EMBEDDED PARENTING?

THE INFLUENCE OF CONJUGAL NETWORKS ON PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

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Using data from a large survey on family functioning in Switzerland, this paper explores the extent to which various types of conjugal networks affect several crucial dimensions of parenting and parent-child relationships, such as problems in the assumption of parental roles, parent-child disagreements, quality of parent-child relationships and parental worries about the child. Results show that conjugal networks have significant indirect and direct effects on parent-child relationships but no significant buffering effect. Bicentric conjugal networks are singled out as associated with improved parenting practices and parent-child relationships, compared to all other types of conjugal networks. Effects of bicentric networks are indirect: They strengthen the conjugal subsystem and improve the psychological well-being of parents. Interfering networks and unicentric networks have negative direct effects on some but not all dimensions of parenting and parent child relationships considered. We further discuss the importance of the results for the understanding of parenting and parent-child relationships within larger relational contexts than the nuclear family.

Most empirical research on parent-child relationships and their outcomes has focused on dyads within the nuclear family, and in particular on the mother-child dyad, with little concern for their hierarchical integration in wider systems (Cox & Paley, 1997). In contrast, some scholars have underlined how important it is to take into account the relational context in which relationships of the nuclear family are embedded (Belsky, 1984; Bott, 1956; Bott, 1957; Burger & Milardo, 1995; Cochran & Niego, 2002). As a matter of fact, some evidence shows that parents with more social support and fewer negative interactions with significant others, provide more sensitive care to their children and have less frequent conflicts with them (Belsky, 1984 & 1990; Chen & Kaplan, 2001; Cochran & Niego, 2002).

How, then, may conjugal networks influence parent-child relationships? Do they have an effect because they enhance the psychological well-being of parents, because they help them to develop a satisfactory conjugal relationship, or through other mechanisms? Do they have a buffering effect (Cohen & Wills, 1985), preventing events or situations which endanger parent-child relationships to have such negative consequences? They may also directly modify parent-child relationships, in providing parents and children with alternative sources of normative influences (Coleman, 1988) or material resources, either financial or domestic (Coenen-Huther *et al.*, 1994; Widmer, 2004a). As

parent-child relationships have a strong impact on a variety of developmental outcomes for children and adolescents (relational competence, drug use, educational success, etc.) (Baumrind, 1989; Widmer & Weiss, 2000), it is important to understand how larger relational contexts may help or hinder them.

This article tests a set of hypotheses about the effects of wider relational contexts on parent-child relationships, with a focus on the mechanisms underlying these effects. Rather than conceptualizing the relational contexts of immediate families in terms of social support as a unidimensional, we use cluster analysis in order to capture their distinct relational structures. This enables us to test their linear as well as non-linear effects on parent-child relationships and on parenting.

Indirect, direct and buffering effects of conjugal networks

Systems theory (Broderick, 1993; Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974) and social ecology theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasize that subsystems constituting the immediate family (conjugal, parent-child and sibling subsystems) are embedded in larger relational contexts, from which they draw resources while trying to maintain some boundaries from them for the sake of their own functioning. In this perspective, it is hypothesized that what happens in any dyad of the nuclear family reflects to some extent what happens in the larger relational context to which it belongs.

How then is this context likely to influence parent-child relationships? When studying the effects of social support on family members, attention has been especially directed to several specific causal channels, suggesting that support available to parents shapes various intermediate variables, which then affect parent-child relationships. In this regard, it has been hypothesized that conjugal networks enhance the psychological well-being of parents, therefore leading to better parenting practices. For instance, a mother's self confidence as a parent may be bolstered by praise from a supportive network member (Cochran & Niego, 2002). The psychological resources of parents are reported to be of extreme importance in the parenting process. More mature parents,

with more robust psychological well-being, are better able to provide adequate stimulation to their children (Belsky, 1984 & 1990). As these psychological resources greatly depend on social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985, Widmer & Weiss, 2000), it may well be that the social network's influence on parent-child relationships is a byproduct of the higher psychological well-being of parents embedded in supportive networks. An alternate hypothesis states that conjugal networks enhance conjugal relationships, which in turn increase the likelihood that spouses or partners will develop more satisfactory parenting practices. According to family systems theory, family subsystems, such as the conjugal and parental subsystems, are functionally coordinated (Broderick, 1993). The conjugal relationship is hypothesized to be the principal support subsystem for parents: a strong conjugal bond increases the likelihood of providing more effective parenting (Belsky, 1984; Robertson *et al.*, 1991), even when adult psychological adjustment is statistically controlled (Cox *et al.*, 1989).

