by changing the reality, apparently not without some measure of success.

In evaluating the intervention effort, authors Cochran and Henderson offer an important theoretical reformulation:

During the past 20 years, the assumption has been . . . that intervention was compensating for some deficiency in the child's life circumstances that would otherwise limit performance. . . . Here the assumption is not that there is a deficiency that needs correction, but rather that a system capable of adequate functioning deserves protecting. . . . The family is conceived of as a system that, if given an opportunity to function in a relatively stress-free environment, can fulfill the basic developmental needs of the children and adults contained within it. Under conditions of high stress, however, the need for survival of individual members may reduce or eliminate their capacity to interact in the service of each other.

In the final chapter of the volume, Cochran and his colleagues spell out the implications of this basic principle for the development and implementation of

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public policy. There is one final piece of evidence of the developmental power of social networks that the authors fail to mention. The evidence is nevertheless contained in this very volume, indeed on almost every page. The work they have accomplished together is, in fact, the product of a primary social network of *nonkin*, committed to each other and engaged in activities in support of human development, both as a science and as a domain for imperative social action. May this network exhibit long-term continuity and growing effectiveness in the years ahead.

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How do personal networks evolve, and what roles do they play in the performance of parents and the development of children? These are crucial questions in a time when the internal dynamics of family life are undergoing rapid change. Can ties with relatives, neighbors, and friends provide stability for family members during periods of disruption within the household – disruption caused by divorce, unemployment, geographic dislocation, or serious illness? How do networks change over time? To what extent are network members interchangeable: Can unrelated friends take the place of close relatives in providing guidance and support for the parenting role, and consistent feedback and advice to developing children?

Little is known about the answers to these questions, partly because the questions themselves have been at odds with powerful assumptions about modern societies: the assumptions that urbanism has created service-oriented, symbiotic relationships that have taken the place of traditional personal relations, and that in Western industrialized societies successful families are the ones that have found ways to function independently of relatives and neighbors. Evidence has accumulated during the past 15 years that challenges these assumptions.¹ Communities of mutually supportive individuals and families are alive and well in modern societies, although they are less visible to the casual observer because they are no longer as geographically bound as they once were. Socially isolated nuclear families have proved too often to be functioning poorly, especially as environments for the rearing of children.

Although the 1970s and 1980s have seen the rediscovery of personal networks and a new appreciation for the dangers to both children and adults of living in socially isolated nuclear families, no one has carried out a large-scale examination of where personal networks intersect with individual development. That was one aim of the Comparative Ecology of Human Development Project at Cornell University, and it is the purpose of this book. We are interested in where personal networks fit in the ecology of human development, and particu-

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larly in what Urie Bronfenbrenner calls “a theory of environmental interconnections and their impact on the forces directly affecting psychological growth.”²

As a book about the place of personal social networks in the ecology of human development, this volume is unusual both in its intellectual origins and in the process by which it was written. The authors came to their studies of personal networks not through a primary interest in networks themselves, but in the hopes of better understanding other phenomena: the social correlates of socioeconomic status; stress and support in the parenting role; relationships between personal and ethnic identity; and social factors affecting child development. Once immersed in the networks literature, and in the complexity of our own networks data, each of us became caught up in the challenge of better understanding and articulating these intriguing webs of social relations. The content of this book reflects the extent to which we have been attracted to the network concept. But we provide the reader with information about the networks of parent and children not only because this way of looking at human relations is interesting, but also because it is insight into the people who anchor these networks that is our ultimate goal, particularly insight into what determines their behavior as parents and as developing human beings. Thus, although this is a book about personal networks, it must be judged in part by the contribution it makes to the reader’s understanding of social class, the attitudes and behavior of adults as parents, and child development.

This is not an edited volume of readings, but an integrated set of studies and insights developed as a working group of colleagues and friends. Each member of the group has brought special insights and interests developed prior to our work together. It is important that the reader know enough about those earlier interests to understand how they might have influenced what we have written.

