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**The Relational Self, the Social Bond and
the Dynamics of Personal Relationships**

A Sociological Analysis

Kaisa Ketokivi

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In memory of my beloved Mother, Grandmother
and little dog Mimi
– all of whom I lost during this research.

For Mikko, whose love and presence have been vital.

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Esipuhe

Tieni sosiologian alan väitöskirjatyön pariin on ollut onnekaalla tavalla monien ihmisten viitoittama. Teoreettisen filosofian perusopiskelijana vietin kaksi vuotta Yhdysvalloissa Minnesotan yliopistossa vuosina 1998–2000. Kaipuuni maailman kyseenalaistamattomaan olemassaoloon oli tuossa vaiheessa jo huomattava. Tuolloin vastaanani sattui kaksi ihmistä, jotka houkuttivat minut sosiologian pariin. Ensinnäkin osallistuin professori William Brusteinin sosiologian klassikkoluennoille, jotka ovat olleet tähän astisten aikojeni parhaita. Toiseksi, tapasin sattuman oikusta Minnesotan yliopistossa tulevan ohjaajani Riitta Jallinojan, joka luennoi vierailevana professorina perhesosiologiasta. Kurssin ympärille syntyi innostunut pieni porukka, jonka perjantaiset tapaamiset luennon jälkeen olivat virkistäviä ja mielenkiintoisia. Riitta tarjosi asiaansa paneutuneena, innostuneena ja eleganttina akateemisena naisena oivallisen samastumiskohteen ja korjasi minut kannustuksellaan sosiologian piiriin. Tein perhesosiologisen graduni Riitan ohjauksessa, minkä jälkeen jatkoin hänen ohjauksessaan Suomen Akatemian rahoittamissa tutkimusprojekteissa ”Perheen murros” (2003–2005) ja ”Läheissuhteet sosiaalisina siteinä” (2005–2007).

Oli etuoikeus päästä Riitan paneutuneeseen ja innostuneeseen ohjaukseen. Riitta ajoi minut sisään akateemiseen maailmaan ja on pitänyt puoliani omia vaivojaan säästämättä. Hän on lukenut lukemattomia versioita erilaisista esitelmistä ja käsikirjoituksista näiden seitsemän vuoden aikana – usein lyhyellä varoitusajalla – ja on kommentoinnissa aina tarkkanäköisesti kohdistanut huomion oleelliseen ja käyttänyt siihen kaiken tarvittavan ajan. Olen käyttänyt oppilaan asemaani sumeilematta vaivaamalla Riittaa isoilla ja pienillä asioilla – etu, jota jään suuresti kaipaamaan. Omaehtoista ajattelua arvostavana ihmisenä ja tutkijana kiitän Riittaa myös suvaitsevaisuudesta tieteellistä debattia, erilaisuutta ja erimielisyyttäkin kohtaan. Lopuksi kiitän esteettisestä ja seurallisesta luksuksesta, josta olen vuosien varrella saanut nauttia Riitan herkullisten ruokien äärellä hänen kauniissa kodissaan ja purjeveneellään.

Kustokseni Risto Alapuro kommentoi työtäni sen viimeistelyvaiheessa. Olen kiitollinen hänelle paitsi kustoksen tehtävien vastaanottamisesta, myös vilpittömästä mielenkiinnosta ajatteluani kohtaan. Oli tärkeää saada kannustavia kommentteja työn loppuvaiheessa hyvin toisenlaisesta suunnasta. Esitarkastajiani Kimmo Jokista ja Stephanie Lawleria haluan kiittää osuvista huomioista, joiden kehu ja rakentava kritiikki olivat molemmat paikallaan. Helsingin yliopiston Sosiaalitieteiden laitosta (joksi Sosiologian laitos väitöskirjan esitarkastusvaiheessa muuttui) kiitän työtiloista ja taloudellisesta tuesta väitöskirjan painatukseen ja kielenhuoltoon sekä hyvästä työympäristöstä, jossa on ollut tilaa olla omanlaisensa ja silti osallinen niin tutkijana kuin ihmisenäkin. Tutkimukseni rahoittamisesta kiitän Suomen Akatemiaa, Emil Aaltosen Säätiötä sekä Alfred Kordelinin Säätiötä.

Olen tehnyt osin yksinäistä tutkimustyötäni lukuisten ihmisten kanssa keskustellen ja erilaisiin seminaareihin osallistuen. Työni kotipaikka on ollut Riitta Jallinojan tutkimusryhmä, johon ovat eri aikoina kuuluneet Anna-Maija ”Annu”

Castrén, Jaana Maksimainen, Heini Martiskainen de Koenigswarter, Riitta Högbacka, Kirsti Suoranta, Ella Sihvonen, Juhani Suonpää ja Anna Kokko. Ryhmän ilmapiiri on ollut innostunut ja vapaamuotoinen. Ryhmässä olen paitsi tavannut erityisen mielenkiintoisia ihmisiä myös saanut nauttia älyllisestä innosta ja erilaisten näkökulmien hedelmöittävästä vuoropuhelusta. Kiitos teille kaikille hyvistä kommentteista ja keskusteluista! Tutkimusryhmästä haluan lisäksi kiittää erikseen Annua, Jaanaa, Heiniä ja Riitta H:ta. Annusta tuli työn loppupuolella sen toinen ohjaaja. Annun relationaalinen ajattelu, into ja pyyteetön panos nuoremman kollegan työhön vaikuttivat merkittävästi tutkimusotteen muotoutumiseen alusta alkaen. Annua haluan kiittää paneutuneen kommentoinnin lisäksi myös lukuisista minulle merkittävistä akateemisista ja elämänfilosofisista keskusteluista, kannustuksesta ja ystävyydestä. Jaana on ollut tärkeä rinnalla kulkija ja luottoystävä koko väitöskirjaprosessin ajan. Tutkimuksen ajanjakso on henkilökohtaisessa elämässäni pitänyt sisällään vastoinkäymisiä, joiden kohdalla tietoisuus juuri Jaanan läsnäolosta laitoksella piti minut usein työkykyisenä silloinkin, kun en muuten olisi sitä ollut. Kiitän Jaanaa aina terävistä näkökulmista työhöni ja sosiologisesta jakamisesta, mutta myös hersyvän tarttuvasta naurusta sekä aivan poikkeuksellisesta välittämisestä, jonka varassa olen niin monia hetkiä saanut levätä. Heinin kanssa olen sen sijaan puhunut enemmän sosiologiaa vapaa-aikanani kuin kenenkään toisen. Heiniä kiitän luovista ja tarkkanäköisistä huomioista työhöni, mutta myös aina inspiroivista keskusteluista, joita punaviinilasillisen äärellä olemme Suomi-Ranska välillä sekä puhelimitse että kasvokkain käyneet. Riitta H:ta kiitän vielä tuesta ja jakamisesta vuosien varrella.

Työtäni on sen eri vaiheissa kommentoinut lukuisa määrä sosiologian laitoksen kollegoja. Olen kaikille kiittollinen, mutta erityisesti haluan edellisten lisäksi kiittää Mianna Meskusta rakentavasta ja haastavasta kritiikistä, Marja-Liisa ”Maisa” Honkasaloa oman ajatteluni vahvistamisesta sekä Kirsi ”Kite” Erärantaa paneutuneista huomioista yhteenvedon sisältöön ja esitystapaan. Miannaa kiitän lisäksi rinnalla kulkemisesta sekä elämän kauneuden ja kauheuden vilpittömästä jakamisesta. Maisaa kiitän vielä lämpimästä kannustuksesta ja akateemisesta tuesta. Anssi Peräkylää kiitän tärkeistä keskusteluista tärkeillä hetkillä sekä henkisestä ja akateemisesta tuesta. Maaria Linkoa kiitän vuosien lämpimästä huone- ja ”naistoveruudesta”. Katja ”Keiju” Yesilovaa, Kirsi Erärantaa, Eeva Luhtakalliota, Liisa Voutilaista ja Netta Mäkeä kiitän mainiosta seurasta ja tärkeästä vertaisuudesta vuosien varrella. Arto Noroa, Ilka Haarnia ja Antti Gronowia kiitän edellisten lisäksi kirjojen lainasta.

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Haastattelin tätä tutkimusta varten 37 ihmistä, joiden henkilökohtaisista tarinoista ja läheissuhteiden kokoonpanoista tutkimusaineistoni koostuu. Kaikki suunnittelemani näkökulmat eivät mahtuneet tähän työhön, mutta jatkan työskentelyä aineiston parissa vastaisuudessakin. Lämmin kiitos tarinoidenne jakamisesta! Lisäksi haluan ilmaista, miten syvästi vaikuttanut olen siitä, miten ihmiset kestävät ja rakentavat elämää erilaisten pienten ja suurten haavojen kanssa.

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Väitöskirjatyölläni on myös ollut monenkirjava ”kotirintamansa”, jonka taustatuki ja ymmärrys on paitsi tehnyt vuosien paneutumisen mahdolliseksi myös antanut elämään mieltä ja turvallisuutta. Ensiksi haluan kiittää vanhempiani Maisa Hlavačekia ja Simo Kuurnetta lapsuudenkodista, jonka avoimessa ilmapiirissä kasvoin kulkemaan omia polkujani, uskaltamaan ja uskomaan omiin kykyihini, mutta myös pelkäämättä kohtaamaan monenlaisia ihmisiä. Väitöskirjaprosessin aikana syöpään sairastunutta ja menehtynyttä äitiäni, Maisaa, kiitän lisäksi periksiantamattomuuden opista, rakastavasta huolenpidosta sekä juurevasta viisaudesta, jota kohti on hyvä mennä. Isääni Simoa kiitän henkisestä ja konkreettisesta tuesta ja rakastavasta läsnäolosta, jota on sekä väitöskirjapaineissa että oman elämän kolhuissa ollut tarpeen mukaan saatavilla. Sisaruksiani Maija Kuurnetta, Saara Johanssonia ja Pekka Kuurnetta sekä heidän puolisoitaan Petri Huttusta, Tuukka Johanssonia ja Miia Kuurnetta kiitän merkityksellisen elämän jakamisesta. Isäpuoltani Milos Hlavačekia kiitän väitöskirjatyön rinnalla kulkeneen, minulle tärkeän toisen hankkeen ”puutaloprojektimme” edistämisestä, kuten myös appeani Heikki Junttilaa, joka on tarvittaessa antanut myös hätäapua. Anoppiani Riitta Niskasta kiitän lämmöstä, jota ovat symboloineet ne lukuisat villasukat, jotka jalassa olen työtäni tehnyt. ”Pakanakummejeni” Kaija ja Pieter van Ooikia kiitän lepopaikasta ja huolenpidosta silloin, kun olen ollut uupunut. ”Amerikan äitiä ja isää” Sheree ja Dale Kesleriä kiitän elämämme jakamisesta ja välittämisestä.

Monenkirjavan perheyhteisön lisäksi monilla ystävillä on ollut tärkeä paikka tutkijantyöni tukena. Outi Manteretta, Saku Manteretta, Pamela Kaskista ja Anu Tuomista kiitän rinnalla kulkemisesta ja läsnäolosta näinä elämäni aika hurjina vuosina. Outia kiitän lisäksi akateemisen elämän ilojen ja taakkojen jakamisesta. Kaikille muille ystäväilleni haluan ilmaista vilpittömän kiitoksen siitä, että olette.

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Kaisa Ketokivi

Prologue

Many people have influenced and encouraged me along my path to becoming a doctoral candidate in sociology. It all began in 1998–2000 when I spent two years at the University of Minnesota as a student of philosophy. My longing to understand the unquestioned existence of world was already strong when I was fortunate enough to meet two people who introduced me to sociology. I first participated in a lecture series on the classics of sociology given by Professor William Brustein. Those lectures stand among the best that I have ever heard. He talked about each classic of sociology with such an enthusiasm that I was simply drawn to learn more. Second, as a lucky coincidence, I met my future advisor, Riitta Jallinoja, who gave a lecture series on family sociology as a visiting professor. A small circle of inspired people in the course began to go out on Fridays after class to socialize. Riitta was a learned, enthusiastic and elegant female academician, an excellent model to identify myself with. It was her encouraging comments that finalized my choice of sociology. She acted as my advisor as I wrote my Master's thesis and later supervised my work in two research projects as a doctoral student: 'Family in Transition' (2003–2005) and 'Intimate relationships as social bonds' (2005–2007), both funded by the Academy of Finland.

It was a privilege to be advised by Riitta, who is always focused and inspired. She introduced the academic world to me and protected my interests without sparing herself. She has read numerous versions of different presentations, drafts and manuscripts over the years on short notice and has given her time generously to comment and encourage me to focus on the essential. I have taken full advantage of my position as Riitta's advisee and bothered her with both trivial and important issues – a prerogative I shall greatly miss. As someone who always wants to think things through for herself, I also have to thank Riitta for her tolerance when it came to scientific debate, diversity and even disagreements. Finally I thank Riitta for the aesthetic and sociable luxury she has offered me over the years, cooking gourmet food in her beautiful home and sailing boat.

Risto Alapuro, the Custos of the final dissertation defence, was kind enough to comment on my work in its final phase. I am grateful to him for not only accepting the formal duties of the Custos, but also for his sincere interest in my work. It was very important to test my ideas by receiving comments from another perspective. My pre-examiners Kimmo Jokinen and Stephanie Lawler must be thanked for their positive and critical comments, all of which were pertinent. I am grateful to The Department of Social Research (into which the Department of Sociology was incorporated in the final stage of the thesis) for offering me a community, an office space, and financial support for the language revision and the publication of this work. The sociology community has been an excellent environment to work in, one where I have felt welcome to contribute in my own idiom. I thank the Academy of Finland, the Emil Aaltonen Foundation and The Alfred Kordelin Foundation for funding my research.

My work has transpired as a dialogue, with several people and groups participating in various seminars, but my research home has always been Riitta's group. Over the years it has consisted of Anna-Maija "Annu" Castrén, Heini Martiskainen de Koenigswarter, Jaana Maksimainen, Riitta Högbäck, Kirsti Suoranta, Ella Sihvonen Juhani Suonpää and Anna Kokko. The atmosphere in the group has been inspired and casual. I have not only met extraordinarily interesting people, but have also enjoyed the intellectual spirit and dialogue on family and social relationships. I thank you all for your useful comments to my work and for all the interesting discussions we have had over the years. In addition, I want to add special thanks to Annu, Jaana, Heini and Riitta (H.). Annu became the co-adviser of this thesis during the last year of the research. This was only fair, owing to all the help she had given me in my work since the very beginning. Her relational thinking and altruistic support had a great impact on the formulation of my research focus. I thank Annu for her detailed and thoughtful comments, for our many academic and philosophical discussions, and for her encouragement and friendship that has meant a lot to me. Jaana has been an important 'fellow traveller' and trusted friend from the beginning. I confronted several trials in my personal life while conducting this research, and at the worst of times it was Jaana's presence at the department that enhanced my ability to work. I thank Jaana for her keen comments on my work and sociological sharing, but also for her famous laugh and her exceptional nurturing that I have been lucky to receive. I have talked more about sociology in my leisure time with Heini than with anyone else. Heini deserves thanks for her creative and focused comments on my work, but also for the inspiring discussions that we have had over the Finland-France phone line and face-to-face, typically over a glass of wine. Riitta H. I thank for her support and sharing.

Several other colleagues have contributed to my work and well-being over the years. They all deserve thanks, but special thanks for commenting on different parts of my dissertation go to Mianna Meskus for her constructive and challenging criticism, to Marja-Liisa "Maisa" Honkasalo for strengthening my own voice and to Kirsi "Kite" Eräranta for her focused comments on the content and the presentation of the summary. In addition I thank Mianna for her companionship and sincere sharing of the beauty and the tragic of life. Maisa deserves additional thanks for her warm encouragement and academic support. Anssi Peräkylä I thank for important discussions, personal and academic support. Maaria Linko I thank for the warm female companionship we have had as office-mates for years. Katja "Keiju" Yesilova, Kirsi Eräranta, Eeva Luhtakallio, Liisa Voutilainen and Netta Mäki I thank for your spirited company and important contributions as sounding boards. Arto Noro, Ilka Haarni and Antti Gronow I thank for loaning important literature.

I thank Riitta Jallinoja, Anna Bagnoli, Eric Widmer and Anna-Maija Castrén for rewarding and successful co-operation in relation to the publishing of the sub-studies. For good seminar practice at the doctoral seminars, I thank Riitta Jallinoja, Risto Eräsaari and Arto Noro and the fellow doctoral students. I also thank the study group of narrative research on illness held by Ullamaija Seppälä during the first

years of my research and the Goffman study group that Antti Maunu started – both of which proved beneficial.

Research visits abroad have served as an important ground for new thoughts in different phases of the research process. I thank Fiona Williams for the invitation to University of Leeds UK at the CAVA-research program in 2006, and Anna Bagnoli and Sasha Roseneil for our stimulating discussions during the same visit. In addition I thank Anna for her companionship and co-operation and Sasha for her support in later stages of the research. I want to thank Carol Smart for her invitation to the Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life at the University of Manchester UK (2006). Eric Widmer I thank for the invitation to the PAVIE-centre of the Universities of Lausanne and Geneve (2009). I am grateful to Marlène Sapin for her spirited company in Lausanne and to David Morgan for his pleasant sociability at conferences and for his encouragement in my academic pursuits.

I interviewed 37 people for this study. The data consists of their personal narratives and configurations of personal relationships. There was no way this study could hold all of the fascinating conclusions and perspectives that I have gathered in this process, but rest assured, I will continue to use the material in my future research. Thank you so much for sharing your stories! I also want to mention how impressed I am by how these brave people constructed their lives through life's travails. I thank Ari Kylänpää for helping me to seek out interviewees, Tarja Jaakola for her careful transcription work, and Joonas Tuhkuri for his assistance with the thesis presentation. My father's partner, Erja Saarinen, is to be thanked for her gift of skilled layout work, my aunt Katri Kuurne for her drawing on the cover pictures and Hemmo Hytönen for his gift of photography. Pamela Kaskinen I thank for her thorough language revision of the dissertation, which in part was given as a gift.

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when I have been worn out. My ‘American parents’ Sheree and Dale Kesler I thank for sharing our life and showing that they care.

In addition to my diverse and loving family, several friends have played an important supportive role as I have pursued my research. Outi Mantere, Saku Mantere, Pamela Kaskinen and Anu Tuominen must be thanked for their companionship and presence during these intense years of my life. In addition I thank Outi for sharing the pleasures and burdens of academic life. All of my other friends, I sincerely thank you for ‘being there’.

Life is made up of the moments we cherish. It is with enormous thankfulness and longing that I remember our little dog Mimi, my fluffy-eared research assistant snoring at my side, who was taken by a sudden illness as this thesis work reached its end. It was hard to think of research conundrums as I followed Mimi’s bouncing little fan of a tail down the street. A big thank you also goes to my young nieces, Evelina and Elina Kuurne and Aliisa Johansson, with whom I have enjoyed many lovely moments.

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Life as we know it is not possible in a vacuum, without other people. Neither is science. Let this long prologue, written both in Tapanila, Helsinki and the beautiful gardens of Madeira in April 2010, serve as a testament of relationality and sharing – something that my personal losses and the stress of completing this research has made all the more precious to me.

Kaisa Ketokivi

Tiivistelmä

Tutkimus käsittelee läheissuhteita empiirisen analyysin ja sosiologisen teorian risteyskohdassa. Erityisesti siteisyyttä tarkastellaan relationaalisen itseyden (the relational self) ja sosiaalisen siteen (the social bond) kysymysten näkökulmista. Tutkimus pyrkii ymmärtämään, miten ihmiset ja heidän itseytensä ovat kiinnittyneitä heille tärkeisiin läheisiin. Erityisesti analyysi keskittyy tarkastelemaan relationaalisuutta elämää murtavien tapahtumien ja kokemusten (kuten menetysten) kohdalla, jossa läheissuhteet järjestyvät uudelleen. Tutkimuksessa kysytään, ketkä muodostavat läheisten ihmisten kokoonpanon, miten eri siteet reagoivat elämän murtumiin ja minkälaisia relationaalisia prosesseja niistä käynnistyy. Miten ihmiset ovat sidoksissa läheissuhteisiin ja miten tämä näkyy yhtäältä suhteiden dynamiikassa ja toisaalta itseyden tai minuuden (the self) relationaalisessa luonteessa? Siteitä analysoidaan läheissuhteiden kategorioiden, kuten ”perhe” tai ”ystävyyks”, sijasta anti-kategorisesta näkökulmasta niinä erityisinä suhteina, jotka tutkimuksen haastateltavat ovat nimenneet tärkeiksi.

Suhdekategorioiden empiiristä merkitystä tarkastellaan analysoimalla nimettyjen suhteiden sekä erityisiä että ”kategorisia” eroja ja yhtäläisyyksiä. Tutkimus perustuu kahden tutkimusperinteen yhdistämiseen, jossa eri tason aineistot ja analyysitavat asetetaan dialogiin keskenään. Yhtäältä tarkastellaan 37 suomalaisen naisen ja miehen henkilökohtaisia tarinoita, jotka perustuvat yhteensä 80 haastatteluun. Toisaalta analysoidaan kaikkien läheissuhteiden kokoonpanoa, joka muodostuu niistä tietyistä henkilöistä, jotka haastateltavat ovat nimenneet heille ”läheisiksi tai muuten tärkeiksi” henkilöiksi. Analyysissa tarkastellaan yhtäältä subjektiivisia kokemuksia ja merkityksellisyyden ilmaisuja tarinoissa. Toisaalta analysoidaan aktuaalisia relationaalisia prosesseja ja läheissuhteiden muuntuvia kokoonpanoja sekä mikrotason historiallinen että rakenteellinen dynamiikka huomioiden. Henkilökohtaiset tarinat ymmärretään osana relationaalisia prosesseja, joissa myöhempien vaiheiden toiminta ja tulkinnat rakentuvat aiempien vaiheiden varassa itse haastattelutilanne mukaan lukien.

Tutkimus sisältää neljä empiiristä osatutkimusta läheissuhteista sekä yhteenvedon, jossa käydään syvemmin keskustelua osatutkimusten analyysista, erityisesti suhteessa sosiaalisen itseyden (the social self) ja sosiaalisen siteen keskusteluihin. Diskussio ammentaa erityisesti G. H. Meadin, C. Cooleyn, N. Elias, T. Scheffin, G. Simmelin ja ”relationaalisen sosiologian” näkökulmista. Ensimmäisessä osatutkimuksessa analysoidaan sitä, miten elämäntarinan odottamaton murtuminen esimerkiksi puolison menetyksen tai muun odottamattoman tapahtuman seurauksena haavoittaa itseä, uudelleen järjestää läheisiä suhteita ja niiden siteisyyttä. Siinä eritellään erilaisia siteisyyden muotoja ja niiden yhteyksiä suhdekategorioiden, joista perhesiteet ja kohtalotoveruus ilmenevät kaikkein yhdenmukaisimpina tai ”kategorisimpina” suhteina. Osatutkimuksissa II ja III tarkastellaan juuri näitä siteitä tarkemmin. Osatutkimuksessa II tarkastellaan perhesiteiden perustavia piirteitä vanhempien ja aikuisten lasten vieraantuneiden suhteiden ja sosiaaliseen uusintamiseen liittyvien pettymysten näkökulmista.

Osatutkimus esittää, että perhesiteisiin liittyy yleisiä sosiaalisia odotuksia, joita ei voida tyhjentää suhteiden persoonakohtaisuuteen. Osatutkimus III erittelee ”kohtalotoverien” välistä sidettä ja sen persoonakohtaisia seurauksia vertaistuen kontekstissa ja esittää, että tuen persoonakohtaiset seuraukset liittyvät siihen, miten ihminen on kiinnittynyt (aktuaaliseen) suhteeseen. Osatutkimuksessa IV analysoidaan kaikkien lähimpien suhteiden kokoonpanoa ja erityisesti sitä, miten puolisoside läsnäollessaan tuottaa eksklusiivisen läheisyysrakenteen ja poissa ollessaan joko inklusiivisen tai eristyneen läheisyysrakenteen. Myös sitä tarkastellaan, miten jotkut ihmiset käyttävät toimijuutta ja rakentavat vaihtoehtoisia läheisyysrakenteita. Kaikki osatutkimukset analysoivat eri näkökulmista ja eri konteksteissa sosiaalisen ja persoonakohtaisen välistä dialektiikkaa ja kysyvät, miten sosiaalinen side syntyy toisaalta sosiaalisen säätelyn ja rakenteiden, toisaalta persoonakohtaisten kokemusten ja neuvottelujen prosesseissa.

Tutkimustuloksia tarkastellaan sosiologisen teorian valossa. Tulokset erittelevät siteiden kiinnittyneisyyttä eri konteksteissa (social settings), kuten lapsuuden perhe, aikuisiän perhe tai vertaistuki. Sosiaalisen siteen kysymyksen näkökulmasta identifioidaan seitsemän ”polttopistettä”, joissa syntyy sosiologisen analyysin kannalta mielenkiintoisia prosesseja. Läheissuhteiden kontekstissa seuraavissa polttopisteissä purkautuu sosiaalisen ja persoonakohtaisen välinen jännite: 1) sosiaalinen konteksti, joka säätelee yksittäisiä suhteita, 2) siteen yleinen versus erityinen perusta, 3) elämäkerralliset ja relationaaliset tapahtumat, 4) siteiden subjektiivisuus ja epäsymmetria, 5) siteisyyden ja individuaalisuuden välinen dynamiikka, 6) siteisyyden tila sekä 7) siteiden ankkuroituminen osaksi laajempia suhdemuodostelmia. Siirtymänä yleisestä sosiaalisen itseyden (the social self) teoriasta, tutkimus erittelee tätä spesifimpää relationaalista itseyttä (”itseyttä suhteissa toisiin”) ja esittää, että sekä siteisyyden että individuaalisuuden dynamiikka on tärkeää relationaalisen itseyden muodostumisessa. Siteisyys ja individuaalisuus esitetään relationaalisten prosessien toisiinsa kytkeytyvinä vaiheina, jotka syntyvät suhteessa toisiinsa.

Individuaalisuus tuottaa tämän tutkimuksen kontekstissa muun muassa aktiivisen yhteenliittymisen, kontrastin ja eriyttämisen dynamiikkoja. Tarkemmin ottaen relationaalisen itsen individuaalisuus ilmenee osana relationaalisia prosesseja kolmessa muodossa: erityisen itseyden kokemuksena (subjektiivisten kokemusten vaalimisen myötä), toimijuutena sekä autonomian tavoitteluna. Epilogissa pohditaan tutkimusteemojen yhteiskunnallista merkitystä ja ”yksilöllisyyden” ristiriitaisuutta sosiaalisen ontologian ja eletyn relationaalisuuden näkökulmista.

Abstract

This study analyses personal relationships linking empirical research and literature to sociological theory on the questions of the social bond and on the self as social. From the viewpoint of disruptive life events and experiences, such as loss and illness, it aims at understanding how selves are bound to their significant others as those specific people ‘close or otherwise important’ to them. Who form the configurations of significant others? How do different bonds respond in disruptions and how do these relational processes unfold? How are selves embedded in their significant relationships and how is this manifested in the processes of bonding, on the one hand, and in the relational character of the self, on the other? The bonds are analyzed from an anti-categorical viewpoint based on personal citations of significance of the research subjects as opposed to certain given relationship categories, such as ‘family’ or friendship’. The status of relationship categories is addressed via the analysis of particular differences and consistencies of the bonds within and across different categories.

The study draws from dialectical analysis of the personal narratives of 37 Finnish women and men (in all 80 interviews) and their entire configurations of significant others as those specific people who are ‘close or otherwise important’ to them. The analysis stresses the subjective experiences and definitions of significance in the personal narratives, while also investigating the actualized relational processes and configurations of all personal relationships with certain relationship histories embedded in micro-level structures. Personal narratives are understood as parts of the relational processes with different phases, including the one of narration. Earlier phases are seen to contribute to the unfolding of new phases in which new interpretations and actions are generated. This became apparent in repeated in-depth interviews that each generated further reflections discussed in the following ones.

The research is composed of four empirical sub-studies of personal relationships and a summary discussing their analyses in light of the questions of the social self and social bond. Discussion draws mainly from G. H. Mead, C. Cooley, N. Elias, T. Scheff, G. Simmel and the contributors of ‘relational sociology’. Sub-study I analyses biographical disruption, such as loss of a loved one, and the ways in which it wounds the self, reconfigures significant others and bonding with them. It elaborates different forms of bonding and their interconnectedness to relationship categories identifying family bonds and bonds with fellow sufferers as the most consistent. Sub-studies II and III further analyze these bonds. Sub-study II examines the peculiarity of the family bond via the analysis of estranged bonds between parents and their grown children and failed social reproduction expectations. It suggests family bonds involving such social expectations that cannot be reduced to the personal. Sub-study III elaborates the bond between suffering selves and their fellow sufferers and the various personal consequences of the bond in the context of peer support. It proposes that the state of the actualized bond is an important feature of the consequences on the selves. Sub-study IV investigates the configuration of the most intimate relationships and the ways in which (co-resident) partnership acts as

an ordering principle producing exclusive intimacies when present, and inclusive or isolated intimacies when absent. It also examines the ways in which people exercise agency in constructing alternative intimacies. Although the sub-studies approach the issue from different viewpoints and in different settings, all of the analyses examine the dialectics of the social and the personal, asking how different structuring mechanisms and personal experiences and negotiations together contribute to the unfolding of the bonds.

Discussion links research to sociological theory. The findings elaborate the embeddedness of bonds in different social settings. Through identifying seven focal points of bonds, ones in which something sociologically interesting unfolds, the question of the social bond is analysed. In the context of contemporary personal relationships the study proposes that 1) social setting, 2) general versus particular bases of relationships, 3) biographical and relational events, 4) subjectivity and asymmetry of bonds, 5) dynamics between bonding and individuality, 6) state of the bond, and 7) embeddedness of bonds in wider configurations are focal points in which tension between the social and the personal emerge. Finally as a shift from general relationality of the social self, the study discusses the particular relationality of the relational self (self in relations). It proposes that the dynamics of both bonding and individuality are significant in the formation of the relational self. Bonding and individuality are suggested to be interdependent phases of relational processes arising from one another. In the context of the study, individuality is manifested, for example, in connecting, contrasting and differentiating dynamics. More specifically, individuality of the relational self appears in three formats in the flux of relational processes: as a sense of unique self (via cultivation of subjective experiences), as agency and as (a search for) autonomy. The study includes an epilogue addressing the ambivalence between the social ontology of individuality in society and the relational reality of relational selves.

List of original publications

This thesis is based on the following publications:

- I Ketokivi, Kaisa (2008) 'The Biographical Disruption, the Wounded Self and the Reconfiguration of Significant Others'. In Widmer, Eric & Jallinoja, Riitta (eds.) *Beyond the Nuclear Family: Families in a Configurational Perspective*. Bern: Peter Lang. Pp. 255–277.
- II Ketokivi, Kaisa (2009) 'Torjuttu autonomia: lapsuudenperheen vieraantuneet siteet ja aikuisten lasten vaihtoehtoiset elämänpolut.' ['Rejected autonomy. Estranged family bonds and alternative life paths of grown children'] In Jallinoja, Riitta (ed.) *Vieras perheessä*. [*Stranger in the Family*] Helsinki: Gaudeamus Helsinki University Press. Pp. 32–62. (translated into English by Pamela Kaskinen)
- III Ketokivi, Kaisa (2009) 'Sharing the same fate. The social bond between the self and fellow sufferers in the context of peer support'. *European Societies* 11(3): 391–410.
- IV Ketokivi, Kaisa (to be re-submitted to *Sociology*) 'Partnership and the relational dynamics of intimate relationships' (8000 words)

1 Introduction

Who do we count on in times of need? How are we bound to these others? How are our selves formed in relation to these people? These are the central questions of my study. Such questions have been posed in various fields of science for decades, appearing in sociology, social psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology and philosophy. In this study the preceding questions are analysed in both the context of lived personal relationships and the sociological understanding of the social bond on the one hand, and the self on the other. Questions about the bond and self are submitted to open-ended empirical scrutiny and expressed as a dialogue relying on personal narratives and configurations of interdependencies between people. My intention here is to look at familiar issues – personal relationships, disruptive events and selves – in ways that link research and theory. I seek to bridge the ‘uneasy’ gap between theoretical and empirical research (Mason 2006: 14) and contribute to both of these areas of inquiry.

Few researchers in the field of personal relationships have investigated the sociological theories of the social bond or self.¹ Until very recently, discussions concerning personal relationships have tended to be fragmented into the separate research fields of family and marriage, alternative intimacies, friendship and kinship. Any theorizing on personal relationships has been more likely to appear in the context of social change and individualization (e.g. Giddens 1991; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Jamiesson 1998; Smart & Neale 1999; Budgeon & Roseneil 2004), or, more recently, in analysis of the concept of relationality (Smart 2007; Mason 2004; Roseneil 2009). This study takes up the question of the relationality of personal life, with theoretical questions on *the social bond* and *the self (as relational)* which can be regarded as general sociological issues. I consider here the significance people give to their important others, such as families, friends and relatives, with the primary emphasis focused on these two questions, as opposed to the more specific frameworks of family sociology, friendship or kinship studies.