The two explanations reported above emphasize a set of indirect effects of conjugal networks, through the weakening of detrimental processes for parent-child relationships, such as conjugal hostility or the poor psychological well-being of parents, which supposedly mediate their effects (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The literature on support, however, also stresses the importance of direct and buffering effects of social support on individual outcomes (Kaplan, Cassel & Gore, 1977). A direct effect of networks on parent-child relationships is defined as one that modifies the parent-child subsystem independently of the changes occurring in other subsystems (and in particular in the conjugal subsystem). For instance, networks provide material resources to parents, which may facilitate the process of parenting, couples with supportive networks being more well-off in terms of the financial and domestic support associated with childrearing (Coenen-Huther *et al.*, 1994). In contrast to the direct effect hypothesis, the buffer hypothesis states that support is related to positive outcomes only for individuals under stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). According to this model, support networks have an effect mostly because they protect individuals from the negative influence of

stressful events or situations (Hill, 1949). Buffering effects are an expression of the homeostatic features of families which, according to family systems theory, compensate for adverse conditions in the environment by making coordinated changes within the system that help to get back to equilibrium (Cox & Paley, 1997). Statistically, this hypothesis postulates that interactions between stress in the conjugal dyad and conjugal networks have significant effects on parent-child relationships and parenting.

Is network embeddedness always a good thing?

Although strong evidence supports a positive effect of social networks on individual outcomes (for instance Cohen & Wills, 1985), one should note that this is not always the case for relationships in the family realm. Some empirical research shows that the effect of support networks on conjugal quality is curvilinear (Holman, 1981; Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2004a), i.e. extremely cohesive networks are detrimental to conjugal functioning. This hypothesis was theorized in the interference model (Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Julien *et al*., 1994), which suggests that social networks and conjugal relationships might actually compete. Although this hypothesis was mostly developed to deal with conjugal relationships, it might also prove relevant for parent-child relationships. Close-knit networks may not always facilitate parent-child relationships and parenting, especially when the expectations of parents and other network members about the child are inconsistent (Belsky, 1984), or when network members are perceived by parents as competitors rather than as supporters in the parenting process (Robertson *et al*., 1991). More generally, systems theory emphasizes the functionality of maintaining strong but permeable boundaries between systems (Broderick, 1993), over-embeddedness in social networks being a potential threat for nuclear families.

Another critical issue associated with network embeddedness concerns the imbalance of social support available to family members. The assumption that the effects of social support for one family member indirectly benefit other family members has been criticized, based on empirical evidence (for instance Robertson *et al.,* 1991). Unbalanced conjugal networks (in which one parent

is more supported than the other) may show low levels of conjugal quality because of third party's involvement in case of conjugal conflict (Baumgartner, 1993; Burger & Milardo, 1995; Klein & Milardo, 2000) or because of the perception of the supported individual being disloyal or rejecting by his or her partner (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Robertson *et al.*, 1991). Therefore, one may hypothesize that imbalance of conjugal networks is also indirectly detrimental for parent-child relationships.

From systems theory (Broderick, 1993), we hold that networks are specific configurations of relationships with emergent properties. Thus, their effects on conjugal functioning should not be tested on a variable per variable basis, even if interaction terms are included among the variables. Cluster analysis is an ideal approach to uncover these configurations, as it produces groupings of individuals according to their proximity in terms of patterns of responses (Borgen & Barnett, 1987; Everitt, 1993), in this case, structural features of their conjugal networks. Based on the evidence described above and this theoretical stance, we hypothesize that: 1) social networks of couples have a significant impact on parent-child relationships through indirect, buffering and direct effects; 2) dimensions of the conjugal subsystem mediate the effects of conjugal networks on parenting, making it an indirect effect; 3) conjugal networks buffer parent-child relationships from conflicts and problems in the conjugal dyad (buffering effect); 4) while controlling for buffer and indirect effects, conjugal networks keep on having an effect on parenting (direct effect); 4) embeddedness in conjugal networks has a curvilinear effect: social exclusion from conjugal networks as well as extreme network embeddedness of partners are associated with poorer parenting and more difficult parent-child relationships; 5) likewise, network imbalance between partners or spouses is detrimental to parenting.

DATA

The data used in the following analyses are drawn from the study "*Social Stratification, Cohesion and Conflict in Contemporary Families*", a large and representative survey of 1534

married and unmarried couples, with or without children, living in Switzerland (Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2003a; Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2004b). Conducted in 1998, the study's primary goal was to examine how conjugal functioning is influenced by the partners' social status and position in the life course. The sample for the project was drawn randomly using a non-proportional stratified design based on the three major linguistic areas of Switzerland. A computer assisted telephone survey questionnaire was translated into German, French and Italian. Data collection took place between October 1998 and January 1999. In each couple, both partners were interviewed separately and for most questions, both had to provide an answer. Overall, the sample has demographic features very similar to those of other recent surveys and micro-censuses on households and families in Switzerland (OFS, 1998).

