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## **Evolutions of personal networks and life events\***

**Claire Bidart, Daniel Lavenu<sup>1</sup>**

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### *Abstract:*

*Networks of personal relations evolve over time. They reflect and go with processes of socialization. Their history and dynamics contribute to their present structure. The number of people involved in them and their composition change, as does the quality of the links that constitute them. What life events might influence these changes, or possibly even explain them?*

*Drawing on a qualitative survey of a panel of 66 young people living originally in Normandy (France), who were questioned every three years, we attempt here to find a relation between the evolution of their personal networks and the events marking their entry into adult life.*

*Do their networks expand or contract, do they move regularly or in stages? What are the links that appear, disappear or change? What events are likely to influence changes in these links and in the networks as a whole?*

*We begin by examining the changes in the young people's networks during the survey's three waves. We then identify the life events that took place in the intervals, focusing in particular on entry into the labour market, geographical mobility, setting up house with a partner and the birth of children in the household. This enables us to advance some hypotheses about the impact of these events on the evolution of networks and to illustrate our argument with a few significant examples.*

Keywords : Personal network ; relationship ; longitudinal study ; youth ; life transitions

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## **Evolutions of personal networks and life events\***

Personal networks have a history. The form and structure they show today result from a construction elaborated over time. Little by little, in the course of a lifetime, ties are woven, some relationships intertwine, others become distant and fade away. As the individual moves through varied contexts, social circles, activities and commitments, ties with new partners have been incorporated and reconstituted. At the same time, old childhood friends have dropped out of sight, cousins have been somewhat forgotten, friends have moved away. In the current network, each relationship has its own history. It was born in a precise social environment, integrated into a group of friends or separated from other relationships, experienced in particular circumstances with forms of exchange and shared resources particular to the contexts and periods in question. It has subsequently evolved, along with new life situations and new socializing contexts. Today's relationship is the product of that history, that evolution, and it bears its marks and specificities.

The whole of the personal network as it appears today is composed of these ties of varying duration. Some stem from childhood and have persisted through many periods of life; others last only a few years and remain 'typical' of a period which has ended but is still recalled in practices more or less tinged with nostalgia; still others are contemporary with current preoccupations and activities.

To some extent, then, the network 'testifies' to the personal history. It points to the different strata of relationships, with their varied origins and durations, and these in turn reveal different time frames within its components.

Our hypothesis is that there is a close correspondence between the dynamics of personal networks and the modes of socialisation. Indeed, each person that an individual encounters opens up a 'little world' made of his or her own knowledge, experiences, ideas and acquaintances (Erikson 1982; Gartrell 1987). The map of the personal network might then be taken to describe the extent of the social circles the person accesses, which circumscribe his or her 'social surface'. In the interface between individual and society, this 'intermediate level' of social networks provides a key to an original reading of the processes of socialisation and social integration (Degenne & Forsé 2004). These are particularly important at the time of entry into adult life (Dubar 1991 ; Cicchelli 2001; Rissoan 2004).

In this period which is so rich in transformations, networks of personal relations change a great deal. Their size, their composition, the quality of the ties are all modified. What specific life events occurring in this very rich and turbulent period of youth can be at work in these transformations and may explain them? What are the social consequences of the changes in ties and networks?

In order to explore the relation between evolutions of personal networks and life changes, we have carried out a longitudinal survey involving repeated interviews of the same young people every three years as they advance towards adulthood (*see appendix*). This procedure allows for an assessment of the changes over time, following the distinct diachronic stages. In these precise time frames, do the young people's personal networks increase or decrease? Steadily or in stages? What ties appear? Which ones disappear? What events are likely to have effects on these changes?

The networks are reconstituted from series of questions which relate to different life contexts (studies, work, leisure activities, family, neighbours, etc.) and function as 'name generators'. By comparing the lists of names cited at each wave of the survey, we have, at this first step of the analysis, established different categories of network evolutions: those which

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\* Thanks to Evelyne Lavenu for her very careful reading of this text.

show a continuous decrease in numbers, those which increase between the first and second waves of the survey and then decrease between the second and third, those which decrease and then increase, those which increase each time. We decided to exclude family ties from the networks because the disparities in the numbers of existing members at hand complicate the analyses. The evolution of relations with kin clearly constitutes an important element in the socialization processes but for the time being, we have put them aside.

## **1 - Evolution profiles**

After constructing categories of network evolution, we have proceeded to identify the social characteristics of the young people involved as well as the life events and changes they have experienced between each of the three survey waves completed to this day. The question is: what has happened in the lives of these young people during each three-year interval to account for such movements in their personal networks? We prefer this kind of inductive approach to a procedure that would establish in advance the pertinence of life changes and then measure their effects on the personal networks. We shall first draw the categories and rapidly describe the social profiles found in them, and then present a more qualitative picture of the relevant life events.