Framing my research interest in this way is a response to some of the suggestions made within the field, especially by British family sociologists. After several decades of studying family life, the distinguished British sociologist David Morgan (2002) suggested that family – which is often viewed as the most specific of all personal relationships – should simply be studied as a subset of social life in general, rather than as an unique entity that differs in quality from other forms of social life. Based on their studies of intimacy and care outside conventional family life, Sasha Roseneil and Shelley Budgeon (2004) argue that a ‘queering of the social’ is taking place. They claim that ways of life alternative to family-centred ‘heterorelativity’ are now becoming more widespread. They challenge the social imaginary to

¹ Giddens (1991) is the exception with his theory of personal relationships as pure relationships. The pure relationship as a model for contemporary close relationships has been one of the central claims of the individualization theory, yet one that few researchers in the area of personal life have commented on.

generate alternative means for understanding bonding in personal relationships (ibid.). Finally, in a similar vein, Carol Smart (2007: 29) has recently proposed a new ‘appropriately neutral’ framework of personal life for the study of all personal relationships. This new idea of personal life does not prioritize ‘the family’ or biological or marital bonds. It allows more conceptual space for different kinds of relational lives and is intended as a shift away from ‘the family’ to ‘a broader sphere of social and emotional (inter)relationships’. (Ibid.)

This study of personal relationships features a research design drawn from several sociological and philosophical themes. My scholarly roots originated in family sociology and an interest in social theory, on the one hand, and philosophy and a phenomenological interest in the embeddedness of ‘being’ and the ontology of categories, on the other. During the research process I was loosely guided by these roots while simultaneously drawing insight from other fields of inquiry, such as ‘relational sociology’ (e.g. Emirbayer 1997; Mische, *forthcoming*; Elias 1978), sociological phenomenology (Schutz 1932), symbolic interactionism and pragmatism (Cooley 1967; Mead 1934; Kilpinen 2008). While these contributions may seem eclectic at first, they each have a common factor. All these traditions address the question of relationality from the viewpoint of processes or particular instances of social life (as opposed to categorical ones). I have drawn theoretical insight from these traditions in my empirical study and searched for a balance between reconciliation of the basic premises of these perspectives and their insightfulness and usefulness in analysis.

My research approaches personal relationships as *particular* relationships that are personally significant to the subjects of the study, not categorizations proposed by the researcher or some institutional criteria. This means that bonds examined in this paper are not explained in terms of their social variables, like age or gender, or are they presented with regard to their relationship categories (like ‘family’, ‘kinship’, ‘friendship’ or ‘peer group’). Rather relationships are examined as open-ended processes of bonding between people embedded in specific social settings. As categorizations of people and relationships exist both in people’s understanding of the world and in wider cultural expectations regarding personal relationships, those categories in the analysis that appear most *effective* in the world – generating certain kind of dynamics in particular personal lives – are considered most. I do not however try to envision an ‘objective’ world beyond particular people, but am committed to the analysis of the specific relational lives of the research subjects (from their viewpoint) in which their experiences, narratives and explicit relational processes are all ‘real’. My stance is perhaps best described as ‘relational realism’, in which whatever generates new processes and actions is considered ‘real’ (see more on my epistemological commitments in ‘Methodology and analysis’).

By ‘personal relationships’ I refer specifically to all those personally significant relationships that the research subjects cited as ‘close or otherwise important’ to them. In the sample these included all kinds of family relationships, friends, and often some kin, but perhaps surprisingly also ‘fellow sufferers’ – others sharing the same fate. During the long research process the multifaceted research subject

crystallized into the threefold foci of the study – the relational formation of the self, the question of the social bond, and the dynamics of personal relationships.

Sub-study I examines how people as selves confront and are wounded by biographical disruptions such as loss, illness and family disruptions, and how this alters their configurations of significant others and changes the very logic of their significance. Sub-study II focuses on family bonds between parents and grown children, the personal relationship that appeared to be most consistent ones of all the personal relationships cited in Sub-study I. Sub-study II analysed the estranged family relationships that rose from stark differences between social expectation and the actual realities in order to further elaborate on the ‘social’ quality of family bonds. In contrast, Sub-study III analysed those often short-lived relationships subjects founded with fellow sufferers in the context of peer support, and the personal consequences the relations had for the selves in question. The final study, Sub-study IV, analysed configurations of the most intimate bonds that were identified in Sub-study I as ‘constitutive’ to the self. This study utilized the idea of social embeddedness to examine how partnership and the family setting constrain the other social bonds. The summary then uses definite articles to talk about *the social bond* or *the self* when referring to the sociological questions and concepts. When *bonds* or *selves* are discussed in the plural, the reference is to empirical relationships and people. When both the plural and the definite article are used, the summary is referring to specific people and relationships analysed in the study.

An important objective of the study was to link research and theory. This was done in three ways. First, I examine different relationships that are personally significant *as social bonds*. Analytically speaking, the study addresses the nature of bonding between the self and the other in different personal relationships that are illustrative of their dynamic formation. This allows for the elaboration of seven generative focal points that deconstruct and define the contents of the ‘black box’ of the social bond. Second, I analyse the significant bonds as entirities, i.e. *configurations of personal relationships*, to grasp the interconnectedness of relationships. This mapping also allows for the identification of distinctive characteristics which can be understood as relationship categories in action. And finally, the study is an in-depth elaboration of the question of the self as relational. This idea has been discussed in social theory as *the social self*. I have adopted the term *the relational self*, which is at least implicitly present in some empirical studies of personal relationships (Mason 2004; Smart 2007; Roseneil 2009; Widmer et al. 2008), but with no mention of its relation to the theories of the social self. This is a gap that my discussion of the relational self attempts to bridge. An empirically grounded notion of the relational self puts the concept of individual into perspective. I argue that it is not sociologically warranted to use ‘individual’ as a general concept referring to a person (also Smart 2007: 28). Yet, analysis suggests dialectics between the ‘bonded’ side of bonding and something that in the flow of dynamics emerges as a contrast made by the self and appears as ‘individuality’ in that very specific moment and context of relational processes (however relationally formed and contingent and permeated by the social that it may be). My analysis elaborates on

the self as a temporal and contextualized ‘dialogic structure’ (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 974).

This summary proceeds as follows. The following chapter (Chapter 2) illuminates the analytical foundations that have loosely directed the study. Some classic and contemporary discussions on the social bond are then covered, followed by consideration of the choices sociologists have to make when conceptualizing social relationships (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 explains how the studies were conducted. Chapter 5 depicts the sociological logic of the sub-studies and condenses their principle results. Chapter 6 begins the discussion of personal relationships as bonds embedded in social settings. Chapter 7 highlights the empirically grounded, but theoretically relevant dimensions of the social bond. Finally, the conclusion specifies the argument for a better understanding of the relational self.

2 The analytical foundations of the study

An important ambition of my study was to build a strong link between theory and research. My stance comes close to what Derek Layder (1998) has characterized as the ‘adaptive theory approach’. It is an stance that ‘attempts to combine an emphasis on prior theoretical ideas and models which feed into and guide research while at the same time attending to the generation of theory from the ongoing analysis of data’ (ibid. 19). This is exactly what I have done. From very early on, there were four tentative sociological questions that loosely directed the research process and analysis. I call these elements the *analytical foundations* of the study. Over the course of empirical analysis, new themes and questions – such as theories of the social bond – emerged and tentative theoretical, thematic and methodological elements were reformulated into a more specific form. ‘Adaptation’ also meant that some other original ideas were dropped, as they did not resonate with the empirical analysis. Listed below are four analytical foundations that acted as my frame of reference throughout the process.

1. *The self as social* was an important starting point, as the research material was collected at the micro-level of selves and their personal lives. In the course of analysis the question of self became even more important, as the analysis of relationships showed how the very same relationship took on a unique position and significance in each person’s life depending on her or his greater configuration of all relationships. Moreover, the bounded notion of self was challenged by several research subjects, who in drawing relational maps, drew the self and the closest others as overlapping. Such empirical observations directed my gaze to the theoretical question of self and finally to its reformulation.
2. Personal relationships were examined from the perspective of *disruptive life events and experiences*. These events and experiences can accentuate lived interdependencies between people, actualize dormant ones and reconfigure both the configurations of relationships and social selves. This focus was originally utilized as a method to gain access to a transformational relational process, but in the course of analysis it also gained thematic importance.
3. *Significant others* in personal relationships were referred to as *particular people who are personally ‘close or otherwise important’*, without categorizing them at the outset. This meant that the participants were allowed to freely define their significant others and explain how they were significant.
4. *The ‘anti-categorical approach’* further focused on personal narratives, relationships, and their interconnectedness from the viewpoint of actualized dynamics or ‘trans-actions’. It meant understanding ‘relationality’ as something actualized in specific lived relationships and configurations of people which are

more or less bonded and interdependent. This approach also enabled the analysis of the extent to which certain *relationship categories* appear in certain social settings, such as family, and in specific configurations of relationships *in action*.

The following sections will further explicate how the research process was founded and directed by these principles.

2.1 The self as social

I set out to study relationships, not social selves. However, after beginning my analysis of significant relationships and reflecting on the method whereby selves set the criterion for the significance of any given relationship and its place in the larger configuration, I was left with the impression that the configuration of significant others was perhaps a more accurate picture of the self as a social being than the relationships as such. I used the snowball sampling technique to find some of the participants in the study and ended up analyzing the same relationships from the viewpoints of different participants. Although the factual information on the relationships matched, it was not the relationship in a vacuum that was significant. Rather, the very same relationship sometimes appeared entirely different when seen from a different point of view. People rated the same relationship differently in their own configuration of personal relationships (cf. Elias 1978: 137). Hence, the way in which individuals rate and map out relationships in their whole configuration of relationships certainly had something to do with the quality of the relationship, but perhaps even more so with both the social and personal situation of the self. The extent to which people bind themselves to others varies according to several contributing factors, including life situation, biographical history, the configuration of existing relationships and the extent to which a person is companionable or oriented towards others.

My gaze turned to two theoretical foci in the study. The first focus of inquiry became that of the social self. The second became the formation of significant relationships and their configurational logic (Elias 1978). Regarding the self then, I wanted to understand how selves are bound to their significant others in various situations – as open, vulnerable, attuned, closed, estranged, isolated, engulfed, haunted or reserved. How do significant social relationships, with their commitments and dependencies, become constitutive to the self? Although this question is not new, it has not been addressed in depth in sociological research on personal life. I will first review the social history of the notion of self and then discuss the social self as a sociological concept.

2.1.1 On the notion of self

This section will relate the history of the notion of self in Western thought and how it came to be understood as ‘individual’. This is relevant to the study, as the category of individual has been largely accepted and assumed both by society at large and sociology (e.g. Sulkunen 2009: 182–186). Marcel Mauss (1985[1938]) has provided an intriguing sociohistoric account of the notion of self in his essay “A category of human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self”. His account and discussions that have followed in later anthropology provided me with the impetus to look behind the category of the self and consider it an open-ended question.

When writing his essay in 1938, Mauss (1985) believed that the notion of ‘person’ and ‘self’ has ‘slowly developed over many centuries and through numerous vicissitudes, so that even today it is still imprecise, delicate and fragile, one requiring further elaboration’ (ibid. 1). Now, over 70 years later, it still raises several questions, although I do not mean to indicate that either the actual self or the notion of self was ever static. Mauss traces the Western notion of self back to the concept of ‘person’. He examines different cultures in his essay, but I will concentrate on Western societies here. In ancient Rome the notion of person was used to refer to masks that people adopted for public ceremonies. The original meaning was therefore closer to the idea of ‘role’: something one can take in a social setting as a superimposed image. Similar role-playing practices took place in many tribal communities. This was indicated by names given to people, which expressed certain positions with respect to their clan. In the Roman culture, however, the notion of a person acquired legal status, along with certain rights and duties, and became synonymous with ‘the true nature of the individual’. In Rome everyone but slaves had a right to personhood. (Ibid.)

According to Mauss (1985) it was the Stoics whose voluntaristic personal ethics enriched this notion by subsuming a moral character to personhood. It also came to mean ‘a sense of being conscious, independent, autonomous, free and responsible’ (ibid. 18). The Christians finalized the ‘person’ as a rational substance that is indivisible and individual – the category Mauss interpreted in the late 1930s. The person became equated with self. Mauss identifies Kant as the first philosopher and Pietist to raise the question of whether ‘self’ could be a category. Kant made individual consciousness ‘the sacred character’ of the human person and the condition for Practical Reason. The German philosopher Fichte was the one to found the science and action on the category of self. (Ibid.)

Later on in early 1900s the category of self became more specific as it was identified with self-knowledge and the psychological consciousness (ibid.) – as a matter of fact it eerily resembles the contemporary notion of ‘individual’ in the individualization theory proposed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002). Regarding the question of self the central claim of individualization may however be that the individual (self) has become the basic unit of social reproduction, putting more weight on individual biography (Adams 2007: 6; Mauss 1985/1938; see also Burkitt 2008).

Mauss (1985: 22–23) concludes his essay by envisioning how social anthropology, sociology and history will teach us to perceive ‘how human thought ‘moves on’ and slowly succeeds in expressing itself through time, societies, their contacts and metamorphoses’. For him and many other like-minded thinkers, self is essentially awareness and thought, an idea. British anthropologist Janet Carsten (2004) discusses the work of Mauss in her book “After Kinship”. She gives credit to Mauss for showing how the notion of self is formed in particular historical and cultural contexts and connected to prevailing social institutions, such as kinship, property, law and religion. She notes, however, that his insight into the Western notions of person and self are abstract and theoretical, not grounded in an ethnographic (or other empirical) understanding of social practices, as is the case when he speaks about other cultures. Mauss is thus inconsistent in his approach when he takes the Western notion of self as a priori given. Carsten points out that those other general anthropological notions of personhood also reproduce the dichotomy between the Western personhood as bounded and individualistic and the non-Western personhood as one composed of social relations. (Ibid.)

Alexandra Ouroussof (1993) has discussed this question in depth. She examines anthropology critically as a reflection and justification for philosophical liberalism in which the individual is the symbol of a humanity which masters its own destiny. This view is then used as a lens through which anthropologists establish the boundary between Western society and others. Philosophical liberalism is preoccupied with the question of free will. Free will requires the perception of the world through the antinomy of freedom and constraint, including ideas that free us from the constraints of tradition. ‘Individual’ then is an idea that lacks empirical evidence of any real substance. This leads to the question: Why does Western thought accept a version of Western society as composed of ‘individuals’ and derived from utopian fantasies of an intellectual elite without criticism? (Ibid.)

In sociological thought, similar questions have been posed by Norbert Elias (1978: 116–117) who suggested that the concept of individual was one of the most confused concepts in sociology. In his view, the notion of individual conveys the impression of an adult standing ‘quite alone, dependent on nobody, who has never even been a child’. He notes that the concept of individual haunts European languages and implies meaning to ideas such as ‘individuality’ and ‘individualism’. He asks: ‘Where and what is the barrier which separates the human inner self from everything outside, where and what *substance* does it contain?’ (Ibid. 119, emphasis mine) Is it then really warranted to view an individual self as a thing or should we create alternative ways to understand the question of self? We all know that people exist as body-selves that can be characterized as separate from others, but is the concept of ‘individual’ justifiable or accurate as a general sociological lens through which to see something essential about people? Or should it be considered only as a counterpoint or contrast to the social or general processes, something unique or contrasting from them, as Cooley (1957) and Simmel (1950), for instance, appear to do? I believe these questions cannot be solved in one study, but are empirical and should be submitted to empirical analysis. I will continue an empirically informed

discussion on the question of self as bound to others in the later chapters, but will now review some of the theoretical accounts of the self as social.

2.1.2 The social self as a sociological question

In opposition to the Western individualistic notion of the self, in some paradigms the self has been seen as social. Different theories of social selves stress various aspects of the social, as well as various kinds of relationships between ‘individual’ selves and the aspect of social that they discuss (Burkitt 2008; Smith & Sparkes 2008). The literature on the subject is extensive. I discuss here only the ideas of American scholars Charles Cooley (1864–1929) and G. H. Mead (1863–1931) who have been assumed by several different traditions (including pragmatism and symbolic interactionism) as well as scientific fields (including philosophy, sociology and social psychology) as their own. I will not get into these disputes in more detail, instead I consider their theories of the social self to the extent and from perspectives that are relevant to my study.

Charles Cooley was an American economist and sociologist who expanded William James’s idea of self to include its capacity to reflect on its own behaviour. For Cooley (1967[1909]) ‘the self’ simply designates the pronouns of the first person singular, ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’, ‘mine’, and ‘myself’. It is the empirical self he is occupied with – one that can be apprehended. The social self in his thinking is ‘simply an idea or system of ideas drawn from the communicative life that the mind cherishes as its own’ (ibid. 823). Self-feeling has its scope within ‘the general life’² (as opposed to the individual), not outside it. Yet it is precisely by means of self-feeling (‘me as something special’) that personal diversity is achieved, because the emotional aspect finds its principal field of exercise in a world of personal forces. Cooley points out that even in common speech the meaning of ‘I’ as a pronoun refers to other persons (cf. Elias 1978: 122–123). Cooley’s (1967) point is that what we call ‘me’ or ‘mine’ is at the same time general and individual: we call those features ‘mine’ that we want to distinguish as something particular to us, in contrast or opposition to others or something general. ‘My’ or ‘mine’ typically refer to different possessions of the self and are in Cooley’s (1957[1909]: 176) thinking as much names of the self as ‘I’. To display such a contrast or individualistic expression implies and presumes social life and relation to other persons, which means that even contrast that seems individualist does not imply a bounded individual, but rather the relational reality of which the self is a part. (Cooley 1957, 1967.)

Cooley feels that the way others see us builds changes and maintains our self-image. He was particularly interested in self-feelings, because they can be seen as an immediate and decisive sign and proof of the essence of ‘I’. He considered the social self to be a reflected or *looking glass self* that produces self-feelings through being

² Cooley (1957, 1967) uses the qualities ‘general’ and ‘social’ interchangeably.

seen and evaluated by others. The looking glass self has three principle elements in relation to others: 1) the imagination of our appearance to the other person, 2) the imagination of his judgement of that appearance, and 3) some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. Self-feeling may be regarded as the antithesis or complement of contemplative love, which tends to obliterate the sense of divergent individuality. Contemplative love has no bounds and the self feels expanding and assimilating new indeterminate experiences. In contrast, self-feeling delimits and defends a certain part of experience, individuating it. From this viewpoint, the self can be seen as a citadel of the mind, fortified and containing select treasures. In love relationships, however, each party contributes to the other and when we love intensively or for a long time, we are likely to bring the object of our love within the citadel, and assert it as part of ourselves. Others are hence not just external to the self, but may, in personally intensive relationships, make their way inside it as well. (Cooley 1957, 1967.)

The social self depicted by Cooley (1957, 1967) has *three different relational dynamics* that may take place in the same bonds, although perhaps more typical to some than others. First, *the self adopts the images of herself from others; others work as a reflective mirror that shows the self to herself through the imagined eyes and judgement of others.* The self is tied, to a varying degree, to these images and responds to them with a certain feeling about herself. This mechanism is one between the self and others in general – not specifically significant others. This kind of dynamic was apparent, for example, in the analysis of bonds between the self and ‘fellow sufferers’, preliminarily examined in Sub-study I and examined in depth in Sub-study III. The self adopts the views of the others about herself and in the case of disruptive events seeks more understanding images from the fellow sufferers who ‘know’ what it is like to be in their difficult situation, as opposed to intimates that are often not able to relate to the self at that level. The self’s relationship to herself is hence mediated by others, and the more favourable the others are, the better the self feels about herself.

The second dynamic is related to the particular and intensive bonds of love: we do not protect ourselves from those we love but rather take them within ourselves. Cooley then suggests that intensive emotional bonds obscure self-feeling and demolish the boundary between the self and the other. (Cooley 1957, 1967.) This mechanism is examined as ‘constitutive bonding’ in Sub-study I in which the selves become wounded due to the loss of a constitutive other.

The third dynamic is that of the contrast which appears as ‘individuality’ in the processes of bonding. Cooley proposes that self-feelings like ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’ are applied with a strong sense of their meaning only to things distinguished as particular to us by some sort of opposition or contrast. They always imply social life and relation to other persons. That which is most distinctively mine is very private, it is true, but it is that part of the private ‘which *I am cherishing* in antithesis to the rest of the world, *not the separate but the special*’ (Cooley 1957: 194, emphases mine). Although Cooley’s terms were not utilized in the sub-studies, contrasting dynamics were examined, especially in Sub-study II where I have named the contrast

‘autonomy’. It is important to note that ‘autonomy’ or ‘individuality’ are understood here in Cooley’s sense of relational terms, tied to those very specific relational processes or bonds in which it is displayed and in which such contrasting dynamics repeatedly take place.³

G.H. Mead, Cooley’s contemporary, is one of the best known theorists of the social self. Mead’s (1934) conception of the self is essentially social in its nature: the individual recognizes and formulates the personalities of others before he does his own. Hence, in Mead’s thinking the personality of the self is the result of the organization of that of others. (Cook 1993, 45.) Mead (1934, 158–159) holds that the full development of the self occurs through two stages in childhood. First, in the play stage the child learns to take roles of particular others, and later, in the game stage, the role of ‘the generalized other’ which represents the attitude of the social group as a whole, and requires an understanding of the whole social organization. After this the self becomes fully developed and capable of seeing herself or himself through the eyes of others, reflected from the social point of view. (Ibid.)

Mead (1934) criticizes Cooley’s focus on experiences involving self-feelings, because in his view, it does not account for the origin of the self. He claims that the essence of self is cognitive and ‘lies in the internalized conversation of gestures in terms of which thought or reflection proceeds’. Mead shifts attention away from feelings and maintains that self-consciousness ‘provides the core and primary structure of the self’ (ibid. 173). He accuses Cooley of placing interaction in the imagination of the individual rather than vice versa, which makes his notion of interaction more introspective and internal than it actually is (ibid. 224). In contrast, Mead considers the mind a product of the social process and interaction as primary. He also brings social interaction into the self as an internal conversation.

Mead (1934) understands the social self as an ongoing social process with two analytically distinguishable phases, the ‘I’ and the ‘me’. The ‘I’ is the subject that responds to the present social situation on the basis of past experience, yet there is always an element of unpredictability regarding ‘I’s immediate response. This element of novelty and unpredictability is the same for the self and the other: no one can know the ‘I’ thoroughly. The ‘I’ represents one’s assertion of one’s own creativity and distinctiveness, and through the response of the ‘I’ one gains a critical distance from conventions. On the contrary, the ‘me’ is the social object which is to be reconstructed by the ‘I’, the agent side of the self. ‘Me’ relates to our self-image when we look at ourselves through the eyes of the others. In the ‘me’ we become objects to ourselves, while the ‘I’ is our impulsive response to the social attitudes and, escaping any present moment reflection. The ‘I’ can be reflected by the self only after immediate action as a memory image when in fact the ‘I’ of the past has already become the ‘me’ of the present. The unity of the self is closely related to the

³ Although in the sub-studies I have not always been explicit about the contingency through which I understand ‘individuality’ or ‘autonomy’, I do not mean to propose an asocial self, even in part. I see it as essentially a protective phase in relational dynamics in which for one reason or another, an opposition occurs.

unity of the 'me' that organizes social attitudes and is associated with the 'conventional and habitual' person. (Mead 1934, 174, 197.)

Still, the self is constituted by both the 'I' and the 'me': different aspects of the same (social) process called 'the self'. The 'I' and the 'me' are not entities or substances that could be distinguished like a foot and leg, as da Silva (2007) argues. They are different phases of the same self (Kilpinen 2008) that is in turn a phase of the even larger process of social life. The self does not stand in opposition to the world, but is a part of it. The 'I' in its dialectical relationship with the 'me' is a response by the individual to a social situation which is within the experience of the self. Da Silva (2007:7, 55) points out that by placing social attitudes inside the structure of the self, Mead possesses (the pragmatist) processual view of reality that considers the emergence and development of the self as an intrinsic aspect of the surrounding world. Hence, 'selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves. No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our selves and the selves of the others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of the others exist and enter as such into our experience also.' (Mead 1962: 168) Da Silva suggests that Mead is nothing short of revolutionary in his abandonment of the Cartesian notion of self, implying that there is no such thinking entity called the self that stands in opposition to the outside world. (Da Silva 2007: 54–55.) Mead can hence be seen as opposing the category of the self as individual – as elaborated by Mauss.

Although the notion of the generalized other is much more central to Mead's thinking than the notion of significant others that he touches on only momentarily, I take up this particular notion and address the self in relation to the specific significant other. I consider Mead's notion of self as an open social process (cf. Elias 1978: 120–121) in the specific context of personally significant relationships. I address the dynamics between the 'I' and the 'me' in relation to the particular bonds of the self. Mead addresses the bond between the self and particular others in more detail when discussing the close relationship between the unity of the self and the unity of the social organization to which the self belongs. He says in a lecture given to his students in 1927: 'Failure to remain in a particular group may mean the breakdown of the self. If one is taking advantage of the group, he does not fully belong to the group. But one cannot exist as a self without the universal, the group that makes the self possible'. (Mead 1982 [1927], 163–164: quoted in da Silva 2007, 47) To my knowledge Mead does not examine the bond between the self and 'the particular group' nor does he explain why in some cases the self 'may' break down, while in some others apparently it 'may' not. He seems to leave us with an impression that a superficial bond to the group does not break the self. To understand this, I suggest it is necessary to grasp the bond the particular self has to the particular others or the group, an essentially empirical question. In Sub-study I, such 'breakdowns' are examined via the notion of the wounded self and the close bonds to others during biographical disruption.

Bonds between the selves and their significant others were analysed in an open-ended manner. The social genesis of the self was not considered, but its current or

past significant relationships with others were narrated as an elementary part of the self's own life story. This was also apparent in the relationship dynamics that took place in disruptive life events. Like Cooley, I am more interested in experiences than cognitive reflection or internal conversation. Regarding interaction, my consideration is that it is both imagined like Cooley observed (narrated in the case of this study), but also actual, as Mead surmised, all manifested in the (actualized) relationship dynamics analysed in the sub-studies. Cooley's theory was especially insightful and relevant to my own perspective, as it considered both the protective dynamics of individuality via the concept of self-feeling, and the emotional fusion that may happen between the self and a loved other. Cooley does not, however, provide explicit concepts for the analysis of the ongoing dynamics that take place within the self, as Mead does in his discussion of the two analytically distinguishable phases of the self, the 'I' and the 'me' (even if he borrowed these terms from William James). I am, hence, inspired by both writers and selectively draw insight that best enlightens the lived interdependencies of people in the study and helps in the generation of a more grounded and elaborate theoretical understanding of the question of the self. In Sub-study I, I have applied Mead's notions of the 'I' and the 'me' in the analysis.

In the final chapter I specify the aspect of the social self as *the relational self*, intertwined with others in various kinds of bonds that are configurationally organized. I will also identify how Mead's two phases of the self resonate with my analysis of the relational self. In addition to the empirical insight of this study and some earlier ones, I add Cooley and Mead's perspectives on the social self to Norbert Elias' (1978: 135) understanding of selves as 'open people'. By 'open', he means that people are not clearly bounded, but bound to others through elementary emotional bonds that become integral parts of the self, and are embedded in more widely spreading interdependencies between people (ibid). Elias will be discussed further in later chapters when considering the social bond.

Brett Smith and Andrew Sparkes (2008) review the different ways in which qualitative researchers have conceptualized selves as formed from 'social', 'relational' and 'individual' aspects. The different perspectives of self are organised along a continuum, with a thick individual and thin social relational view to the self and identity on one end and thin individual and thick social relational view on the other end. I will now discuss their continuum and consider how Mead and Cooley might be located on it. Smith and Sparkes (2008) begin their analysis from a so-called *psycho-social approach* that involves a thick individual and thin social view of the self. They offer Giddens' (1991) reflexive self as an approach that emphasises a person's interiority and a life story of the individual in relation to others. Giddens believes that self-identity is constituted by the reflexive ordering of self-narratives. It is closely understood in terms of biography and as the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. Others are present, but have a rather marginal position, according to Giddens (ibid.). Smith and Sparkes call this next step towards a thicker social relational view the *inter-subjective perspective* and include Mead here. However, inter-subjective approaches consider the self as born into the world as a private

subject that only afterwards experiences others. This may be an overtly individualistic interpretation of Mead, who holds that the full development of the self requires the ability to take on the role of others. On the contrary, Archer (2003: 78–92) interprets Mead’s self to be ‘over-socialized’, with a loss of interiority and subjectivity. My interpretation of Mead differs from these two. I believe that Mead’s view of the self has a thick relational aspect, but also incorporates some ‘individuality’ (see also the discussion of Gronow, 2008).

The next step the authors call *a storied resource* or *webs of relationality perspective*. Here people are viewed as culturally immersed and the culture speaks through them (Smith & Sparkes 2008.) *A dialogic perspective* is near the end of the continuum of with a thin individual and a thick social relational view to self. These perspectives shift the focal attention to ongoing social processes, decentralize the concept of self and stress relatedness in the main to precede individuality. Elias would fit well in here, and perhaps even Mead, to whom relatedness precedes the fully developed self. Cooley (1957: 48–49) also maintains that everything human about a person has a history in the social past. (see Smith & Sparkes 2008.)

Finally, Smith and Sparkes (ibid) place *performative perspectives* in the far end of the continuum with the thinnest individual and the thickest social relational view to the self. This embraces the vision of persons embedded within society and relational flows. Discursive psychological perspectives with a Foucauldian inspiration are suggested to fit here, but perhaps Goffman (1990a[1959]) and his analysis regarding ‘the presentation of self’ might coincide as well. Performative selves are destabilized rather than possessive of the inherent and unified properties of the individual (Smith & Sparkes 2008).

Although the distinctions Smith and Sparkes (ibid.) make between the different perspectives may not seem evident, in my view their point is important. They want to make visible certain important differences between researchers’ perspectives on selves as social, even within the narrative viewpoints. Their approach to the questions of the individual or the personal and the social relational is insightful, because it enables the consideration of both individual and social aspects of the self within each perspective. Also, it points out how differently the social can be understood (as dialogue, discourse, or interaction, to name a few). This makes ‘the social’ a tricky category that in the end may end up resembling a ‘black box’ of sorts. My own approach could have been located somewhere in the middle of the continuum, but my perspective remained open to reformulations during the research process. Utilising both personal narratives and configurational data on actualized relationship dynamics, a relational view to the self was revealed from slightly different viewpoints. In the following sections I specify my further foci on disruptive life events and experiences and the question of significant others. These points of view depict selves as vulnerable and open to others. However, my own position on the continuum is presented only in the final chapter, ‘The relational self’, after summing up and discussing the results of the empirical analyses of selves and their bonds to significant others.

2.2 Disruptive life events and experiences

Examining selves and their significant others from the point of view of disruptive life events and experiences actualizes the social in a different way than most other viewpoints would. These *actualized* relational dynamics embody the bonds between their participants, and show the extent to which selves are bound to their significant others and the others are bound them. This does not mean examining relational dynamics as principal or hypothetical future expectations, but as processes which already are in motion. Those going through disruptive life events do not form a uniform or certain social group. Rather the notion of disruptive events draws attention to the fact that such events can in principle happen to anyone. No life goes undisrupted; ‘fate’ hits everyone with unwanted incidents. By disruptive events I mean such ruptures that cannot be incorporated into the life as the self knows it. They break both the ordinary flow of life and biographical expectations in an acute way that reconfigures both the configuration of significant others and the self. In pragmatist terms, such situations can be seen as crises of ‘habitual action’ as they require reflexive deliberation (Mead 1934: 90–91).

Essentially, I approach *disruptive events and experiences* as an empirical question (see also Williams 2000): anything that disrupts the life as the person knows it qualifies as such. In this study, this overarching notion comprises events such as the loss of a spouse through death or abandonment, the serious illness of oneself or a family member, infertility and an inability to work among others. I have analysed such events both as experiences of loss, illness and disrupted family relationships and vis-à-vis the relational dynamics they generate. In the first three sub-studies disruptive events were built into the research design. In Sub-study IV I examined the social formation of the most intimate bonds from a configurational perspective, focusing on bonds in Sub-study I that appeared constitutive to the disrupted selves. The notion of disruptive events draws attention to the constitutive character of bonds between selves and their significant others, as many of the personally disruptive events are ones that may have happened to a loved one, or have had a deep impact on close relationships. Selves, their biographies and significant others are intertwined in disruptive events. In addition, I have focused on events that have ‘real’ and shattering consequences, such as the inability to work or perform even habitualised action in other spheres of life.

The focus on disruptive life events was a theoretical and methodological choice that helped me get closer to personal experiences, relational realities and their interplay. Because these situations demand reflexive deliberation (Mead 1934: 90–91), they are fruitful ‘entrance points’ for an interviewer interested in relational lives. This is not to say that undisrupted lives were less authentic, but the particularity of disruptions is that they stir personal relationships by generating transactions between selves and others, and in this way elicit visible dynamics to be analysed.

Another motivation behind the focus on disruptive events lied in my growing frustration with the framework and concepts of individualization theories (Giddens

1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002) that had broken through in the study of personal lives in the beginning of this research process. They depicted people as individuals and their actions as choices to the extent that we can talk about 'biographies of choice' (Beck 1992). Social relationships were characterized as individual commitments and subjects of negotiation between (bounded) individuals involved in pure relationships that last only insofar as they satisfy the individuals (e.g. Giddens 1991). However, I felt that such concepts were able to convey neither the comprehensive relational features nor the 'randomness of life' events that just often happen. Studies interested in relational constraints and employing both interview and network approaches have suggested that people describe their lives and relationships in a much more individualistic manner – as creations of their own – than actualized relational dynamics show (Castrén & Maillochon 2009; Suoranta 2006). The choice to interview people about their lives and relationships after life-altering disruptive events was an effort to overcome some of the overly individualistic understandings typical both to current mundane (Jallinoja 1997, Castrén & Maillochon 2009; Suoranta 2006) and sociological understanding, both of which have adopted the 'jargon of autonomy' (Sulkunen 2009; Bagnoli & Ketokivi 2009, see also the discussion on the category of self in the previous chapter). Disruptive events that are usually both involuntary and painful particularly force people to incorporate the given or fateful into their understanding of life and relationships. Hence, they empirically challenge the notion of bounded individuals who design their own lives and find them meaningful as such (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

I use the notion of *disruptive life events* and *experiences* as an overarching concept in order to capture several aspects. I talk interchangeably about events and experiences that both express one of the two essential components of disruption. Although they refer to different levels of analysis analytically, in lived relationships they are intertwined. I refer to events as incidents that are real and actually happen: people fall ill, they are left alone, lose loved ones and jobs. These events have real material, emotional and social consequences. Discussing them as events is a neutral way to refer to an incident without becoming biased in questions of agency and structure – a duality that tends to haunt sociological terminology (Emirbayer 1997). They are something that simply occurred. In our time, in which fewer metaphysical explanations rooted in an intelligent God, fate or nature are easily accepted, disruptive events tend to escape general explanations and obtain meaning in personal narratives that are shared with others. This may be accentuated by the widely popularized therapeutic understanding in which difficulties are perceived as personal problems (e.g. Furedi 2004). Disruptive events call for a personal response and do not only change the intrinsic configuration of life, but also the relationships and selves involved. Thus, these two levels of reality are closely linked, and it is more than apt to talk about these experiences. They cause suffering by breaking up the subjective life and require people to become re-engaged, cope, act and try to reconstitute their life. Disruptive experiences invade and wound the self, actualize it and its ties to others.