The subsample considered here focuses only on couples with co-resident children, with N varying between 771 and 440 depending on the dependent variable. Average age of fathers is 43 and average age of mothers is 41 (standard deviations are 8.7 and 8.3). Average duration of the couple relationship is 16.9 years (standard deviation 11.3), with 15.4 years spent within marriage (standard deviation 12.1). On average, each household includes 2.02 children, with an average age of co-resident children of 11.7 (standard deviation 7.7). Only 4% of couples are unmarried and 6% of them include at least one child who is not the biological child of both partners[1]. Levels of education of mothers surveyed are: 9% with only compulsory schooling (up to 15), 63% with an apprenticeship diploma, 22% with the equivalent of a high school diploma, and 6% with a university degree. Of fathers, 6% have only compulsory schooling, 52% have an apprenticeship diploma, 29% have the equivalent of a high school diploma, and 13% have a university degree. Concerning household income, 6% of couples receive less than 4'000 Swiss francs a month, 22% between 4'000 and 6'000, 30% between 6'000 and 8'000, 23% between 8'000 and 10'000, and 19% more than 10'000. Compared with other surveys of the population of Switzerland, there is a

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[1] This figure is consistent with other sources concerning the demography of families in Switzerland (OFS, 1997; Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2003b).

slight but statistically significant overrepresentation of high levels of income and education in this sample (Kellerhals, Levy and Widmer, 2000). This is mostly due to the fact that this study only selects individuals who belong to couples.

MEASURES

Three sets of variables are directly examined in this article: those relating to types of conjugal networks, those relating to parenting and parent-child relationships, and mediating variables. Since couples and their children differ in their sociodemographic characteristics, we also include various control variables. Because of the study design (with interviews of parents only), we focus on the parents' perceptions of parent-child relationships. It is possible that children or other members of the larger relational context of parents would have different perceptions.

Types of Conjugal networks

In order to derive meaningful types of conjugal networks from the data, we focus on five dimensions (Bott, 1955 and 1957; Coenen-Huther et al., 1994; Milardo, 1988; Surra, 1988; Wellman & Wortley, 1989): size, composition, activity, support available and the overall cohesiveness of the network. Information was collected independently from the two partners of each couple, so that we have measures for each partner's network.

- *Network size* is measured by asking respondents how many members of the kinship and friendship network live in parents' geographical area (no more than 20-30 minutes's driving). 42% of fathers and 41% of mothers have four or more relatives living in the area. 68% of respondents of both genders have three or more friends close by.

- *Network activity* is measured by the frequency with which each parent meets with relatives and friends. 64% of fathers and 66% of mothers meet with relatives at least once every two weeks. 68% of fathers and 58% of mothers meet with friends at least once a week.

-*Network support available* is measured by asking whether respondents can count on their family's and friends' support in the event of a serious problem. Emotional support is the most readily available: 65% of fathers and 76% of mothers think that they would get such support if needed. Domestic support is also present: 52% of fathers and 53% of mothers say that they can rely on important domestic help from relatives or friends if needed. Similar results were found for financial support (47% of fathers and 48% of mothers say that they can count on important financial support from their network if needed). Available support was used instead of activated support, as various studies have shown that this has much more impact on individual outcomes (i.e. Wethington & Kessler, 1986).

-*Cohesiveness of the kinship network* is measured with two indicators: the overall quality of interpersonal relationships in the kinship network and the interference of the kinship network in the couple functioning. The first question read: "how would you best describe the relationships among your relatives?" *Responses were* a) - a close, affectionate and united family; b) a family where people get along with each other but where relationships are rather distant c) a family characterized by indifference; d) a family characterized by hostility and conflicts. 62% of mothers and 50% of fathers say that they belong to a close affectionate and united family. Network interference was measured by a single item asking respondents whether or not they feel controlled by their relatives in their conjugal life. 22% of mothers and 18% of fathers feel that their couple is controlled by their family.

Based on this set of variables, we first ran a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) (Greenacre, 1983). We then derived from MCA scores six distinct network types using cluster analysis (Lebart, Morineau & Piron, 1997). Cluster analysis makes it possible to go beyond the effects of specific dimensions of networks on conjugal quality and find holistic configurations of network dimensions. It has been used before to construct typologies of networks (Coenen-Huther *et al.*, 1994; Stein *et al.*, 1992). To determine the number of network profiles, we examine a sequence

of hierarchical cluster analyses based on Ward's method of clustering on the first four axes of the correspondence analysis (Lebart, Morineau & Piron, 1997). Instead of partitioning the observations into some predetermined number of clusters in a single step, this hierarchical procedure produces step by step splits (Everitt, 1993). Ward's method minimizes within-cluster variance and thus produces good estimates of cluster groupings. Most of the distance reduction occurs at or before the fifth split. Thus, couples can be adequately described as belonging to one of six clusters, which profiles are presented in table 1.

-Table 1 about here-

Couples with sparse networks (16% of the sample) are characterized by weak ties with friends and relatives for both parents. Their network is rather small and contacts with friends and relatives are sparse; support is not readily available. Interference from the network is very low, as is the overall quality of relationships in the network.

Couples with friendship networks (15% of the sample) are strongly embedded in friendship ties, whereas kinship ties are almost nonexistent. These couples have few relatives living close to them and they do not interact very often with them. Their family is not considered warm and supportive, but neither is it interfering. Support is available, most likely from friends. Again, both partners have similar network profiles although fathers tend to have a smaller and more passive kinship network than mothers.