### 1.1 - Continuous reduction of the personal network: the “fast lane” into adult life

Among the population of the 66 young people who responded to the three survey waves, 12 show networks that diminish between each wave. Numbers of relationships vary a lot in our panel as soon as the starting point.

We know that the decline in the number of members in social networks with age, although general, is much more pronounced in the lower classes (Forsé 1981, 1991; Héran

1988; Paradeise 1980; Burt 1990). In our category of continuously decreasing networks, we find a majority of young people of working-class origins (9 out of 12), five young women and seven young men, mainly coming from vocational education.

When we examine the trajectories of these twelve young people, we can notice that they all share a very rapid entry into adult life. They all have left school, entered the working world or not, however in any case childhood is far behind them. Two profiles may be distinguished though, according to the size of the network and the relation to the working world:

- The '*go-getters*': They were in employment and committed to their work following the first wave of the survey. Some pursued training courses alternating work and study, which also started their socialization to the working world and led to a job before wave 2. These young people gave up teenage sociability and lost their schoolmates in a fairly extreme way through abrupt change of life. They had relatively extensive networks which underwent a major replacement of ties at the time of their entry into working life. There are seven young people in this category.

Viviane, for example, had a network of 62 mates and friends in wave 1; immediately afterwards, she began working as a sales assistant and her network in wave 2 only included 44 relationships, followed by 28 in wave 3.

- The '*strugglers*': They had smaller networks which were also thoroughly revamped. These young people were often confronted by unemployment and the women focused on their home and family life. In this case, early entry into adulthood was accompanied by an overall limitation of sociability. The difference here had to do with much smaller numbers: not many people remained in the end. Noémie is one of the five young people in this category. She went

through a work integration course, worked as a child-minder, then in an old people's home for some months and then remained unemployed. She quickly settled in a couple after leaving Normandy for Paris and now has two children. Her network went down from 19 to 9 relationships, and further down to 4 (without family).

Even if the networks of these relatively disadvantaged young people are often replenished by family ties (when they are taken into account Noémie gets to 14 relationships), they remain much more limited than those of young people with more schooling and more comfortable family backgrounds. In any case, these are young people who went quickly through the stages of entry into adult life, who 'grew up' very fast. Some of them already had a steady love relationship and had moved in together at the time of the second wave of the survey.

#### 1.2. Increase followed by decrease in the number of relationships: a later passage to adult life.

In this category, the networks initially show an increase in numbers and then a decrease. If the social classes are fairly equally represented among the fifteen young people in this case, there is clearly a majority of young women (11 out of 15) and students coming from academic education (10). But once again we find two different profiles, closely linked to the social situation.

- *University and then the shock of work.* For eleven of these young people, the transition to the working world only took place after a period at university following the *baccalauréat*. During these studies between the first two survey waves, they maintained a kind of 'teenage' sociability, typical of young students: large groups of friends also including former high school classmates, multiple activities, frequent encounters. Besides, between waves 1 and 2, many of them left their homes to live alone or share an apartment with friends, thus

experimenting with the freedom of independent housing. The networks increased through the accumulation of all their old and new ties. This was the case above all for those coming from the middle (3) or upper (5) classes, which are known for being able to combine more lasting ties over time with a greater ability to make new ones.<sup>2</sup>

Thus we see an initial expansion of networks during university days, followed by a decrease. Indeed between waves 2 and 3, all these young people started to work. The transition to the working world comes later as well as the drop in network members. At that time, they massively gave up their friends from high school and university and adopted the more limited form of sociability of workers, as those in the former category had done before them. We also find here a very clear effect of entry into working life, which has simply been postponed. For the majority in this category, settling in as a couple happens in the same period as the transition to work.

- *Small networks and withdrawal.* These situations are characteristic of much smaller networks, namely those of the four lower-class young people with the least education, for whom the increase in wave 2 was due to one or two relationships which account for the difference: very fleeting ties coming from an odd job or neighbourhood acquaintance or a friend of their husband's, and have more to do with circumstance than choice. In wave 3, these ties are less willingly recalled and some have been broken off by conflicts. It is above all the attitude in terms of openness to others that has changed. This is the case, for example, with Vanessa, a former trainee who gave up the idea of working in order to raise her children at the time of wave 2 and whose network went from 6 to 11 ties and then down to 10.

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<sup>2</sup> As François Héran (1988) remarks on this point, "Capital goes to capital."



### 1.3 - Decrease in relationships followed by increase: “hard times” and their outcomes

A large number of networks (32 altogether) underwent an initial decline in the first period, with the number of members rising again in the second period. This increase is various: in certain cases, the numbers just stop declining and level off; in others, the recovery is more pronounced and finally there are some for whom the increase is considerable and surpasses the numbers of wave 1. Here again, several profiles can be singled out.