Utilising the trials of life, as opposed to people's deliberate actions, as a premise for the research rose from a belief that inevitable, disruptive events such as illness and loss actualize complex interdependencies that tie people together. As Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994: 1413) point out, it is essential to study both the subjective experiences and configurations of relationships (or in their vocabulary 'networks') in order to grasp the multifaceted ways in which people are bound to each other, I concur. It is in times of crisis when bonds are put to the test and accentuated, not in the undisrupted, habitual phases of life when matters seem to be more or less stable or under control. Disruptive events tend to reveal and actualize the extent to which relationships are bonded (Somers 1994), which is not always obvious, not even to the people involved. They also materialize as transactions that can be grasped with the means of empirical research (Tilly 2005; Emirbayer 1997). In addition, I felt it was important to develop tangent ways to incorporate the life of contingent actors into the sociological imaginary (see also Bagnoli & Ketokivi 2009). It is important to realize that sociological vocabularies tend to overemphasize the social side of life, and have difficulties discussing those contingent aspects of life that are fatal or given (*ibid.*, see also Honkasalo 2006), but cannot be reduced to the social.

The role of disruptive events in the research design was twofold. First, it was used as criteria for theoretical sampling. Half of the interviewees were recruited from settings dealing with ruptures in life, such as support groups or through a therapist. In these settings people discuss, share and make sense of their disruptive experiences. Taking part in either peer support or therapy has become an increasingly common way to deal with such issues. The studied disruptive events and experiences were not results of particularly disadvantaged lives (socially-speaking), but can be seen as painful reminders of the contingency of life (Honkasalo 2006). My aim was then not to examine a specific population, but to grasp a variety of different dynamics and phases, including such acute situations in which both habitual and agent-driven action are dramatically ruptured. Entering people's lives in the context of these situations also operated as a literal window from which to study the extent to which certain ties bind, along with the experiences and actions that follow disruptive events.

Second, I inquired into and focused my analysis on significant life events, such as disruptive ones, and the relational processes they generated in all interviews and the analysis. Most people have experienced some 'critical' moments (Holland et al. 2002; Holland & Thomson 2009) or phases in their lives – either willingly or unwillingly – that in retrospect are understood as crossroads in which life takes a new, unanticipated and perhaps uninvited direction (Bagnoli & Ketokivi 2009). Many such crossroads are related to the bonds we have with our significant others. Hence, I heard many stories of loss, illness, divorce and other relationships ruptures. Such incidents are common. Although most lives will not have to confront all of them, it will be difficult for us to escape all of them. Yet, the framework of individualization had diminished the uncertainty of life into a matter of risk assessment (Giddens 1991; Honkasalo 2006). It offers no analytical insight into

understanding the painful and fatal side of life and this is vital in order to grasp something essential about the most significant ties that this side of life actualizes.

My search for analytical understanding led me to sociological studies of illness and suffering, especially ones considering the notions of *biographical disruption* (Bury 1982) and *loss of self* (Charmaz 1983). These concepts take the viewpoint of the self, but these studies also examined disruption of the social in the family setting. In Sub-study II I analysed the estrangement of family bonds via Simmel's (1950) notion of the relations between the stranger and the original group, in which the characterization of the bonds is primary to the viewpoint of the self.

Sub-study I drew from Michael Bury's (1982) notion of biographical disruption, a concept he suggested for understanding chronic illness. I expanded its use to include any disruptive events that in Bury's words would involve a recognition of pain and suffering, and 'bring individuals, their families and wider social networks face to face with the character of their relationships in stark form, disrupting normal rules of reciprocity and mutual support' (ibid. 169). Biographical disruption destroys the taken-for-granted assumptions about life and forces people to fundamentally re-think their biography and self-concept and respond to the altered situation by mobilizing resources, such as the support of others (ibid.). In all of the analysed disruptions, the selves were profoundly tied to their significant others or, in the case of their absence, professional help. Loss or illness had a deep impact on both the content of particular relationships and their entire configuration. The analysis focuses on the nature of bonding and the capacity of different significant others to recognize and sympathize with the wounded self.

Charmaz (1983) proposed the concept *loss of self* to describe the fundamental form of suffering faced by severely or chronically ill people. According to her, loss of control and action due to a given illness and the restrictions and isolation it poses accumulates in a loss of self – an experience of losing the foundation on which to construct the sense of self (ibid.). I use this much-quoted notion of Charmaz in the analysis of the social bond between the self and fellow sufferers whom the self who has experienced disruptive events highlights as significant. It represents here the experiences of any fate (see Sub-study III) that interviewees address as colonizing their whole lives, pushing them to the margins. At the *personal level* this means a state where selves feel as if they have become passive sites of events that destroy their sense of self and the habitual stability of their life. At the *social level* it refers to the loss of the viable self that can take part in social life and be respected by others. (Ibid.). Charmaz' concept of the loss of self is developed from the empirical analysis and subjective experience of people who are ill, but it coincides with Cooley and Mead's theories of the social self that both imply interdependency between the personal and the social (also demonstrated in the sub-studies). The feeling that one becomes a passive site of events can be seen as parallel with Mead's loss of 'I' and the loss of respect can correspond to the loss of a viable 'me'.

'The Stranger', a classic essay by Simmel (1950), depicts an in-depth view of social relations between the stranger – who does not belong to the group, yet takes part in it – and the original group. The presence of the stranger 'who arrives today,

and stays tomorrow' (ibid.) can be seen as disrupting the tacit flow of social life, as he does not fit into the neat categorizations that distinguish outsiders from insiders. Simmel points out that sometimes such disruptions are not inherently viewed in negative terms, but may also be welcomed. My analysis (Sub-study II) provocatively took the unorthodox point of view and analyzed estranged family bonds in light of the stranger. Family can be seen as a setting into which strangers do not belong (Jallinoja 2009) and are hence strangers are perceived in negative terms there. Families engage in boundary-maintenance, even if the boundaries are flexible and permeable (McKie et al. 2005). In the case of the analyzed estranged family bonds, parents reject their grown child's alternative life, which disrupts assumed social expectations. This creates dynamics in which the grown child is encouraged to re-enter the original group (and to abandon the alternative life), but in many cases ends up becoming an outsider. However, as family bonds cannot be abolished, even if left dormant, parents have to accept the idea of their own child as stranger in the family.

The preceding perspectives convey some tools for understanding the central role of the interplay between the social/relational and the personal (cf. Smith & Sparkes 2008) in disruptive events. However, their centrality can be extended to any biographical changes which involve disruptive elements, even on a smaller scale. These events tend to heighten significant ties and re-configure them (Bidard & Lavenu 2005). Becoming a parent, moving home or retiring from work, for example, are all biographical events that are usually anticipated or planned. People hence possess more ways to adjust to these changes than to disruptive events that take place without warning and are unwanted. However, anticipated biographical changes can also turn chaotic, because they also interrupt the habitual life and involve insecure elements that cannot be anticipated. A few of the analysed disruptive events were, in fact, cases where an anticipated biographical change turned into a chaotic experience (as in the case of post-natal depression, for example). Many people are aware of this chance and confront such changes with a heightened self-awareness. This is why disruptive events are commonly understood to be potential threats to all people, not just for risk groups or the disadvantaged. I want to suggest that in this sense disruptive events are an essential part of human life. Sooner or later the fragilities of life are actualized (Honkasalo 2006), because in the end all life is fatal. At the same time, the analyzed disruptive events are extraordinary at the micro-level of the biographies of the selves, destroying their previous life as it was known and habitual to the self.

My focus on disruptive events considered circumstances and experiences that could happen to *anyone*, although people's social resources make a great difference in the ways in which people respond to such incidents. Hence the troubled people in the study did not form a group of people who were disadvantaged from a social perspective, but rather one that was randomly faced with 'fate'. Sociological concepts are not well suited to the analysis of the fragilities of life (Honkasalo 2006; Bagnoli & Ketokivi 2009). Examining interdependencies between selves and their significant others from the viewpoint of disruptive experiences is a modest attempt

to develop some less restricted understanding of the important givens of life and to stress the ‘life’ of ‘social life’ as the subject of sociological inquiry. This is done by analyzing the transactions between people that actualize in the interplay between the given and the interdependency between the selves and their significant others in such incidents. The following section discusses the third foundational element of the study, the question of significant others. It is closely linked to both the notions of self as social and the disruptive life events in which others become essential for the survival of selves and selves losing significant others are wounded (also Elias 1978: 135–136).

2.3 The question of ‘significant others’

I began the study with an interest in personal relationships: who is important, how are the relationships formed and how are they organized in relation to the self and each other. Instead of studying relationships through predefined or institutional relationship categories such as families, friends or kin, I wanted to address the essence of what are considered close relationships from the outset. I collected personal narratives and mapped the configuration of all those *specific people* who were cited as ‘close or otherwise important’ to the study participants. Each drew a circle map of these personal relationships and provided detailed information on these relationships, which I integrated into the configurational data (see Chapter 4 for more details). These then were the people who were known as the ‘significant others’ for the purposes of the study.

My use of the term here is hence not at all the same as the popular use in which ‘significant other’ denotes intimate partners. Rather, theoretically speaking, the people who are close appear to have a somewhat similar role to that found in the discussion on socialization by Berger & Luckmann (1991[1966]). Therein significant others are primarily the agents of socialization, and later in life, those others who hold a central position in the maintenance of one’s subjective reality (like an identity, *ibid.*). According to Berger & Luckmann (1991: 170–171) reality maintenance in crisis – as with a disruptive event – involves the totality of the self’s situation. It therefore accentuates the role of others as ‘significant’, as they are needed to confirm the altered situation. Thus, my use of the term is rooted in the personal definitions of ‘close or otherwise important’ people, but in terms of sociology, it is close to Berger and Luckmann’s use (*ibid.*).

There is a whole genre of studies on personal relationships that approach relationships from the viewpoint of personal significance, albeit focusing on the question differently. I review briefly such studies that come close to my own approach in order to position myself in the genre. In family sociology, a shift from institutional criteria to more open-ended definitions of significance took place in British sociology in 1990s. One of the most influential contributions was from David Morgan (1996), who developed the concept of ‘family practices’ that understands family as connections and their quality rather than as a specific ‘family’

concept. Morgan's focus was on family rather than any kind of relationships, but his point was that family practices are not necessarily tied only to relationships that we tend to understand as family, but to any relationship given the personal or moral significance usually associated with family. For him such significance was something that from the viewpoint of relationship practices would be difficult to ignore, from a participant's point of view (ibid.). In a similar vein Lynn Jamiesson (1998) investigated intimacy and personal relationships in her book "Intimacy" via the notion of significant others as those intimates who have a particular significance in and commitment to the shaping of a self (see also Berger & Luckmann 1991). This phrasing of the question of significance most resembles my own approach as it defines significant others as those specific people who hold such a position.

Approaches accounting for actual significant relationships have also been developed within the field of therapy research. Ruthellen Josselson's (1996) study "The Space Between Us" examines relational space between people. She asked people to draw relational maps with circles indicating how each person on the map was 'important'. She asked people to think back and draw a relational map for each five-year interval, beginning at age five and ending at their present age (ibid. 252). Her study was an effort to combine phenomenology and theory that derives from psychoanalytic object relations and self psychology approaches. Her theoretical interest emphasized the subjective world of the human mind rather than actual relational dynamics, both of which are relevant components of my analysis. Moreover, although she analyzed different patterns of relatedness, her perspective was tied to the subjective needs of the selves in a more normative manner than a sociologist might find suitable.

Interestingly enough, the approach closest to my own interest in personal relationships was published during my research process, at the time I was finishing the data collection. Liz Spencer & Ray Pahl (2006)'s book "Rethinking Friendship" is a qualitative study of solidarities hidden in informal friendships outside the reach of any formal statistics. Already in their earlier articles (Pahl & Spencer 2004; Pahl & Pevalin 2005), they had considered friendships and family relationships from an anti-categorical perspective. They explored 'the actual set of social relationships in which individuals were embedded' (Spencer & Pahl 2006: 214). They asked people to tell them about people who were 'important' to them now. They also asked people to place different people in order of importance on an 'affective map' consisting of five concentric rings covering different degrees of importance. (Ibid.) I did the same, although the maps used in this study had only four circles.

As Elias (1978: 137) suggests, I believe it is essential to examine a person's *web of relationships from her or his point of view* in order to understand the whole range of interdependencies between people. Elias' stance captures well what the study is about. More specifically, my study involved two interrelated interests. First, I study people's narratives of self and significant others from the viewpoint of lived experiences (Schutz 1932), and second, I study people's particular bond as embedded in the wider configurations of people. Adopting *significant others* as a research focus links these two dimensions to each other. Following the

phenomenological tradition, Alfred Schutz (1932: 99) points out that we always co-exist with others – they are our alter egos, our ‘other selves’. The meanings of this co-existence are always subjective, as they are constituted within a unique stream of consciousness that is essentially inaccessible to every other individual. This is why asking people about their experiences may be the only way to grasp not just their own significance but also the significance of other people. What follows is that a meaning given to someone else’s experience can never be exactly the same as the one given by that someone’s own experiences. (Ibid.) It is to some extent then always tied to a specific self, which in the case of personal relationships is a reasonable premise.

Significance, hence, is a subjective category requiring an understanding and description of subjective ‘lived experiences’ that the individual is able to observe through attending to them reflectively (Schutz 1932: 102). Studying significant others as lived experiences then means the effort to grasp the subjective experiences regarding these others without defining, categorizing or challenging the feelings of the people in question. These experiences are taken as ‘real’, even if they are accessible only through people’s verbalization and interpretations of them. They assign other people with their significance and postulate the bonds at the subjectively significant level that I am interested in the study. Experiences do not appear in a social vacuum within a bounded self, however, but emerge in and through relational processes. I understand experiences of significance and bonds to others as being in a constant interplay in which both emerge. The extent to which the subjective criteria are linked to common relationship categories with common cultural meanings like ‘family’ (Yesilova 2009; Castrén 2009) or ‘friendship’ (Castrén & Lonkila 2004; Pahl 2000) is an empirical question and examined accordingly. I discuss this in more detail in the following section.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) further elaborate on the concept of significant others when they characterize Mead’s theory of socialization and explain how subjective realities are bound to others. They specify significant others as the agents of socialization, a given social structure that each individual is born to and where she or he encounters those others who are in charge of her or his socialization and whose definition of one’s situation are posited for her or him as an objective. Hence, it is significant others who appear as an objective social structure, but they are also the ones mediating the wider social world and modifying it in the course of socialization, based on their own location in the social structure, but also on their individual biographies. What makes these others so significant from the viewpoint of the self is that the self identifies with them emotionally and takes significant others’ roles and attitudes as given through a process of internalization. This is how others become the subjective reality of the self, to a fashion. In the case of children, the most significant others are usually the parents, but as pointed out in the previous section, Berger and Luckmann also consider biographical ruptures where other significant others emerge. What is common to all significant others is that they hold a central position in maintaining, but also in alternating the self’s subjective reality: ‘They are particularly important for the ongoing confirmation of the crucial element

of reality that we call identity' (ibid. 170). 'Significant others in the individual's life are the principal agents for the maintenance of his subjective reality. Less significant others act as a sort of chorus' (ibid. 170). The influence of significant others on the self is then explicit and emotional, while that of less significant others is more implicit. Significant others are indispensable in retaining confidence that one is indeed who one thinks themselves to be (ibid. 151–170). This interrelation is an interest of this study as well, and is conceptualized through the notion of the relational self.

Another tradition keenly concerned with significant others is that of symbolic interactionism, which has also acted as an interpreter and developer of Mead's ideas⁴. Referring to Mead, Charon (1985: 68), for example, characterizes significant others as those individuals who take on importance to the individual, those whom the individual desires to impress, those he respects, wants acceptance from, fears or those with whom he identifies. In short, significant others are seen as role-models. Charon further interprets Mead's ideas on the social self that in the course of development presumes first perspectives of her or his significant others of itself and then those of the generalized other. Finally the self is able to perceive itself from the perspective of several reference groups. An adult can define the self as a social object in relation to his or her 1) significant others and 2) reference groups that can be both 'alive or dead, imaginary or real, from the past or in the present, and physically present or physically distant'. (Ibid. 68–71.)

What is common to the approaches of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism is the view that significant others are those bound to the self in an especially *influential* way. Both perspectives do not only draw from Mead's thinking (Berger & Luckmann 1991; Charon 1985) – although they interpret and further develop it into different directions – but also leave it open to lived experiences and processes to determine *who* these significant others are.

The other departure point when considering the question of significant others rose from the figurational or configurational sociology of Elias that is somewhat parallel to the preceding perspectives, albeit focused differently. Also in Elias' (1978: 136) thinking people are fundamentally directed toward other people. From the perspective of interdependencies, Elias discusses important others in terms of the 'emotional valencies' people attach to specific others – not so much the ways in which others influence the self's subjective reality. Each person has many valencies at any given point of time, some of which are firmly connected to certain people, but some valencies may be free and open, searching for people with whom to form

⁴ Interpreting Mead as the forefather of symbolic interactionism is a controversial issue, as pointed out by pragmatists who emphasize his notions of habits and action as more important features of Mead's thinking (Kilpinen 2009; Gronow 2008). In fact, Mead used the term 'significant others', but he did not highlight it as an important concept, as the symbolic interactionists do. For Mead, the question of significant others seemed to be only an intermediate phase in describing the genesis of the self through first taking the role of a particular (significant) other (play-stage) and then taking the role of 'the generalized other' that represents the attitude of the entire social group (Mead 1934).

bonds. Although Elias does not talk about ‘lived experiences’ concerning significant others he discusses something rather similar when offering the death of a loved one as an example of emotional valency. He maintains that when a loved one dies, the emotional valency attached and fixed to that other person is torn out. This is not an event happening outside the self or even some external occurrence that has an internal impact. This is the case of the self losing a part of her or his self. (Ibid.) The event crosses the psycho-social divide and occurs both inside and outside the self. His perspective emphasizes the *dynamic nature of interdependencies* that are always in motion. However, the idea of a profound and emotionally charged interdependency of selves and their significant others (those to whom emotional valencies are fixed at any given point of time) is somewhat similar in phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism and Elias’ configurational sociology (see also Fuhse 2009).

Unlike phenomenology, the configurational perspective is interested not only in the personal significance of different others, but also in the logic in which selves and different relationships are interdependent. In large part these dynamics are not under control of the selves. Configurational analysis opens up another viewpoint to different kinds of significances that are sometimes tense. *Hierarchies of loyalties* related to different relationships constrain free-formed personal significance given to others and link personal lives to cultural expectations, such as the prioritization of family commitments (see Castrén 2008). The significance of relationships is examined from both the viewpoints of the self and of the configurational organization of personal relationships.

I drew insight from sociological phenomenology and symbolic interactionism in order to understand people’s lived experiences when it came to their significant others. The figurational approach of Elias (1978) was utilized to depict the dynamic nature of relationships that evolve over time, as well as to understand the interrelationships between selves and their various significant others as parts of the wider webs of relationships. The following questions concerning significant others were examined. Who are they? How are they significant? Where do the relationships originate? How are selves bound to them? How are the different significant others interrelated? In which ways are significant others constitutive to the self? My focus on disruptive life events and experiences framed personal significance in a special way: the significant others of the study are those who are influential to the selves not in the course of everyday life, but during and after heightened situations with disruptions. Many of the others particularly significant to a self at the time of the interview were, in fact, those intimates who had cared for the self when disrupted or stepped up in a comforting, but unexpected way.

2.4 The anti-categorical approach and relationship categories

Examining people’s relationships from the viewpoints of the personal significance of specific people, disruptive events and experiences, and the dynamics between

people can be characterized as an anti-categorical approach. This kind of approach is committed to examining specific processes between specific people without a priori definitions regarding the selves or the relationships. It is hence an open-ended research design that does not essentially operate with given or institutional categories, but begins the examination with actualized relational dynamics and the experiences of specific people (e.g. Emirbayer 1997; Fuhse 2009). This means that 'significant others' are not treated as a specific category of relationships, but are those particular people who were cited as 'significant' by the research participants. In the research process, I have moved from tentative theoretical interests to the analysis of experiences and relational dynamics between specific concrete people. Instead of categorizing the relationships, experiences or dynamics in advance, I analysed how they vary across particular cases, how they are embedded in specific social settings, and how they are structured by relationship categories in action.

Paradoxically, the anti-categorical approach proved the importance of relationship categories, which cannot be fully set aside in the analysis of lived experiences. This is because the people in the study referred to their particular relationships as 'family' or 'friendship' and offer these categories as common ground to discuss their particular relationships. Another reason is that the analysis of relational dynamics clearly shows that some categories, 'family' in particular, are in effect particular bonds patterned into specific forms of bonding. The relevance of relationship categories in my study rose from the constant overlap between significant others and certain categories. For example, each configuration of significant others in the sample included some family.

At the same time, the significance given to particular relationships of certain other categories, such as kin, varied to a great extent. An open-ended interest in the relationship categories in action stemmed from this observation. From an anti-categorical stance I analyzed the extent and the ways in which categories of 'family', 'friends' and 'fellow sufferers' do or do not structure particular relationships of that category. Hence, the anti-categorical approach does not mean setting categories altogether aside, but rather an effort to assess their contextualized and worldly 'reality' from the viewpoint of particular relationships and selves. It means taking relational dynamics as the primary focus of analysis rather than explaining dynamics from social variables of people (e.g. age, gender, class) or from familiar relationship categories. Hence, neither selves nor relationships are seen as pre-existing substances, but submitted to empirical scrutiny in which anything generating relational dynamics and processes are taken as 'real'. This stance, also known as 'relational realism' (Mische, *forthcoming*), is explained in more in detail in the section entitled 'Methodology and analysis'.

A commitment to understanding empirical particularities rather than relying on prior theoretical schemes is an effort shared by phenomenological research, symbolic interactionism and relational sociology, including Elias' (1978)

configurational sociology⁵. It does not mean contesting all theoretical generalizations, but implies a stance that enables one to study what takes place in lived relationships within relationship categories that to a certain degree structure both action and experience. It enables studying categories in action. This study then asks *How categorical the different relationships are?* It also allows for the generation of theory that is fluid enough to be attuned to lived relationships.

In forming an anti-categorical stance, I was inspired by Anna-Maija Castrén's (2001) qualitative work on the social networks of teachers in Helsinki and St. Petersburg. She and her colleagues had collected anti-categorical data on all the people their research participants were in contact with over 15 days. She focused on the actual encounters and the content of the encounters rather than the people or relationship categories involved and examined the formation of both the life historical paths and networks. She then analysed how partnership and family affected these formations. (Ibid.) Although my own interest was somewhat different, I also wanted to examine the lived interdependencies rather than their common meanings or categories. I wanted to account for the research participants' lived relationships from their point of view in my study. I used the combination of a narrative approach, to grasp the personal significance of others, and configurational data, to grasp the whole web of relationships. However, these two kinds of data do not address mutually exclusive parts of relational processes. Both address the selves and their relations, but stress different viewpoints.

Relationship categories form a wider cultural understanding of personal relationships that is hard to ignore, as people understand and live their relationships in relation to that understanding. Family, for example, is an influential category, 'an ordering principle' (Fuhse 2009) that structures people's lives, relationships and our common understanding of how family relationships are meant to be (Yesilova 2009; see also Sub-study IV). In personal narratives particular relationships are to a large extent understood through this cultural understanding of relationships, as 'family' and 'friendship' or role categories, such as 'daughter' or 'husband', and so labelled by the research participants. Although such categories only provide a certain somewhat fluid framework for personal lived relationships (e.g. Finch & Mason 1993), they direct the ways in which interviewees understand and discuss these relationships. Hence, studying significant others necessarily requires discussing families, friends and other relationship categories. Yet in the interviews the anti-categorical approach meant that significant others were discussed as *particular* bonds (cf. Elias 1978: 136) via 'name-generator' questions that invite people to

⁵ Berger and Luckmann (1991: 34) talk about an 'empirical understanding of the subjective experience' (emphasis mine). When characterizing interpretative phenomenological analysis, Smith et al. (2009: 37) depict 'particular instances of lived experience' (emphasis mine) as the focus of analysis. Blumer (1969: 45) describes symbolic interactionist inspection as a method that seeks to identify the nature of the analytical element by an intense scrutiny of its instances in the empirical world (emphasis mine). Elias (1978: 130–131) suggests particular figurations as the dominant changing pattern created by all people as an important research focus, as social life has no substance without the people involved (emphasis mine).

name the particular persons in relation to particular situations, such as a disruptive event. Significant others are then particular persons referred to by their first names rather than relationship categories, unless otherwise enforced by the interviewees.⁶ The insistence of certain categories is interesting as such, as it denotes the importance of the category in the personally significant context. Some relationships are more categorical than others. They are more governed by a social understanding of relationships of that kind, while others are more personally defined.

Insights into particular relationships are analysed side by side and commonalities or patterns are depicted and set to a dialogue with relationship categories that structure particular relationships or not. My analysis, hence, enters into a dialogue with those theoretical approaches that operate with categories, which Layder (1986: 375) has called 'objectivist modes of thought'. Instead of denying the worldly existence of categories as ideas outside the particular people in figurations, as Elias (1978: 130) does, I examine their empirical area of qualification in light of the dynamics that they do or do not produce in the world. This also allows me to discuss the question of structure and agency in an empirically embedded way, as the relational dynamics conform to the structuring relationship categories or through individual agency show alternative practices (see Sub-study IV on intimate relationships). The following will shortly discuss the categories of family and friendship and the ways in which discussions operating with these concepts are relevant to the research.

The category of family⁷ is much debated in the sociology of personal life. It is a very charged concept culturally and quite varied in meaning. Some sociologists have considered it apt to reject the notion of 'the family' altogether and replace it with something more fitting in order to define different families in a more fluid way. Ulrich Beck (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 204) suggests 'the family' is a zombie category, a living dead, as in fact families are constellations of very different kinds of relationships. Still, he acknowledges that empirical studies show that families, even if troubled and varied, are still valued in a classical way. Most empirical sociologists do not agree that the family is a zombie category, but one that is living and well. Yet many of them have developed more fluid ways to understand families, for instance, as practices (Morgan 1996) or negotiated responsibilities (Finch & Mason 1993). Although family is a fuzzy category, it is worth examining. *To what extent are analyzed family relationships categorically family and to what extent are they simply 'social' bonds like any other?* In this study, the category of family as

⁶ Sometimes family members as significant others are so closely linked to role categories such as 'father', 'mother', 'wife' and 'husband' that the interviewee insists on using the category. In these cases the role category often still refers to one particular person, although it emphasizes the institutional understanding of the relationship in the context of the interview.

⁷ I understand family here in a wider sense than 'the family', which is often used to refer to a nuclear family with parents and children in the same household. I use the term family in a way that can refer to both families of procreation and families of origin, as well as, extended families including in-laws and other kin members, such as grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. Family here is seen as a quality of relationship rather than as an entity (Morgan 1996).

one in action in lived family relationships⁸ is submitted to empirical scrutiny from an anti-categorical approach, focused on particular narratives, relationships and people. Moreover, families are studied as significant others in the same way as other significant others, meaning friends, relatives and work colleagues, and sometimes even less personal relations to people who share the same fate or life situation. However, it is difficult to ignore the family-quality of relationships (Morgan 1996) when trying to understand some of the distinctive elements of bonding taking place between genealogically-related people (also Finch & Mason 1993: 169).

According to Finch and Mason's (1993) study of family responsibilities, one of the distinctive features related to family is the way in which a person belongs to the kin group. Family of origin, for example, is the group a person is born into in which the membership is given and continuous even if family relationships are left dormant. It is then a ready-made context in which responsibilities develop, but often it is also a safety net one can fall back into in times of need, if only as a last resort. Giving and receiving help within families is a common experience, yet it is seen as unremarkable and a characteristic part of family life. Still, as Finch and Mason suggest, family relationships cannot be understood as given, nor can they be seen as involving duties or the right to receive help. Rather, they can be seen as processes of negotiation that create certain responsibilities in a given setting. (Ibid.) This calls for analysis of the particular dynamics.

Actualized dynamics between people can be understood as concrete transactions between people without final attribution to 'elements' or other presumptively detachable or independent 'entities', 'essences' or 'realities' (such as individual selves or relationships categorized in a specific way) (see e.g. Dewey & Bentley 1949: 108; also Emirbayer 1997; Tilly 2005). These involve both the practical and moral aspects of bonds as expectations that people have developed over time in their relationships (Fuhse 2009; Finch & Mason 1993). Tilly (2005: 14) describes transactional accounts as ones that take 'interactions among social sites as their starting point, treating both events at those sites and durable characteristics of those sites as outcomes of interactions.' I understand these sites as those (either individual or collective 'beings') that take part in the relational processes, but that are not assigned a specific ontology, as they are formed through not their innate properties, but 'as outcomes of interactions'. Transactional accounts are relational 'when they focus on persistent features of transactions between specific social sites' (ibid.), such as relational selves. The focus on disruptive events generates not only transactions, but brings out the most intensive dynamics of personal relationships (in the

⁸ In principle, family relationships are included in the configurations of significant others only when cited as significant by research participants. However, members of both families of origin and of choice are discussed, regardless of the citations. In some cases, family members are not included as significant because of their rejecting attitude. One of the research strategies has been to examine the boundaries of the relationships of different categories. The case of rejection between parents and their adult children is analysed in depth in Sub-study II. In the case of family especially, relationships are often important even if their significance would be negative due to estrangement or disruptions. All interviewees discuss their family relationships or the lack of them as significant, even if it is sometimes in negative terms.

relational sense), leaving other less intensive sociable dynamics in the background. Disruptive situations call for a response, which later in life often become an important criterion for the personal significance of a person. Such a reconfiguration of significant others transgresses relationship categories, and effects both family and non-family relationships (see Sub-study I).

Regarding family, I analyse how ‘categorically’ the setting of family governs or standardizes the relationships within it, as well as, outside it (see Sub-studies II and IV in particular). How uniformly are closely-related people cited as ‘significant others’ and which ones especially? How are they significant? Significance, it should be noted, should not only be seen as something positive, but in an open-ended way it can also be considered entangling and even entrapping (Morgan 1996; Smart 2007; Widmer et al. 2008). I also study the expectations of relationships through negation: how do estranged, difficult or isolated relationships fail their participants and what happens when they do. The power of negation is acutely actualized in relation to close family who are typically expected to give more than other people (see the Spencer & Pahl 2006). The category of family – with its expectations of togetherness and support – also figures in lived family relationships as negation: the family bonds that do not live up to expectations are narrated as ‘significant’, although not in a positive way. ‘Family’ was the most consistent of the analysed relationships, and hence the most effective relationship category of the ones examined. Even if families differ from one another, there are still similar expectations and dynamics common to different families when compared to other relationships. It is important to note that other relationships may develop ‘family-like’ qualities (cf. (Spencer & Pahl 2006) which makes the category of family one not fixed to any particular setting.

My position regarding the category of friendship is essentially similar to that of the family: My empirical results on selves’ bonds to their significant others was set by all kinds of interplay with the understanding of friendship offered by the interviewees themselves, but also by sociological inquiry on friendship. This approach does not view family and friendship as mutually exclusive categories, but rather considers them as qualities of relationships that can encompass more than one facet.

Sociological discussion of friendship has raised several questions relevant to the study. In their 2006 book, Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl point out many important aspects of friendship. They suggest that friendship encompasses a great deal of solidarities hidden from all official records and show how the wide-ranging category of friendship could just as well refer to a variety of very different relationships – from associates sharing just one particular interest and fun-friends to helpmates, confidantes and soul mates. Moreover, Spencer and Pahl examine friendship within ties of kin. They propose that friendship is a type of relation that can be found between spouses (see also Pahl and Pevalin 2005), siblings, cousins or even between parents and their children. In fact, one of their core arguments is related to suffusion between families and friends. Namely, they suggest (Spencer & Pahl 2006: 108) that ‘family’ and ‘friend’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories when real-life

relationships are examined. Rather, they found that some family ties to have friend-like qualities and conversely that some friends feel like family (ibid.). Analysis of the entire configuration of significant others also allows this study to also consider such questions.

Participants in this study also introduced other relationship categories. Less obvious categories proposed as significant were *'kohtalotoverit'* in Finnish or 'fellow sufferers of the same fate'. It is perhaps surprising how much importance is sometimes given to fellow humans or acquaintances that happen to share something momentous. Not all significant others are particularly close, nor personally well known, but can still play a major role in different stages of personal lives, as instances bonds between fellow sufferers shows. This first came up in the case of biographical disruption (see Sub-study I). Their significance and the bond between selves and fellow sufferers was further examined in Sub-study III.

