

Editorial

## Family in Challenging Circumstances: Ways of Coping

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### Abstract

The aim of the thematic issue *Family Supportive Networks and Practices in Vulnerable Contexts* is to provide a cross-national perspective on the current state of caregiving and support practices within family networks in Europe. The articles featured in this volume were selected from among the presentations made in 2021 at two conferences promoted by the research network Sociology of Families and Intimate Lives of the European Sociological Association (ESA RN13). Authors of the most promising, topical, and up-to-date research papers were invited to contribute to this thematic issue.

### Keywords

family functioning; international perspective; networks; practices; vulnerability

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Family Supportive Networks and Practices in Vulnerable Contexts” edited by Jacques-Antoine Gauthier (University of Lausanne) and Vida Česnuitytė (Mykolas Romeris University).

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### 1. Introduction

In response to the challenging circumstances produced by the current and ongoing political, economic, health, and environmental uncertainties, contemporary families are increasingly at risk of vulnerability. In the framework of this thematic issue, vulnerability is defined not only as a characteristic of a person or a group that relates to precariousness or indigence but also as a process that generates stress and loss of resources in addition to challenges of various degrees in the coping strategies of those concerned (Spini et al., 2017). Facing vulnerability potentially has an influence at the micro, meso, and macro systemic levels as well as on many, if not all, life domains (e.g., work, education, family, residence, health). These range from interpersonal relationships, conjugal and parental stability, and family–work reconciliation to migration, fertility, and life expectancy partly as the consequences of the interactions with the institutions of the state welfare system. Moreover, the fact that these life domains are largely interdependent tends to amplify the consequences of vulnerability (Bernardi

et al., 2019). Eventually, vulnerability can also influence the family by challenging its conceptualization and boundaries, as well as its members’ specific roles and practices (Sarkisian, 2006).

One of the central functions of the family is to provide care and support to its members. However, stressful events occurring in the life course may strengthen or weaken social ties, networking dynamics, and division of tasks and, therefore, transform family practices regarding material and emotional support. Moreover, the organization of childcare and elderly care largely depends on the availability of dedicated institutional structures and targeted social policies. Their absence may cause overload and/or loneliness (Widmer & Spini, 2017). Caregiving also depends on the availability and commitment of close network members. When individuals face adverse circumstances, they may need the support of not only their kin but also their non-kin to help them cope with the situation. Last but not least, these contextual uncertainties have an impact on gender roles and hence on practices regarding the household division of tasks and caregiving between men and women.

## 2. Contributions

In total, ten original articles by authors from nine countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland) were collected. The empirical results they offer stem from both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies and instruments. The content of this thematic issue is organized into two main parts: (a) family supportive networks and (b) family practices in vulnerable contexts. To ensure the quality of the contributions, all articles went through a double-blind review process.

### 2.1. Family Supportive Networks

Małgorzata Sikorska documents the tensions existing between the everyday family practices and representations that parents have of an ideal child (Sikorska, 2023). Based on a series of interviews, the results reveal that parental expectations regarding the human quality of their children may be reduced to two dimensions characterized by the opposition between independence and obedience on the one hand and between egoism and empathy on the other hand. For this author, the shift from a socialist democracy to a liberal democracy is associated with the coexistence of conservative and progressive values and practices that may have an influence on social norms, meanings, and discourses on parenthood and childhood.

Marcela Petrová Kafková explores the relationships among biographical events, the intensity of social relationships in later life, and subjective feelings of loneliness and solitude (Kafková, 2023). Results indicate that with considerable gender differences, the main reasons for feelings of loneliness in the elderly are the loss of a life partner and unsatisfactory relationships with close family members. In addition, the author notes that the social networks of lifelong singles and childless people are smaller and more diverse and are associated with more negative feelings compared to other individuals.

Irma Budginaitė-Mačkinė and Irena Juozeliūnienė turn their attention toward caregiving practices in families in which their members live on both sides of the state borders (Budginaitė-Mačkinė & Juozeliūnienė, 2023). Mass migration in Lithuania has contributed to making such situations increasingly frequent. While scientific attention has been given so far to the intergenerational caregiving triangle, intragenerational care practices remain underexplored. The authors claim that the type of relationships providing care and support to migrant families' members remains "overlooked." Findings suggest that cross-border family practices create new patterns of family relationships characterized by an "intimate, but different" type of solidarity.