- *A period of hardships followed by a positive outcome.* This is the case with the trajectories of twenty-eight young people of different social origins, educational backgrounds and genders. In all cases, however, the respondents entered adult life during the first period.

Some had a job as early as wave 2, lived in couples and had children. Most of them had left Normandy where they were living at the beginning of the survey, in order to take up a job in distant regions where they knew nobody and so were cut off from their friends and acquaintances. These moves, combined with work and the beginning of conjugal life caused a lot of important relational changes during this period.

For others, this first period was marked at least as much by unemployment as by work, in addition to conjugal and family difficulties (the breaking up of a relationship, single parenthood, caring for an alcoholic parent, etc.). Sometimes health problems were also the source of hardships.

In all of these cases, sociability and network size initially showed a rapid decline. Then, after this period of instability and, for some, of great difficulty, their living conditions improved, often after a turning point in their lives. The number of people in these networks seems to follow this life pattern: in the second period, it stops decreasing, which shows they have resumed social contacts. Difficult situations improve. We see two young women moving back in with the fathers of their children and thus increasing their networks through their

partners' friends. Some finally had a job and become all the more involved in it since they had a hard time finding one. New ties emerge from this intense commitment to work. The 'exiles' also stabilise their new ties with neighbours and leisure friends in their new areas. After a confused and often difficult period in wave 2, subsequently networks are reconstructed on the basis of new stability.

- *The conquest of freedom.* This category includes four cases with much larger networks at the outset. They had an academic education and came from middle-class (2) or upper-class (2) backgrounds.

Moving far from Caen for work often combined with studies, living in students' residence during the week and parents'home during the week-end for some, starting a conjugal life for others, all these situations had also generated a decrease in the number of network members for these young people, although it was proportionally much more limited. In the second period, leaving home completely or breaking a relationship gave them wings. Independant housing and single life enabled them to invite friends over and develop their sociability; some became intensely involved in an occupation which they consider a 'passion'. This work, in combination with leisure activities, therefore caused their network to fill up again. In every case, autonomy, material resources and confidence, but also a fulfilling environment for them, constituted factors permitting a new growth of personal relations.

1.4 - The continuous growth of the network: belated students or courageous social advancement

In this final category, the number of network members rises in both periods. This group includes three young women and four young men, mostly with social sciences

*baccalauréats* (6) and upper-class backgrounds (5). Once again, two types of trajectories seem to emerge in relation to social origins and living conditions.

- *Lengthy studies*. Six young people are still at university or have just left in wave 3. Those who recently entered employment enthusiastically involve themselves in work as well as in relations with colleagues. But for all of them, the friends from the university remain dominant and the nascent work relationships did not counterbalance them.

Single life, moreover, seems characteristic of this kind of trajectory. Some of these young people had no love relationship during this 6-year period of the survey; others had a few fleeting or quite recent affairs at the time of wave 3. Some of them lived with their parents, others lived alone or with roommates.

- *Difficulty in climbing the social ladder*. Here we may single out the trajectory of Rose, who had been working since the end of the training scheme where we had found her at the outset. In her case, employment was above all a way of escaping her social situation as the daughter of Polish immigrants enduring hard family problems. For her, having a job was the priority. She 'slaved away' at the beginning of the period, going from training schemes to undeclared jobs. Her network expanded, however, due to relationships made in her first jobs into which she put a great deal even if they hardly seemed status-enhancing. In wave 3, the new relationships were made mainly at the young workers' residence where Rose lived. Her trajectory demonstrates her will to get somewhere in life and benefit from all the circles she entered, especially in terms of personal relationships. Her network went up from 11 ties in wave 1 to 19 in wave 2 and 29 in wave 3, including 8 stemming from her work context.

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After this rapid picture of the evolutions of the networks and trajectories in each category, we shall now look more closely at the factors we identified, causing the reduction or increase in the number of relationships. The search for the most detailed possible analysis of their combined effects on the forms of sociability leads us to pass rapidly to a more qualitative approach.

## **2 - Factors reducing the networks:**

### 2.1 - The end of studies.

It has been shown that the transition from school to work has a very strong impact on the size of networks: large numbers of peers and classmates disappear at the time of leaving the unified, structuring school environment. Work relations are not at all established in the same way and are far less numerous.

The case of Mélanie offers a good example of this trajectory. Her personal network is the one that decreases most sharply. In 1995, at the time of the first wave of the survey, it included 50 people (outside family); by the second wave in 1998, it had 'fallen' to 28 people; and by the third wave in 2001, it had dropped less sharply to 15 relationships. The most massive decrease lies in the loss of friendly ties between waves 1 and 2. This interval is situated precisely between the moments when Mélanie left high school where she got a vocational *baccalauréat* in 'business and services' and when, after a two-year course alternating work and study, she worked at the Post Office. This is where we found her at the time of the second (and third) interview.