This study concentrates on the intensive ties that have found their way into the personal narratives of the self. The interviews invited people to talk about those significant others who have a significant role in disruptive events, but also other major life events. Another kind of a focus would have been likely to propose additional relationship categories as relevant, involving relationships that are not in such an intensive relation to the self, but stem from and remain within certain 'personally significant' social settings in which selves are embedded. I suspect work colleagues, for instance, would have been given a more significant place were the focus on identities. It is important to note however, that relationship categories, although analytically separable, are not mutually exclusive. Many of the close friendships stemmed, for example, from the settings of work, but had become personally so significant that the relationship no longer was discussed in relation to that setting alone. Likewise, some friends may at some point in time be also fellow sufferers. Friends may over time become so much like family in terms of the nature of bonds and their logic that they are closer to what we understand when talking about family (see Sub-study IV for an example). Transformations relationships live through point out how relationship categories as such fail to grasp the contingent and worldly character of loved relationships.

3 The social bond as a sociological question

In the course of the research process I started to feel a need to understand the relationships under investigation not just empirically as personal relationships, but in more sociological depth. I wanted to examine the extent and the ways in which even the most personal relationships are not simply ‘personal’, but ‘social’. ‘Social’ is not used here in a popular sense as anything that involves more than one person, but in a stronger sociological sense, as something that binds people together, something that is linked not just to the particular relationships, but also to social life and its structures in general. In the discussion (Chapters 6, 7 and 8), I consider the questions of the social bond and the social self in light of the empirical analysis of the personal relationships. In this chapter I review and reflect on relevant sociological contributions to the understanding of what a ‘social relationship’ or ‘social bond’ is.

Thomas Scheff (1997), a contemporary theorist on the social bond, claims that although the social relationship is crucial for all social sciences, sociology has not been able to provide an adequate definition that captures its vast importance. He suggests that sociologists have only given definitions of relationships between abstract roles that are not helpful in trying to understand relationships between certain people. It is rather striking how little sociologists have explicitly discussed the question of the social relationship or bond. (Ibid.) However, sociology has not disregarded the importance of the social bond altogether. This chapter will first look into the sociology classics and then into more recent theories and contemplate how the social bond has been addressed in sociological literature.

Now may be a good time to specify that in my vocabulary the concept of (social) relationship refers to an overarching concept covering all relations between people, whereas the concept of (social) bond refers to a stronger association, in which interdependency exists between the participants (cf. Tönnies 2002[1887]: 242–243). However, in the context of personal relationships it is apt to use the terms interchangeably, as most writers do. As the analysis will show, personal relationships may be more or less bonded (Somers 1994: 622), but they are as a rule bonded.

3.1 The social relationship in classic sociological thought

It seems as if sociological inquiry has passed over the definition of social relationship and social bonds rather quickly. Perhaps scholars considered the matter too trivial or obvious for analysis. Classics of sociology were mostly occupied with solving the problem of *social integration* in modern society. Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), for example, focused on understanding the social glue, the nature and source of solidarity in modern societies at the macro-level, rather than analysing the solidarities that take place at the micro-level between people. Tönnies, however, did discuss the question of social relationships in the light

of his famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and the notions of the natural will and the rational will that described the bases of relationship respectively.

Tönnies understood *Gemeinschaft* relationships as affective, based on the natural will innate to humans. Such relationships are formed through organic needs, reproduction, memory, feelings and habits, and are typically found in family, kin, village and friendship, although no relationship is purely of any one type. Tönnies further delineated the different levels of natural will placing, e.g. family relationships on the more biological side of natural will, and friendship on the more mental side of natural will. *Gesellschaft* relationships, on the other hand were based on the rational will, and formed through human volition, goal-oriented thinking, knowledge and concepts. *Gesellschaft* relationships are to be found in nations, cities, and the state. Relationships based on the natural will are always between people, and tend to be local and intensive. Relationships based on the rational will, on the other hand, are characterized by contracts between isolated parties. They tend to be complex, and are not tied to any locality. (Tönnies 2002: 103–125; Töttö 1996; Melkas 2003.)

Tönnies elaborated further on the nature of ‘social relationship or bond’ as one that ‘implies interdependence’, meaning ‘that the will of the one person influences that of the other, either furthering or impeding, or both’ (Tönnies 2002: 242–243). In general, in his view, social relations, however, are social entities, ‘things’ that are the subject of sociological inquiry. Although he further typifies different kinds of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* relationships, and points out that in fact most relationships are mixed rather than pure in their nature, his analysis lacks the notion of relationships as dynamic. (Tönnies 2002: 242–246.)

Later on the concepts of Tönnies were further developed and added to by Herman Schmalenbach (1847–1927), a German sociologist who specified the widely-used concept of community (*Gemeinschaft*) by introducing a new category of communion (*Bund*). He considered social relationships as constituting three different bases for social relationships: community, communion and society. He referred to community as a given, assumed structure where interdependence is mutual, enduring and something one is not completely aware of. In his view, community does not presume emotional bonds, but pre-exists people. It becomes an object of attention only when it experiences disturbance. Hence, it is natural according to Tönnies, and as a principle means social bonding where the given interdependence overpowers individuality. Schmalenbach offers family as a specific structure that most often encompasses elements of community. Schmalenbach then considers the principle of society (*Gesellschaft*) as assuming separate individuals who make contracts and participate in exchange while sustaining a mutual distance. In societal bonding, the individual is prior to the whole and so it remains. The prototype of society is to be found in juridical and economic relations, but it can be found in the sphere of personal life as well. (Schmalenbach 1967[1922].)

Schmalenbach’s key contribution, however, is the introduction of the principle of communion. As opposed to community that precedes and perhaps overlooks

emotions, communion is based on emotional experience, felt connectedness and intimacy. Communion is akin to Durkheim's (2001 [1912]: 163) notion of 'creative effervescence' that refers to a spontaneous communal feeling (see Delanty 2003: 43–45). Schmalenbach suggests the prototype of communion as a vibrant encounter with God or a lover. Unlike Durkheim, he defines communion as a base for a relationship and states that it does not hold out by itself. Rather, sustaining this kind of relationship requires a transformation of communion into a communal or societal bond if it is to survive over time (Schmalenbach 1967).

Schmalenbach's analysis of the three different bases of relationships opens up a more elaborate and dynamic view of human bonds than that of Tönnies. He does not focus on explaining the ways in which people are bound to each other in a society, but talks about relationships more specifically. He notes not only that relationships rarely exist in pure types and are subject to historical changes, but also that they alter over time within the history of each relationship. A relationship may, for example, begin as society-based (a business association, for instance) and transform into a communion (develop into a friendship or a romantic relationship), and then even further adopt elements of community to sustain over time.

Emilé Durkheim's contribution to understanding micro-level social relationships was modest when compared to the huge impact his work had on sociology in general. Scheff (1990: 5) names Durkheim's central concept of social solidarity as the collective counterpart of the social bond. Durkheim however also considered the question of solidarity between people. He, for example, discusses the interior of the family via the concepts of solidarity, domesticity, affectivity, gender, socialization, and individuality. Durkheim views family as an affective unit that involves feelings of love and passion, which make it too affective to work as a basis of socialization. Even when discussing the micro-level of the family, Durkheim is occupied with the wider problem of social integration. However, he does address the relationship between family and individuality and suggests family to be a setting where the personalities, feelings and characters of the members matter. In his view, individuality and family (like the social in general) are not contradictory: individuality can develop in a modern family that is no longer controlled by a wider network of kin. (Lamanna 2002: 117–127.) Durkheim's contribution to the analysis of micro-level relationships is not very comprehensive, although his notion of solidarity has been adhered to by sociologists of personal relationships (e.g. Scheff 1997: 77; Spencer & Pahl 2006: 10).

It was up to Max Weber (1864–1920), another icon of sociology, to consider the question of social relationship more systematically. He felt social life could be traced back to individual action. Weber (1947 [1920], 118–119) has also provided a formal and comprehensive definition of the social relationship that is, like all his definitions, formal and ideal typical in the sense that it is emptied of all historical content (Gronow & Töttö 1996: 298). He regards social relationship as 'the behavior of a plurality of actors in so far as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms. The social relationship thus *consists* entirely and exclusively in the existence of *probability* that there will

be, in some meaningfully understandable sense, as course of social action' (Weber 1947: 118, emphasis original). Weber's definition of social relationship then implies at a minimum a mutual orientation of the action of each to that of the others. The nature of relationships can be varied and contain conflict and hostility, as well as, sexual attraction, loyalty, friendship or economic exchange. Although this definition is an abstract one, it does account for the actual relationship dynamics rather than fixed or abstract roles or categories. He also notes that the subjective meaning need not necessarily be the same for the participants; in this sense the relationship does not have to be reciprocal. These meanings are not static, but can change somewhat or entirely: turning a co-operative relationship, for example, into a competition. The meanings of relationships may be agreed upon in a binding way that implies making promises regarding future behaviour and thus producing a sense of loyalty, duty or the like. Relationships can be of a temporary character or have a varying degree of permanence. Yet even for Weber the social relationship is subordinate to his theory of action. (Weber 1947.)

Although Weber's definition of a social relationship is abstract, Scheff's criticism is misplaced because Weber's notion of social relationship does not rely on abstract and static rights, rules or roles (Scheff 1997: 69). Even in its abstract nature, it refers to a relational probability of a mutual orientation to social action. However, the notion of the probability of social action is loose. How is it determined? Can all human existence relevant to the question of social bond be reduced to action?

Weber does not divulge where the level for the probability for social action exists. He leaves us with an impression that it may have either internal or external sources, as the sense of loyalty appears as at least in some part subjective, developed over time toward someone, whereas the sense of duty seems to rise from outside, from a certain role categories or positions. Weber's definition is ambitious and at least in part empirically accurate in the sense that it does, in fact, have the analytical flexibility to comprehend the bond between the self and the other that binds them to a mutual orientation. However, its high level of abstraction makes it difficult to see how it could be utilized in empirical analysis.

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) was the first of the classic sociologists to highlight the importance of micro sociology. In his view, understanding how social life shapes experience requires an understanding of the forms of sociation, examined separately from their content. Hence, he did not focus on relationships as such, but rather the different social forms that are realized as individuals interact with one another (Ashley & Orenstein 1998: 318). He considered, for example, the questions of gratitude and gift-giving, the constitution of social relationships in different forms of dyads and triads, for example, and the more specific relationship forms of friendship and marriage (Simmel 1950). However, he discusses only little about the actual relationship between the people within those forms. He points out that similar content can be found in various forms and that one social form can encompass different contents. This justifies formal sociology that is characterized not by a certain subject, but its aim is to make abstractions of social reality (Noro 1996). Thus Simmel's approach is valuable for understanding the formation of social

relations, but it offers few analytical tools for the study of their content. However, when discussing certain social forms he sometimes offers valuable insight for understanding the basis of bonding, although that may not have been his focus. This is true of his classic essay “The Stranger”, which he considers an inquiry into the spatial organization of society and not a characterization of social relationships (Simmel 1950). Herein, I will only consider his analysis of the stranger to the extent that I find it helpful in understanding lived relationships. “The Stranger” offered much insight in my analysis of estranged family relationships (Sub-study II).

Simmel’s (1950) contribution to understanding social relationships in “The Stranger” lies in his analysis of the qualities or elements that work as the basis of a relationship. He distinguishes them as either *general* or *particular*. The *particular* position of the stranger in the group is determined by the fact that the stranger has not originally belonged to the group and imports qualities ‘which do not and cannot stem from the group itself’ (ibid. 402). Hence the original group can only have certain *general* qualities in common with the stranger, as opposed to people organically related to each other, whose bonds are based on the commonness of specific or *particular* differences. The essential question then is whether the relation is particular in its essence and could not take place between other people with similar general qualities, or whether it is more general and could happen between some similar others, as well. Hence, ‘the stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of national, social, occupational, or generally human, nature. He is far from us insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us.’ (Ibid. 406). The relationship to the stranger then is not personal; it is general, which adds an element of contingency and coolness into even a warm relation to a stranger. Simmel points out, however, that even the most personal and intimate relationships have a trace of strangeness. Sometimes people even in a close relationship realize that a similar bond could perhaps take place between some other people. (Ibid.)

Simmel’s insightful analysis illuminates the foundation of any relationship in which the question of their particularity and generality is a relevant. This foresees later discussions on social relationships which tend to stress the *particular* side of the social bonds. I will next consider some of these more recent models for understanding social relationships.

3.2 More recent contributions to the question of the social bond

Derek Layder has contributed to general sociological theory and inquiry in various ways in the past decades. Layder (1998: 110) offers a distinct specification of the dual character of social relations when he points out that all social relations contain both socially ‘reproduced’ and free-form aspects. On the one hand, social relations reproduce and reflect the character of the already established social systems in which they are embedded (ibid.). People always work within the constraints and enablement of social relations (cf. Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994) as they draw upon

the resources that flow from them and the positions, powers, and practices in which they are implicated. On the other hand, social relations contain aspects that are open-ended in particular encounters and both allow and demand creativity from the participants. Layder suggests that the more the setting is socially organized, in terms of a formalized set of objectives, the more likely it is that the reproduced relations and practices will permeate the content and specific encounters within the setting. He also notes that creativity and open-endedness is not literally free-formed, as both the symbolic interactionists and phenomenologists claim, but that it is free-formed merely in relation to the social system, as it does not stem from the system. (Layder 1998, 110–111.)

The idea of social reproduction has not been very popular lately in sociological thought. Sociological inquiries are naturally always influenced by the prevailing *Zeitgeist* and social change. While classic sociology was occupied with solving the problem of the social order, and considered bonding only insofar as it was relevant to social integration, more recent theorists have been keen to understand the bond in its own right and to describe the logic of the relationship between particular people. Individualization thesis has been powerful in the sense that it has shifted the focus of inquiries from the level of the social system to that of relationships relevant to particular individuals.

Perhaps the most famous characterization of the social relationship in recent sociology has been the work of Anthony Giddens (1991) on the notion of ‘pure relationship’. As one of the central proponents of the individualization thesis in sociology, Giddens suggests that contemporary personal relationships are ‘pure’ in the sense that they are not anchored or embedded in the external conditions of social or economic life. It is typical of present day sociological theories to not aim at general and abstract definitions of the social relationship. They instead tie to a more specific context, in the case of Giddens: the personal life. He suggests that contemporary relationships are detached from social systems and free-formed. The pure relationship is sought only for its own sake and for the sake of the satisfaction it can bring to the partners involved. It is reflexively organized in an open fashion and involves the self-examination of both partners connecting to the reflexive project of the self. This is indicated by questions like ‘Is everything all right?’ and ‘How am I?’ (Ibid. 91). In the pure relationship, external anchors are replaced by commitment in a historically new way. A committed person recognizes the tensions intrinsic to the relationship, but is nevertheless willing to decide to be committed. The other bases of the pure relationship are intimacy and mutual trust between the particular partners. (Ibid. 88–98). Giddens then proposes an all-embracing shift from the social to the personal in the organization of the relationship.

The pure relationship has been both welcomed and criticized. It has been embraced by other proponents of the individualization thesis for being able to account for the growing weight individuals have in contemporary social life. In the recent decade it has, however, also received a substantive amount of critique from sociologists studying personal relationships. Virtually unanimous criticism points out that although individuals have more to say in organizing their lives and

relationships, empirical inquiries show that individuals actually live lives that are more relational and less individualized. They have to adjust to a number of necessities that anchor relationships in external conditions (for example, Jamiesson 1998; Smart & Neale 1999; Williams 2004; Brannen & Nielsen 2005; Smart 2007; Widmer et al. 2008) The criticism is definitely apt, but without going into the details of the debate herein, it is still important to note that even if the notion of pure relationship exaggerates the extent to which personal relationships have been individualized, it is not wise to reject the concept of the pure relationship altogether (see also Roseneil & Budgeon 2004). The extent to which bonds are or are not 'pure' is an empirical question, linked not only to the relationships themselves, but also to their embeddedness in different social settings (these are examined in detail in Chapter 6.2).

Another theorist on the social bond is Thomas Scheff, who approaches the issue from a different perspective. His interest does not lie in characterizing the social change, but in understanding the bonds between people at the micro-level. Scheff (1990: 4) considers the maintenance of bonds as the most crucial human motive – in his view, this is seldom discussed (cf. Elias 1978: 135). He suggests that secure social bonds are the force that holds our society together. He claims also that the collective counterpart of the social bond, social solidarity, remains in effect a 'black box', because even Durkheim did not specify its content or discuss the structure or nature of 'normal' social bonds. Scheff proposes the generation of a detailed model of the social bond that would specify at least some parts and connections within it. He proposes that a 'normal' social bond involves what Goffman calls 'reciprocal ratification' from each of the parties that are 'legitimate participants' in the relationship (Scheff 1990: 6). Drawing from Goffman's work Scheff goes on to develop his model, with emotion as an important component of the social bond. His emphasis on emotions is different from the classic notion of emotions in which some bonds derive from emotions, but the social bond is not all understood in terms of emotions (cf. for example, Durkheim's 'creative effervescence' and Schmalenbach's 'communion', see the earlier section). Scheff bases his model on the concept of attunement: a mutual understanding between participants that occurs both at the mental and emotional levels of the bond. Attunement does not mean a conflict-free relationship, but rather it means that even in a conflict the participants are able to take each other into consideration. In this way even a conflict can be constructive and serve the purpose of change and mutual adjustment. When the maintenance of the bonds ceases to be an issue, there is no attunement and conflicts become destructive and threaten the relationship. (Ibid.)

In his later book "Emotions, the social bond and human reality" Scheff (1997) further explains his model of the social bond as a relationship between a particular self and a particular other. Scheff consider the bonds to be in one of the three states: attunement, engulfment and isolation. Attunement as mutual identification and understanding is central to the model. Scheff holds that attuned bonds are secure and involve a balance between the viewpoint of the self and the other. Threats to secure bonds come in two different formats; either the bond is too loose (isolated) or too

tight (engulfed), respectively. Isolated bonds result from mutual misunderstanding, distance or rejection, while engulfed bonds the self is subordinated to the other and accepts the other at her own expense by rejecting parts of herself. (Ibid., 76–77.) His model of the social bond is dynamic, because he considers the states of the bonds to be in motion: at times there is mutual understanding and at other times there are misunderstandings (Scheff 1990: 10). The use of language can be taken as a cue about the state of the bond between people. Scheff (1997: 100) focuses on the use of pronouns – I, you, we and it especially – and the relative weight given to them as indicators of the state of the bond. Scheff’s model is analytically flexible enough to be able to account for different kinds of bonds, and comprehensive enough to offer actual tools for empirical analysis (see Sub-study III). It pictures human life as profoundly relational – drawing from Norbert Elias’ notion of *interdependency* as the most central feature of social life.

Elias developed his relational sociology in explicit opposition to the classic tradition of sociology, Weber in particular. Elias (1978: 120) felt the main problem of Weber’s analysis was his claim that action could be purely individual and non-social. Elias brings some important insight here. Although sociologists presume a borderline exists that designates the areas of the individual and the social, there is, in fact, no answer to the question of what actually forms the dividing wall between them. Elias concludes that such a notion of the individual originates from confusion of the ideal with the (empirical) ‘fact’ that we are all born as infants that have to be fed and protected by others, who then only slowly grow up. Even as adults we live interdependent lives with others. (Ibid.)

Elias hits the mark with his criticism, but Weber does not only assume the idealized Western notion of person (see discussion in ‘On the notion of self’) in his distinction between the individual and the social, but also builds the definition of social relationship on the theory of action. This narrows even further the scope of relational features his definition is able to cover. Namely, his notion of relationship presumes action, and hence, (individual) agents. Although Weber (1947: 92) suggests sociologists should also address the irrational, he perceives it as a deviance of rational action. This implies that rational action is seen as the reference point in understanding social relationship, which in turn suggests the ‘normal’ social relationship is also rational in terms of either its ends or means. However, I argue it is not reasonable to consider conscious action and its means and ends as the sole or even the primary element of a relationship. Such a presumption fails to see those sides of both people and bonds that lack mutual action and perhaps deliberate action, but that still bind people together. In fact, such bonds do not only happen between people, but they break the presumed divide between the self and the other that are among the basic premises in, for example, Weber’s sociology.

In some cases of biographical disruption (see Sub-study I), and other situations of dependency, the other may be oriented to the self even if the self is not capable of agency. Moreover, in such situations the essential element of the bond is not captured by the notion of action, but by something more emotional, more personal, accompanied by something normative rising from the particular social setting the

relationship is developed in. By no means does the person lacking the sense of agency cease to be a person or her or his relationships to others cease to be social relationships. In fact, I argue that a relationship that survives that kind of situation goes beyond the notion of a person as a bounded, active and intentional agent and is 'more bonded' (Somers 1994: 622) than most other relationships. Such situations show the binding connection in a relationship that cannot be examined through the lens of action alone. This study suggests that the extent to which participants in a relationship are in fact either bonded or mutually oriented *in action* is an empirical question which indicates the dynamics of that specific relationship as opposed to being a defining feature of all relationships.

Elias (1978) developed a dynamic notion of bonds as part of his figurational⁹ sociology. Elias is very sensitive to historical developments and social change, but he considers human interdependencies should be the very heart of the sociological inquiry in all times. He states that human interdependencies have one or two universal features. In his view, it is not necessary to determine where our need for emotional response from the other originates, but it is clear that 'people look to others for the fulfilment of a whole gamut of emotional needs' (Elias 1978: 134). He discusses these affective bonds via the concept of emotional valencies. The concept of valency originates from chemistry and is defined as 'the phenomenon of forming chemical bonds' and as 'the number of atoms of hydrogen that an atom or chemical group is able to combine with in forming compounds'¹⁰. For Elias valency refers to the very primary way people are directed towards others via deeply affective and personal bonding. He pictures a person as having many valencies at any given time. All these are directed toward other people: some are already firmly connected with certain people, while others are free and open, and search for people with whom to form bonds. He offers the example of losing a loved one as a simple example of the durability typical of the elementary emotional bonds between people. When a beloved person dies, it is not an event in the social world outside the survivor. It is not even an external event that is felt inside. Rather, the emotional relationship is to be understood more radically: losing a beloved means the survivor has lost a part of herself or himself. This can be understood via the valency that has been attached and fixed to that person. When the person dies the valency is torn out and an integral part of the self and 'I-we' images have been broken off. Moreover, as a result, the particular configuration of all the survivor's valencies is altered and the balance of the web of relationships has changed. (Ibid.)

Elias' insight into the dynamic interdependency between both people and their relationships is captured well in the notion of valency. In fact, Elias goes on to say that as a result of the broken valency, some previously marginal people may become much closer, while other relationships that had a special role in the relationship with the deceased person may cool off. (Ibid.) This was apparent in the incidents of

⁹ Elias (1978) has used both terms 'figuration' and 'configuration' interchangeably. I prefer the term 'configuration' that has been adopted by some researchers in the field of personal life (see Widmer & Jallinoja 2008).

¹⁰ See Free Dictionary by Farlex: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Valencies>

biographical disruption examined in this study, where the whole web of relationships was often reconfigured (see Sub-study I). His contribution to sociological theorizing on the social bond was to stress the importance of personal interdependencies and emotional bonds that he felt knit society together. He is then among the first sociologists to emphasize the personal as a person's particular valencies and web of relationships, instead of the social as something general or universal beyond particular people. To Elias, 'particularity' means that a person's valencies and bonds differ from everyone else's. To understand 'a whole range of widely spreading interdependencies' requires assuming the 'I' perspective (Elias 1978: 137). Elias uses interchangeably the concepts of human bonds and social bonds and further divides these into affective or emotional bonds and economic or political bonds. The way he approaches social bonds is different from the classics in three ways. First, he stresses the dynamic and transforming nature of relationships, instead of seeing them as social 'things' or entities (see also Emirbayer 1997). Second, he considers bonds in the particular context of wider configuration of relationships, and third, he suggests bonds to be understood from the 'I' perspective, accounting for how that specific person feels.

Sociological literature on social relationship is somewhat scattered, but by no means non-existent, as Scheff (1997) appears to suggest. This gap may be due to Scheff's explicit focus on emotions rather than the 'social' element of the social bond – the aspect that most sociological contributions, unlike Scheff, consider primary. This analysis of personal relationships has considered both. Before presenting the research materials and discussing methodology and analysis, I pause for a moment to consider the choice sociologists have to make regarding the way in which they see the social world, including selves and bonds, consisting primarily in substances or processes.

3.3 The choice between substantialism and relationalism

In his "Manifesto for Relational Sociology" Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) identifies the fundamental dilemma facing sociologists as the choice between substantialism and relationalism, i.e. whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily of substances (as static 'things') or processes (as dynamic, unfolding relations). Although both viewpoints have their own rationalities, each inquiry is directed by the choice of a point of view that inevitably colours the way in which the world is seen. Like Elias (1978), Emirbayer (1997) points out sociological dualisms, such as 'individual versus society' and 'structure versus agency', propose substances of various kinds. In the substantialist viewpoint these 'things', 'beings' and 'essences' are seen to constitute the fundamental units of not just reality, but also inquiry. Conversely, the relational (or 'transactional') viewpoint is interested in the processes, action and interaction, rather than 'things'. It further argues that the participants of these processes are not entities, but that they emerge through these processes. (Ibid.).

Many classic contributions to sociology have pictured the social world as substances, such as ‘social facts’ (Durkheim 1951 [1897]), ‘social entities’ (Tönnies 2002 [1887]), or (bounded) ‘individuals’ (Weber 1947 [1920]). In the substantialist viewpoint, such substances are considered pre-existing and self-sufficient, even if dynamic flows between them are examined (Emirbayer 1997). Emirbayer’s discussion of the substantialist and transactional viewpoints draws from the work of Dewey and Bentley entitled “Knowing and the Known” (1949), which I consider here only insofar as it contributes to the sociological inquiry at hand.

Emirbayer distinguishes between the two versions of substantialism identified by Dewey and Bentley. The first kind presumes *self-action* and conceives of ‘things’ as acting under their own powers (Dewey & Bentley 1949: 108; Emirbayer 1997: 283). These powers differ depending on the approach, but versions of self-action substantialism can be found both in methodological individualism and methodological collectivism. An example of the former is the rational choice theory that considers individual action as the elementary unit of social life, and an example of the latter is the notion of a norm-following individual as self-propelling entities that pursue internalized norms and conformity. (Emirbayer 1997.)

The second category of substantialism is that of *inter-action*. This approach is often confused with the more profoundly relational viewpoint. The inter-action approach does not presume that entities generate their own action, but considers the relevant action or dynamics to take place ‘among’ the entities themselves (Emirbayer 1997: 285: the emphasis original). The entities then remain fixed and unchanging throughout the interaction, each independent of the existence of the others. Variable-centred analyses tend to follow the logic of inter-action substantialism: interactions are examined, but they are not seen as transforming the substance of the entities. Herein, lies the fundamental difference between inter-actional substantialism and the trans-actional approach that Emirbayer names ‘relational sociology’. *Trans-action* does not assume a final attribution to the elements or other detachable entities. Dewey and Bentley (1949: 201) solve the long-existing controversy between idealistic and materialistic (ontological) explanations by eliminating an a priori ontological reference and placing the question in the context of inquiry rather than ontology. In the trans-actional or relational approach, the very units involved in transaction derive their meaning, significance and identity from the transaction where they have dynamic and changing roles and positions. The basic units of analysis then are not the constituent elements of reality, but rather the dynamic as an unfolding process. (Emirbayer 1997; Dewey & Bentley 1949.)

Taking the relational stance has far-reaching theoretical implications, as it throws open central concepts of sociological analysis, those like ‘power’ or ‘agency’ to an extensive reformulation. Reconceptualizing the idea of agency, for example, from a transactional perspective would mean to view agency as inseparable from the unfolding dynamics of situations and especially from the problematic features of those situations. Agency is ‘agency *toward* something’ by means of which actors

can enter into the relationship with surrounding persons, places, meaning and events. (Emirbayer 1997: 294.)

The trans-actional approach proposes similar shifts from given definitions to open ones regarding all sociological categories of relevance. However, the very practice of theorizing tends to freeze the picture of social life when it attempts to define some of its main features conceptually. I consider Emirbayer's (1997) "Manifesto" an important meta-theoretical contribution that shows how, in fact, many theories of social relationship are not capable of grasping the full *relational* nature of social bonds, but rather depict them as substances or as movement between substances ('individuals') that remain intact despite the relation. While Tönnies, for example, takes social relationships as social entities as such, Weber and Giddens for their part build their theories on the presumption of intact individuals who are not essentially bound to others in relationships, but who orient themselves as capable agents of action. Hence, in their thinking, relationships are simply something that is superimposed onto the mutual orientation of individual actors, rather than the very reason of mutual orientation.

Even Scheff's (1997: 78) model of the social bond, which sees bonds as one of the three states: attunement, isolation or engulfment, is more inter-actional than trans-actional. It draws from Elias' relational thinking, yet applies it to the typification of social relationships as dependent, interdependent and independent. From this interpretation (if not necessarily true to Elias' original idea), Scheff goes even further and suggests that these three types correspond closely to the three levels of integration: too tight (dependence, isolated bonds), balanced (interdependency, attuned bonds) and too loose (independent). (Ibid.) It is here that Scheff detaches his theory from the relational viewpoint (in the transactional sense) and the open-ended, contextualized inquiry into the character of bonds. His account is based on the idea of balance between the perspectives of the self and the other and implies that the self and the other are detachable. In the attuned state, the bond means a dynamic connection between the bounded self and the bounded other, or at least this appears as the ideal for all bonds. In light of Emirbayer's agenda, this view is not relational. However, Scheff's 'relational' thinking is manifested in the other two states of the bond, which appear as undesirable. In the isolated state of the bond, the self and the other are too separate and bounded to form a bond with mutual identification. In the engulfed state, the self takes the viewpoint of the other by rejecting some parts of her or his self. The boundaries of the self and the other are by extension blurry, as they stand the chance of fading away. This happens, because the self 'understands and embraces the standpoint of the other' at the expense of her self (Scheff 1997: 77). In a sense then, Scheff proposes that the boundaries of the self and the other may shift, but his stance is normative. Instead of just describing the states of the bond as different levels of integration, he seems to suggest engulfment (dependence), for example, is a harmful state, in which parts of the self are occupied by the other. His vocabulary resembles therapeutic language (see e.g. Furedi 2004). Perhaps Scheff unintentionally reproduces the individualistic notion of self elaborated by Mauss (see 'On the notion of self'). In a sense then Scheff (1997)

seems to propose a relational reality (trans-actional stance), and yet pursues bonds between intact selves (inter-actional, substantialist stance). Regardless of its focus on bonding, his model is committed to the idea of the self as a bounded entity. It has added prescriptive elements to the Elias (1978: 121) notion of relationity which saw people formed through their bonds as ‘rather open, interdependent processes’.

This study began with a trans-actional approach, studying the relational processes of the self and bonds. My first focus was on the processes of bonding as generated by an event of biographical disruption (Sub-study I). Fuhse (2009: 52) points out that empirical networks (or configurations of relationships in my case) as analytical constructs can be based on two relational levels of inquiry: on transactions, on the one hand, and on expectations, on the other. In Fuhse’s view anything that ‘happens’ in networks can be subsumed under the notion of ‘transactions’, but it is the expectations that explain *why* they take place (ibid.). In the case of biographical disruption, transactions between the wounded selves and their significant others were the various interactions, flows of support (emotional, financial, concrete), and other dynamics people signified in their narratives. Significance was in the narratives linked to transactions (like support) or an unexpected lack of these transactions. While transactions are *what* happen between people, interpersonal expectations offer explanations as to *why* transactions occur (ibid. 52), and also why they do not occur. It is vital to realize that expectations may concern non-transactions, as well as transactions. In other words, there may be a strong expectation that some people do not get involved, as for example, is often the case in kin relationships that are disrupted by divorce, which divides loyalties (Castrén 2008).

Naturally people and relationships also differ, with different expectations from different people, but expectations are not simply personal. Fuhse’s (2009) proposes that expectations are part of ‘the meaning structure of a network’ (or a relationship) that consists of expectations and definitions of ‘identities’ (or in my vocabulary, selves) and bonds both at the subjective and at the social level. Expectations are constructed in light of previous transactions by defining their meaning, and this in turn leads to further transactions and so on. Fuhse sees expectations not as principally subjective *or* social, but as interpersonal ones that are embedded in concrete relationships. They embody personal, socially embedded elements, but also wider cultural blueprints that may for instance stem from the cultural understanding of relationship categories that link certain expectations to certain kind of relationships (e.g. friendship vs. love) (Fuhse 2009; cf. Somers 1994.)¹¹

The logic of my inquiry into the bonds between people was very close to the suggestions of Emirbayer (1997) and Fuhse (2009), although I did not use these terms in the sub-studies. I talked about events, processes, practices, dynamics and bonding between people. However, such a design allowed me to consider what Fuhse names ‘the meaning structure of relationships’ as an actualized one –

¹¹ I interpret Finch & Mason’s (1993) analysis of the development of family responsibilities to suggest a similar relational pattern in which certain commitments toward family members develop over time on the basis of previous commitments and negotiations between family members.

something already realized – instead of a focus on unrealized expectations and hypothetical or latent meanings of relationships as certain kinds. My analysis points out that even though some dynamics appear typical to relationships within certain categories ('family' for example), or untypical to other categories ('fellow sufferers', for example), some other dynamics are common across different categories. I was then able to take notice of the extent to which the meaning structure in effect was consistent or 'categorical' in different relationships, and the extent to which the expectations were fixed to the relationships category producing certain dynamics (or disappointments respectively) within the category. I argue that in the cases in which the relationship categories have what I call 'worldly correspondence', which mean they are realized as specific kinds of dynamics, they have temporal and contextualized 'social ontology' (however open-ended and contingent it may be). This also means that the extent to which the empirical variance and particular dynamics outweigh any 'categorical' (or consistent) dynamics, the relationship category has no corresponding social ontology in light of relational realism: it does not produce certain kind of dynamics. In such situations the personal outweighs the social in the sense that I am using the terms.