In *couples with patricentric networks* (18% of the sample)*,* fathers have a much larger circle of relatives and friends than mothers. They meet with their relatives and friends more often and can get support from them much more easily than the mothers. These couples can be described as asymmetrical or unicentric, as one parent's network – the father's – is predominant. Note, however, that the cohesiveness of the kinships is equal on both side.

Couples with matricentric networks (21% of the sample) have the opposite characteristics to couples with patricentric networks. In their case, the mothers have a much larger and more active network than fathers, both in terms of relatives and friends. Support is more readily available for the mothers than for the fathers, and the overall the cohesiveness of their kinship network is significantly higher than that of their partner's.

Couples with bicentric networks (20% of the sample) are characterized by strong kinship and friendship ties for both partners, who have a large number of friends and relatives around them and frequent contacts with them. Both partners would get support in case of need. Family relationships are seen as strong and warm by both of them.

Couples with *interfering networks* (10% of the sample) are similar to couples with bicentric networks with regard to the strength of support. However, there is a strong feeling of being controlled by the kinship network, especially for the mothers. Family relationships are much more often considered cooler than in bicentric networks.

Parenting and parent-child relationships

Parenting and parent-child relationships were measured in four domains: problems in the assumption of parental roles; the extent to which parents were worried about their children; the seriousness of parent-child disagreements; and the quality of the parent-child relationship (Sabatelli & Waldron, 1995). The first two measures refer to parenting, defined as the act of caring for someone in the manner of a parent (Cowan, Powell & Cowan, 1998), whereas the third and fourth measures directly refer to interactions between parents and children. These measures were constructed at the couple level, by including responses from both fathers and mothers.

Problems in the assumption of parental roles refers to the notion of parental role strain and perceived parental competence (Sabatelli & Waldron, 1995). To study this, a randomly selected partner in each couple had to indicate whether or not the couple was currently experiencing any of five problems with any child still in the household, such as significant difficulties in raising the

child, maintaining a satisfying conjugal relationship because of the child, organizing everyday life, etc. For each of the five items, respondents had to say whether this problem had ever existed with the child. Responses were then compiled into a five-point scale, ranging from zero to five problems (mean .95, standard deviation 1.35). Cronbach's Alpha was .73. In order to have a more or less balanced distribution of respondents across the scale's values, we recoded the larger values into a single category (three problems or more). Of all respondents 53% did not report any problem with any child living in the household; 23% reported one problem, 12%, two problems, and 12%, three or more problems. The number of respondents was 771.

Worries about children refers to the extent to which children were exhibiting, according to their parents, problematic behavior of various kinds (Barber, 1994; Suitor & Pillemer, 1988). These were measured using a set of 9 items, which were asked to a randomly selected partner in each couple. He or she had to indicate to what extent the couple was worried about the behavior of their children in the house or at school, their relationships with their peers, their consumption of drugs and alcohol, and possible deviant behaviors such as petty theft and violent behavior. Answer categories were "major worries", "some worries", "minor worries" and "no worries at all". Because of a highly skewed distribution toward "no worries at all", the first three answer categories were merged into a single value. These items were combined into a single scale, ranging from zero (no worry on any of the nine item considered) to nine (minor, some or major worries on all 9 items), with a Cronbach's Alpha of .65. As the distribution of this variable was also skewed, we dichotomized it, with 18% of couples reporting 5 or more worries for their child. Parents were asked to report worries only about cohabiting children over six years old, therefore the subsample is limited in size (n=507).

The quality of parent-child relationships is dealt with in various ways in the literature (e.g. Simons, Johnson and Conger, 1994; Rueter and Conger, 1995). In this study, it was measured using a set of 8 items which capture the overall positiveness of the parent-child relationship by ascertaining the extent to which it is characterized by trust, exchange and intimacy, or by anxiety

and anger. Questions were asked independently to both partners and concerned the oldest child and the second oldest child still present in the household. Response categories ranged from "not at all" to "very much" (four response categories). Because of a highly skewed distribution toward positive responses, the answer categories indicating the presence of a problem were merged into a single value. These items were then combined into a single scale, ranging from zero (no problem on any of the 8 items considered) to eight (some problem at least on all items considered). As scales based on responses from fathers and mothers taken independently had only low reliabilities (for instance, Cronbach's Alpha for quality of relationships with the oldest child was .62 for fathers and .56 for mothers), their responses were combined into two single ordinal measures (four categories), with a Cronbach's Alpha of .70 for the oldest child in the household and .77 for the second oldest child. Because the distribution of these scales was also highly skewed, scale values were merged into a four-fold scale: a total score of 0 to 4 problems reported by both partners was set to 0, a score of 5 to 7 problems to 1, a score of 8 to 11 problems to 2, and a score of more than 11 problems to 3. N is 772 for the oldest child, but only 563 for the second oldest child, as 27% of parents in the sample had only one child in the household and therefore could not provide information for that second variable.

Finally, *Parent-child disagreements* were measured using a single indicator describing the severity of parent-child open conflicts. As in the case of the two previous variables, the question on parent-child disagreements was asked to a randomly selected partner. 15% of respondents reported serious conflicts existing between them and at least one of their cohabiting children, 54% reported minor conflicts and 31% no conflict at all (n=763).