If we examine the composition of her network more closely, we see that the portion made up of school mates declined shortly after graduation: out of the 14 ties which she had in high

school in wave 1, the only one remaining in wave 2 was her childhood friend Stéphanie, whom she had met in primary school. In wave 2, she cited 5 new ties encountered in her later studies. In wave 3, all of these friends from the later studies had in turn disappeared and in the end, the only one remaining from the school and university contexts was her oldest friend, Stéphanie.

Most evolutions of networks follow the pattern illustrated by Mélanie's case. In the largest networks, there are sometimes dozens of high school classmates who disappear just after graduation. There is a wide gap between the worlds of school and work, as Mélanie explains:

*“Over the past three years, my situation here has gotten stable. I see fewer people, I think I've restricted the circle of my friends, not deliberately, but in the right way. Although you say that you'll keep in touch, at that moment, there are people who are important to you but with time, inevitably, they're less so because you don't see them any more. Personally, I feel I've matured, maybe by knowing more things in terms of work and friends alike. What's kind of amazing now is when I see my friends who are still at university and when I see my friends who now work like me: it's funny because the contact isn't the same at all. My friends who work are much more mature and much more ready to prepare, to build something in life, than those who are still at the university.”*

In what she says, we can notice that moving away from the world of studies is accompanied by the adoption of more adult roles, those of the working world where Mélanie has settled well.

The example of Agnès is equally typical of this evolution related to the transition to the world of work, even if she first continued her studies and new classmates initially expanded her network before it declined again. Agnès had cited 106 ties (without family) in wave 1 and 121 in wave 2, but within the latter group, only 17 ties came from wave 1 while

all the others (104) were new. In wave 2, she was living alone in Paris and had just completed a two-year business course. Her love relationships were rather brief and episodic; the essential part of her network at that time was composed of recent acquaintances established in her new life, friends from the course and friends of friends’.

In wave 3, she was working in advertising and living with roommates, still in Paris. Her network dropped from 121 to 65 cited ties. Among these friendly ties, there were 11 from wave 1 which formed a stable core, 19 from wave 2 and 35 which were new to wave 3. The turn-over continued but less radically, especially in terms of new ties (35 compared to 104 in wave 2). We thus notice a slowing down of the new sociability with the establishment of a stable core.

Agnès describes these breaks and replacements in wave 3 as follows:

*“Sophie, Joël, Rémi, Yasmina, Thierry... these are people from the business course. I left the course, everyone went their own way. With the people from the university, it’s the same: each one went off on their own... I think it’s the fact that they stayed at university while I worked and we got completely out of phase. For them, vacation plans meant back-packing. And for me, their nightmarish schemes I used to get a kick out of when I was at university, the day I worked, when I had a vacation, I didn’t want nightmarish schemes any more. And then, afterwards, everyone went their own way.”*

We also find in Agnès’s experience the gap between the student sphere and the world of work which affects forms of leisure activities... and other patterns:

*“They’re not people I see now, they’re all married with children, they went their own way. I think that most of them met girls I didn’t especially feel close to. They adopted a style that wasn’t mine... And it’s the same with the ones who disappear: it’s because our lives take different paths.”*

Social distances grow. As she enters adulthood, Agnès increasingly selects people like her and rejects others: those who are married, who have children or who have a liking for cars are no

longer part of her “little world”. Homophily shows its strength as a key factor structuring sociability (Verbrugge 1977; Fischer 1982; Marsden 1988; Maisonneuve & Lamy 1993).

Here we can distinguish between three kinds of relationships: a stable core of friends from childhood and high school which resists life events and network changes; a larger but more labile (Ferrand 1989; Morgan, Neal, Carder 1996) pool of friends from university who provided sizeable contingents in wave 2 - but most of them are not cited in wave 3; and finally, the present ties, which are more homogeneous - mostly related to work - but far less numerous.

It is important to single out two complementary but different movements here: the end of studies produces above all the abrupt disappearance of large numbers of ties. Once they leave the relatively closed world of the high school or university, these friendships are not maintained individually; the relationships have not acquired the ability to resist the disappearance of this ‘required’ meeting context (Allan 1979). The entry into the more heterogeneous world of work causes a transformation of the way of ‘making ties’.