The decision sociologists have to make between substantialism and relationalism in the study of social phenomena can be seen as an epistemological one (how to approach the world) rather than an ontological one. Ontological questions are essentially empirical (however fluid they may be) or as Dewey and Bentley (1949: 202) suggest, they can be converted into logical ones which are occupied with what takes place in the conduct of inquiry, as opposed to the world itself. If the aim is to study bonds between people, an ontologically-fixed starting point does not open up enough analytical space to examine them in an open-ended manner. For this reason the categories such as the social self or the social bond are not useful in a relational analysis of personal relationships, as they conceal relational processes instead of unravelling them. This is the motivation for an anti-categorical point of view: it allows for a comprehensive analysis of bonds, and an appraisal of the extent to which relationship categories may have social ontology (cf. Martiskainen de Koenigswarter 2006; Yesilova 2009).

Relational viewpoints have become more common in the studies of personal relationships both in the UK and continental Europe (Widmer et al. 2008: 5). The rise of the study of the sociology of personal life in the UK (Smart 2007) marks a radical shift away from viewing 'the family' as an entity to a trans-actional or relational approach to personal relationships. A few contributions and conceptualizations have cleared the way for this more open-ended way of understanding people's relational lives.

Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason's (1993) book "Negotiating family responsibilities" and David Morgan's (1996) notion of 'family practices' are among the most influential re-conceptualizations of family life that have opened up the way for more radical suggestions. Finch and Mason (1993) view family responsibilities as open-ended processes in which responsibilities to kin develop, not from any given set of rules, but rather through explicit and implicit negotiation between individuals.

They argue that commitments (and expectations) even to kin are created, although moral dimensions and accumulated commitments constrain negotiation. (Ibid.) Morgan's (1996) notion of family practices was a similar endeavour to see family relationships in a more open-ended way. He suggested family is best understood as connections and the quality of these connections as opposed to a specific 'thing': 'the family' (ibid. 186). Family practices hence have a theoretical status and involve recognition that practices of families could be seen otherwise. Moreover, they are perceived as something not necessarily tied only to relationships that we tend to understand as family, but to any relationship given the personal or moral significance usually associated with family. It is important to note that significance of some practices does not necessarily mean that they are positive evaluations, but rather something difficult to ignore from the participants' point of view. (Ibid.) Both of these conceptualizations of family life stress particular processes between people and the diversity of arrangements. In Finland this approach has come to be known as 'critical family sociology' (Forsberg & Nätkin 2003; Yesilova 2009).

More radical suggestions have been made in the areas of queer theory, non-conventional intimacy and friendship studies. Roseneil & Budgeon's (2004) idea of 'the queering of the social' suggests that it is no longer warranted to assume that personal lives are family-centred, even among the heterosexual majority. In their book "Rethinking Friendship" Spencer & Pahl (2006: 33) note that one of the major problems in the study of personal relationships is that terms like 'family' and 'friends' do not have shared or stable meanings. Hence studies on personal relationship cannot rely on categorical labels. One of their key arguments is that the boundaries between family and friendship are blurring. They examine the whole of significant relationships as 'personal communities' that are defined in subjective terms through choice and commitment. (Ibid.)

Even if the preceding approaches view relationships in slightly different ways, they all understand people's lives as relational and dynamic. They hence suggest that we should try and develop concepts that have the analytical flexibility to fully grasp the different dimensions of relationships. The concept of relationality, for example, acknowledges that 'people relate to others who are not necessarily kin by 'blood' or marriage, thus allowing considerable flexibility in the approach' (Smart 2007: 48–49). Mason (2004) adds that relationality should not be solely understood in a positive light, but rather in open-ended terms, for sometimes relationality drives people away from draining relationships. Although the notion of relationality is flexible enough to cover different kinds of relationships, it is too general to be utilized in the analysis of actual relationships. In my study, I take up the 'relational' or 'figurational' viewpoint (Elias 1978; Emirbayer 1997; Somers 1994; Fuhse 2009) in the analysis of personal relationships. It is, however, important to note that the trans-actional approach is a theoretical stance, an idea that can be realized in various ways (using various methods) in the empirical study. Although it presumes breaking down sociological dualisms such as the one of structure and agency (Emirbayer 1997), even data concerning transactions tends to stress one side of 'the duality' more than the other. Personal narratives 'invite' the narrator to depict her or his

actions as deliberate and to make sense of them (stressing the active agent component of bonds), whereas the configurational approach examines the embeddedness of relationships and tends to depict transactions as parts of a chain of interdependency (stressing structural features) (see Widmer et al. 2008; Castrén 2008: 247–249). I have kept this in mind in my analysis and designed the sub-studies to address the same dynamics from different viewpoints in order to identify some of the interplay between the more structural and agent-driven sides of relational dynamics. This effort is specified in more depth in later chapters. Now it is the time to present the research materials and explicate the process of analysis that more explicitly depicts what I mean when I identify my approach as relational and anti-categorical.

4 The study

4.1 Materials: personal narratives and the configurations of significant others

The sub-studies all draw from the same qualitative sample of 37 adult Finnish women and men, a data set that I collected in the years 2004–2006. The data is twofold. The first set of data contains 80 qualitative in-depth interviews in which the significant life events and experiences of the interviewees are narrated mainly from the subjective viewpoint of the self, although factual information about the discussed events was also inquired after (e.g. When did that happen? Who was involved?). I call this part of the data the ‘personal narratives’ (cf. Mason 2004). The second set of data includes detailed relational data on all of the relationships cited significant during the interviews, in the form of questionnaires and individual maps of significant others. The two levels of data respond to questions on two different levels. While personal narratives present people’s lives as subjective stories which are told and made sense of; the configurational data identifies the actualized relational dimensions and dynamics of the significant relationships and positions each relationship in the context of the whole configuration of significant others. By ‘actualized’ dynamics I refer to the relational processes and events that have already taken place (as opposed to any hypothetical ones). An important feature of the analysis is the cross-fertilization of the two kinds of data. Mixing methods in this way is not eclectic, but purposely derived from my interest in identifying the dynamic complexity and multidimensionality of interdependent lives. This requires an innovative palette of data generation (see Mason 2006).

I conducted 80 interviews from the sample, which included 24 women and 13 men¹². The interviewees were 30–76 years old, heterosexual¹³ and lived in the urban or suburban settings of southern Finland. The interviewees differ in terms of their educational background, occupation and life situation. Nine of them had completed compulsory education only, 11 had pursued further education for a vocation, and 16 had received an academic degree. Some held prestigious occupations as judges, academic experts and government officials, while others did manual work in maintenance, industrial kitchens and the like. Some were employed, while others were retired, unemployed or at home with their children. The majority of interviewees (23/37) was married or in a co-resident partnership and had either minor (17) or adult (13) children. Some interviewees lived in more alternative life

¹² My original aim was to interview about 20 persons of each gender, but finding men who were willing to participate was so laborious that the sample ended up having more women.

¹³ Sexual orientation was identified from the narratives in which intimate (even sexual relationships) were discussed in length. However, in the spirit of the anti-categorical imperative, sexual orientation can primarily be seen as sexual and intimate practices, as opposed to an exclusive category. Moreover, some of the significant others of the interviewees were non-heterosexual, and the relationship with these intimates was narrated at length.

configurations as solo, as the sole adult in the family in some cases in close connection to friends.

Each interviewee was recruited differently from diverse contexts. Some were explicitly recruited because they had experienced disruptive events, while others did not have such a focus. I wanted to include different kinds of people with varying life experiences and situations in order to identify certain dynamics of the personal relationships that were not specific to any certain event or situation. Through an investigation of the particularities I hence searched for some commonalities and patterns in the dynamics and narratives. As Goffman (1990b[1963]: 174) suggests, such a choice may be poorer in accounting for details, but richer in analytical depth.

Close to half of the interviewees were recruited from support groups, through a therapist or from organizations that provided support for people in challenging life conditions. Finding volunteers who were willing to be interviewed was laborious, and I sought them out via several organizations, in my own network of contacts, snowball sampling, and internet columns. I made direct contact with some people who had been interviewed in the media about their alternative lives. The sample is purposefully heterogeneous and intended to include a variety of life situations in which the role of others is accentuated, without forgetting people in more stable situations (cf. Spencer & Pahl 2006: 214). Research permission was granted from a hospital psychiatric unit, and this provided me with access to both patients and family members from an outpatient unit, 12 people in all (6 family members and 6 patients). These included people taking part in ‘depression school’ helping them to cope with their depression, family members of mentally ill patients taking part in a peer support group, and people seeing a therapist to deal with disruptive events like difficult divorces, burn out, or ‘trauma’. My anti-categorical stance meant that I did not consider these people as ‘patients’ or ill, but simply as selves with certain kind of experiences. I did not consciously categorize people who were diagnosed with acute ‘psychiatric disorders’ or were hospitalized or had long-term illnesses that prevented them from participating in social life (such as work and close relationships).

People who had experienced the loss of a spouse through premature death or abandonment were located through my own contacts and from a website. Other interviewees were found, for example, through a voluntary family organization that organized peer support for stay-at-home mothers with small children. I used my own contacts and snowball sampling to ensure that the sample was heterogeneous enough to encompass a variety of relational dynamics. My own contacts were crucial for locating male interviewees, who were much more difficult to find.

Each interviewee was interviewed two to three times¹⁴. The interviews lasted two to three hours on average. The first interviews concentrated on the most focal issues

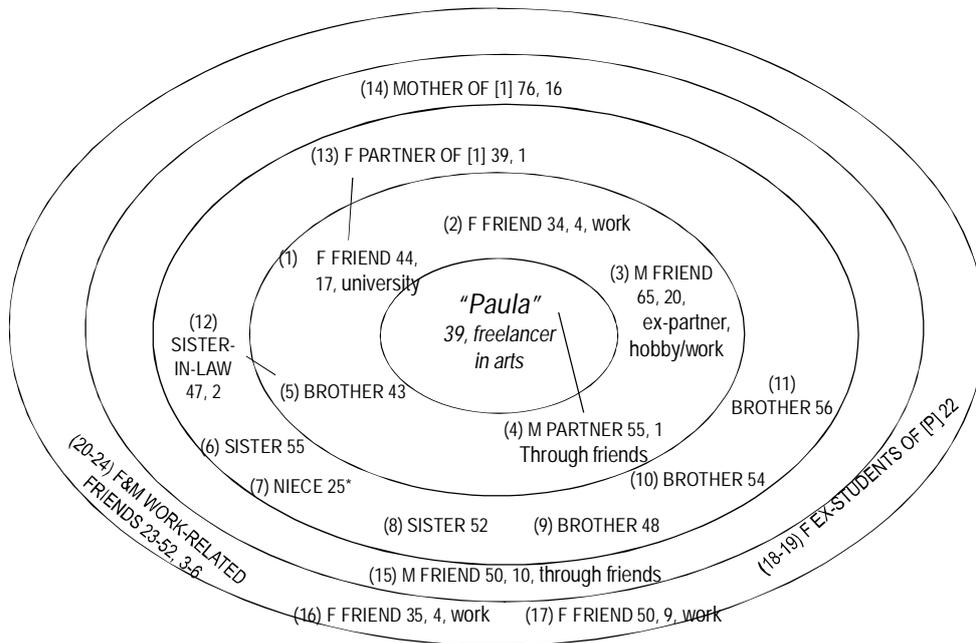
¹⁴ One male interviewee was interviewed only once and was therefore an exception. After several unsuccessful attempts to arrange a second interview, it became clear that he was very pressed for time as the sole parent of three small children and the effort was abandoned. The interview was however very productive in the sense that he was very open and outspoken about his life. It lasted over three hours and covered more of his life than most of the other first interviews.

like recent biographical events and experiences, the current life situation, and the people involved. The discussed themes were introduced with 'name generator' questions, such as 'Who was there?', 'To whom did you turn to when that happened?', 'How did they respond to the situation?', 'Were there any people you could talk to about your feelings, who were they?', 'Were there any people you were disappointed in then, who?'. The idea was to induce narratives about *particular* people of personal significance to the interviewee, and a list of names. Later on, important people who were not yet on the list were added. The questions were designed to produce narratives rather than simple responses and in most interviews they were successful. Moreover, they were designed to induce an anti-categorical perspective by focusing on significant events and processes and through them, significant others and personal life.

At the end of the first interview, I gave each interviewee a blank circles map (see figure 1) with four circles. The placement of significant others in the concentric circles was meant to clarify the degree of significance of the people who were cited in the interviews as 'close or otherwise important'. The interviewees discussed their significant others while filling out the map. The differences in the degree of significance between different people were discussed in the interviews. Interviewees were told that they could make changes later if they felt the need. In most cases, the people cited as significant were important enough to 'make it' to the map of all currently 'close or otherwise important people', but this was not always the case. Also, the narratives revealed that many people had everyday sociable contacts with acquaintances that they did not count among their personally significant people. Some people also had important support contacts that were not cited as significant bonds.

It is important to note that the circles maps characterizing the entire configuration of significant others revealed remarkable differences between individuals. The size of the configurations of significant others varied extensively, with the smallest indicating just 11 people (including some professionals) and the largest listing 57 significant others (including some aggregates, such as work colleagues and support groups, each counted as one). The typical size of the configuration of significant others was between 15 and 30 people. A typical composition of significant others included a partner and children, some family, some friends, some family and friends of the partner, and some work colleagues or leisure activity acquaintances. Some of the less personal, but significant connections were often mentioned as aggregates: baseball-mates, neighbours or a peer group for new mothers. Differences among them were drastic: while most of the configurations were family-centred, some were more friend-centred, and some had very few people at all.

The relationships "Paula" (39, freelancer in arts) finds close or otherwise important



Each significant other is indicated by a number to maintain anonymity. The category of the relationship (friend, brother, niece, etc.) was assigned by the interviewee in the open-ended questionnaires. F or M refers to gender, the first number after each person is their age and the second is the duration of relationship in years. The context in which the relationship was formed is indicated last, unless obvious. The lines linking people indicate which persons form a couple.

Figure 1. An example of a circles map of significant others.

Only two kinds of relationships, if they existed in the interviewee's life, appeared in each of the configurations of significant others in the study sample: the partner and children. The partner, whether a resident partner or a living-apart-together partner was a significant other even if the relationship was of a poor quality. It appears that partners and children are also culturally expected to be listed as significant. Even if close (blood) relatives were almost always included among the significant others, in some cases of estrangement, parents or siblings were left out (see Sub-study II). Differences in the logic of significance appeared as well. While some people listed all the partners of their siblings or children, for instance, and coupled them together, others listed only the part of a couple that was important to them personally and did not mark the partner. Some included all the partners of distant relatives, like nieces and nephews, even if they had never even met the new partner. The partners of significant others that were friends in the context of dyadic or group gatherings were typically left out or located much further out on the map. Although it was rare that someone would cite an extended family member and omit their partner (if there was one), it did happen. The most notable cases had to do with

daughter-in-laws or son-in-laws that were left out of the circle of significant others, even if they were present at all the family gatherings. Hence the configurations of significant others showed remarkable differences both between people and between the commitment shown by the interviewees to relationship categories (i.e. the cultural expectations regarding relationships). It was apparent that some people were more individualized and self-driven in their notion of personal significance; while others were more family-driven and defined even the personal significance of their significant others according to the institutional or cultural criteria that stress group membership more than personal feelings. Such differences are analysed in the cases of the most intimate relationships in Sub-study IV.

After the first interview I also gave people questionnaires that inquired after detailed information about each significant other and their relationship. The open-ended questions concerned the demographic and social characteristics of the significant others, their place of residence, the history, nature and duration of the relationships, frequency of correspondence, and the felt emotional closeness on a scale from one to seven (one indicating the closest possible bond, and seven not emotionally close, but in some other way significant). These questions identified the formation and content of relationships and put each relationship into perspective by showing personal relationships as a whole. The questionnaires were filled out in the interim between the first and second interview, when they were returned.

The second interview typically took place some weeks after the first, but in a few cases it was later due to difficulties finding a suitable time. The second interviews were directed by the circles map and the narratives shared during the first interview. Several interviewees also told that they had begun to think about their lives more intensively after the first interview and now wanted to share their thoughts or to make some changes or additions to the circles map. Each significant relationship was discussed, including the origin and significance of the relationships, their practices and changes, their ups and downs, and possible conflicts or disappointments. The interviewees were also asked whether they had had any experience with estrangement from family or friends, or lost or broken contacts with people who had been very significant to them in the past. Interviewees were encouraged to explain any significant biographical events that came up in the interviews. Hence, although the main focus was on current and recent events and relationships, the interviewees were also asked to describe the origin and phases of their lives and its most important relationships. This was designed to reveal the relational processes through which later events and the nature of relationships had evolved. If the two interviews did not seem sufficient to cover the essentials of people's lives and significant relationships, a third interview was arranged. Some people had lived such colourful and intense lives that a third interview proved necessary. Others were just very talkative.

Interviews were conducted in several places: people's homes, in a quiet room at the Department of Sociology (now Social Research), or at the outpatient clinic from which part of the interviewees were recruited. One interview took place at the interviewee's workplace in a quiet room, and two others took place in quiet public

cafeterias. The choice of location was left to the interviewee, in order to make participation as easy and comfortable as possible. In order to get an impression of at least some of the contingent features of the interviews and the potential short-term changes, I interviewed seven people (for the third or fourth time) again, one or two years after the first interviews. I did not do temporal analysis, as the changes in the configurations were not remarkable, but I used the material to put the interviews into perspective as parts of ongoing relational lives.

In all of interviews, people were encouraged to talk subjectively about events and experiences that were significant to them, regardless of social expectations or desirability. Phrases like ‘Although it is not talked about much, disagreements with family or friends are quite common or ‘Most of us are disappointed with someone at some time’, or ‘Have you been badly disappointed with your significant others?’ were used. An effort was made to respond to all experiences sympathetically and refrain from speculation or judgement. I tried to take people’s narratives as they were told, simply asked some clarifications like ‘How did you feel about that?’ or ensured I had made a right ‘So you felt as if you were left alone ?’. I also asked for facts and background associated with the events.

In order to move beyond the mere narrative and satisfy the study’s phenomenological and relational objectives, it was necessary to win the confidence of the interviewees. For this reason I was interested in not only how the interviewees interpreted and told about their lives in the narratives, but also in the experience (see more on my epistemological stance in the following section). I felt it was important to confront people human to human, even if I was going to walk out of the situation with interview material and use it in my study. After beginning the research process with a methodological interest in disruptive events, I had to endure loss and illness in my own personal life, which meant I was attuned to disruptive experiences at the time. Perhaps that made me better able to hear painful experiences and induced people to tell me about theirs. I later wondered how openly people had talked to me and how I had been able of absorb all of those stories about agonizing experiences like loss, illness, abandonment, violence, depression, self-destruction, and loneliness. Of course I heard stories of loyalty, gratitude, love, reconciliation, negotiation and deliberate kindness as well.

I feel I succeeded in attaining the interviewees’ confidence in all cases but three. I conclude that those three interviewees were either more reserved or more careful about what they said. Especially those interviewees who were recruited from psychiatric help and peer support were very willing to tell their stories, including many traumatic details that would have most likely been concealed in an ‘ordinary’ encounter. I felt I was counted in as part of the organization in which such issues were ordinary or their discourses worked as a common ground for discussion (I explain my view of the relationship between experiences and discourse in the following section). With those interviewees who had been recruited outside the therapeutic settings, the more difficult and controversial issues often came up later, in the second interview.

I once 'succeeded' in attaining the interviewee's confidence to the extent that he shared such troubled feelings that he became very distressed and we had to stop the interview. This incident made me better aware of the runaway depths that I induced people to go to in the interviews, leaving them alone with their feelings when we had finished. In some cases I talked to the psychiatric staff of the unit where I conducted interviews to get support and make sure I was not crossing any limits with their patients. Once I offered to act as a mediator between a self-destructive interviewee and the psychiatric staff which was not aware of her current situation, because as another human being I could not leave the person isolated in her situation. The troubled situations were discussed later with the interviewees and I made sure to be more sensitive in the following interviews.

I was very explicit about the fact that I had no therapeutic training and was only there to collect data, but many people said it was therapeutic to talk to me. One interviewee even felt that it had helped her to confront the first anniversary of her husband's death. Others said they felt odd disclosing details about other people behind their backs. Some thought it was cruel to place their intimates in order in terms of their importance. One older woman almost refused when I asked her to fill out a map of her significant others. She was not comfortable with the idea at first, and I said that she didn't have to do it if she felt that way. In the end she wanted to fill out the map, but made sure her husband did not hear what she said about their sons. I attributed her discomfort in listing her sons and their families to the poor relationship she had with one son and his family. The relationship was difficult and wounding due to constant conflicts with her son's wife. During the interviews, many people cried, lowered their voices, or lamented their fates, sharing a whole range of emotions. The interview situations were often very intense for both the interviewees and the interviewer. Many times I was impressed by the ways in which people endured their burdens and suffering, and were still able to find sense in life.

The data set includes 79 recorded and transcribed interviews¹⁵ comprising over 2000 pages of narratives from 37 people. It also includes configurational information on the composition of the whole web of the interviewee's significant relationships. It includes 37 circular maps of significant others and 35 questionnaires concerning these others. The recording of one interview failed and two people never returned the questionnaires. The data is extensive and could be analysed from several angles to respond to various kinds of questions. This study concentrates on those dynamics and bonds that disruptive events and experiences generate as especially significant or constitutive to the selves. It could be claimed that I analysed only the most intensive relationships or moments in the data. Sub-study IV is the exception in the sense that it does not focus on the analysis on any disruptive situation, but examines the relational organization of the closest relationships as they were at the moment of the interviews. However, the analyses of earlier sub-studies show how they appear as constitutive to the self in disruptive situations.

¹⁵ All interview material was transcribed by a trained transcriber. The transcribed data was organized into 37 folders, one folder for each interviewee, in which each interview was saved separately as a Word document.

4.2 Methodology and analysis

The study draws from two qualitative research traditions: narrative (and biographical) research on the one hand and the configurational perspective on the other. Combining two different traditions is both a strength and a challenge of the study. While the narrative approaches depicts people's lives from a subjective point of view, configurational analysis is interested in revealing 'real life' dynamics and interdependencies between people. In this study the former rises from a phenomenologically-oriented interest in selves, and the significance of events rather than the actual facts of that event. Importantly, narrative approaches also take an interest in the ways in which selves make sense of and interpret their lives (Lawler 2002). The latter proposes a more 'realistic' epistemology, conventionally-speaking. At first this may seem like an unlikely or incoherent epistemological combination, but the notion of narrativity offered by Somers (1994) acts as a link between the two. It opens up a view to such 'relational realism' in which both levels alternate and together contribute to the unfolding of lives as relational. Combining these two approaches also means examining personal narratives as embedded in wider webs of relationships, and relationships as essentially also narrated ones. It involves a systematic investigation of the formation and interconnectedness of all relations indicated as significant, and cross-fertilization of the two lines of analysis (for examples of this kind of analysis, see e.g. Castrén & Maillochon 2009). However, the link between the 'networks' (or configurations in my vocabulary) and narratives is close: 'Networks are phenomenological realities ... Stories describe the ties' (White 1992: 65). In this sense the two lines of analysis empirically approach the very same subject, but from different analytical viewpoints.

The narrative research tradition has become rather popular in the past decades and entails quite different approaches to people's stories. While some researchers focus on the form or structure of the narratives, others focus on their content (Elliot 2005). This study does the latter. Narrative analysis is often used to study selves and identities (e.g. Somers 1994; Smith & Sparkes 2008; Lawler 2000; Budgeon 2003; Josselson 1996; Holstein & Gubrium 2000). However, as Smith and Sparkes (2008) point out, the literature that suggests that our lives are storied and selves narratively constructed is wide-ranging: narrative researchers promote different ideas regarding selves. In addition, while some narrative research regards narratives as such with no reference point to any external 'reality' (such as 'real' relational lives), others like myself are more interested in (narrated) lives than the narratives as such. The narrative perspective can be seen as one way to approach people's lived experiences (Josselson 1993; Smith et al. 2009: 197). I drew from phenomenological understanding that stresses the importance of subjective life and the process through which it emerges as something that one takes for granted (Holstein & Gubrium 2000; Schutz 1932). The phenomenological interest in narratives meant a nuanced analysis of particular instances of lived experience, but the notion of narrativity proposes a social ontology for the narratives. It links experiences and narratives to the 'real-life' relational processes through the notion of 'relational realism' that

makes the tension between ontology and epistemology, realism and constructivism, and structure and agency a productive one rather than troubling (Mische, *forthcoming*). Instead of presupposing something as ‘real’ a priori, whatever particular events or situations produce visible processes or actions (always grounded in the interpretations of relations) is seen as ‘real’ (ibid.¹⁶; cf. Emirbayer 1997; Dewey & Bentley 1949).

Margaret Somers (1994: 613–614) has suggested that narratives are ‘an ontological condition of social life’, as social life is itself storied. ‘Experience’ is not just represented, but constituted through narratives. A chief characteristic of narrative is that it ‘renders understanding only by *connecting* (however unstably) *parts* to a constructed *configuration* or a *social network* of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices’ (ibid., 616: emphasis original). Narrativity gives significance to certain instances or experiences, but does not make assumptions about their categorical order. Somers maintains that without emplotment, events or experiences could only be categorized, even though our action is not based on categories. Emplotment allows the construction of a significant network or configuration of relationships. Evaluative criteria, as another crucial element of narrativity, allow us to make qualitative and lexical distinctions among ‘the infinite variety of events, experiences, characters, institutional promises, and social factors that impinge on our lives’ (ibid., 617). A plot is thematic and the primacy of the narrative theme determines how events are processed and what criteria will be used for prioritization (ibid.).

In my study the over-arching entrance point to relational lives was that of significant life events, and even more specifically, disruptive events. They call attention to those others who have either expectedly or unexpectedly become significant to the self. It is important to note that by ‘significant’ I do not mean only relationships that are experienced positively, but also those that are sticky, messy (Smart 2007; Lawler 2008) or absent, but significant as such through longing or bitter feelings. I perceive the narratives produced by the research participants as ‘ontological narratives’ (Somers 1994: 618) that are ‘the stories that social actors use to make sense of – indeed, to act in – their lives’. They can hence be used to define who we are, which produces new narratives and also new actions. Narratives from this viewpoint are not only personal, but ‘interpersonal’. They ‘exist interpersonally as the course of social and structural interactions over time’. (Ibid., 618.) Such a notion of narrativity embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time. As Lawler (2002) notes, the significance of the narrative lies in the way in which links ‘the individual’ to the social world: even personal narratives must incorporate other life narratives, and narratives are produced by not just individuals, but are also socially circulated. Narrativity hence challenges ‘the myth of the atomized individual’ (ibid. 251) much like the configurational perspective. Somers (1994) highlights relationality as an analytical viewpoint, rather than a fixed

¹⁶ Mische (*forthcoming*) identifies the term ‘relational realism’ as first used by Charles Tilly, but fails to specify in which one of the numerous writings of his he discussed it.

category. It suggests that selves be analyzed in the context of relational matrices, because they do not exist outside them. Thus, the notion of relationality has analytical flexibility to see relationships as more or less bonded or the experience more or less constrained by them (ibid. 622).

The 'truth' of the interviewee stories is not only what is experienced, but also what becomes the experience in the telling of their stories to the other (Frank 1995: 22). Narration can hence also be seen as interplay between the self and the other in which the self simultaneously presents herself to the other while also making sense of her or his self. This may then produce new narratives and actions, as the idea of ontological narrative suggests. How might narratives which draw from cultural discourses then be experiences? It is, for instance, likely that people dealing with their agonizing experiences in 'therapeutic' settings make sense of their lives in reference to a 'therapy culture' understanding of personal life (Furedi 2004). People involved in other kinds of settings may use some other point of reference when talking about their lives and relationships or participate in the 'therapy culture' that has become one of the dominant paradigms for understanding personal relationships (ibid.; Maksimainen forthcoming). What is then personal or authentic about stories if they are narrated through certain cultural paradigms, such as the therapeutic understanding of personal relationships? My belief is that everything, because when a discourse it becomes the medium through which experiences are made sense of, the discourse is then incorporated in the experience. I concur with Frank (1995) when I say that I believe there is no essential gap between sensemaking, telling and experience. I do not regard experiences as fixed or simply residing in the interior of the self, but something rehearsed each time we talk about them. It follows that an interviewer can never fully grasp experiences in their entirety or learn the whole truth, but simply be witness to a moment in the ongoing flow of relational realities that include the experiences, telling about them, sensemaking and the new experiences that they produce. Furthermore, these processes of the (relational) self are firmly linked to 'real-life' relationships.

Somers further suggests the concept of 'relational setting' to link the notion of narrative identity (or self in my vocabulary) to the whole range of factors sociologists call social forces. Relational setting for Somers is 'a pattern of relationships', 'a relational matrix, a social network' that has a history, and must then be explored over time and space. In this study, the configurations of significant others were produced as a combination of the extensive narratives, the relational maps of all those people who were 'close or otherwise important' and the detailed information about these significant others and their relationships. For each level of the data, this *configurational information* acts as a relational setting. In the study this 'relational setting' is discussed at two other levels as well. Namely, I use the term *setting* in terms like 'the setting of family' or 'the setting of peer support' to indicate the context in which those relationships are generally understood. Within such settings very different kind of configurations may take place.

Where settings refer to the context that has a general cultural definition ('family' for example), configurations are specific webs of relationships with unique patterns

of interconnectedness and significance. *Relationship categories* are labels through which relationships within certain settings are classified. They can also be seen as cultural expectations that are manifested at the micro-level. I interpret the consistency of relational dynamics in the light of cultural expectations, although I do not directly address the cultural level in the analysis. The level of settings was included in my analysis and vocabulary as a solution to the common problem regarding categories: their existence cannot be fully disregarded even by an anti-categorical approach, because they are used by the interviewees. The notion of setting places them in an empirical (and cultural) context and allows discussion of the extent to which categories in certain settings do structure the particular relationships and the extent to which certain structures are non-categorical and yet 'real' in the micro-level of particular configurations. Therefore, in the research design, it is quite meaningful to ask how 'categorically' (in other words consistently regarding the cultural label and expectation) different (particular) configurations of people act in a certain setting, such as family.

The two levels of data stress different sides of relational realities. Whereas the narratives take the subjective viewpoint of the self as socially embedded, the configurational analysis examines the actualized relationships and the ways in which they are organized into wider webs of relationships. It is important to note that configurations of relationships constrain, but also assist or enable agency (Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994) that can hence be seen as embedded agency, rather than individualistic. From the two different viewpoints, narratives and configurational data examine the ongoing and dynamic relations of the selves to their significant others, in lieu of predefined categorizations (closed 'boxes') of relationships or phenomena (Mason 2006; Spencer & Pahl 2006; see also Budgeon and Roseneil 2004).

Configurational analysis goes even farther. By viewing the self and each relationship as a part of a larger chain of interdependency, it also points out the relational constraints that the agent does not realize or verbalize in the narrative. Configurational analysis enables the analysis of explicit practices and dynamics in the light of the relationship histories, their formation and micro-level contexts (see Castrén 2001). It enables the accommodation of various elements and layers of interdependence between (specific) people without relying on predefined relationship categories or ontological presuppositions about those involved. This combination of the two lines of analysis allows me to perform an anti-categorical analysis that can discuss questions such as the one of structure and agency, both understood in relational terms. It is important to note however that 'relational realism' in my research design does not postulate an objective relational reality that would look the same to the different participants. My firm belief and observation is that the same relationships are never the same for their different participants. 'Reality' seen from the configurational viewpoint actually means there is no sense in suggesting there even is such thing as the relationship as such, as each relationship and the wider configuration it is embedded in is to be examined from the 'I' perspective (Elias 1978). Whenever I discuss relationships and their dynamics I do

not view realities as fixed; instead I suggest a 'relational reality' that from the specific viewpoint of the narrator is real, although that reality is contingent in the sense that, in another time and setting, it could have been interpreted differently.

The analysis was designed to respond to more specific questions in each sub-study and was conducted accordingly. The first three sub-studies do not use the data in its entirety, but theoretically selected sub-samples. In Sub-study I, the 24 narratives in which biographical disruptions (Bury 1982), such as loss, serious illness and inability to work had taken place were analysed, and 12 of the narratives in which the disruptive event had occurred recently were central. I focused on actualized events and dynamics to keep the analysis at the particular level and analysed the different kinds of support and correspondence between people. I was interested in the link between the biographical event, the self and her or his bonds and the reconfiguration of them. Although I focused on the narratives, I used the configurational data to further identify the whole picture of each person's web of relationships as the concrete relational setting of the narrative. For example, when an interviewee talked about a friend who had been very supportive, I checked the history of the relationships, what kind of family or other kind of relationship the person had and how the relationship with the friend was linked to the entire web of relationships. This allowed me to consider the boundaries of family and friendship in actual relationships and their possible blurring in the particular circumstances in particular chains of interdependency (Spencer & Pahl 2006; see more details of the analysis in the sub-study).

In Sub-study II I analysed 11 narratives that included estrangement and conflicts between parents and their grown children. I examined these narratives in detail according to content-focused narrative analysis in which the particularities are examined as part of the entire narrative (Elliot 2005). I drew further analytical insight from Simmel's analysis of "The Stranger" (1950). This choice was data-driven in the sense that in the course of analysis the analysed dynamics just began to resemble those between the stranger and the original group. This choice was also linked to the anti-categorical agenda in which I wanted to look at familiar issues differently. Family is the most difficult research subject, because everyone 'knows' what it is. I decided differently, set aside the common understanding of family as a closely-bonded unit and focused on the opposite: family as difference and estrangement. This idea was provocative, but it was supported by the data in which estrangements were among significant events. I analysed those dynamics in which the general characteristics of the bond overrode the personal ones. Also here I concentrated on the dynamics between parents and their children, such as interactions, collisions and reconciliations, as well as experiences and reflections of them. I analysed estrangement as a process entailing different phases with different dynamics and reflected on the narratives in the configurational information of the current closeness and correspondence and the position estranged parents or children have in the configuration of significant others as a whole. I also analysed processes of reconciliation.