Mediators

In order to investigate the hypothesized indirect and buffering effects of conjugal networks on parent-child relationships, we included indicators of conjugal conflict, parental experience in their own families of orientation and psychological distress, as potential mediators (Baron & Kenny,

1986; Shrout & Bolger, 2002) of network effects. Conjugal conflict was measured by three constructs: conjugal problems, conjugal disagreements and coping strategies (Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2003; Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2004a; Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2004b). These measures were constructed at the couple level, by including responses from both fathers and mothers[2].

For *conjugal problems*, each partner had to indicate whether or not they were currently experiencing any of a list of 19 problems, such as a serious inability to communicate, problems in dealing with their partner's personality, sexual problems, infidelity, task-sharing problems, etc. Responses from both spouses were combined into a single measure with a Cronbach's Alpha of .73. *Conjugal disagreements* were measured using a set of four indicators describing the frequency of open conjugal conflict, the frequency of covert conjugal conflict (passive aggressiveness), the severity of these conflicts and the ease with which they were overcome. Both spouses graded the items and their responses were summed into a single measure (Cronbach's Alpha is .78). *Poor coping strategies* were measured using a set of nine items that captured the way partners acted toward each other when a serious problem occurred, e.g. they could put each other under pressure, threaten each other, or, alternatively, negotiate, listen, etc. Cronbach's Alpha is .70. *Psychological distress* was measured using a set of 6 items: respondents were asked whether they currently felt sad, lonely, helpless, tired or nervous and whether or not they had unexplained somatic troubles (Radloff, 1977). Cronbach's Alpha was .74 for fathers and .75 for mothers. Both scales were dichotomized at the last quartile. One item measured *relationships in families of orientation*. In 43% of couples, at least one parent reported poor relationships in his or her family of orientation during childhood. Another variable recorded whether one or both partners had experienced *divorce in their families of orientation, before they were 15*, which was the case of 14% of couples.

When measuring the effect of conjugal networks on relationships between cohabiting parents and children, we controlled for several socio-demographic variables which are significantly

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[2] These measures are available from the authors. They are presented in details in Widmer, Kellerhals, Levy (2003).

associated with parent-child relationships: age of children in the household, age and level of education of mothers, household income, presence of a non-biological child of either or both parents in the household, and the mother's participation in the work place (Aldous, 1996; Bornstein, 2002).

RESULTS

As all dependent variables are on a point-scale, we estimate ordinal logistic models (Kleinbaum & Klein, 2002), using the procedure PLUM of SPSS[3]. The principle of an ordinal regression model is similar to a logistic model, as it estimates the odds ratio for each independent characteristic in the model. A deviation contrast method is used, which makes it possible to estimate the effect of each category of a covariate in comparison to its overall effect. Parameters represent the effect of covariates in terms of odds ratios. For example, the odds ratio of couples with a bicentric network for problems in assumption of parental roles (see model A of table 2) means that their odds of reporting problems with their parental roles are multiplied by 0.67 compared to parents on average. As the ratio is less than one, it indicates that they report fewer problems than parents on average. An odds ratio greater than one would mean that they would report more problems than parents on average.

The testing strategy implemented in tables 2 and 3 is based on the assumption that effects of independent variables on an outcome decrease in significance when mediator covariates are added into the model (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Network types are chosen as the independent covariates, with parent-child relationships as the outcomes, and indicators of conjugal conflict and psychological distress of parents as the mediators, in a series of nested models. For each dependent variable a first model tests the effect of network types with only control variables included.

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[3] Ordinal models are more appropriate than OLS regression models, considering the specific data at hand, since the dependent variables have very few orders, only between 2 and 4. For example, in the case of problems in the assumption of parental roles, there are four orders, from 0 (no problem) to 3 (three or more problems). Using ordinary

Potentially mediating variables are then added in a second model, and are predicted to make network effects insignificant, following the indirect effect hypothesis. Note that tolerance tests (Stewart 1987) show that there is no problem of multicollinearity between independent variables in all following analyses. Moreover, indices of variance inflation factors (VIF) do not increase when mediator covariates are added to network and control variables.

<mark>TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE</mark>

Models A and C of table 2 show that network types are associated with unequal odds of experiencing problems in parenting. Couples with bicentric networks report significantly fewer problems in the assumption of their parental roles and less worries about their children than other couples (p<.05). In addition, interfering networks are associated with significantly more worries about children than other couples (p<.01).

We proceed in testing indirect effects of conjugal networks by the inclusion of potentially mediating variables in models B and D of table 2. In other regression models (results not reported) we used mediators as dependent variables and conjugal networks as independent variables, with control variables added. These models showed that bicentric networks are significantly associated with less psychological distress of fathers (p<.05) and mothers (p<.01), fewer conjugal problems (p<.01), less severe conjugal disagreements (p<.01), better coping strategies (p<.01), and more positive experiences of parents in their families of orientation (p.<.01). Patricentric networks are associated with greater psychological distress of mothers (p<.05) and poor coping strategies (p<.05). As further testing reveals that hypothesized mediators have a statistically significant effect on all indicators of parent-child relationships and parenting except for parental worries, we expect their inclusion in the model to account for the effect of bicentric networks, in making it statistically

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least square regression analysis may lead to covariates for which an estimated order is greater than 3 or less than 0, a highly problematic case for statistical estimation.

nonsignificant (indirect effect). This is what happens in table 2 for parental roles, but, as expected, not for parental worries, because these variables do not have statistically significant effects on parental worries (see model D of table 2). To the contrary, the negative effect of interfering networks remains significant after mediating covariates are added. Indicators of parent-child relationships show a similar pattern of results in table 3.