## 2.2 - Entry into employment

With the entry into a working world which is more divided, differentiated and hierarchical, young people learn to ‘sort out’ the people who most resemble them (Bidart & Pellissier 2002). This was the case for Agnès, as we have seen, as well as for Samuel, who followed a similar path:

*“I think it’s the fact of growing older, becoming a little more mature, marking another passage, going from high school to university, and to another world, to work, I’ve entered working life. That was something extreme. Myself, I was working, and for them, work... They would look down on me while the friends I have now, they’re people who resemble me a lot.”*

The passage from the world of high school and university to the world of work is a shock which affects their networks and friendships. This was also the case for Jean, who described in wave 3 the very difficult conditions of his experience in sales working for a brand of drinks, a job which he had just left:

*“In fact, I wound up there, I’d just graduated, I was persuaded I could become a great salesman, that I could sell the Eiffel Tower and then sell it again a second time. And then I realised it wasn’t so simple... In fact, it was a crazy job, the pace was unbearable... Because already, I didn’t see anyone any more. I saw absolutely no one. Already because I didn’t have time, I was working seven days a week... I think that I had to react in that kind of framework.”*

So Jean reacted: he went to live in Rodez [a small town in the southwest] with his partner and changed his cell-phone number, thus radically breaking away from his former life. His network, which had gone from 21 to 33 ties, fell to 24 relationships, only 2 of which were maintained from wave 2.

### 2.3 - Geographical mobility

Some of these young people underwent considerable geographical mobility: Elodie followed her parents to Boston, François went to Oslo. For them, however, the network increased in wave 2 because of the number of new contacts at university and in the odd jobs they held there. Elodie’s network went up from 26 to 32 ties, François’ from 31 to 39. Other students followed the same path and immediately made friends in Paris or a region other than their own. At university, even far from home, it is easy to make new friends, especially for those coming from the upper classes. But most of them saw their relationships diminish as soon as they started to work, which turned out to be most disturbing for them.

For the young people who go away in order to work, by contrast, the uprooting led to a restriction of the network. When Joseph moved to Lyons in wave 2, for example, his network



went down from 29 to 21 ties. His school mates, his friends from leisure activities and from his village, did not 'survive' this move. In wave 3, Joseph was still in Lyons and he rebuilt a network, which in fact rose to 40 ties, well beyond the number in wave 1, from which he kept only 3 relationships. His new ties stemmed in particular from leisure activities and work. His new job marked a sharp difference and he became heavily involved in it, but also played soccer.

*"It was above all the work context which brought me... I knew a fair number of people at work, and from soccer too, so that enlarged my field of buddies. In Lyons, with the friends I made, I met others and that expanded even more... In fact, the work I had before didn't interest me at all any more and the work I found, in addition, is kind of my sector, my area of training, and in addition, I feel very good. I'm at ease. Even in terms of relations with co-workers, it's completely different. I feel very good."*

The work of reconstructing their network turns out to be more laborious and longer than for students. But the well-being is clearly linked to the increase in sociability, and a positive investment in work counts a great deal.

#### 2.4 – Going into a relationship

The process of starting work is often combined with that of beginning a relationship, even if this process becomes longer and longer (Galland 1990, 2001; Lagrange 1999; Le Gall & Pellissier 2001; Maillochon 2001, 2003; Pellissier 2002). First they experience fleeting affairs and then start dating without living together. They move in together later. We may see the latest step greatly limits sociability (Wellman & al. 1997; Loitron 2001, Kalmijn 2003). The evolution occurs in two phases: at the time of the romantic encounter and the beginning of the relationship, friends are pooled and thus increase the couple's stock of ties (Milardo 1982; Berger 1988) , but when they begin to live together on a daily basis, sociability

becomes more limited and concentrated on the home consequently (Wellman and Wellman, 1992). The network diminishes and even more with the birth of a child.

Emeline, who, like Agnès, left Caen for Paris to study in wave 2 and then entered working life between waves 2 and 3, also began living with Frédéric during this period. She expresses quite clearly the consequences of these changes in terms of sociability:

*“[Question: What do you think of the changes in your relationships over the last three years?]*

*The family bubble is identical. The big polytechnic bubble has completely disappeared... And then, that work thing that didn't exist is really there. It hasn't taken a phenomenal place but it has come nonetheless. And three years ago, I still cited the old friends from High School and now, the break is final, that's clear. And obviously, the rowing group has also completely disappeared... I am rather likely to reduce things, to burn bridges rather than try to keep in touch. And I know, in any case, that I've focused on Frédéric. What I've built with him, other things have suffered as a result, I know, it's not surprising... So I'm already in a kind of humdrum situation, very 'cozy couple'. When we give each other loving looks, we tell ourselves, 'Oh, w've got each other and it's all we need.' Yeah, that's great, but in practice, well ...*

*And the quality of my relationship with Fred means that it was much easier for me to eliminate the kind of superficial relationships I had with certain people. In other words, when, three years ago, it didn't bother me to spend time here and there with people who were, all things considered, very different from me and with whom I had a very superficial relationship: we would go for drinks, smoke, making a few jokes about living in couples or more... I've eliminated those superficial relationships to spend more serious time with Fred, to do more serious things. I've pulled back on one side to reinvest myself on the other. So Frédéric in fact may have played a part in the pruning of my social tree.*

*[Q: Do you see other events which could have had an influence on the evolution of your relationships?] The transition from student life to the working world. I don't spend my days in the classroom any more with fellow students who have the same profile as me. I've completely left the school hours behind, I'm in a 9-to-5 daily routine. Whereas before, I was still something of an idler at university. So obviously, the fact of spending your days with other people in a lecture hall, inevitably you all do the same thing, so it's not hard to find subjects of conversation. Even so, I haven't replaced all my fellow students by co-workers. With the job I have, it turns out that I'm fairly alone all day long on the road, so there hasn't been any compensation."*

Indeed, Emeline's network, which had gone up from 66 to 78 relationships, fell to 38 ties in wave 3, since she started working and living with Frédéric.