In Sub-study III I studied 22 narratives in which the narrator had taken part in some kind of peer support. These were people who had sought support from ‘fellow sufferers’ who had also experienced the same. The analysed peer support took place both in support groups organized around issues like widowhood, depression, mental illness in the family, or motherhood, and also in personal networks of people. The interview material on peer support was coded with Atlas-ti software according to inclusive descriptive themes and inclusive analytical themes. The analysis proceeded from the description of significant dynamics and personal outcomes of the interactions between the selves and their fellow sufferers to the more analytical elaboration of the social bond, which was understood in Scheff’s (1997) terms. Similar to Sub-study II, my focus was on certain bonds and their relational dynamics. I further elaborated on the different states of the bond, following Scheff’s idea of using the relative balance or imbalance of different personal pronouns as indicators of the states of the bonds. The narratives of support and fellow sufferers as significant were reflected on the configurations of significant others that only rarely involved these significant support contacts. This observation further depicted the logic of the significance of fellow sufferers which did not involve a bond between particular people, but proposed a more general tie.

Unlike in the first three sub-studies, in Sub-study IV I adapted all the configurations of personal relationships as my primary data source in order to identify and understand the dynamic formation and interconnectedness of the different intimate relationships. Personal narratives were used as a secondary data source, providing material for understanding the formation and interconnectedness of relationships from the subjective viewpoint that made sense of the relationships, their dynamics, and embeddedness. I analysed the formation of the most intimate relationships (those who were cited as the closest with a value of one on a scale from one to seven) into family-exclusive intimate configurations and inclusive intimate configurations involving also friends or members of family of origin. I examined all ‘possible’ categories in action that were potentially relevant in explaining relational dynamics. After a systematic analysis of the extent to which gender, educational level, age group, partnership and parenthood patterned the lived intimate relationships into exclusive or inclusive patterns I identified co-resident partnership (in the setting of family) as the most effective ‘ordering principle’ (Fuhse 2009)¹⁷. I then analysed the relational dynamics and boundaries of the most intimate circle, comparing two groups of people: those in co-resident partnerships and those outside them. The analysis showed how partnership constrains other relationships, with the exception of common children, by assigning them into further circles of intimacy. As a rule, it appears that partnership pushes intimacy from outsiders to the periphery. Configurational analysis focused on these particular relational patterns showed however, that some people push this empirical pattern and have alternative,

¹⁷ This empirical analysis is an example of how categories are ‘in action’ in the world. In the case of intimate relationships co-resident partnership has the strongest, i.e. the most categorical, effect on the particular dynamics. As an ‘ordering principle’ it structures particular configurations into certain patterns.

more inclusive intimate configurations, even when partnered in the setting of family. The combination of configurational and narrative analysis was used to analyse both (common) relational constraints (that took place across the particular cases), as well as particular patterns in which agency was used in constructing and maintaining alternative intimate configurations.

5 The design of the sub-studies and their results

My study was designed to examine personal relationships as a dynamic interplay between the *social* and the *personal*. My use of the concepts here is contextualized. I do not wish to account for concepts like ‘social’ or ‘personal’ in general terms, but rather anchor them firmly in the dynamics and processes I analysed. Hence, I use them as very fluid concepts pointing out consistent patterns in ongoing and constantly changing flows of relational dynamics (or transactions). In this context, by ‘social’ I then mean the ways in which different *particular* social settings and categories (such as ‘family’) *structure* specific bonds and *selves*. This is manifested in the patterns of interconnectedness between the self and different relationships, and further in the configurational patterns which particular relationships actualize. The analysis shows, for example, how ‘family’ as a category is in action shaping particular relationships in the setting of family into certain kind of patterns, and is hence in this sense more socially shaped or structured than, for example, friendship, that is a less ‘categorical’ relationship with less consistent patterns and more personal variance in relational dynamics. This ‘categories in action’ is what I have in the analysis also referred to as ‘ordering principles’ (Fuhse 2009), a term well suited for pinpointing those (however fluid) features that generate certain relational dynamics. Within specific bonds there is also the question of how bonded they are or ought to be, which in the context of relational dynamics tends to be contrasted with the personal experiences and agency. By ‘particular’ and ‘personal’ I then refer to subjective experiences and meanings and the extent to which the bonds are negotiable by selves and their significant others.

The sampling as well as the logic of the sub-studies followed this aim. This research process began with a theoretically informed interest, but also a willingness to adapt theoretical ideas to the empirical material. My eventual theoretical interest was then formed through the close reading of the data. Some of the sub-studies approach the bonds from the viewpoint of the personal (such as experiences) while others consider the social (bonds and configurations) as the starting point of the analysis. Two levels of data of the same relational lives allow such logic. Another prerequisite for analysing the interplay between the social and the personal is the anti-categorical approach that does not commit itself to a predefined understanding of what the social or the personal generates, but examines what they do and how consistent or alternative these (particular) patterns are in relation to the data. Approaching relationships both from the viewpoints of personal narratives and the relational dynamics is designed to allow the examination of *people and social categories in action, that is, to what extent particular personal lives and their relational dynamics are formed through agency (however embedded) and the extent to which they are socially structured or shaped by configurations, social settings and relationship categories.*

The sub-studies show how some relationship categories are more prone to generate ‘categorical’ dynamics than others and hence, to some extent govern the selves in even the most personal relationships. However, I do not consider selves

and their agency as asocial or pre-relational, even if in the analysed dynamics they often appear as such. I cannot stress enough that even if I have not always been vocal or clear enough about this, I am committed to relational realism (Emirbayer 1997; Mische, *forthcoming*) which does not postulate pre-existing entities who then enter the relational realm. Still in the context of relational dynamics the selves often *contrast* themselves from bonds and the social. The question of contrast and its inherent relationality is an important one and elaborated on further, for example, by Cooley (1957). I will discuss this more in depth in the conclusion, but in the meanwhile, I want to note that I sometimes talk about individuality or even more so about agency, and that both of these should be understood in their particular contexts as they appear in relational processes. This does not mean that agency or ‘individuality’ reside in the self as a fixed quality. I elaborate on this question more in depth in the final chapter.

As Smart (2007: 28) points out ‘personal life’ can invoke ‘the social, and it is indeed a conceptualization to be understood as part of the ‘social’, as the whole possibility of personal life is predicated by connection to others. In short ‘personal relationships are embedded in the social’ (ibid.). To clarify the point I just made above, I want to say that I agree with Smart, but still suggest that within the ‘personal’ (not just its embeddings) I find it useful to distinguish the (empirically) contrasting generators of the ongoing dynamics – namely those evoked by the social (configurations, settings and relationship categories) and those evoked by the personal, such as experiences, agency and such relational contrasts in which ‘individuality’, however relationally formed, is protected or in other ways manifested. Although Archer (1988: 80) has pointed out that in the absence of any autonomy (however limited), we cannot analyse the interplay, because there is not way of ‘untying’ the constitutive elements, even for the moment of the analysis. This does not have to mean there is a fixed boundary between the social and the personal (within the relational processes) or that it would not be permeated or transgressed often. Neither does it propose that agency, for example, resides within the self who can be capsulated from the relational sphere every now and then, as proposed for example by Weber (1947). It simply means that within the relational dynamics there are contrasts that are worth elaborating, as empirically speaking such motions make up the relational. To relationally understand agency, for example, is a conceptual challenge for sociology (also Emirbayer & Mische 1998), and I sometimes feel I have not been able to find proper alternative ways to discuss these important questions. In part the research process has been a constant process of conceptual elaboration and explication and I hope what I have said above clarifies my thinking even if it in some of the sub-studies has been less developed or vocal.

5.1 Sub-study I: 'Biographical disruption, the wounded self and the reconfiguration of significant others'

Sub-study I examines the actualized experiences and dynamics that take place between the selves and their significant relationships in a turbulent situation of biographical disruption. Such an incident stirs up the way in which important relationships have been lived before and creates a whole new logic of significance, as people react in unexpected ways. Family, for example, may not be there for you as imagined (Gillis 1996), while some previously insignificant or more distant people may step in as supportive. The sub-study draws mainly from personal narratives, but places them in the context of actualized changes in the configurations of significant others. Biographical disruptions are events and experiences that break the expected biographies of the self and the sense of self, altering their personal relationships in a wounding way (see Bury 1982). The analyzed disruptions include, for example, the premature loss of a spouse through death or abandonment and serious illness of oneself or a close family member. The chapter examines biographical disruption as a dynamic process of interplay between the self and her or his relationships. My analysis suggests that personal relationships become significant in a pronounced way, because the self as an agent is stagnated and in need of others. The self is relational not through the virtue of intentions, but through its neediness. In the sub-study, I analyze the wounding experience of the self, the mobilization of others such as families and friends in the acute situation of disruption, the normalization of the situation and the re-activation of the self as (a relational) agent with an intent to find new significant others to shape her or his social experience. These new significant others are often people who have had similar wounding experiences.

In Sub-study I identified five forms of bonding between the wounded and her or his significant others in the case of biographical disruption. These forms of bonding can be seen as dynamics between the selves and their significant others, some of which transgress relationship categories, while others are more peculiar to a certain category. Analyzing different forms of bonding side by side with relationship categories across different personal lives helped me to identify which relationships tend to be more 'categorical' (that is show more consistent empirical patterns) than others. The first form of bonding that was especially apparent in the case of biographical disruption I call *constitutive bonding*. It takes place when the other is fused into the self to the extent that the self is seriously wounded by losing the other. The self has directed and fixed an emotional valency to the lost other and does not only lose someone important, but a part of herself (Elias 1978: 135). In Cooley's (1967) terms, the other has been asserted as part of oneself, as often happens with people we love. Although Sub-study I does not explain which different features make the other constitutive, I note here that several levels of interconnectedness tend to take place with such others, including material bonds such as common property and finances, as well as common activities and life plans firmly linked to the self. The narratives about losing a long-term partner or child and its 'real' consequences

to the self indicate constitutive bonding. After losing a constitutive other, such as a partner, the lost constitution is sought for in others, often children. In such cases the wounded selves turned to their (minor) children to find their sense in life. In the sample, the instances of constitutive bonding took place between closely-linked family members, but in principle they could be any loved ones with whom an emotionally bonded whole with other levels of firm interconnectedness is formed.

The second form of bonding I call *maintaining bonding* and it takes place with others who mobilize themselves to support the self by offering practical and financial help that ensures the survival of the wounded and her or his family. Such bonding is most particular to families of origin, especially to the bond between parents and their adult children, often acting as a safety net for their members (Finch & Mason 1993: also Ritamies & Fågel 1998). This is true even though some families fail to mobilize themselves. Maintaining bonding is more pragmatic than emotional. In fact, between family members it is rarely accompanied by full emotional divulgence of the devastation of the disruptive experience. The close connection to family members seems to prevent people from confiding in each other (cf. Spencer & Pahl 2006: 111–117). On the one hand, the wounded selves protect their parents and siblings from getting too concerned and worried. On the other hand, it appears that concerned others (like parents in many instances) are often too eager to get the wounded person on their feet again and fail to give the necessary time and space to rebuild the self. This dual dynamic of close family bonds, especially with parents, was particular and showed a boundary-maintenance not found in other relationships. In some cases, maintaining bonding also took place between long-term trusted friends that stepped in to either supplement the support from the family or substitute for it. In such cases the bonding was often accompanied with emotional sharing. The analysis of the peculiarity of family in the dynamics made me interpret that the relationship between parents and adult children has a more ‘categorical’ social character than other bonds that seemed more fluid. In the case of tragic events and the need of support, family appears to be a rigid setting, especially when compared to friendship, that is more prone to diverse practices. Family was the only relationship setting in which membership in relation to the whole was characteristic and important in order to understand the particular family bonds. To examine how this whole is maintained and formed, Sub-study II was dedicated to family dynamics. More specifically, family dynamics in which an original family member (a grown child with an ‘alternative’ life) was rejected by parents who guarded the family ideals and identity. Through estrangement, the social elements of the binding nature of this membership apparent in these cases of biographical disruption were studied. Biographical disruption and estrangement cases may be seen as ‘special’ instances, but these situations make visible many of the dormant and hidden qualities of family relationships.

In the case of biographical disruption, I named the action of keeping distance as *avoidant bonding*. This was when closely-related people failed to ‘be there’ for the wounded (Josselson 1996), a source of great disappointment to the self. Especially between closely related people, avoidance was a wounding experience as such. The

wounded selves felt that their avoidant family members had failed them. When family members or close friends are expected to care, but are indifferent or keep their distance in a disruptive situation, the imbalance in the significance of the bond becomes visible: what is important to the self may not be as important to the other, or so the avoidance is interpreted by the wounded selves. Avoidant bonding also takes place in everyday encounters with acquaintances who may not know how to confront the wounded. That this avoidance adds to the wounds is further indicated by narration from the selves indicating that *sympathetic bonding* from remote acquaintances is very significant. Sympathetic bonding refers to a sympathetic attitude and bonding from a proper distance (determined by the nature of the bond). It is important as such, and contains the possibility for a new significant relationship.

Finally, *empowering bonding* involves emotional sharing and confiding about disruptive experiences. It was not typically found between family members, but with friends and fellow sufferers. Empowering sharing does not necessarily require a personal relationship; it can happen between previously unknown people who share the same momentous or 'traumatic experience'. The bond between fellow sufferers encountered in the setting of peer support is another 'categorical relationship' in the sense that it produces certain kind of dynamics peculiar to peer support. It is individualistic, rising from matching experiences of the self and the other: the sharing occurs at the level of the generalized experiences of selves who share the same fate. The empowering logic in peer support is not occupied with the peculiarities of the particular lives, but focuses on the common. Hence, in essence, empowering bonding can occur with anyone who happens to share the same experience. Empowering others legitimates the wounded self without intervening in the selves' lives. Even among friends empowering experiences were often related to similar life situations and experiences. Friendship appears as an intermediary and fluid category that in effect allows different kinds of bonding, whether maintaining, empowering or sympathetic, within a single relationship. Family is more prone to maintaining (or avoiding) bonding only and fellow sufferers narrated as significant in the case of biographical disruption are more prone to empowering bonding.

A lot of the research critical to the individualization thesis has shown that people live relational lives and that selves are relational rather than individualistic (Mason 2004; Widmer et al. 2008; Roseneil 2009; Smart 2007). The biographical disruption cases show how both wounding and rebuilding are relational processes. They also provide an opportunity to explore in depth *how* this link is anchored in the ways in which the selves bond with their significant others. The sociological gaze now turned to the micro-level dynamics of bonding across different relationships and suggests that the relationality of the self can be understood in many ways and manifested in various dynamics. Biographical disruption pictures selves as rather open (social) processes, as suggested by Elias (1978). Furthermore, in a situation where the self is wounded, the process is contingent on others. To use the words of Mead, biographical disruption wounds the active 'I' by putting the self into the socially determined and habitualized state of 'me', which is incapable of the agency needed in the altered situation. The wounded self stagnates. After maintaining by

others, the 'I' gains back its ability to reflect and act, and, subsequently to assume a new direction. Hence my analysis and interpretation suggest that the self is relational as such, but contains a reflexive capacity of agency through which the self can form meaningful and empowering bonds with others. The wounded selves are at the mercy of others to an extent, but after reclaiming some (however, minimal) agency many of them also actively *differentiate* among the different kinds of support received from the different relationships. This is especially clear in cases where wounded selves choose not to confide their feelings to their parents, who may be giving financial help and spending substantive amounts of time at their homes taking care of their children and households. I argue that even when wounded, contemporary selves often seek to protect their autonomy and try to manage their personal relationships accordingly, although naturally people differ substantially. Simmel (1950: 417) identified differentiation as a social development in which the number of relations rises, which loosens the social unity, and frees 'individuals' from 'jealous delimitation'. The dynamic here is similar, although it appears to originate with agency rather than as a general social development beyond micro-level analysis. I discuss the question further when reviewing Sub-study IV, in which differentiation was one of the central dynamics discussed.

Reflected in the context of the entire study, Sub-study I is the most important in several ways. First, from the viewpoint of the selves it anti-categorically analyses the entire configuration of their significant others. Disruptive events do not only produce dynamics specific to such situations, but also make visible some of the foundational characteristics of different bonds. This sub-study works as the basis and the sounding board for all the other sub-studies. The analysis of bonding with particular significant others revealed the practical importance of different relationship categories as observed in the occurrence of intense disruptive events. In Sub-study I the settings in which certain clear patterns of bonding were generated were those of family and peer support. The bonding that took place between parents and their grown children (as the most consistent or 'categorical' of relationships in the family setting) and that with fellow sufferers appeared to be mutually exclusive. In Sub-studies II and III these two relationship categories were more closely examined to delineate the dynamics of particular bonds within in order to tease out both consistent characteristics and diversity. These sub-studies take the categories of family (Sub-study II) and peer support (Sub-study III) as the starting point and analyse both the peculiarities and differences of bonds within the relationship category – family and peer support respectively. While family appears as a community-like whole in which membership or being part of 'the same' is important; peer support presumes distinct 'individuals' who remain distinct through their involvement with others. Hence, the analysis of family bonds then examines families as social wholes and reflects the dynamics between this binding whole and the autonomy of its members. The analysis of the bonds between fellow sufferers, in contrast takes the viewpoint of the self, and examines the personal outcomes of the bonds with fellow sufferers at the level of the self. Sub-study IV focuses on the configurational analysis of the closest relationships that appeared in Sub-study I as

constitutive. From the viewpoint of interdependency of different relationships and their relational dynamics, it, among other things, offers another perspective on the very same relationships that were analysed in Sub-study I.

5.2 Sub-study II: 'Rejected Autonomy. Estranged family bonds and alternative life paths of grown children'

This sub-study concentrated on examining the bond between parents and their grown children which was identified in Sub-study I as the most 'categorical' relationship with the least variance across particular cases. It examines the contrast and tension in the category of family as a social mechanism that seeks unity in lived family relationships during the fierce processes of estrangement between adults and their grown children. Whereas Sub-study I approached relationships from the viewpoint of personal experiences of biographical disruption, Sub-study II took the category of family as its starting point, and then sought to understand its effect on estranged bonds between parents and their grown children. In such situations demarcations peculiar to family emerge (Jallinoja 2009) and are fiercely in effect as a struggle between binding membership and personal autonomy ensues. In such extreme situations the social glue between parents and their children is about to unravel or has already unravelled, due to the parents' rejection of the alternative life paths of their grown children. The sub-study draws from interviews of 11 Finnish women and men with narratives of such estrangements. They occurred for many reasons, but the common ground for different sources of estrangements was tied to the thwarted expectations of similarity between family members. Parents and their grown children ended up in different social groups. The reasons behind the estrangements were one or more of the following: (and often an accumulation of them): marriage to the 'wrong' person, such as a member of a rejected minority, the choice to forego further education, mental instability, divorce and coming out as gay. These all produced similar dynamics, as they were subject to parental disappointment and rejection. Each led to conflict between the binding membership in the family and personal autonomy.

The analysis examines the constitution of the bonds as an interplay between the particular (or personal) and social elements that bind or unravel the relationships between parents and their children. It shows how even the close (blood) tie between parents and children cannot be taken for granted as given, as these bonds are also vulnerable to estrangement. The analysed estrangements took place due to a stark disagreement over the alternative life paths of grown children – ones that differ from their parents' expectations. Moreover, such paths often compromise the social reproduction of the family which I suggest as an important source of difficulties. Parents invest in guiding their children towards 'the right track' (Jones et al. 2006), which in middle class means higher education, among other things. Most parents consciously expect such social features to be reproduced by their grown children. But grown children may instead adhere to their autonomy, even if it threatens their

relationship with their parents. The analysis draws from discussion on the social reproduction of the family (Bourdieu 1976; de Singly & Cicchelli 2003) and from “The Stranger” of Simmel (1950) that looks at the relationship between the stranger and the members of an original group.

Simmel (1950) defines *the stranger* as someone who arrives today, but does not intend to leave, which means that the distant and unfamiliar has now become close to the original group. The stranger’s position is defined by the fact that he or she does not originate from the group and brings elements that are not and could not originate from the group. Simmel (1950: 405) suggests that the original group can only have certain *general qualities* in common with a stranger, as opposed to people more organically related to each other. The bond is then based on the commonness of specific differences from merely general features. ‘The stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of national, social, occupational, or generally human nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us.’ The counterpoint to these general (or social, as I have called them) features are ‘individual elements that are exclusive to the particular relationship’. (Ibid. 406.)

Although choosing use the concept of *the stranger* in the analysis of family – a group in which sameness is perhaps more relevant than difference – is provocative, I consider it as apt when it comes to estranged family bonds. The idea behind the anti-categorical imperative is to not fix the nature of the studied phenomena as something specific, but to look at it with an open mind from the viewpoint of processes. I wanted address family simply as ‘a subset of the social in general’ (Morgan 2002) and to look at it differently, from a new perspective. The empirical subject was fascinating for someone interested in understanding family, as in estrangements, difference is present in a setting in which much more similarity is expected. My choice was to analyse the dynamics of difference in order to be able to say something about the setting. Simmel’s general (or social) and particular (or personal) qualities then offered an analytical device for the study of estranged family bonds. Namely, when divested from the expectations of social similarity and the enduring bonds peculiar to family, estranged bonds between parents and children strikingly resemble the dynamics between Simmel’s stranger and the group.

The analysis opens up a view to family bonds as social bonds (as opposed to personal ones) that derive their meaning not only from the micro-context, but from the wider social world and its categorizations (also de Singly & Cicchelli 2003). The rejected partners of the children are treated as strangers, but in the process of estrangement some of the children become such outsiders themselves. Dissolving the personal and social features of family bonds reveals something about their constitution (however fluid it may be). The analysed collisions do not rise from personal insults or differences, for example, but rather from the more general contradiction between the expectations of parents and the autonomy of their grown children. In the instances examined here, for example, the struggle over the kind of partner the child can take is not necessarily due to the precarious character of the partner, but from the partner’s membership in a socially shunned minority group,

like Roma or immigrants that represent a different culture and ethnicity. Results suggest that the bonds between parents and children may be filled with social expectations that only emerge when threatened, but in some relationships become a condition for the continuity of the relationship. The analysis shows how even a grown child of one's own can become a stranger when a deep contrast between the expectations of the parents and the adult choices of the child emerge. Even contemporary families (see also Sub-studies I & IV) tend to be binding units with certain social expectations, even if this is not as obviously apparent as it was in the past.

However, I do not suggest that social reproduction expectations exhaust family bonds from personal attachment. In most cases in the sample estrangements do not last forever. Then over time a process of reconciliation of the different viewpoints is initiated. The sub-study proposes that the dynamic constitution of family bonds encompasses both personal and social elements. Estrangements in families due to the alternative lives of their members suggest that one of the peculiar qualities of family bonds is their resistance towards their members' autonomy, as they tend to limit or even reject it. This is manifested for instance in the socialization of children into the same social group through binding membership. Moreover, in the case of a rejected partners of the children, the struggle between the two families – the family of origin and the immediate family of 'one's own' – reasserts this interpretation. It appears almost impossible to belong to two families that represent contrasting social groups. Yet, research shows that the process of reconciliation is proof that many contemporary families also recognize their members as 'individuals' who can negotiate their commitments (Finch & Mason 1993: 60, 167). Contradictions such as these within family bonds made it appropriate to ask whether the essential character of contemporary family bonds has become the struggle between the binding family relationships and the autonomy of its members.

Sub-study II was published in a book about family boundaries and the ways in which families respond to anything strange or unfamiliar which enter their realm. The premise of the book was the category of family (Jallinoja 2009). My aim too was to begin with this category, but to look it from the unexpected angle of estrangement. Reflecting on the sub-study now, I feel I failed to address my position vis-à-vis the category of family explicitly enough and that the sub-study may suffer from theoretical ambiguity. The sub-study I provided empirical evidence of the relationships within the category of family as the most consistent or 'categorical' kind of relationship with respect to the actualized forms of bonding in the case of biographical disruption. It also suggested that the bond between parents and children was the most particular of all family relationships (see also Jallinoja 2008). Yet I was committed to exploring in depth what family in this specific analysis of estranged bonds meant, and how the analysis would contribute to our understanding of family as a quality of relationships or a form of relatedness that involves not just dyadic relationships, but some kind of a whole (however fixed or fluid). I consider family as *a certain setting* of relationships. In later discussion I further clarify the link between the category of family and relationships that takes place in the setting

of the family. I suggest that family is a quality of relationships that tends to go against autonomy, but that some lived relationships follow this logic more, others less. From this angle, it can be asked whether this makes those (lived) families which do allow individuality *less family* or *non-family* in their quality. This anti-categorical stance which allows differentiation between the origin of relationships and their quality also implies that relationships taking place in some other settings can, in their quality and practices, be more family-like than some of those in the setting of family. I mean here bonds outside blood and marital relationships that adopt dynamics that the analyses shows are typical of family. Hence, in principle I do not wish to tie family to any specific setting or to 'real' family relationships (cf. Jallinoja 2009). Instead I regard the question as an open-ended empirical question.

Utilizing the concepts of Simmel in an analysis of relational processes is a theoretical challenge because although they have the analytic flexibility to identify and explain the relational dynamics, they are meant to the analysis of spatial instead of temporal relations. They are not committed to the relational viewpoint (Emirbayer 1997) or are they especially flexible in understanding processes and ongoing dynamics, although they effectively clarify the nature of relatedness in the case of estranged family relationships. Nevertheless, its contribution to understanding relationship dynamics is to show how social expectations through binding membership are in action shaping the lived relationships in the setting of family. Family as a unique quality of relationships between parents and children can not be fully disregarded, however, even if my own analysis shows that to some extent the bonds could be seen as any kind of social bond.

5.3 Sub-study III: 'Sharing the same fate. The social bond between the self and fellow sufferers in the context of peer support'

If the family bond between parents and their children seems to be a rather consistent relationship in terms of its binding nature, so does the bond between fellow sufferers in the setting of peer support. This is intriguing because the latter bond has the opposite foundation: in principle it is a voluntary and openly individualistic bond which one can enter into and exit from at any time, based on the needs of the self. Sub-study I found that some selves wounded by biographical disruption began to claim back their lost agency via actively searching for new significant others who offer a more favourable perspective of the wounded self than those closely linked to the self who may themselves be involved in the wounding situation. Already in the 1950s David Riesman et al. (2001[1950]) pointed out in their classic study "The Lonely Crowd" that peer groups and contemporaries had become a significant source of social signals that people need in order to be able to direct their lives. They called this kind of dynamic the other-directed social character. By 'others', Riesman et al. meant those belonging to the same social group in terms of their age and social class, and pointed out how an other-directed person in fact can in effect change himself or herself by changing the others around the self (ibid.). Although the setting

and the time is different, this dynamic can be interpreted as happening in the disruptive situations in which the surrounding 'signals' from 'like others' are not available. Selves confronting suffering and experiences rare in their social environment actively began to search for others 'like them'. In the setting of peer support, the peer relationship is not based on age or class, but the matching experiences. Yet, both in the classic notion of the importance of the peer group during youth and in the incidents of peer support examined here, the viewpoints of others are often needed to provide a sense of direction in uncertain phases of life.

The sample of Sub-study III was made up of repeated in-depth interviews with 22 Finnish women and men who had taken part in some kind of peer support practice. It contains personal narratives and information about the configurations of significant others and all of the support contacts in their personal networks. The sub-sample includes all kinds of peer support practices, both formal and informal, that attempt to convey help for those coping with agonizing events and experiences. In the instances of biographical disruption, sharing with others who had 'the same fate' was narrated as empowering. When looking more closely at people's personal narratives on the sharing with their fellow sufferers, different outcomes appeared. Not all people were empowered by peer support, some felt brainwashed and others remained 'untouched' by the meetings. It was the bond between fellow sufferers that mediated these personal outcomes, not on an idealized or principal level, but as an actualized bond involving varying dynamics between the suffering selves and their fellow sufferers.

The sub-study examined the social bond between the selves and their fellow sufferers who 'share the same fate' both in support groups and personal networks of people. Analyzed 'fateful' conditions included serious illness, depression, premature loss of a spouse through death or abandonment, infertility and family disruptions. The analysis suggests that selves colonized by agonizing life experiences confront social isolation in their personal lives and turn to their fellow sufferers in order to find understanding. A distinct kind of social bond is proposed between fellow sufferers. The bond between fellow sufferers requires a common experience powerful enough to mobilize people to interaction, which the social isolation of the suffering selves in their personal lives strengthens. The bond is based on the idea of mutual help from fellow sufferers, yet it is openly self-driven in the sense that people are expected to take part in it only insofar as it does convey help for the self. The bond actualizes in sharing at the level of generalized experiences and selves as opposed to particular ones, although the aim of peer support is to help selves cope better in their particular lives. In the analysis then, the bond appears as one essentially constructed of the same experiences, and of the same fate.

The further analysis of the different states of the bonds and their personal outcomes drew from Thomas Scheff's (1997) distinction of the social bond as one of the three states: attuned, engulfed or isolated. The analysis elaborated how the bond mediated the personal outcome of the sharing. Narratives suggested that when the self felt attuned to her or his fellow sufferers the sharing was self-empowering, but other consequences also emerged. In bonds that appeared as engulfed, the self was

sometimes overpowered by others. This manifested in narratives in which the experience of the self was later reflected on as ‘brainwashing’. Isolated bonds with no genuine feeling of sharing were too loose to break the lonely state of suffering. The sub-study then provided in-depth empirical understanding of the interplay between the fateful experiences, the social setting and its relational dynamics and the personal in the case of peer support.

It can be argued that the generalization of experience is not only the strength of the bond (in conveying help), but also its frailty. Scheff (1997) suggests that attuned bonds involve a balance between the viewpoints of the self and the other. Yet the generalization of selves that takes place in peer support blurs the boundary between the self and the other, as they are regarding the essential glue of the bond as the experience that is perceived to be the same. The risk of becoming overpowered by others is further increased by a loss of self (Charmaz 1983) and sometimes a desperate need for validation from others. In such situations the actualized bond to fellow sufferers is by no means voluntary, nor is the self attuned to herself or himself well enough to be able to leave when the group’s storyline does not fit her or his experience, becomes overpowering or is just not helpful. In this sense then, it is the actualized bond that mediates the personal outcomes, not the principal one involving the well-meant aim of support. Thereby, like the cases of biographical disruption and the analysis of family bonds both showed, the bond between fellow sufferers is best understood as actualized in a particular setting between particular people. In generalizing experiences the boundaries between the self and others are blurred, as is the sense of the (particular) self. It appears clear that the social code for peer support is not to create a tight bond between people, but to strengthen them as ‘individuals’. Regardless, the personal narratives show that sometimes fellow sufferers bond to the extent that the sharing is no longer supportive to them as selves. Moreover, the selves taking part in peer support are not bounded and intentional ‘individuals’ as presumed by the architects of peer support, but rather especially vulnerable to the others’ views of themselves (cf. Cooley’s looking glass self, 1957). The bonding between fellow sufferers is empirically contingent, but this contingency is more essential to understand than the principle and idealized nature of peer support.

This sub-study was published as a part of a special issue “At a crossroads: contemporary lives between fate and choice” that Anna Bagnoli and myself edited for the journal *European Societies* (Bagnoli & Ketokivi 2009). It went through the ordinary double-blind peer review practice of the journal. The aim of the special issue was to draw together thematically different qualitatively-oriented studies that rarely participate in the same discussions and to empirically address the analytical questions of personal ‘choices’ and the given. The dimension of fate, instead of structure, was introduced as the counterpoint to choice. This pointed out that not all constraints on personal choices originate from structure, some spring from the inherent unpredictability of life as such – an aspect that sociological perspectives are not well-equipped to consider in their analyses. The question of fate was also approached from the micro-level of selves, social relationships and situations as

something inevitably given, which from the viewpoint of the self is in both cases seen as something constraining personal life and action. (Bagnoli & Ketokivi 2009.)

Sub-study III analysed the bonds to fellow sufferers from the viewpoint of the self and her or his personal life. Fellow sufferers were the least likely relationship category to be included among the personally significant relationships, although some people cited them as significant. Still, the interviewees going through disruptive events and experiences repeatedly mentioned peer support. Investigation into the role of fellow sufferers was interesting for the definition of significant others. It shows that not only certain particular people can become significant in the maintaining of the subjective world of the self (Berger & Luckmann 1991), but that people who are not originally or personally 'significant' in this sense can also become so. The bond does not have to be personal, only the circumstance they share. After all, I argue it is the self that is reproduced in peer support. It could even be said that suffering selves are given a specific bounded setting where they can 'pour over' their wounds (cf. Meskus 2009), but are expected to walk out as 'individuals' with all the capacities associated with an individual (see the previous discussion). In an undisrupted situation, others with similar experiences would likely not become this significant, but act among the 'chorus' (Berger & Luckmann 1991: 170) in the maintenance of the subjective world of the self. In an unlikely or sudden situation where loss of self (Charmaz 1983) is experienced and such a 'chorus' missing, even previously unknown others may become significant in a pronounced way. Although the bond between fellow sufferers is often short-lived, it often is given significance beyond the bond. This sub-study suggests then that even episodic bonds (Bauman 1995) direct the self in significant ways. Reflecting back, I feel that this sub-study managed to elaborate peer support as actualized bonds well and added to my analysis of the question of the social bond. I do have some later reservations regarding Scheff's (1997) model of the social bond as a general one, but I still feel it worked rather well in the analysis of the bond between fellow sufferers. In later discussion I will however problematize and reflect on the ways in which Scheff labeled (and perhaps also viewed) the different states of the bond.