Donatella Bramanti focuses on the transition of vulnerable individuals to old age to develop and implement new community networks of care in Italy (Bramanti,

2023). The representations of seniority are considered in relation to the intergenerational dialogue occurring in the care-based dyad as well as in the informal and formal networks in which elderly people are integrated. These depictions are closely connected with the quality and intensity of relationships, especially when facing stressful events.

Finally, Judit Monostori examines the factors underlying the prevalence and characteristics of living configurations in Hungary (Monostori, 2023). Results indicate that factors such as parents' lower level of education and single parenthood are becoming increasingly relevant to predict the likelihood to live in three-generation households while the influence of living in rural areas is gradually declining. At present, coresidence is more frequent among socially disadvantaged and poorer individuals and is strongly linked with the transition to parenthood of young adults living with their parents.

### 2.2. Family Practices in Vulnerable Contexts

Begoña Elizalde-San Miguel, Vicente Díaz Gandasegui, and María T. Sanz analyze the capability of family policies to reverse the sharp decline in fertility that has been observed in Spain in recent decades (Elizalde-San Miguel et al., 2023). Results demonstrate that family policies alone, even if they are in line with gender and social equality values, are not sufficient. The authors claim that to reach their objectives regarding fertility, public policies must adequately integrate family, employment, and educational policies to match the complex set of mechanisms and values associated with a satisfactory work-life balance.

Thomas Eichhorn, Simone Schüller, Hannah Sinja Steinberg, and Claudia Zerle-Elsässer investigate the changes in the family climate during the first Covid-19-related lockdown in Germany (Eichhorn et al., 2023). The concept of family climate helps in assessing the level of cohesion, regulation, conflicts, and emotional closeness within the family. Findings suggest that half of the respondents reported a deterioration in their family climate. This is, in particular, the case for mothers doing more than 80% of the chores and childcare as well as for adolescents at risk of poverty and not or rarely involved in family activities. However, the authors observed systematic and substantial differences between the mothers' and the adolescents' perceptions toward changes in the family climate and hence underline the relevance of distinguishing between the perspective of children and parents in family studies.

Beáta Dávid, Boglárka Herke, Éva Huszti, Gergely Tóth, Emese Túry-Angyal, and Fruzsina Albert explore the impacts of the first Covid-19-related lockdown on the Hungarian adult population (Dávid et al., 2023). Findings show that social isolation increased during this critical period. The authors also evidence a restructuring process of the respondents' social relationships in which a proportion of their kin ties (especially those involving

children) increased whereas that of their non-kin ties (in particular, friendships) decreased. This is associated with a rise in the emotional intensity and time devoted to interpersonal communications and a decrease in the frequency of face-to-face meetings. Older individuals were the most affected by this change in sociability patterns.

Ronny König and Bettina Isengard aim at linking specific patterns of communication with objective and subjective loneliness before and after the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (König & Isengard, 2023). Results based on data from 26 European countries show that electronic communication was often the dominant medium used to maintain relationships. Moreover, multivariate analyses evidence that online communication cannot substitute face-to-face interaction and may even potentially increase feelings of loneliness, especially in older adults.

Finally, Alenka Švab and Tanja Oblak Črnič focus on how the dynamics of family relationships changed in relation to the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (Švab & Oblak Črnič, 2023). Authors use the notion of “forced nuclearization” to show that some family practices and routines intensified during this period as a consequence of the closure of schools and teleworking, in particular regarding domestic chores, childcare, and work–family balance. Globally, this contributes to an increased asymmetry in the gendered division of labor and a greater workload for women. Comparable patterns of change are observed between the first and the second lockdown, although they were less marked in the latter as new routines and behaviors were already established during the former.

### 3. Conclusions

This thematic issue firstly provides an up-to-date perspective on family functioning in situations of stress with limited resources. Second, it presents original empirical findings based on innovative theoretical approaches and methodologies. Third, it offers an all-important international perspective on this complex, multi-dimensional, and multi-level issue that social vulnerability represents.

The editors and contributors hope that the thematic issue will be a valuable tool for researchers, teachers, students, practitioners, and all others whose interests are related to the phenomena and processes presented in the volume.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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