In models A, C and E of table 3, couples with bicentric networks show higher quality of relationships with the oldest child (p<.05) and with the second oldest child (p<.05) living in the household, and less severe disagreements with them (p<.01) compared to couples on average. These effects are fully accounted for by the inclusion of mediating variables in models B, D and F, which makes effects of bicentric networks statistically nonsignificant. It should be underlined that mediating variables vary depending on the outcome: effects of bicentric networks on parental roles are mediated by psychological distress of mother, conjugal problems and relationships in the family of orientation; effects of networks on relationships with the oldest child are mediated by psychological distress of father and coping strategies of couples, whereas for second oldest child, psychological distress of mother and relationships in the family of orientation play a key role. For parent-child disagreements, psychological distress of mother and conjugal disagreements are mediators.

In addition, the quality of parental relationships with the second oldest child appears to be significantly lower in unicentric network types (either patricentric or matricentric). Also, parent-child disagreements are more frequent in couples with an interfering network. This effect remains significant when mediating covariates are added into the model. Finally, do network effects interact with the psychological distress of parents, conjugal disagreements or problems (buffering or moderator effect)? We single out bicentric networks when testing interaction terms, in order to

include only statistically significant variables in the logistic model (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1989). However, testing of interaction terms (results not reported) fails to support the buffering hypothesis, as no interaction term is statistically significant.

To summarize, parents with bicentric networks are better off than other parents, with respect to all five indicators of parenting and parent-child relationships considered. The hypothesis of an indirect positive effect of bicentric networks, working primarily through their mitigating effect on conjugal problems and the psychological distress of partners, is confirmed for all four dependent variables on which hypothesized mediators do have a significant effect. Parental worries are insensitive to potential mediators included in this study. Therefore, the effect of bicentric networks remain significant after they are added in the model (direct effect). Interfering, patricentric and matricentric networks have negative effects on several dimensions of parenting and parent-child relationships, which remain significant after mediating covariates are added.

DISCUSSION

Conjugal networks do matter for parent-child relationships. Bicentric conjugal networks are singled out as associated with improved parenting practices and parent-child relationships, compared with all other types of conjugal networks. Their effect is mostly indirect. The stress-buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which suggests that only couples under conjugal stress benefit from their networks, must be rejected according to the data, which raises questions about the homeostatic features of the larger relational contexts in which the immediate family is embedded. However, it can be noted that tests of buffer effects (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Hill, 1949) usually imply a longitudinal research design, in which the impact of stressful events or situations is measured over several time-lagged observation points. This is obviously not the case in this study, which is cross-sectional.

Conjugal networks have an indirect effect on parent-child relationships and parenting, by their influence on the conjugal subsystem and the psychological well-being of parents. In decreasing the likelihood for parents of experiencing psychological distress or conjugal problems and conflicts, and in increasing the quality of their coping strategies, bicentric networks indirectly influence parenting and parent-child relationships. In other words, the positive effect of network embeddedness on parenting and parent-child relationships works primarily by strengthening the conjugal subsystem, which is the principal support subsystem for parents (Belsky, 1984). Thus, the conjugal subsystem represents the generative mechanism (Baron & Kelly, 1986) through which bicentric networks influence parenting. The results also suggest that specific dimensions of the conjugal subsystem (conjugal disagreements, conjugal coping, psychological well-being or distress of partners, etc.) are mediators for specific dimensions of parenting, although more research is needed in this regard.

But this study also confirms that network embeddedness is not always beneficial to parent-child relationships. First, interfering networks make parent-child disagreements and parental worries increase. This result corroborates other findings pertaining to conjugal relationships that show that network interference is detrimental to intimacy development and conjugal functioning (Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Julien *et al.*, 1994; Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2004a). Indeed, boundary issues have long been considered central by family systems theorists (Broderick, 1993). Secondly, unilateral conjugal networks have a statistically significant worsening effect on the quality of relationships with the second oldest child living in the household (p>.05). In other words, it is not enough for only one parent to have access to a strong network. Both parents need to have one in order for network embeddedness to fully benefit parent-child relationships. Thus, one important result of this study is that balance between parents in terms of network embeddedness is important for some dimensions of parent-child relationships as well as for conjugal relationships (Robertson *et al.*, 1991; Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy 2004a). The results show that effects of network interference

and network imbalance are not mediated by processes occurring within conjugal dyads. Further research is needed in order to uncover the mechanisms associated with these effects of conjugal networks on the parent-child subsystem.

