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# Personal networks and the development of individual vulnerability or strength in the life course

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## Abstract

In the last decade research on personal networks (or so called "ego-networks") has surged, with a focus on their impact on a variety of issues such as health and consumption, norm reinforcement and values, work and family lives. We propose a session on personal networks and the development of vulnerability in the life course in order to focus on situations where personal networks play a key role in either increasing individual vulnerability throughout the life course, or, quite differently, moderating the effect of adverse life events on individuals. Vulnerability has been defined in various ways in the social sciences. In the perspective of this session, we refer vulnerability to personal situations where individuals lack reserves (financial, cultural, health, etc.) to meet social expectations associated with their roles and statuses. Personal strength, on the other hand, represents situations where individuals have enough personal resources to meet social expectations. We wish to better understand the role of personal networks for the accumulation or non-accumulation of such personal reserves.

Research offers various evidences that personal networks are closely interrelated with the development of vulnerability in individual life courses. Life transitions and life trajectories are enmeshed within webs of interpersonal relationships. Such enmeshment may have positive or negative consequences, as personal networks provide individuals with resources that help them to manage life transitions or to deal with non-normative events. Personal networks however not only provide social capital, but also in many instances limit individuals' life chances, by increasing stress, conflict and interference. We encourage submission of papers that focus on network processes that increase either resources or strain in life courses, with likely consequences for individual vulnerability.

Papers on the following issues are welcome:

- Composition of personal networks as factors of individual vulnerability or strength in the life course. The relational origin of personal vulnerability stems not only or mainly from the number of alters who belong to one's personal networks, but also from their statuses (family, occupations, gender, type of ties, etc.). We need to know more about the effect that the

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composition and the heterogeneity of personal networks has on individual vulnerability and strength.

- Relational structures of personal networks as factors of individual vulnerability or strength in the life course. The effects of density, centrality, reciprocity, transitivity, but also size of personal networks need to be better understood. Conflict structures as well as support structures of personal networks need to be better known.

- The impact of life events and transitions on personal networks. Such events, either normative or non-normative, often have consequences on personal networks, which may add up in trajectories of cumulated advantages/disadvantages. It is important that the role of personal networks in such cumulative processes be researched.

- Personal networks of individuals in high risk or ostracized social subgroups. The composition and relational structures of personal networks of individuals at the margins of society, truly disadvantaged, must be better identified. In a quantitative perspective, the resources and strains might be compared with those present in the mainstream population. In a case study perspective, the interpretation of network graphs in connection with life events and situations might constitute straightforward method for identifying potential risk factors for vulnerable individuals.

- Methodological developments for the study of personal networks in life course research. Collecting and analyzing personal network data is also challenging, particularly in a quantitative perspective when the multiple dimensions of composition and structural features that might intervene with regard to the processes of development of vulnerability and strength in the life course have to be considered.

Papers with a longitudinal design (several interview waves) are particularly encouraged, although research on specific life stages are also welcome. Quantitative research as well as case study research are of interest.

**Keywords:** Personal networks, life course, vulnerability, social resources and social capital, conflict and stress