Moncrieff Cochran initiated the research activities that gave rise to the findings reported here, and has been the prime mover behind the book. Mon’s interest in personal networks as they might influence child development was spawned in his own childhood, when he was in regular contact with 22 first cousins and their parents and friends. An early academic interest in connections among the characteristics of local communities, childrearing patterns, and child development eventually led Cochran, through the writings of British social anthropologists, to the concept of the personal network. In 1975, Urie Bronfenbrenner invited him to serve as co-investigator for the U.S. component of a study in the comparative ecology of human development. He used that opportunity to include in the overall research design the networks data that provide the empirical grounding for our emerging conceptual framework.

William E. Cross, Jr. was the third American co-investigator involved in shaping the Comparative Ecology of Human Development project. Bill is a professor in the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University.

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He has for many years been deeply interested in black identity and identity change, and has put forward his own model of nigrescence, the psychology of becoming black.³ In our joint project, Cross was able to collect and analyze various kinds of information about the ecology of childrearing in urban African-American families, and to bring the richness of that information to bear on the question of how black preschool children learn about blackness, and especially about being black in a society dominated by the white majority.

Lars (Lasse) Gunnarsson is one of two co-investigators leading the Swedish component of our international comparative study. Lasse first joined with Mon Cochran in 1970 on a longitudinal study of the effects of day care on Swedish children. He has had a long-term interest in how the wealth of formal supports to Swedish families with young children might affect their informal social ties. Gunnarsson collaborated with Cochran in development of the social networks interview that was used in all the participating countries, and has become well known in Sweden for his work on social networks and social support.

Mary Larner came as a graduate student to the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Cornell University with a particular interest in studying the kinds of support that sustain families, an interest rooted in previous work with families and children in day care centers and family support programs. Mary's knowledge of the Swedish language and earlier work in Sweden were ideally suited to collaboration with Mon Cochran and Lars Gunnarsson, first on their longitudinal day care study and then with the networks aspect of the Comparative Ecology of Human Development project. Within the ecology project she played a leading role in development of a method for measuring change in personal networks over time. Larner has a continuing interest in how people use both personal relationships and more formal ties to cope with stress and challenge.

David Riley was also introduced to studies in the ecology of human development as a graduate student at Cornell. Dave brought with him experiences as a Head Start teacher and consultant, as member of an art cooperative and as a local politician, each of which contributed to his interest in informal social supports. He realized in Head Start that parents were growing mostly from contact with each other, rather than from teachers and other staff. Local politics taught him about how information and influence flow through patterned network channels, and the political advantages of a diverse, loosely knit group of acquaintances. Riley's general theoretical interest in the coevolution of the individual and the personal social world is reflected in his studies of how network ties affect the attitudes and behavior of fathers and children.

Charles R. Henderson, Jr. had worked with Urie Bronfenbrenner on earlier cross-national research. Chuck was involved with planning the comparative ecology project from its inception, as a research methodologist and statistician.

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His primary research interests are in statistical methods for analyzing complex models used in ecological, sociological, medical, and evaluation research. His current research includes a simulation study of estimators in mixed models (models with both fixed and random factors), and work on methods for addressing selection bias and the examination of this bias in relation to participation in social programs.

The characters in this book come to the reader in what might, at first, seem like a bewildering variety of roles, settings, and time periods. There are mothers, fathers, and children. They are Swedish, Welsh, and West German, as well as American. Within the United States they are both African-American and Caucasian. We meet all of the families first when each contains a three-year-old child, and then again three years later (if they are Swedish or American). There is even an interest in several kinds of circumstances occurring to families between those two time points, as those conditions can be linked to changes in the networks of parents. An overview of the contents of the book is provided in the following five paragraphs, to reduce complexity to a manageable level.

In Part I of the book Mon Cochran explains why we are interested in personal networks and development, from the standpoint of theory and on the basis of recent studies linking personal networks with parents or children. Part II provides an overview of the methods employed in our research, describes the diverse range of neighborhoods, cities, and cultures containing the families in the study, and introduces the reader concretely to what we mean by personal social networks. Because this is a book written for nonacademic as well as academic audiences, technical details are provided as chapter notes in the back of the book.