## 2.5 - Family life and focusing on the home

The birth of children can also have a considerable impact on this already limited sociability (Bott 1971), and the size of the network declines even more. Nadège, for example, had abandoned her high school friends in wave 2 and 'adopted' her partner's band of soccer friends, going to matches with them, having them over for dinner and so on. In wave 3, she stabilised her work situation but above all, had a child, which very sharply limited her social activities, even with the soccer friends.

*"[Q: Have certain events in your life affected the evolution of your relationships?]*

*To begin with, finding a steady job... And then the birth of Chloé, it's clear. Work and childbirth, those are really the two big things that have happened. Just for Chloé, we did the baby swimming thing at the pool; that's a new activity and it keeps us from doing lots of other things, roller skating, cycling, going to the movies. That's the main thing."*

Some young men qualify themselves as doting fathers as well. Etienne, who has a vocational *baccalauréat*, worked at the outset as a silkscreen printer, then as an electromechanical engineer. He lives with Christelle and had his first child before the second survey wave. His network went from 20 to 15 ties in that first period but Etienne faces this restriction on his sociability with great serenity:

*“I don’t know, I’m calmer, we have a quieter life than three years ago. Before, we were scattered all over the place, partying this way and that... But I don’t miss it at all. My daughter is all the happiness in the world... We don’t live for ourselves anymore, we live for her. We live at her pace...”*

For the young women who don’t work, this reorientation is even clearer. In this case, there is no real entry into employment but the renouncement of work does not prevent this estrangement from former circles and friends.

## 2.6 - Changing modes of sociability

The passage to adult life bears upon the changing pools of relationships but also the ways of establishing bonds with others. Besides the life thresholds and their direct or indirect effects, there are also the consequences of living conditions on the movements of the network. In times of hardships, in dark periods, the network is likely to be reduced and sociability limited to a few close ties as selectivity wins out over the carefree outings in groups and openness to others.

Thus Joël, encountered in wave 1 in a work integration program and who was mainly faced with odd jobs and unemployment in wave 2, had become a seasonal bar waiter in wave 3. He remained single.

Joël had 18 friendships in wave 1, 13 in wave 2 and 16 in wave 3. For him, we notice a slow, steady replenishment of the network, always dominated by the ties of the moment. In wave 2 Joël was aware of the connection between the changes in his network and those in his life, but he also linked them to his ‘vision of things’, which had become darker than before:

*“It’s changed a lot, you know, I’ve kind of renewed [my ties], I have relationships which are more or less over, you know, and then I’ve created a few new relationships. And then also maybe because of the evolution of everyone’s lives, you know, the fact that they’re in couples, that they have their own apartment, that they have this and that, you know, you grow up so you change your vision of things... [Q: In what sense?] Probably because I see life a little less rosy than before, probably darker but, maybe that’s more realistic also you know... Myself, I change and then there are people who either haven’t changed at all or changed but not in the same direction as me, so obviously we’re not compatible any more...”*

In wave 3, Joël followed what he formerly evoked as a maturing process and now justifies the limiting of his sociability and his sensitivity to social differences from a more personal point of view: it is his way of looking at the relationships which has changed.

*“Everybody has grown up, has matured, so maybe I’m less trusting, so I’m less likely to go towards the others, I’m more distrustful. There’s a reason, we’re not the same... I’d rather have a circle that’s more closed but, in terms of feelings, more intense, more real, rather than have dozens of friends, the style where you go to a discothèque and say hello to half of the people there without really knowing them, and pretending they’re all my buddies when I don’t really know them. And without knowing what kind of hassle there will be with them the next day, or wondering what fate was in store for me.”*

This evolution from a collective sociability towards a more selective one is a very widespread trend and it contributes to reducing the number of members in the networks

(Bidart 1997). Here, we are also dealing with a behaviour of distrust and withdrawal more characteristic of disadvantaged populations.

In all of these movements, whether because of the transition from school to work or because of a withdrawal into a very tiny world, we notice a massive disappearance of older ties. They are not replaced to the extent that, in the meantime, other more cautious or restrictive constraints or behaviours prevent the opening up to other spheres of social interaction. Socialization seems to entail a limitation of their circles. Strong ties win out over weak ones and resist better over time (Perlman & Duck 1987; Duck 1991; Blieszner & Adams 1992). We also find the procedure of 'sorting out' in favour of those who are similar which accompanies the entry into working life and the adoption of adult roles.