5.4 Sub-study IV: 'Partnership and the relational dynamics of intimate relationships'

Sub-study IV returned to the analysis of the closest relationships that in the case of biographical disruption were characterized through the notion of constitutive bonding. The constitutive others were those people who were so essential to the self that losing them almost literally broke the self 'into pieces' as described by a young widower (see Sub-study I). While Sub-study I used personal narratives as the main source of data, this sub-study took another angle. Instead of relying on what people said about their lives and relationships, the primary line of analysis in this study was the relational investigation of the *social embeddedness* of different relationships (see Feld & Carter 1998). Both the most intimate relationships and the boundaries

between familial and non-familial bonds were examined – a question Jamiesson (2005) feels has not been properly addressed by empirical analysis. I analysed how intimate relationships were embedded in co-resident partnership and ‘the family’ from the viewpoint of the relational dynamics between different relationships. McKie et al. (2005) claimed in their book “Families in society. Boundaries and relationships” that ‘the family’ was a flexible social category. Sub-study IV in part suggests otherwise. It examined the empirical question of how ‘categorically’ co-resident partnership and the setting of family constrain particular relationships at the micro-level. This study examined *the extent to which* partnership and the family setting do or do not structure close relationships into exclusive or inclusive intimate configurations.

The study systematically analysed 35 configurations of intimate relationships, focusing on the analysis of the closest relationships. The data includes those who have experienced a biographical disruption or estranged family bonds, those who have taken part in some peer support, as well as people without any special circumstances. The relational analysis addressed those intimates who the interviewees cited among their most intimate others (value one on a scale from one to seven) and investigated the patterns of exclusion and inclusion in a wider group of families and friends vis-à-vis the most intimate circle. I speak here interchangeably about close and intimate relationships. The comprehensive process of different analyses involved an anti-categorical elaboration of the structuring effects of each characteristic that has been depicted as relevant regarding intimate lives. Hence, the study systematically examined how *gender, generation, the level of education, partnership* and *parenthood* structured intimate configurations into specific patterns. The greatest distinction in intimate configurations was produced by the co-resident partnership which appears as an ‘ordering principle’ (Fuhse 2009) – a category in action that organizes intimate relationships into exclusive or inclusive configurations. I analysed the distinct intimate patterns of both those in co-resident partnerships and those outside them. In this sample, which can be characterized as ‘mainstream’ when it comes to family commitments¹⁸, co-resident partnerships are embedded in the setting of family, while more alternative intimate patterns take place outside the co-resident partnerships. First the common patterns within each group of people were analysed, followed by the alternative patterns *within* each group. Relational dynamics were further analysed in light of the personal narratives that highlight the significance of relations as parts of larger (personal and social) ‘meaning structures’ (Fuhse 2009; see also Lawler 2002).

The analysis suggests that living with a partner by rule structures intimate relationships into *exclusive family intimacies* involving only the couple and their possible children, while omitting all others (in 17 out of 23 cases). Other family

¹⁸ By this I simply mean that most people in the sample are heterosexual and married or in a cohabiting union. The minority are divorced or live alone. This is also the case in more general terms in Finnish society. Regarding family commitments, the sample is then better characterized as conventional than alternative, which explains the centrality of the heterosexual couple and the nuclear family in the analysis.

members and friends are assigned to more remote circles of intimacy, separate from the family. Within the group that had co-resident partners, this exclusive pattern was realized by all of the male interviewees, and all of the interviewees with only a compulsory education level. The intimacy with partners was often not narrated in terms of disclosing intimacy (cf. Jamiesson 1998; Oliker 1998), but rather as a tacit closeness along with a common focus on the family. Family-exclusive intimacies were often narrated as drained by child-rearing and some people searched for a dialogue of mutual disclosure outside the family setting. A few educated women kept up alternative configurations even when they were embedded in the setting of family. These alternative intimacies were interpreted as different from the family-exclusive pattern in light of their agency. These women had actively constructed and maintained *alternative intimacies* inclusive of their *own* close friends or family members together with their partners and children. One female interviewee even omitted her partner and children from the most intimate circle, which she reserved for herself only. These women managed relationships that were meaningful for them *personally* (as opposed to their entire nuclear family). These relationships confirmed these women as selves not fully embedded in their families, but also as distinct from them (cf. Oliker 1989).

This inclusivity was interpreted as an attempt to differentiate between the intimate relationships and to loosen what Simmel (1950: 417) has called the ‘jealous delimitation’ (of the family in this case) to allow more space for autonomy. In ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ Simmel (1950: 417) characterized a similar kind of link between differentiation and autonomy: ‘To the extent to which the group grows – numerically, spatially, in significance and in content of life – to the same degree the group’s direct, inner unity loosens ... The individual also gains a specific individuality’. In the context of the sub-study, the differentiation is not simply ‘a social development’ as in the case of the metropolis, but a ‘self-made’ group of differentiated intimates stemming from an active effort to shape a configuration that allows more space for the self than the family setting does, resembling the opening for autonomy. What is different is that each of the intimate relationships is close and personal, as opposed to impersonal relations of the metropol. This is possible because their differentiation is also physically real: they are very rarely all present at the same time. The differentiation of the intimate group of people is managed by the self. However, Simmel’s point regarding differentiation is also simply numerical: the more people, the less ‘jealous delimitation’ and hence also the more autonomy. (Ibid.) This I interpreted to be the point in the active inclusion and differentiation of intimates.

Among the group without a co-resident partner, there is only one clear pattern: The majority of them maintained *inclusive intimate configurations*. Half cited at least one friend among their closest intimates, together with their children, if any. This was in opposition to the group with co-resident partners, where only one in ten included a friend at this level. Parents and siblings were also cited significantly more often as intimates. The most inclusive patterns were from persons with no co-resident partners or children, but there were also women with minor children who

cited active friendships in the most intimate circle. In this group, personal affinities were emphasized, whereas social categories and expectations were downplayed. Some intimacies were genuine arrangements between kindred-spirited friends of different age, gender and sexual orientation that can be interpreted as a true example of the 'queering the social' and the hetero-normative relationality centred on the couple (see Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). However, the sub-study argues that maintaining inclusive intimacies requires both open-minded and relationally-oriented agency and personal networks that not all people possess. Some without a partner have intimacies that are exclusively oriented to their children, or in an extreme case, to no one (as in the case of a chronically depressed man). They show a strikingly different social profile from those with exclusive intimacies in the family setting. Namely, all the people without a partner and exclusive intimate pattern either suffer from depression or from some other personal hardship or have been rejected by their extended families. Their intimate configurations appear affliction-driven, and can be characterized by social isolation and a lack of primary relationships. They appear to lack the central position of exclusive intimacy, the partner, which in many cases, has in fact been forfeited in divorce. This finding further indicated the importance of the intimate couple as the bedrock of close relationships in the Finnish culture.

I argue then that regarding intimacy certain 'disembedding' like that suggested by Giddens (1991) has taken place in the Finnish context. Living outside the co-resident partnership certainly leaves more space for the inclusion of friends and other intimates, but in a family-oriented culture like Finland (Castrén & Lonkila 2004), it could potentially mean social isolation. There appears to be no other intimate 'community' available to those without partners. They have to construct alternative intimate relationships, because those with partners do not have intimate openings for them in their exclusive configurations, where other intimates are assigned to more remote stratum. Or they may end up in asymmetrical bonds in which they are seen as less important to those whom they hold primary. Structurally speaking, exclusive family intimacy as the sole source of constitutive bonding (cf. Sub-study I) can also be a fragile structure for even those with partners. Namely, my conclusion is that when the couple fails (whether in establishing intimacy or is dissolved), it appears that regarding intimacy the only one left to knit together the social is the 'individual' who has no access to intimacy in the existing configuration of relationships. This is even more problematic when we consider that the 'individual' may be simply an idea of Western thought, rather than reality (Ourosoff 1993; Elias 1978; also this analysis). Yet this disembedding of social structures presumes selves who are capable of constructing intimacy from relative isolation – an assumption that fails to recognize how 'individual action' derives from social embedding. In reality, many people are left in isolation.

Analyzing the very same relationships that were examined in Sub-study I made me re-evaluate some of my first study's interpretations. The first sub-study adapted the viewpoint of personal narratives when interpreting the dynamics between the wounded selves and others whom they felt were avoidant. I assumed the viewpoint

of the wounded and named the dynamic ‘avoidant bonding’. However, after examining the patterns of intimate relationships in more structural terms, an alternative or supplementary interpretation arises. Namely, if people living as a couple tend to withdraw from other intimates in order to devote themselves primarily to their (immediate) families, other relationships with friends or extended family members are by extension more remote. This is a dynamic common to the exclusive family intimacy practiced by most couples, which protects the boundary between the family and the other intimates. However, in a disruptive incident such as the loss of spouse, the state of these other relationships is not going to change over night. Moreover, if the mutual understanding between certain friends, for example, has been not to get involved in acute family concerns, the level of intimacy has to be renegotiated before an opening is made for more intensive bonding. Hence, people may not always be acting avoidant, but simply continuing the relationship at the same level. The notion of avoidant bonding is then a phenomenological viewpoint that could more neutrally be seen as isolated bonding. However, in the case of exclusive intimacies there appears to be no other ‘community’ that would act as a safety net in an incident of family disruption, although extended families often offer practical support. This may in turn be one of the reasons for the lost agency in biographical disruption – agency which instead of being individual after all has been embedded in the constitutive others who are now lost (see Sub-study I).

In more general terms Sub-study IV was committed to analyzing the interconnectedness of relationships in wider configurations. The study elaborated on the social embeddings of personal relationship more explicitly than any of the earlier sub-studies. It also discussed the relationship between structure and agency empirically and suggested co-resident partnership as the relationship category with the most effect in the empirical world of lived relationships. Furthermore, the way in which this conflicts with the cultural expectation of the primacy of the couple (cf. Castrén 2001; Castren & Lonkila 2004) suggests a link from the macro-level of the culture to the micro-level of the most personal of all relationships. Social expectations structure personal lives in many ways, but personal lives can also be shaped by agency (however relationally formed they may be). I will elaborate these questions further in the following three chapters. The next chapter, I depict the ways in which my study suggests personal relationships as embedded or disembedded in different social settings.

6 Personal relationships as embedded in social settings

Up until this point in the study, I have simply referred to ‘personal relationships’ as those bonds that the interviewees have cited as ‘close or otherwise important’ to them. I have also suggested many of these others to be their ‘significant others’ in the sense that they have a central role in the formation and maintenance of the self, as supported by the analysis (cf. Berger & Luckmann 1991: 170–171). Now I discuss what personal relationships actually are in more depth. I also consider what ‘the personal’ and ‘the social’ denote as sociological terms and how they are linked to one another. I begin by discussing the analysed personal relationships as embedded in specific social settings. This helps to specify how personal relationships can be seen as ‘social bonds’ – a question that is examined in depth in the following chapter. It also allows analysis of the extent to which relationship categories have social ontology that is realized in lived relationships that exist in certain social settings.

Social setting refers here to those forms of social organization (however informal) that the research participants are embedded in. The clearest references to such settings were made in relation to family (either the ‘family of origin’ stemming from one’s childhood, and/or the ‘immediate family of one’s own’ formed as an adult) and peer support. Friendships were rarely embedded in a single setting. Due to my focus on intensive life events in which the wider kin group was only rarely involved, kin was not analyzed as a distinct setting. The different relationships and their settings will be discussed here later, but first I want to pause and explicate the analytic relevance of the notion of social setting.

Social setting can be seen as an intermediary structure that places particular relationships in a context without prescribing them a given or categorical ‘ontology’. The concept of social setting in this study resembles Feld & Carter’s (1998) notion of ‘focus of activity’ which they suggest as an important source of embeddedness to any particular relationships, including friendships (cf. Giddens 1991). Foci of activity (or social setting in my vocabulary) can take varied forms, including families, workplaces and neighbourhoods, but all have *the common effect of bringing a relatively limited set of people together in repeated encounters in and around a setting*. The embeddedness of relationships in any certain setting *facilitates communication among shared associates*, which is also likely to create social pressure. On the one hand, the embeddedness of bonds limits free choice. On the other, it often means that social support is available. (See Feld & Carter 1998.)

Derek Layder (1998: 156–158) discusses embeddedness of activity (as ‘situated activity’) in social settings in similar terms in his framework of adaptive theory. He points out that it is important to distinguish activity (or in my case the dynamics) from the social settings in which it is embedded, because although these two facets of social life in specific instances seem intimately related, they also possess independent characteristics. He argues that there is a point in keeping them analytically separate, because settings represent pre-existing and embedded circumstances, while activities (or dynamics) also have their own inner dynamic that

has to do with the specific participants and their negotiations (ibid.; cf. Finch & Mason 1993). This is useful in my research design because, from the viewpoint of ongoing relational processes, social settings (however relationally formed) are already institutionalized and hence involve certain expectations and structures. Within these social settings emerge processes that are much more fluid and open-ended. Hence, analytically-speaking, specific dynamics and social settings represent different levels (or phases) of the social (at that cross-sectional moment of analysis). Next the analysis is linked to the understanding of social settings and particular bonds are considered as embedded in the settings of the immediate family of one's own, the family of origin, friendship (which is typically embedded in various settings), and peer support.

6.1 Bonds in the setting of 'the immediate family of one's own'

For most people in the study, the family that they have formed is the most binding setting of their personal lives. Herein, by the 'immediate family of one's own' I mean the one started at an adult age, with no distinction as to who it may contain. For the purpose of this study, it is simply those people with whom a self is more or less 'fixed' in her everyday life. The 'immediate family of one's own' may be a nuclear family, or it may be a family of friends with no children (as in the case of one woman in the study), or anything in between (like one parent and children or a cohabiting or married couple). In this 'mainstream' sample, 'the immediate family of one's own' tends to include a co-resident partner and/or children. What is relevant here is that it is the everyday setting in which 'family practices' (Morgan 1996) take place and in which people have become to form a whole as a mutually-oriented unit. The significance of some practices, as 'family practices' does not have to mean a positive evaluation, but rather something so foundational that they are difficult to ignore from participants point of view. Like Morgan I maintain that although family practices have something to do with relationships based on marriage, parenthood and kinship, they could also be defined in other terms. (Ibid.) I define it in terms of personal significance and everyday embeddedness.

At the empirical level *relationships within family settings draw from the category of family to a varying degree*. How consistent and particular the dynamics, practices and bonds that actual families live by is essentially an empirical question. By this I mean dynamics that keep recurring across different particular family bonds, and yet they are only rarely found in other kinds of relationships. Sub-studies I and IV suggest family bonds such as the ones with co-resident partners and children have a few particular attributes.

The first way in which the bonds in the setting of 'the immediate family of one's own' were particular was that in many instances they were *constitutive* to the self. In Sub-study I bonds with partner and children emerged as constitutive in the sense that family bonds had developed into a foundational whole on which the self depended on. People were not aware that these bonds were so foundational until a disruptive

event took place. This kind of constitutive bonding was not found in any other setting in this data. The self was not only wounded, but also lost 'the purpose' in her very *own* life. In many instances the self saw no reason to keep living. Another way in which the bonds with the immediate family of one's own emerged as constitutive was the way in which the self who had lost a constitutive other – a long term partner in this sample – searched for a sense of purpose in life from her other constitutive others, typically children. The self hence turned to the remaining members of the family in order to continue her or his life. After a loss like this, caring for children was considered constitutive, because it forced the self to go on without questioning whether there was any sense left in life.

In light of this finding, it seems very misleading to suggest that contemporary partnerships are 'pure relationships' (Giddens 1991). Instead, the case of unexpected disruptions show how selves do not remain bounded, but form a relational whole on which they become highly dependent. I do not mean dependence here in its psychological sense (although such dependence may take place), but rather 'social interdependency' in which the immediate family configuration becomes the anchor of both the self's everyday life, as well as, her sense of life in general. This is also manifested in some cases in the sample in which the self is so embedded in even an unsatisfactory marriage that she is unable to leave, even if she dreams of living alone. This blurring of the boundaries between the self and the other calls into question the validity of Scheff's (1997) model of the social bond as attuned, isolated or engulfed, as it does not seem to capture the basic character of constitutive bonds. When one's *own* sense in life is anchored in others, how can we define when there is 'a balance between the viewpoints of the self and the other'?

It seems as though Charles Cooley's characterization of the social self best explains the dynamics that this study discovered in disrupted immediate families of one's own. Cooley (1967: 824) suggests that loving others intensively or for a long time tends to obliterate our sense of divergent individuality and to assert these others as *part of the self*. This is essentially the same dynamic that Elias captures with his notion of emotional valencies that people direct and fix in particular others. When these others are lost, the self loses not only the other, but also a part of herself or himself. The tight bond between the self and the other may sometimes be engulfing, witnessed in the study from a mother of a mentally ill son who felt at one point as if her son was pulling her along into his illness. It seems insensitive and inappropriate to interpret the wounding from the loss of a loved one as engulfment – the only option available for a state of dependency in Scheff's (1997: 78) model. From this viewpoint, Scheff's terminology appears prescriptive rather than descriptive. It may not be intentional, but his classification system appears to pathologize love that blurs the clear boundaries between the self and the other. Another problem in Scheff's theory is that it does not understand imbalance between the self and other as a 'normal' state of the bond, not even in the family setting. It does not have the analytical flexibility to account for different settings in which the 'normal' states of the bond (this is Scheff's term) differ, as well as the extent to which it is reasonable to assume selves as (relatively) bounded. In bonds that involve care, the other may

be seen as a primary significant other even when the bond was not experienced as engulfing. For example, there were several mothers of small children in the sample who identified with their children and considered their care the primary purpose of their *own* lives. These kinds of bonds appear as peculiar to the setting of 'the immediate family of one's own'. Some of the mothers feel engulfed, but others feel very balanced. Scheff (1997: 77) points out that engulfment means rejecting important parts of the self out of loyalty to the other, but he does not provide us with a notion that would have the analytical flexibility to deal with intimate bonds involving care, love and sharing that have genuinely become a part of the self. Still Scheff's contribution is to offer an analytical elaboration of the different and shifting states of the bond, which is useful for empirical analysis. Yet what is needed here is a notion of the self as relational in a trans-actional sense: In constitutive bonds like the ones people make with their loved ones, selves are formed and transformed through the processes of bonding.

The constitutive character of the bonds in the setting of 'the immediate family of one's own' is also manifested in the way in which the intimate embeddedness of the selves is in most cases exclusive to family. Sub-study IV demonstrates that this configurational logic is typical in the setting of family, which tends to protect its boundary from other relationships. This exclusivity is a typical feature of both intimacy (Simmel 1950) and family (Jallinoja 2009; McKie et al. 2005). Typically in this sample, family members, more specifically partners and children, hold the primary position in the configuration of personal relationships (see Sub-study IV, also Castrén 2001, 2008; Castren & Lonkila 2004). This tends to constrain the intensity of bonding with other even immensely important people. In the setting of the family, the configurational logic makes room for those particular relationships that either maintain or enrich the already existing and primary ones (Castrén 2008; Eve 2001), while still keeping them more remote in terms of intimacy. Lives become centred round co-resident partners and children (if any). As a rule in the sample a co-resident partner and children (if any) are cited as the most intimate and primary relationship, although there are some exceptions. Closeness of this sort however, does not necessarily imply a warm relationship, but can refer to primary significance as something that is difficult to ignore (Morgan 1996). Even inflamed relationships with partners and children tend to be close. Those who have an immediate family of one's own feel compelled to cite it as close, or so it seems. Namely none of the configurations in the sample indicated a remote immediate family. However, it is important to point out that families of one's own are not 'categorical' in a deterministic way, but have considerable fluidity. I then propose the category of family, as it is empirically realized in the setting of the immediate family of one's own in this sample to encompass the following features: emotionally charged bonds, a tendency to develop into constitutive bonding (see Sub-study I), intimate exclusivity and development into a whole in which the selves become members or parts of the same. In the Finnish culture, family is expected to inspire primary commitment that surpasses all other relationships (see also Castrén 2001; Castrén & Lonkila 2004).

Alternative bonding may be rooted in the agency of doing things differently or in an affliction in the family (see Sub-study IV). I only consider agency here. Social setting can be seen as a concrete intermediary structure that governs particular relationships so they are able to respond to cultural expectations. The interplay between the setting and agency is manifested in cases in which people do things differently within the family setting (at least to some extent contrary to the category of family in this case). People have (more or less) agency in constructing and maintaining their relationships even within the structural settings and in opposition to the cultural expectations built into the relationship categories. Although families tend to demand primary loyalty from their members (see also Castrén 2008), social constraints may also be shaped through negotiation and agency. This may happen by *differentiating* the embeddings of the self among different settings, for example, by including other intimates outside the family setting in the most intimate circle. Although individual embeddings may cause conflict within the family (cf. Feld & Carter 1998), they loosen the tight bonds and leave more autonomy for the self (cf. Simmel 1950; see discussion in conclusion). I found in Sub-studies I and IV traces of agency in the shaping of the bonds with families. Sub-study I found that the selves who had lost their agency in a biographical disruption and then were maintained by others, often began to shape their social lives anew by searching for new others – fellow sufferers – with matching experiences. They reclaimed their agency, but this agency could be characterized as assisted or embedded rather than individualistic (Honkasalo & Ketokivi, *working paper*). This can be interpreted both as a search for a new embedding distinct from the (now broken) family setting, and as a search for a more secure ‘grounding’ for the self (Josselson 1996).

Hence, selves in the family setting may be more or less embedded solely in the family setting. The individual embeddings of family members may, for example, stem from inclusion of one’s *own* friends among the most intimates parallel to the family or from an intensive involvement at *work*. It is important to note that in modern social life there are almost always some individual embeddings (such as work, friendship or leisure activities) of some intensity that are brought to the family setting. I suggest the examination of the extent to which the embeddings of family members are common or individual as one empirically-grounded way to assess their level of individualization. A lot of the tension in contemporary families may not just take place between certain ‘individuals’ or between ‘individuality’ *per se* and the family, but in fact, with regard to the individual embeddings (Feld & Carter 1998) of their members.

To sum up: although there are common features in bonds that exist in the setting of the immediate family of one’s own, these features are not enough to constitute the family categorically as a specific kind of a ‘thing’ with a specific kind of ontology applicable to different families a priori. Still in light of the analysis the family is not a ‘flexible social category’ as suggested by McKie et al. (2005). Although the diversity of family forms may leave us with an impression of fluidity, the analysis of the setting of family member embeddedness is deeply rooted in particular chains of interdependencies laden with expectations of primacy and exclusive intimate

involvement. This suggests that for those within families, family is by no means just fluid. If the structuring side of family is tightly embedded in micro-level settings and configurations, it may not be wise to talk about family in general terms in these contexts. Rather, the question of how 'categorical' families are can be addressed through the notion of family as a setting. It appears to me that there is a lively interplay between what is 'categorically' or particularly 'family' and what is created by agency and the negotiation of particular others.

Generally speaking, the setting of 'the immediate family of one's own' appears from the viewpoint of the selves to be the tightest embedded by far (however alternative different families may be). In the next section I consider family in a looser setting, namely that of the family of origin. In the narratives of people, it is typically distinguished from the immediate family of one's own (although not in all cases). However, the one feature peculiar to families of origin is their continuing role in both biological and social reproduction (de Singly & Cicchelli 2003). Expectations regarding social reproduction become visible when children are grown and do not fulfil parents' expectations (see Sub-study II). In this sense then, although the settings of the immediate family of one's own and the family of origin should analytically speaking be kept separate, they also form a continuum over time. Families of one's own become families of origin to the grown children. The people may remain the same, but the nature of their interdependency changes.

6.2 Bonds in the setting of 'the family of origin'

People's lives are typically less tightly embedded in the setting of family of origin than in the setting of the immediate families of their own. By 'the setting of the family of origin' I simply refer to the (however loose) form of organization that connects the members of the childhood family configuration together later in life. The analysis shows that it is warranted to consider the family of origin as a setting, because most grown children remain embedded in their families of origin. Absolute estrangement from them is rare. Bonds with family of origin have some typical features, but in the sample they show considerably more variance than the bonds to the immediate family of one's own. This reflects the negotiable side of kin relations in which both the bonds and responsibilities are looser than in the immediate family (Finch & Mason 1993).

Once the children have grown, the family of origin is dispersed in the sense that it is not a tight unit in which people no longer have to be mutually oriented in order to be able to live together. A male interviewee in his forties thought over the significance of his family of origin (one of close and affectionate bonds) and described these family members as *'bystanders' in his life*. He then characterised his wife and children as *parts of his life* (see Sub-study IV). The members of the family of origin are in his case not right 'here', but they are 'there' as an all-important background (Josselson 1996: 31). The family of origin is often a setting that acts as a sort of a safety net one can fall back into it in times of unexpected crisis (Finch &

Mason 1993: 164). This is also what the analysis shows, although some families of origin do not form a common setting in which their members are mutually embedded and which would provide their members support (cf. Feld & Carter 1998: 140). However, the majority of families of origin also maintain some of the binding nature of the family – even if they do not seek to control the everyday interactions and matters of their members. This becomes apparent in relation to the unfulfilled social reproduction expectations of parents that their grown children reproduce the social features important to the family (see Sub-study II). This happens to a varying degree in different families, but what is common in the sample is that troubled dynamics appear in the bonds between parents and their grown children who have lived in a radically alternative way. I hence argue that the familial role in social reproduction should not be neglected when considering bonds in the setting of the family of origin. The analysis of failed social reproduction expectations shows how families of origin do not only operate as kin groups, but can revive their roles as families, attempting to impose common embedding by putting pressure on its members. A female interviewee verbalizes this perhaps inevitable tension by saying that ‘every family has its hang-ups.’

Layder (1998: 110–111) argued that the more the setting is socially organized and has a formalized set of objectives, the more likely it is to be occupied with social reproduction. Although he suggests that family as an informal and personalized setting (ibid. 158) – which it certainly is in some ways – it also involves the kinds of *social* expectations that go far beyond the personal. This study suggests that social reproduction expectations lie in the heart of families with offspring however deep down or latent (also de Singly & Cicchelli 2003; Bourdieu 1976). Expectations do not only rise from inside the family, but also from outside it: it is assumed that family members belong to the same social group. Social reproduction links families to wider societies in which they also reproduce social classifications, such as the social class (Crompton 2006). Among personal relationships the theme of social reproduction is one peculiar to family and stresses the importance of understanding the embeddedness of personal relationships in distinct social settings, however personalized they may be. The setting of the family of origin as an ‘external condition’ characterizes particular relationships to the extent that there is no point considering these family bonds as ‘pure relationships’, as Giddens (1991: 98) claims.

Social reproduction expectations show that families of origin maintain their sense of oneness, of being a whole unit. This is also manifested in the way in which family members are expected to assist and often also mobilize to maintain a wounded member in times of crisis. Maintaining bonding typical to families of origin in the case of biographical disruption aimed at the survival of the family member – and perhaps even at the survival of the family as a whole – beyond the distinct person (see Sub-study I). On the other hand, the protective dynamics (refraining from deep emotional sharing, for example) that take place between parents and grown children implies a close relation in which the self protects itself from being overpowered by the family (I call this the ‘dynamics of individuality’, see more in Chapters 7 and 8).

The self is also likely to protect the closely related others, especially the parents, from getting too concerned (see Sub-study I).

In addition to features stemming from the family as a social setting, the extent and the ways in which family members maintain each other are likely to be related to negotiations and commitments that have over time developed between its particular members and the emotional bonds in question (Finch & Mason 1993). Some parents fail to help their offspring even in a case of biographical disruption. I say fail because the cultural expectation is that families support their members in times of need (cf. Gillis 1996). Yet some families are simply troubled or isolated. Regardless of the extent to which lived families realize expectations, material help like financial support is specifically linked to family in all personal relationships. In their study of kinship and inheritance Finch and Mason (2000: 12) note that close kin connections have material, economic personal and symbolic aspects that are linked to the quality of relationships. Hence, when help is offered in family relationships, much more is at stake than material assistance only (*ibid.*). In part the bonds are formed through the recognition of genealogical ties or those created through marriage (Schneider 1968), but actual commitments develop over time.

Moreover, Finch & Mason (2000: 11) suggest that it is highly predictable that 'biological' parents and children will include each other in an intimate circle of kin, however warm or difficult the actual relationships are. This study revealed that the members of family of origin showed considerable variance in their actual degree of closeness. The most typical value of closeness assigned to parents was between two and three (on a scale from one to seven). Parents were rarely indicated among the most intimates, although there were some exceptions. However, a considerable number of people in this study did not consider their parents close (although otherwise important, closeness was valued at 4–5), while some omitted their parents from their configuration of personal relationships altogether. Although this omission runs against all expectations, it is clear that people can and do reject relationships that they experience as toxic, including their own parents. The appearance of such dynamics in the sample may stem from the fact that some interviews were recruited in the settings of therapy and peer support in which the idealized images of family are sometimes intentionally broken as unrealistic. Therapeutic settings often work to create an alternative view of families in which a close connection to parents is understood to be potentially harmful to the self. People undergoing therapy or discussing their depression, for instance, in a peer support group, talk about families more openly. They are therefore likely to assume a therapy culture understanding of personal relationships (Furedi 2004). These settings then individualize family members, and encourage people to detach themselves from their parents when they feel overpowered. They are also more likely to create individual embeddedness, while loosening their embeddedness in the family setting. However, the process of disembedding oneself from the family of origin is so demanding that it often appears to require professional support.

While inappropriate for the analysis of bonds stemming from the setting of the immediate family in which selves are so tightly embedded, Scheff's (1997) model is

more suitable, albeit still limited, for understanding relationships between siblings and grown children and their parents. Once the children are grown, parents, their children and siblings are not as likely (as partners and small children) to serve as the self's purpose in life or as the primary setting in which the self is embedded. In this sense the self and the other are more distinct than in the immediate families of one's own. Stephanie Lawler (2000) has analysed the bonds between mothers and daughters in relation to subjectivity, and provides us with insights into the dialectics that take place within the bonds between grown children and their parents. In particular, she discusses the distinctions the daughters make in relation to their mothers in the cases of social upward mobility. The need to build a life of 'one's own' is more likely expressed if the mother is not regarded as sophisticated enough. Lawler interprets this distinction made by the daughters from the viewpoint of the social class. In my analysis the social reproduction expectations of the parents become visible in a rather analogous situation: the social classifications are intertwined with questions of identification. When a grown child chooses or drifts to a life path with a radical 'downward' mobility in social classifications the parents try and pull their child from such a fate first, but may later even reject the child and distinguish themselves from such a relation (see Sub-study II). (Ibid.) This brings the discussion back to the question of social reproduction.

While one side of the bond with parents from the viewpoint of the child is to 'inherit' some of their characteristics, something Lawler calls the 'inherited self', the other side of the bond is manifested in the need to become relatively independent. In relation to parents then, these dialectics between the binding bond and individuality are characteristic of a relationship in which the Scheff's (1997) notion of imbalance in a bond as one too tight or too loose may be appropriate. The personal narratives and subjective meanings given to the bonds in this study support this claim. A bond with parents that is 'too loose' stands to fail expectations of parental help in times of need and leads to disappointments and isolated bonding. 'Too tight' a bond overpowers the self, rejecting her or his search for autonomy.

In estranged family bonds, the grown children's struggle for autonomy is manifested as a crucial element of the bond – one necessary to account for in order to understand the bond. In Mead's terminology it is the 'I' side of the self that is needed to understand the dynamics between such 'individuality' and the connection to others. This is why the 'I' cannot be set aside, as Smart (2007: 28) proposes. She suggests that the field of personal life is solely associated the 'me', the interconnected person. Smart proposes that the 'I' has been overemphasized by the individualization thesis. However, Mead (1934: 199) maintains that these two sides of the self are only different phases of the same (social) process, the self, and there cannot be one without the other. However, the extent to which sociologists emphasize each side of the self – as a question of intensity – is a question worth considering. Smart states that agency is part of being a person, but that it requires 'the presence of others to respond to and to contextualize action' (Smart 2007: 28). Yet her understanding of 'personal' leaves us with only the 'me' that in Mead's thinking does not really have the capability to innovate – agency in its classical

sense. This question will be discussed in depth at the level of the social bond in the next chapter, and at the level of the relational self in the conclusion. It is important to point out that family relationships involve intensive bonding – especially in disruptive situations, but my analysis suggests that they also show dialectics in which ‘individuality’ is important. This is especially apparent in bonds with parents.

While relationships to parents have more peculiarities than most other bonds, sibling relationships form an interesting intermediary category where no typical dynamics can be found (see also Melkas 2003: 62). Like parents, siblings are rarely cited among the most intimate others. When they are, it is often a special sibling who is personally very close. This relationship is often described as friend-like, yet it can also involve the aforementioned protective dynamics regarding intensive emotional sharing which are not present in friendship (see Sub-study I). This is manifested in more limited confiding (cf. Spender & Pahl 2006: 114). Most often siblings were assigned middle values of intimacy (from two to four, on a scale from one to seven). Some were omitted from the map of significant others altogether, if cogent reasons existed. In her study of the changing social forms of personal relationships in Finland, Tuula Melkas (2003) suggests that sibling relationships share the same interest in each other’s well-being as relationships with parents, but in a less intensive form. Often sibling relationships are in part maintained through other kin relations, like those to parents who also often to some extent mediate the bonds and bring siblings together via inviting them to common gatherings. (Ibid.) In cases of biographical disruption and estrangement, bonding with siblings sometimes takes forms close to that which exists with the parents and sometimes with friends. Siblings can therefore be narrated as maintaining, isolated, or even episodically empowering the self, like friends and fellow sufferers. Although siblings are not chosen based on personal preference, bonds with them are less ‘categorical’ than bonds with parents. There is more space for particular dynamics and negotiations, although the question of whether they are closer to the category of family or the category of friendship may also stem from the setting of that particular family and whether it favours a certain definition over another. One of the most unique aspects of sibling relationships is that in the case of viable relationships they last longer than any other relationships. They can just ‘be there’ (Josselson 1996), which may be personally important as such, or they can be among the most active and intimate relationships a self may have.