In the three chapters that constitute Part III, the emphasis is on describing and comparing networks, and on those macroinfluences that affect their size and composition. We begin in the United States with the networks of African-American parents, first considered in their own right and then compared with mothers in the white majority. From there we turn to the cross-national comparison of married mothers' networks in Sweden, Wales, West Germany, and the United States, and then the networks of single mothers in Sweden and the United States.

The emphasis shifts from description to prediction in Part IV, which focuses on U.S. families and networks. First we extend our interest in single mothers to an examination of the ways in which their networks might affect how they perceive their children as easy or difficult to rear. Then as the spotlight swings to fathers, the focus is on the people to whom these men turn for childrearing advice, and the kinds of social relations that are associated with more or less involvement in the parenting role. The third chapter in this section is concerned with the networks of six-year-old children. The contributions made by their

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parents' networks, characteristics of the neighborhood and school, and the socioeconomic status of the family are highlighted, with links made to the performance of the child in elementary school.

We shift gears again in Part V, to a concern with changes in networks over time, and the ways in which intervention can affect those changes. One chapter focuses on the generic question of how personal networks change over a three-year period. Another is devoted to the effects of local residential moves (one neighborhood to another) on the characteristics of parents' and children's networks in both the United States and Sweden. In the third chapter, the impetus to change is more public and systematic: a parental empowerment program designed with networks in mind. The implications of these findings for public policy and program evaluation are discussed.

In the final section of the book, Mon Cochran addresses the questions that formed the basis of our original inquiry: What aspects of personal networks have significance for human development, and how is that influence manifested? Developmentally significant aspects of the network are specified, based both on our findings and on the studies discussed in Part I, and a set of processes are proposed through which these key network features come to bear on the developing individual to produce particular psychological outcomes. Having addressed the question of development at the individual level, Cochran then shifts the level of analysis to development of the network itself. He presents a model for understanding the development of personal networks that depicts the parent's personal network as a product of both the constraints imposed by more encompassing environmental systems and the initiatives taken by the developing individual. After discussing the implications of the full-blown framework, he then highlights key aspects of both the constraints and the initiatives sides of the framework. The book concludes with a brief chapter on what we have learned about how public policies come to bear on network development, and through networks on the development of parents and their children.

The work described in this book has been built on a foundation laid by many, many others. First, and most importantly, we acknowledge with deepest gratitude the families in four different countries, who let us into their lives not once but many times.

A number of other colleagues have made important contributions to our thinking. The influence of Urie Bronfenbrenner has been vast, as is attested to by the many references to his ideas that appear throughout the book. He has been and continues to be a generous colleague and friend. David Olds and Anne Tietjen made important early contributions to our thinking with both their ideas and their research. Jane Brassard played an instrumental role in early conceptualizations and, like Olds and Tietjen, went on to test those concepts against

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reality in scientifically sophisticated ways. Margaret Lee Campbell made substantial and significant contributions to our understanding of networks from a sociological perspective, to development of the social networks interview, to procedures for coding our networks data, and to the early stages of data analysis. Heather Weiss made a major contribution to development of the stresses and supports instrument, guided qualitative analysis of our program neighborhoods, and provided helpful guidance to every aspect of the project in its early formative stages. Jeanie McDonough had a central role in the development of the school outcome measures. Inge Bø has provided a useful Norwegian perspective on networks and development, and both Inge and Ingerid Bø have given valuable feedback on chapter drafts. Liz Kiely provided invaluable computer analysis and other technical assistance. Sam Morrie, Nancy Burston, and Ann Bell also assisted in the analysis of data. Sandra Rightmyer has done extraordinary duty in preparation of the manuscript, and Laurie Eastman did a very professional job of preparing the figures. Dorothy Lerner made important contributions to the subject index. The authors also acknowledge the contributions to the project of the many other students and staff members who have worked in the research and the intervention program since inception of the project in 1976.

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Researchers and others reading this book may be interested in knowing that the data analyzed in this book are in the public domain. Data types are stored in the archives of the National Institute of Education in Washington, D.C. Individuals interested in gaining access to the data should contact the first author at the College of Human Ecology, Cornell University for more information. Various other reports and materials related to the Family Matters Project can be obtained from the same author and address.