Because relational contexts in which couples are embedded do have consequences for parenting and parent-child relationships, scholars may wish to systematically include measures pertaining to the structural and functional dimensions characterizing the social networks of the immediate family (Widmer, 2004) when dealing with parent-child relationships or their effects on developmental outcomes. From a social policy point of view, these results show that there is a need to include interventions within the larger relational contexts of immediate families when dealing with dysfunctional parenting and poor parent-child relationships.

Some of the limitations to this study should be noted. First, the study is correlational in nature: longitudinal data would permit a more precise test of the model, especially regarding the buffering effect of conjugal networks. Furthermore, one may hypothesize that a reciprocal effect of parent-child relationships on network composition also exists, for example, in the case of families who withdraw from their social networks when they encounter a problem in their parent-child relationships. Longitudinal data in which the network structures are measured at an earlier stage in parent-child relationships, would be extremely helpful for addressing the causal order between the two sets of variables. Secondly, we lack similar studies for comparison, as research on this subject is scarce and often based on small exploratory samples; they feature, for the most part, very heterogeneous and indirect measures of network structures, with a strong bias toward a linear effect of social networks on family process. Only a sociometric approach to conjugal networks (Widmer, 1999; Widmer & La Farga, 2000) would make it be possible to deal comprehensively with the effects of network structures on parenting. Finally, effects of social networks on parent-child relationships were considered here only in two-parent households. It remains to be seen whether the

same mechanisms can be detected in single-parent families in which network embeddedness is hypothesized to play an even more crucial role for parenting (Cochran & Niego, 2002).

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Table 1 : Characteristics of conjugal networks (average scores according to network types, n=771)

	Gen-der	I Sparse	II Friendship	III Patricentric	IV Matricentric	V Bicentric	VI Interfering	F-Test
	%	18	15	18	21	20	10	
Large number of relatives	F	0.19	0.14	0.54	0.46	0.62	0.80	40.7**
	M	0.23	0.15	0.64	0.31	0.61	0.65	35.2**
Large number of friends	F	0.49	0.74	0.61	0.76	0.74	0.76	8.3**
	M	0.39	0.71	0.73	0.60	0.76	0.78	15.5**
Frequent contacts with relatives	F	0.30	0.30	0.60	0.63	0.83	0.85	42.9**
	M	0.23	0.21	0.80	0.52	0.80	0.67	57.6**
Frequent contacts with friends	F	0.60	0.84	0.52	0.75	0.71	0.86	11**
	M	0.40	0.72	0.60	0.36	0.70	0.61	14.2**
Domestic support available	F	0.14	0.65	0.03	0.81	0.95	0.69	174.6**
	M	0.09	0.76	0.68	0.04	0.94	0.76	176.4**
Emotional support available	F	0.44	0.91	0.42	0.97	0.98	0.90	92.3**
	M	0.20	0.97	0.81	0.27	0.94	0.89	159.6**
Financial support available	F	0.07	0.47	0.11	0.69	0.92	0.62	123.8**
	M	0.07	0.77	0.63	0.09	0.84	0.56	111.7**
Close and united family	F	0.38	0.39	0.57	0.77	0.85	0.55	29.2**
	M	0.25	0.39	0.57	0.43	0.68	0.22	21.7**
Family tries to control the couple	F	0.13	0.22	0.13	0.17	0.06	0.93	89.2**
	M	0.13	0.08	0.20	0.14	0.09	0.57	26.7**

**=sig<.01

Table 2. Problems in parenting and conjugal networks (odds ratios)

Variables	Parental roles (A)		Parental roles (B)		Worries (C)		Worries (D)	
constants	0.93		1.00					
	0.31	**	0.33	**				
	0.15	**	0.16	**	0.23	**	0.23	*
Conjugal networks								
Sparse	1.61		1.27		1.48		1.57	
Friendship	0.91		0.87		0.62		0.67	
Patricentric	0.89		0.80		0.83		0.83	
Matricentric	0.91		0.99		1.03		0.91	
Bicentric	0.67	*	0.89		0.50	*	0.52	*
Interfering	1.27		1.28		2.60	**	2.43	**
Level of education of mother								
Low	0.86		0.86		0.93		0.91	
Medium	0.97		0.99		0.70		0.73	
High	1.20		1.17		1.54		1.51	
Income of the household (Swiss francs)								
<= 4'000	0.73		0.54	*	1.64	*	1.61	*
4'001 - 6'000	0.94		1.07		0.42	**	0.41	**
6'001 - 8'000	0.97		1.11		0.77		0.87	
8'001 - 10'000	1.06		1.22		1.94		1.97	
> 10'000	1.42	*	1.28		0.96		0.89	
Work participation of mother								
0%	1.04		1.02		1.12		1.13	
1 - 89 %	1.04		0.90		1.37		1.36	
90 - 100 %	0.93		1.08		0.65		0.65	
Age of oldest child								
0-4	0.88		0.79		0.81		0.85	
5--12	1.04		1.07		0.58		0.59	
13-15	1.14		1.11		0.69		0.67	
16-18	0.92		0.99		1.49		1.52	
more than 18	1.03		1.08		2.10		1.98	
Family structure								
Nuclear	0.88		0.90		0.74		0.69	
Recomposed	1.14		1.11		1.35		1.45	
Age of mother								
< 30	1.32		1.13					
30 - 40	0.90		0.86		1.48		1.40	
41 - 50	1.11		1.17		1.36		1.33	
>= 51	0.75		0.88		0.50		0.54	
Psychological distress (father)								
No			0.83				0.76	
Yes			1.21				1.32	
Psychological distress (mother)								
No			0.67				0.78	
Yes			1.50	**			1.28	
Conjugal problems			1.23	**			0.96	
Conjugal disagreements			0.99				0.99	
Poor coping strategies of couples			1.00				1.02	
Relationships in families of orientation								
Good			0.81				1.00	
Not good			1.24	*			1.00	
Divorce in families of orientation								
No			0.96				1.55	
Yes			1.04				0.64	
Chisquare	33.329	**	152.718	**	51.08	**	59.48	**
DF	21		28		21		28	
N	770		770		440		440	
**=sig<0.01 , *=sig<.05								