### **3 - Factors increasing the networks:**

Conversely, other life processes can help increase the numbers of network members over time. In some cases, this is mainly due to the postponement of the thresholds which cause them to diminish and to the prolongation of 'youthful' sociability.

#### 3.1 - Remaining in single student life

Even in wave 3, some young people were still students and maintained quite 'open' forms of sociability which favour group life and the growth of friendship networks. Denis for example was still a law student, lived with his parents and had only a few brief romantic relationships. His network went up from 12 to 29 ties in wave 2, then to 39 in wave 3. The portion stemming from leisure activities also showed a regular increase.

*“I still have two completely different groups which don’t mix with each other: one from the university and the other from leisure activities. I’ve changed because I go out much more now. Since I’ve been friends with Yann, you know, we’re always seeing each other, doing things. I can’t care less about studying. I think it’s kind of related to that... Still play as much ping-pong, I’m still in my club but now we see each other outside of the club all the time.”*

### 3.2 - Investment in a long-awaited job

While entry into working life constitutes a shock for certain young people and causes the network to diminish radically, for others access to work, at last, provides a breath of fresh air and opens new possibilities for personal relationships<sup>3</sup>. Katia, encountered in wave 1 in a job-entry training scheme, went back to school, obtained a job at the time of wave 2 and was now working in a residence for mentally disabled persons. She had been living with her partner Martine since wave 1; in wave 3 they had just bought a house together. For Katia, work represented an enormous opportunity, a happy ending to a very difficult childhood and great moral investment:

*“If I compare to three years ago, I think there’s been a lot of change in the relationship with fellow workers. I’ve focused on a job, I’ve been working in the same place for three years now. For me, the job is so important that I don’t have the right to make a mistake, I don’t have the right not to think about my job. Maybe it’s also me who’s changed, who manages to get on more with people too. You’ll see that a lot of my relationships have to do with work. I’m more ready to accept a friendship, I’m more open to that, maybe it frightens me less. I’m more ready to communicate with others, to accept others too, and to have confidence, above all... At the same time, the older I get, the more I move towards a much more stable life too.*

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<sup>3</sup> This relation between involvement in work and relationships with colleagues has been explored at a macro-level by Ruan, Freeman, & al, 1997.

*There was the purchase of the house. It's super important in our life, in the way we can evolve."*

Here too we find the hardships and lack of confidence which in the past contributed to limiting sociability. In this case, however, they are 'repaired' by the commitment to work, by satisfying work relationships and emotional and material stability. More generally, when hard times are followed by happy ending, we see a decline then a growth of the network (Burt 1987).

### 3.3 - The conquest of freedom

Sometimes the process of investment in personal relationships goes through a period of seeking greater autonomy with regard to some ties that limited sociability. In this sense, the fact of leaving one's parents or spouse can encourage the development of networks of friends.

Nina, who was still a student in wave 3, had just left her partner Sofian. Quite happy with her newly found freedom, she increased her outings and leisure activities beyond what she had experienced in her couple. In this first period, her network had declined from 24 to 12 relationships; it rose again to 25 relationships in wave 3 in spite of the disappearance of the couple's shared friends:

*"I have gained more and more independence. It's because of the break with Sofian that I've seen my female friends more, the ones I used to see less. I wouldn't see my group of friends in Caen so much if I were still with him, that's for sure. And I can say that I go out more. Before, we did go out, but I go out even more. It's true that when you're a group of friends, and when most of you are single, you go out a lot. When you're all alone, you have more time for your friends."*

The withdrawal into the couple that Emeline talked about above can thus be reversed in the case of a separation and return to single life, at least for young people who are relatively



'privileged' like Nina. Young people who are less advantaged, on the contrary, often find themselves incapable of resuming youthful sociability abandoned too long ago.

### **Conclusion:**

Through this inductive approach, we have identified certain recurring features in life events and social categories that are likely to act upon the evolutions of personal networks. The qualitative study has complemented the analysis of these interactions:

- Leaving the structured, homogeneous world of school produces a massive loss of 'contextual' relationships which can partly be assimilated to the 'weak ties' typical of young people's forms of sociability.
- The entry into the world of work encourages a general transformation of sociability towards greater selectivity, which favours homogeneity: one prefers maintaining intensive relationships with the 'same as oneself'. The number of network members declines again, with less value accorded to the weak ties. For the most disadvantaged young people, however, the job permits greater social life and sociability that, conversely, can produce an increase in the network. This is also the case for those who passionately invest themselves in an occupation.
- The beginning of a romantic relationship initially favours the addition of new ties shared with the partner. However, when the couple comes to live under the same roof, the overall level of sociability drops. Conversely, a break-up can favour the resurgence of richer sociability. The birth of children, which tends to occur earlier in more modest households, contributes to the decrease in the size of the network.
- Geographical mobility first produces a significant decline in the number of network members but over time new ties are created in the new environment. For students arriving at university, this drop in the network is brief and limited. Those coming from upper-class

backgrounds, moreover, show an ability to replenish their network rapidly in spite of the successive moves.

Certain macro-social patterns, and the differences in social status in particular, 'resist' and impose themselves at the very heart of the individual trajectories and explanations in terms of life events. They have an impact on the ways individuals live these events both subjectively and objectively. Indeed, there seem to be events which, according to the initial conditions, serve to 'open' or 'close': for young students in favourable situations, starting to work 'closes' the world of personal relationships, while for disadvantaged young people, it 'opens' the social world. Forming a couple 'closes' the network, separation 're-opens' it, but for an isolated single mother, the fact of reconstituting a couple 're-opens' the world. The initial social conditions and the prior stages thus provide different meaning and effects to life events.

Even so, we cannot simply equate the number of ties and social circles to a social advantage in terms of resources. Ties which are less numerous but qualitatively richer in forceful ideas, 'new worlds' to share or emotional support, as well as ties which are more available or giving, are likely to bring the individual as much as a great number of ties, even diversified ones (Granovetter 1982; Wellman & Wortley 1990; Degenne & al. 1991). In this respect, selectivity in personal relationships is not necessarily a catastrophe. From our point of view, the quality of the ties and the individual characteristics are reintroduced (Ferrand, Mounier, Degenne, 1999), along with the structure of the networks, in the production of what is called (unfortunately in a too restrictive way) 'social capital'.

It is perhaps also necessary to distinguish, within the events we are discussing, between, on the one hand, the thresholds which mark crossroads and transitions from one state to another (student to worker, single person to spouse, etc.) and which generally produce a kind of 'break' in the network; and on the other, their consequences in terms of life

transformations and the adoption of a new social situation, which are then likely to open new sources of personal relationships - at least in certain conditions (creating relationships in a work environment when one is positively involved, making friends abroad when one is studying there, etc.). After these 'breaks', it is possible to single out life contexts which, to a greater or lesser degree, favour the creation of new interfaces with the social environment. These contexts do not simply serve as meeting places. They mark diverse systems of references which orient the very way people consider their place in and commitment to society.

## Appendix

### The longitudinal survey

*‘Sociability and social integration: Processes of entry into adult life,  
transition to work and evolution of social networks’*

This on-going qualitative survey is conducted among a panel of young people originally living in the Caen area in Normandy. We interviewed them on the eve of an important stage in their lives, namely graduation from high school (marked by the *baccalauréat* exam) or the end of a training scheme.

The survey population was selected on the basis of two criteria: educational type of training and gender. In 1995, a first wave of interviews were conducted with 87 young people; one third of them were in their last year of high school in the economics and social sciences section (*‘ES’ baccalauréat*); one third were in vocational high school (vocational *baccalauréat*); and one third, less-educated, were in a job-entry scheme. There was approximately an equal number of males and females in each group. Three years later, in 1998, 73 of them were interviewed a second time. After another three years, in 2001, 66 of these young people again took part in the survey.

During the first wave, they were between 17 and 23 years old. Three years later, some were still students, some were working, some were unemployed or in other situations. After three more years, as they continued to move towards adulthood, some still lived with their parents, others lived alone or in couples, some had children. In each instance, we re-interviewed them where they were living at the time.

The personal networks were reconstituted on the basis of a series of questions related to the various life contexts addressed (studies, work, leisure activities, family, neighbours, etc.),

which operate as “name generators”. Respondents would be asked, for example, “In your work, have you met people whom you know a little better, with whom you speak a little more?” A list of first names was established and the sociographic characteristics of these different partners were collected. The strong ties were identified in function of their multiplexity and the importance attributed to them by the respondent. In this way, we have attempted to reconstruct the broadest possible network taking into account the whole of the ties maintained in all spheres of life. This procedure was followed by in-depth qualitative interviews, in which personal and relational changes were discussed at length.

We have thus pursued the study of the transition processes in terms of the problematics defining this research project from its beginnings: the study of interactions between the different spheres of life in the construction of young people’s trajectories, the analysis of their personal networks as factors of socialization and the diachronic dimension of their progression towards adult life.

This survey was carried out by Claire Bidart, Alain Degenne, Daniel Lavenue, Didier Le Gall, Lise Mounier and Anne Pellissier. It is being conducted in the framework of cooperation between LEST, LASMAS-IdL and LASAR, three joint CNRS-University research laboratories. Its main funding came from the Calvados Department of Social Services (DDASS), the Inter-Ministerial Department for the integration of Youth into the Labour Market (Ministry of Employment and Solidarity) and France Télécom R&D.

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