Table 2. Parent-child relationships and conjugal networks (odds ratios)

Variables	Relationships with oldest Child (A)	Relationships with oldest Child (B)	Rel. with second oldest Child (C)	Rel. with second oldest Child (D)	Parent-child disagreements (E)	Parent-child disagreements (F)
constant	0.26 **	0.28 **	0.16 **	0.26 *	1.65 **	0.99
					0.11 **	0.06 **
Conjugal networks						
Sparse	1.07	1.06	0.62	0.61	0.85	0.69
Friendship	0.80	0.87	0.81	0.91	0.95	0.94
Patricentric	1.22	1.13	1.56 *	1.44	1.02	0.97
Matricentric	1.50	1.44	1.97 *	1.85 *	1.22	1.30
Bicentric	0.68 *	0.71	0.65 *	0.69	0.70 **	0.83
Interfering	0.95	0.93	1.00	0.98	1.43	1.49 *
Level of education of mother						
Low	0.68 **	0.66 **	0.98	0.94	0.90	0.91
Medium	1.21	1.28	1.04	1.13	0.92	0.98
High	1.22	1.18	0.98	0.94	1.21	1.11
Income of the household (Swiss francs)						
<= 4'000	1.41	1.31	0.91	0.88	0.92	0.89 *
4'001 - 6'000	0.74	0.72	1.21	1.13	0.81	0.88
6'001 - 8'000	0.94	1.00	1.05	1.16	0.89	0.91
8'001 - 10'000	1.26	1.33	1.22	1.29	1.24	1.26
> 10'000	0.81	0.80	0.71	0.67	1.21	1.10
Work participation of mother						
0%	1.42	1.45 *	0.89	0.87	1.28 *	1.26
1 - 89 %	1.30	1.29	1.22	1.21	1.25	1.18
90 - 100 %	0.54	0.53	0.92	0.95	0.62	0.67
Sex of the child						
Female	0.85	0.84	0.87	0.84	—	—
Male	1.18	1.19	1.15	1.18	—	—
Age of the child						
0-4	0.25 **	0.25 **	0.75	0.65	0.38 **	0.34 **
5--12	0.95	0.96	1.86 *	1.88 *	1.39 **	1.37 *
13-15	3.33 **	3.33 **	3.44 **	3.95 **	2.12 **	2.26 **
16-18	1.43	1.55 *	2.18 *	2.21 *	1.55 **	1.51 *
more than 18	0.87	0.80	0.10 **	0.09 **	0.58 **	0.63 *
Age of mother						
<30	2.27 *	2.26 *	0.92	0.88	0.49 **	0.43 **
30 - 40	1.81	1.79	1.60	1.58	1.34	1.31
41-50	1.03	1.04	1.34	1.43	1.46 *	1.57 **
>=51	0.24 *	0.24 **	0.51	0.50	1.05	1.13
Family structure						
Nuclear	0.79	0.80	0.90	0.94	0.97	0.98
Recomposed	1.27 *	1.26	1.12	1.06	1.03	1.02
Psychological distress (father)						
No		0.74		0.77		0.89
Yes		1.36 *		1.30		1.12
Psychological distress (mother)						
No		0.83		0.63		0.83 *
Yes		1.21		1.58 **		1.21 *
Conjugal problems		0.98		0.96		1.04
Conjugal disagreements		0.97		0.96		1.08 **
Poor coping strategies of couples		1.03 *		1.03		0.99
Relationships in families of orientation						
Good		1.10		1.31		0.96
Not good		0.91		0.76 **		1.04
Divorce in families of orientation						
No		1.05		1.00		0.88
Yes		0.95		1.23		1.14
Chisquare	112.30 **	129.57 **	74.15 **	101.58 **	100.85 **	147.37 **
DF	22.00	29.00	22.00	29.00	21	28
N	772.00	772.00	563.00	563.00	763	763

**=sig<0.01, *=sig<.05