The embeddedness of selves in the setting of the family of origin is looser than in the setting of the immediate family of one’s own. It involves ‘categorical’ family features like social reproduction expectations and the recognition of the family as a whole over the distinct selves. It is important to note that some features of the family discussed here challenge the idea of family bonds as simply a subset of social life, as any other social bonds (cf. Morgan 2002). However, the considerable variance across the bonds in the setting of the family of origin suggests that embeddings in families of origin are not formed ‘categorically’ from some general expectations, but in particular processes. This however does not mean that the bonds in even particularized family settings are free or disembedded, but that their embeddedness

is more closely linked to the micro-level particular configurations than general macro-level rules or categories in action (cf. Finch & Mason 1993). Such embeddedness can be either constraining or enabling (cf. Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994), as embeddings stemming from relationship categories are laden with cultural expectations.

6.3 Close bonds with friends

In light of this study, friendship appears as the least ‘categorical’ relationship of all personal relationships, as particular friendships are so diverse. Friendship can be close or more distant and can be tied to a certain context or extend to several. Friendship can be centred on some activity or emotional sharing. Friends can form wider ‘gangs’, they can be dyadic or both can occur. The diversity of friendship is a well known feature in the area of friendship studies. Moreover, of all analysed relationships *friendships appeared as the relationship category least embedded in any specific setting*. In itself friendship is difficult to see as a social setting. In their study of contemporary friendship in Britain, Spencer and Pahl (2006: 60) distinguish eight types of friends: from associates sharing one single thing to confidants and soulmates with whom several aspects are shared. While some scholars stress the fluidity of the category, others find it misleading that so much research considers friendship free-formed and suggest that also friendships should be studied as embedded in the contexts from which they rise (Feld & Carter 1998; Adams & Allan 1998).

This study finds friendship as least embedded in any single setting. As Feld & Carter (1998) point out, I find that although friendships may stem from a specific, a focus of activity that brings people together repeatedly, in most cases they outlive these specific social settings. Although all kinds of friendships were discussed in the interviews, the focus of the analysis was on the intensive, close friendship that is narrated as a relevant part of the self’s life. The close friendships analysed in the study originated from various settings including school, childhood neighbourhood, leisure time activities, college, stays abroad, work and family or kin. The analysed friendships were the really significant, as they had either supported the wounded self in the case of biographical disruption or remained isolated or even withdrawn, disappointing the wounded (see Sub-study I). In fact, many friendships had due to their significant role in crisis become immensely important. Interviewees would respond to the question ‘How did this person become so important to you?’ by referring to the support the friend had volunteered when needed. But even in the very ordinary flow of life, friends may in some cases be constitutive parts of people’s lives. Sub-study IV shows how, especially in intimate configurations where there is no co-resident intimate partner, friends are often cited among the most intimate people. Even if the tight embeddedness of those with families in the family setting constrains other intimate relationships, trusted friends are often among the

most important relationships. Friendship is hence by no means a marginal topic when significant others are concerned (also Roseneil 2004; Spencer & Pahl 2006).

Of all personal relationships, friendship is the most free-formed in terms of content and intensity (cf. Layder 1998). Even if the settings of friendship are varied and loose, friendship is rarely free from 'external conditions', as is suggested by Giddens (1991: 89). Commitments develop over time with friends like with kin, and accumulated commitments create expectations, even if they are not of a similar nature to those with kin (cf. Finch & Mason 1993). The relational perspective brings out an intriguing feature which stems from the loose embeddedness of friendship. Namely, most people's adult lives are focused around certain foci of activity, of which immediate family and work are typically the most important or at least the most time-consuming activities in the context of everyday life. In such a context this means that friendships not tightly embedded in them tend inevitably to be constrained by these 'primary' foci of activity. Although *family bonds* (especially with partner and children) *tend to be more constraining than friendships, friendships are constrained by the existing family bonds*. In such situations friendship is hardly free-formed (see Sub-study IV). The cultural expectation – one also apparent in the analysis – is that immediate families often require this primary position among personal relationships (also Castrén 2001), which subordinates friendship to family commitments (see also Castrén & Lonkila 2004). Eve (2001) has suggested that the formation of new friendships is linked to pre-existing relationships that already are important. Hence, people are more likely to become friends with people they can incorporate into the existing configuration of important relationships. It is much easier to maintain a friendship if the reconciliation of family and friends, for example, is felicitous, but this is true of any important relationship that already exists. That such a selection takes place already in the bonding processes show configurational logic in action (also Castrén 2008; Eve 2001; Castrén & Lonkila 2004). This study leads me to argue that the determining feature in the formation and nature of close friendship may be the co-resident partnership (whether present or absent) (see Sub-study IV). It appears to be an empirical rule that for those embedded in families, exclusive dynamics exist that push even immensely important friends out to further circles of intimacy, while reserving the centre for the partner and children, if any (cf. Spencer & Pahl 2006: 136). Its impact as a negation is also notable in that those in the sample without a co-resident partner often cited several friends as intimates (see also Roseneil & Budgeon 2004). However, there are always people who exercise active agency and plough through with alternative ways, even if they may be against cultural expectations and structural constraints.

Intensive friendship competes with partnership. This was also manifested in those rare cases in which the most intimate others included both family and friends. Three of the 23 people in the study who live with their partners challenge the cultural expectation that the primary positions are reserved for the partner and children alone. It is worth noting that they are all academic women. All men and all people with a lesser education cited only their families as the most intimate others, but these academic women maintained intimate female friendships or special

relationships to sisters, citing them among their most intimates, together with their partners and children. In such cases friends seem to serve as confidantes and adult companions that in addition to the importance in their own right appear to complement the (limited) intimacy with the partner (Oliker 1998). All these women are in a situation where intimacy between the partners has become drained by the intensive focus on child-rearing. The tension between intensive friendship and partnership is recognized, and the intensity of the intimate friendship is kept from the partners. The gendered differentiation of embedding in those families in which women are more intensively focused on the family and the men on work, both create the need for other intimates sharing the same focus, and makes it easier to reconcile friendship and family. Namely, many of these intensive friendships are maintained during the day and in part incorporated into the family setting between the stay-at-home mothers and their children (but not their partners). This enables both everyday companionship and intimate disclosure about family issues as distinct from intimate 'family time' in which exclusive intimacy is devoted to the family (see Sub-study IV). The intensive friendship and disclosure of family issues could cause tension between the partners, but the practice of intimate sharing may also serve the family by easing the tensions of everyday life (also Oliker 1989: 106).

Intimate friendship also challenges the expectation that immediate family should be the primary focus of personal life (Roseneil & Budgeon 2004). Although family relationships constrain friendship, in terms of the content, friendship is less structured than family relationships. This is apparent in the sample, where friends act in so many different roles in people's lives. Some friends are primary and act as substitutes for family (as in two cases in the sample) while other friendships involve episodic or everyday sharing of common experiences, much in the fashion of peer support. The development of a particular friendship into a really close and important one happens in particular settings in the history and interactions of the relationship, as opposed to some generally defined guidelines. As a social bond then, friendship is open-ended and escapes general theorizing. In the case of disruptive events, close friends can be maintaining, empowering or isolated in relation to the self (see Sub-study I). However, friends in this sample were expected less or lighter support in times of need than family members. In personal narratives supportive friends gained extraordinary significance as opposed to the 'ordinary' support from families that is sometimes so taken for granted that it goes unnoticed. In fact, the experience of being empowered and maintained by a friend in a disruptive situation is narrated as the exact point in time when an important friendship can turn into a primary relationship. This is especially true during the loss of a partner, which also loosens the self's embeddedness in the family.

Like Spencer & Pahl (2006) this study also found some friendships to be 'family-like', in other words, strong in giving the maintaining support that is typical to families. Other friendships were particularly strong in emotional sharing and confiding (see Sub-study I). Some friendships supplement the maintaining support of family members, and some compensate for the lack of it. The sample includes an interviewee rejected by her family of origin and failed by her abusive marriage. Her

closest relations on both medical records and in the care of her children are friends. Another interviewee has an alternative ‘family configuration’ consisting of friends without co-resident spouses or children (see Sub-study IV). Even in an alternative ‘family configuration’, close friends appear to be different from conventional families in the sense that they confide to each other more openly. These narratives suggest that protective dynamics like those in use between family members (see Sub-study I) are not needed. One woman who assigned some friends to her most intimate circle, together with her partner and child, verbalized the difference between family and friends in her case: ‘Friends and other people are separate, but they [my immediate family] are part of the same. They are a part of me.’ The family as ‘part of the same’ is one way to characterize the tight and common embedding of the family that is absent from even the closest configurations of friends. However, like families, friends can also become habitualized and attached to the self as known in a certain setting or phase, and not particularly supportive of changes that especially disruptive events generate in the selves. Friendships may hence develop an embedding of their own that both anchors and constrains the self. On the other hand, friends can negotiate considerable amount of autonomy for the selves that is acceptable within the bond.

It is important to note that bonds with family members, especially those of the same generation, can also be friend-like. This was the case with some especially close sibling relationships in the sample. These relationships are not tightly embedded in specific relationship categories, but allow personal definitions. When asked about the nature of the relationships, some people first refer to a sister, for instance, by her first name while others cite this person first as a best friend, and only afterwards add that she is in fact a sister. In such cases the relationship contains extensive emotional sharing and self-disclosure – features described as being central to friendship already in Aristotle’s account of friends of virtue (Pahl 2000). Although Pahl & Pevalin (2005) suggest otherwise, in light of this study, I am inclined to suggest that (co-resident) partners are not likely to be friends. Although the relationship may have such qualities and be narrated as friendship, the tight embedding in the pressures of everyday life and the dynamic as an exclusive unit, the couple, is rare among friends.

When theorizing on the social bond, friendships as subject matter are so varied that they escape any models descriptive of the relationship, such as the one of ‘pure relationship’. Although they in terms of the content and internal dynamics are less ‘categorically’ formed than family relationships tend to be, in terms of their embeddedness among the majority of people with an immediate family of one’s own, friendship is constrained by the family setting. In fact, it is constrained both at the micro level of relationships and at the macro level of cultural expectations, including a social organization that favours coupled people. In this sense then, those whose primary bonds are friends live in an alternative manner. At least in the Finnish context, they must do so, because mainstream sociality is based on intimate couples (the Sub-study IV, cf. Castrén & Lonkila 2004). Scheff’s model of the social bond may be suitable for examining friendship in the long term, but if it was applied

in short-term, it would not allow a balanced friendship to be acutely oriented toward maintaining or empowering its participants.

6.4 Bonds with fellow sufferers in the setting¹⁹ of peer support

Peer support²⁰ has become a common source of support for people dealing with difficult life situations. It is more often studied within the frameworks of illness, loss and health care than in the framework of personal life. Yet the relevance of peer support as personal is manifested in findings that suggest a link between (unsupportive) personal relationships and participation in support groups (Damen et al. 2001), as well as in the personal narratives of the data. Peer support may compensate for a lack of support from families and friends, but is significant also in its own right. This became apparent in Sub-study I which examined the bonds with fellow sufferers in relation to the configuration of all of the significant others. The empowerment of the selves felt in the practice of peer support was associated with its disembeddedness in other relationships. In the context of peer support, the selves are detached from their existing social embeddings of their personal life. However, peer support organized around a specific theme and for the explicit purpose of support in a distinct setting has multifaceted consequences for not only the selves, but also their bonds with fellow sufferers and their more embedded relationships. Walter (1999), for instance, who has studied support groups for mourners of deceased family members has pointed out that peer support may influence how people see and cope with the issue and that participation in a support group by one family member may create divisions within the family.

The setting of peer support is a very particular kind of setting. It recognizes 'individuals' as disembedded from their other social bonds. Robert Wuthnow (1994), an American sociologist, suggests that the eagerness of 'individualistic' Americans to participate in small groups is a clear indication that people want others to 'share their journey'. Wuthnow argues that in intentional groups of like-minded 'individuals' people regain a sense of community: people feel cared for, they identify with their groups and share their intimate problems. Yet, the social contract binding members together is individualistic: 'come if you have time, talk if you feel like it'. In his view, support groups elevate the acceptance of individual opinion to a high art, while providing a sense of sharing and at least some of the intimacy that families, friendships and neighbours in his view have 'always' provided. Still, rare or poor attendance in the peer group does not mean dismissal, which it can mean in

¹⁹ Sub-study III did not yet theorize on peer support in light of the concept of social setting. The term 'context' was used to denote what is referred to here as 'setting'.

²⁰ Researchers study support groups using different terms that all carry slightly different connotations, including mutual help or aid (Walter 1999; Arminen 2004) and self-help (Riessman 1997; Williams 2004; Damen et al. 2000). By using the term 'peer support' I wish to draw attention to the nature of the social bond between fellow sufferers as a peer relationship where a common life situation connects fellow sufferers as peers.

personal relationships, but in practice simply not being part of the group anymore. Hence, such groups are especially fit for complex social environments, like contemporary society, Wuthnow argues. (Ibid.)

In Sub-study III, I examined the bonds between the self and her or his fellow sufferers in the setting of peer support and suggested the social bond as a rule of a distinct kind. It is based on the match between the subjective experiences of people who are not personally related. The driving force of the bond is the insufferable burden of individuality that in suffering pushes people to seek out others who confront the same. The bond with fellow sufferers may break the individuality which is felt as intolerable and wounding through generalization of experience. The bond is not personal in its essence, because a fellow sufferer is really *anyone* who shares the experience. Yet sharing can be very intimate and intensive. It is inclusive of other fellow sufferers by nature, as opposed to the more exclusive intimacies of (other) personal relationships. These relationships can be narrated as extremely important experiences, even if the bond to particular fellow sufferers is short-lived.

The significance of fellow sufferers is different from close relationships, as it is not measured at the level of the particular bond. In fact, not many people list their fellow sufferers among their significant others, and even fewer among their intimates. And still the significance of having *some* fellow sufferers gains enormous importance in the personal narratives of people who have confronted suffering. I argue it is not central in which setting where fellow sufferers – whether in personal networks of people or in intentional peer support groups – are found is not important. The bond between fellow sufferers then resembles the one with *the stranger*, as it is based on ‘common generalities’ only as opposed to the uniqueness of those involved in the bond. It does not make those particular people interdependent on one another, because they can be replaced (Simmel 1950: 406.) It is much like the relation with the peer group as understood in sociology: a reference group that works as an alternative source of socialization (Riesman et al. 2001: 21). In the case of disruptive events, the need for signals from others in order to direct oneself in life is not tied to a certain age, but rather to the situation where one is confronting something extraordinary of which there are no signals available from others around the self. They have to be sought out. Sharing at the level of generalized experiences is the only option, as confronting a wounding fate like the loss of a loved one in one’s personal life is an absolutely lonely experience: at the particular level there is no one who can share it. Mead (1934: 33) points out that it is accessible only to that one person (also Schutz 1932: 99) and can hence be stated only in relation to her or his specific biography. However what Mead (1934: 33) calls ‘parallelistic psychology’ becomes possible when each private experience has a common object to which it refers. Generalization of experience has this dynamic and hence has the capability to break the isolation.

The connection to fellow sufferers confronted with the same fate acts concurrently as both an escape from ‘individuality’ and its consolidation. It leaves the uniqueness of each experience and person largely untouched, cherishing the subjective and legitimating the self through its commonness with the others. It does

not bind people towards a common goal or a binding membership, but simply conveys support for the self. This is the aim of peer support, whether practiced by people in personal networks or in actual peer support groups. It has become a (rather new) form of social organization that at the same time is very crystallized and individualistic. This is a duality Layder (1998) fails to account for in tying formalized objectives to the binding reproduction of a social system. Some settings like the one of peer support have collectively recognized ‘formalized sets of objectives’ – which do not involve mobilizing the individual towards common social goals. Rather, some contemporary settings are (formally or informally) there to support or help ‘individuals’ cope with difficult subjective experiences. Therapy and peer support groups, for example, are intended to *reproduce the self* rather than the social system. Such settings are themselves individualized. They are socially organized to promote individuality. This generates an interesting paradox: even if the bond with fellow sufferers is individualistic in practice, in its pre-given individuality, it is more ‘categorical’ than most personal relationships. It is recognized as a ‘social contract’ between ‘individuals’ involving reciprocal and voluntary sharing between people who are free to enter and exit the relationship based on their own needs. Sulkunen (2009: 184) points out such contracts penetrate all areas of society and are delivered in a ‘jargon of autonomy’ that may be more mirage than reality (cf. Ourossoff 1993). Yet I found very little variance in the relational practices across the particular bonds between fellow sufferers.

The bond between fellow sufferers is in principle individualistic. Sub-study III suggests the bond between fellow sufferers resembles a ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens 1991) or even ‘purer’, as the common understanding is that people are free to enter and exit according to personal need. It involves personal sharing and reflexive orientation, yet only rarely involves personal commitment to the bond. It is detached from other personal relationships and their settings. In an important way, however, it is not free-formed, as it is typically sought out when confronted by an unwanted or agonizing fate – a feature that sociology has had a difficult time incorporating into its analyses (Bagnoli & Ketokivi 2009).

The explicit emphasis on the experience of the self and a clear distinction between the personal embedded lives of the self and the others in the case of peer support, make Scheff’s model of the social bond suitable for the analysis of the bonds between fellow sufferers. Namely, even if sharing with fellow sufferers can be similar among different particular bonds, the personal consequences of peer support involvement differ considerably according to the state of the bond experienced by the selves. In the incidence of biographical disruption, peer support is narrated as *empowering*, but the analysis of all peer support experiences in the sample show that the contact can also leave selves untouched or wounded. I argue that the different states of the bond are not necessarily attributable to troublesome dynamics between fellow sufferers as to the state of the self. In peer support the self is extremely vulnerable to the others, since the whole point of peer support is the legitimation of the self. However, when people are in need of such support the selves are at the same time struggling with a loss of self (Charmaz 1983). This may

drive them to take the viewpoints of others as given and/or reject their own experience that they are not yet capable of understanding as legitimate. It is a state in which the self cannot distinguish itself from the others, to use Mead's (1934: 140) terms. It cannot provide itself social experiences, but acutely needs others to do so. A self in desperate need for validation may easily become *engulfed*, as was narrated in two cases in the sample. Some people are simply left untouched or *isolated* by peer support, which may be due to mismatching experiences of fellow sufferers or reservations in sharing, among other things (see Sub-study III).

Scheff's model is well attuned to the personal consequences of the bonds with fellow sufferers. This is due to its commitment to the analysis of what I regard as the subjective viewpoint to the bond and of the limited nature of interdependent bonding with fellow sufferers. The model has explanatory power to show how even the very same practices between fellow sufferers may have different consequences for the self. The self in need of validation is not a bounded one. The essential strength and weakness of peer support in making a difference for the self lies in the internalization of the viewpoint of others. In a way then, the self is open to the attitudes of others in a way that resembles a child who takes the particular attitudes of others as given and is determined by them (Mead 1934; see also Berger & Luckmann 1991). Fellow sufferers become 'significant' in the strong sense of the term, because they may be the only ones with whom they can share their rare experience. Extreme situations like those that drive people to search for fellow sufferers show the self as vulnerable and open (cf. Elias 1978). This is paradoxically not accounted for in the principle of peer support. To grasp the dynamics of the self reaching out to others and internalizing them calls for a notion of relational self. I now revisit the problem of social bond in light of the analysed personal relationships.

7 Personal relationships as social bonds: linking research and theory

Examining the social embeddedness of personal bonds through the notion of setting was a means for elaborating on what ‘social’ in the case of personal relationships may be. In this chapter I continue this effort to analyse and find empirical grounding for the meaning of the ‘social’ in the social bond. How would it be sociologically meaningful to approach personal relationships as social bonds? How can personal relationships be seen as ‘social’ in terms of sociology, and not just in the popular use of the term? I suggest a close link between research and theory will prove useful for opening ‘the black box’ of the social bond.

The study drew from four analytical foundations that framed the focus in a loose theoretical way. Personal relationships were then analysed as particular bonds from an anti-categorical perspective, stressing the processes and dynamics that were narrated as personally significant. Linking research and theory I now compile *seven generative focal points* that pinpoint *the intersections in which, in the context of personal life, the tension between the social and the personal actualize in lived relationships*. These focal points are the: 1) social setting, 2) general versus particular cases of the bond, 3) biographical and relational events, 4) subjectivity and asymmetry of the bond, 5) dynamics between bonding and individuality, 6) state of the bond, and 7) embeddedness of the bonds in the wider configurations of relationships. They can be understood as empirically grounded, but analytically meaningful viewpoints that may be of use in formulating insightful research problems or in making more elaborate interpretations of bonds between people.

Lived relationships are so diverse that they escape universal theories about the social bond, but linking research and theory allows more fluid theorizing – one not too rigid or abstract in contrast to the ‘messiness’ of the world and its ongoing processes that constantly transform reality. The proposed focal points are ones in which something sociologically interesting has unfolded. They are points worth considering in theoretical depth. They break the tension between the social and the personal into turbulent relational processes, with transactions better accessible to a researcher than the tension underneath. They should not be viewed as mutually exclusive categories. On the contrary, many of them are interconnected. In fact, they should not be seen as categories at all. As the research process progressed, it became more and more clear that of the use of general or universal theory was counterproductive. My gaze then shifted to the focal points in which notable relational processes were generated. They can be seen as theoretical keywords to the analysis of the interplay between the social and personal in the setting of personal relationships that all have some relation to the named focal points. This relation is not theoretical, but empirical in the sense that these points generate *actual* motion in lived relationships. Sociologically speaking, they can also be seen as links between theory and the world.

7.1 Social setting

In the preceding chapter I embedded personal relationships to specific social settings that could be understood as (however) loose ‘forms of organization’ (Layder 1998) that have the common effect of bringing a relatively limited set of people together in repeated encounters in and around a setting (Feld & Carter 1998). My inquiry suggests social settings as a means to consider the relationship between particular relationships and their dynamics in relation to relationship categories that also work as cultural expectations. Social settings, such as family, work, therapy and peer support, can be seen as intermediary social structures that mediate the processes between the micro and macro levels. Social settings transmit social expectations that constrain personal styles of doing things. This is why they also bring to light the tensions between the social and the personal that I believe characterize all bonds to a varying degree (Simmel 1950: 406). However, the notion of setting does not suggest any uniform way to see the embeddedness of people in specific relationships, and should be kept analytically separate from constantly unfolding particular configurations – the webs of interdependency – in which people are even more explicitly embedded. Whereas configurations are dynamic in their nature, the settings are more stable forms of organization, however loose they may be.

As both Feld & Carter (1998) and Layder (1998) stress there is a full range of different settings. While some settings are highly formalized and defined, others are more informal and personalized. The nature of relationships varies considerably with respect to the settings they are embedded in, as shown by the analysis. This means that different settings have different typical forms of ‘commitment’ and ‘attachment’ (‘bonding’ in my terminology), as well as different expectations regarding emotional involvement (Layder 1993: 98–99). I may add here that different settings are also likely to produce different kinds of wider configurations of relationships. Finally, as Layder (1993: 98–99) and my analysis both suggest, settings should be seen fluidly enough to be attuned to their differences to the extent to which wider macro features, such as relationship categories (understood as cultural expectations directed toward particular relationships) shape their particular activities (or dynamics). I propose then that utilizing the notion of social setting in collecting data and conducting analysis of personal relationships directs the sociological gaze to those potential struggles in which the structuring side of the social and the particular tied to the particular selves and bonds become visible. In the spirit of ‘relational realism’, such struggles show the variegated and specific ‘realities’ of the social within personal relationships. Grown children’s struggle for autonomy from the social reproduction expectations of their parents is an example that shows how the issue of social reproduction resides in family relationships, however dormant it may seem.

7.2 General versus particular bases of the bond

Different settings are more or less occupied in social reproduction. While some settings are crystallized and have a rigid social organization (stressing the ‘social’), others are more personalized and allow free-formed bonding (stressing the ‘personal’) (cf. Layder 1998). From the viewpoint of a particular bond, the social reproduction of a setting or a system in which the bond is embedded is a *general* feature as opposed to specific. It is not about those *particular* people involved in the bond. I draw the distinction between general and particular from Simmel’s (1950) analysis of the stranger. Following him I also use the terms ‘general’ and ‘social’ interchangeably. As he states and my analysis further suggests, *personal* relationships involve both general and particular features, but certainly not always in harmony, as the question of social reproduction in families shows. With respect to the theme of social reproduction, ‘social’ can from the viewpoint of particular bonds be seen as general, while what is ‘particular’ is specific to the bond and the people involved. Examples of general features in the context of particular bonds are really any social qualities stemming from a wider social categorization than the bond itself. This implies relationship categories as wider cultural expectations and social classifications, such as social class, gender, race and sexual orientation. Particular features are those that are seen as unique to the bond and the persons involved. A prime example of particular is a blood bond that as a connector is fully specific to the people involved.

The *particular* side of the bonds is sometimes called ‘personal’ (as a counterpoint to the social) familiar from Layder. I would like to suggest, however, that both of these aspects – general (or social) and particular – may be ‘personal’. This is also what Simmel (1950, 405, also Smart 2007: 28) proposes. He maintains that ‘all somehow personal relations’ encompass both features particular to the relationship and common to many. As Smart (2007: 28) defines, the personal can be seen to designate whatever ‘impacts closely on people and means much to them’. Exactly for this reason both general and particular features tend to be accentuated in the context of personal relationships.

I have elaborated on the different bases of bonds, in Sub-study II in particular, in which I analysed the processes of estrangement and reconciliation of family bonds in reference to social reproduction. Estrangements between parents and their children unravelled the twofold constitution of the bonds that I further analysed in terms that Simmel (1950) used to describe relations between *the stranger* and the original group members (whatever the group is). In the setting of the family of origin, social reproduction appeared as a general feature of the bonds (see also Bourdieu 1976; de Singly & Cicchelli 2003). Social reproduction as a dimension of a bond is not tied to those specific people only, but to more general social classifications such as social class. Family appears as a setting that mediates social features of the surrounding social world and attempts to mobilize its members to their reproduction. The close link between family and social class is a good example (see de Singly & Cicchelli 2003, Crompton 2006). Yet at the same time family

relationships are typically also made of particular bases, such as the blood connection, love and intimate sharing. The question regarding the general versus the particular bases of bonds is one of intensity, not category. The mutual presence of both within a bond creates dynamics and potentially tension, which in different settings highlights each side of the dichotomy differently. Moreover, agency plays a role in shaping the bases of the bond. Some people are more determined to shape the bonds at the particular level and have the resources to do so. Examining both the multifaceted bases of general and particular bonds and their interplay is one way to approach the question of the individualization of personal life in an empirically grounded manner.

If personal relationships were placed on a continuum, where one end would indicate the bonds that primarily reproduce the setting and the other those that are most individualized in the same regard, based on my study, I would place the relationship between parents and their children at the socially reproductive end and the bond between fellow sufferers at the individualized end. This is because the bond with fellow sufferers does not only reproduce the social, but in fact 'reproduces' the (broken) self. Friendships are more free-formed in relation to social reproduction and hence closer to the bond between fellow sufferers than family. What is important to note however is that the extent to which a setting is occupied with social reproduction and the extent to which it is more open is an empirical question. It is important to also note that some settings are themselves occupied by 'individuals', as the example of peer support shows. It is hence not given that the basic unit of the reproduction is 'the social'. It can also be 'the individual'. To examine the focus on general or particular level social reproductive features in different social settings is another way to address individualization as an open-ended empirical question.

The general and particular bases of bonds are not only apt viewpoints with respect to the question of social reproduction, but also more directly to the bonding processes of a relationship. Simmel (1950: 402–408) suggested the relationships with *the stranger* are different from all personal relationships, as they are solely based on features of a general feature, such as 'national, social, occupational, or generally human' (ibid. 406). Typical relationships seem to contain both general and particular commonalities. Even the most intimate relationships sometimes entail a trace of strangeness, as the idea of generalization occasionally enters the relationship: What if the bond is not just tied to this specific relationship, but could potentially exist with an indeterminate number of other people (the same general features) as well? The essential difference between primarily general and particular bonds lies in the feeling as to whether the basis of the bond is anchored to 'precisely this relation' or whether those involved could be replaced by others (Simmel 1950: 405–407). In Elias (1978) and Cooley's (1967) terms, the extent to which people in the bond have attached and fixed emotional valencies to each other, or have asserted the other as part of the self, determines whether the basis of the bond is particular.

Family relationships that involve blood bonds, love and intimate sharing tend to be strongly based on the particular bond, while bonds between fellow sufferers are

typically based on the commonality of a general human feature, the common fate that connects not certain specific people, but any people with that fate. Close friendships analysed in the study are typically long-term relationships in which commitment has come to be directed to that particular person, but even among important friendships there are people with whom the intensive sharing is mostly about the (general) common situation (for example, intensive mothering). One way to trace the nature of the basis of a bond is to examine whether it outlives particular settings: bonds specific to particular people are typically not linked to one setting only, but 'follow' the person from one setting to another. In such bonds, people have become interdependent on one another, but often not without tension, which indicates how 'the social' sometimes collides with 'the personal'.

7.3 Biographical and relational events

The third suggested focal point in the bonding processes rises from biographical and relational events. Disruptive events are an example of such events but what I mean here is more comprehensive than that. I derive this focal point directly from the analysis, while the first two have been addressed by social theorists in depth. Events generate dynamics which allow the investigation of relational processes in the spirit of 'relational sociology' (Emirbayer 1997). Some such events are biographical in the sense that they originate directly from the self's experiences, such as falling ill or losing a loved one, and throw the biography of the self off its habitual course of life and push it into something unexplored. Biographical events may be either inherently relational (such as in the case of loss) or become such, as they have a deep impact on significant relationships. Some events are relational in their very origin, such as estrangement of important relationships, but have likewise consequences for the self and its biography. However, I do not want to stress the distinction, as my argument proposes that the line between biographical and relational is only analytical. However such events are focal points of relationships, as they generate motion in both selves and bonds. Although biographical research has become rather popular in the past decades (e.g. Roberts 2002), I have not seen it theorized in relation to the question of the social bond.

My analysis suggests a close link between biographical and relational aspects in relationships, but analytically speaking, they can be seen as distinct. The close link was especially well indicated in the analysis of biographical disruption and the reconfiguration of significant others (Sub-study I). Although disruptive events are especially accentuated in unravelling the nature of bonded relationships, any biographical events, however well-planned, tend to change the configuration of relationships to some extent (e.g. Bidard & Lavenu 2005; Widmer & Sapin 2008). Biographical events show and accentuate interdependencies between people and turn them into visible dynamics, interactions, practices and processes of bonding. Methodologically speaking, this helps to tease out the extent to which bonds have particular or general bases, and in elaborating the interplay between the two.

Biographical and relational events can be seen not only as a thematic research interest, but also as entrance points to explore bonds and their configuration with a theoretical interest in understanding bonds not as ‘things’ or ‘boxes’ (cf. Mason 2006).

In my study I considered biographical and relational events (especially in Sub-studies I and II) from the viewpoints of biographical disruption and estranged relationships between parents and their grown children. In these cases the events took place uninvited, but however planned an event it is always a process of transformation and may end up becoming a crossroads of existence. Any biographical or relational events involve change and stand the possibility of turning into ‘fateful moments’ when ‘things are wrenched out of joint, where a given state of affairs is suddenly altered by a few key events’ (Giddens 1991: 113; see also Bagnoli & Ketokivi 2009). Taking an analogy from political sociology and the analysis of revolutionary times, they may become ‘moments of madness’ when participants are acutely conscious of the unusual state of affairs and believe ‘all is possible’ (Zolberg 1972). In such moments – also in personal life – whatever is transforming bursts its bounds to invade every aspect of life, transcending what appeared as fate (ibid.). Biographical and relational events of this intensity involve transformation of both social embeddings and selves and their personal experiences. This rarely happens without conflict. Becoming a mother is a good example of an event in which great expectations a priori (rooted both in personal hopes and social imaginaries) tend to collide with social realities (Martiskainen de Koenigswarter 2006). Such collisions are generative of relational processes, such as changes in existing relationships, the search for new significant others and acute internal conversations. Cultural expectations, social settings, configurations of relationships, specific bonds and personal experiences are all in turbulence, where their constitutive roles become visible. As social settings transform into different ones due to a biographical event, they may resemble ‘moments of madness’ (Zolberg 1972). ‘The social’ as it has been known in one moment may be either disembedded or transformed into something quite different. Analyzing such turbulent situations deconstructs the ‘social’ into more specific and contextualized features. This turns biographical and relational events into focal points worth considering in the study of (social) bonds in motion.

7.4 Subjectivity and asymmetry of bonds

My study confirms that it is crucial to remember that personally significant bonds are never fully symmetrical in the sense that the self and the other would give the bond exactly the same position and relevance. This is due to the subjectivity of all experience that is not accessible to anyone else but the self. The *significance of each specific relationship is a subjective category based on such experiences* (Mead 1934: 33; Schutz 1932). In the context of social relationship this is also pointed out by Weber (1947: 119) who notes subjectivity as a factor when considering the social

bond: ‘the subjective meaning need not necessarily be the same for all the parties who are mutually oriented in a given social relationship; there need not in this sense be ‘reciprocity’’. This also means that the participants may have different attitudes towards one another. Elias (1978: 137) further suggests that each particular configuration of ‘valencies’ (as deeply particular emotional bonds) is unique: no one can have the exact same relationships and subjective feelings about them. Moreover, the wider chains of interdependency of relationships, as particular bonds, are always different for each person involved (ibid.).

Bonds are often and in many ways asymmetrical. In my study, this became apparent when I examined the same relationships from the subjective viewpoints of different people involved: in the data the very same friendship, for example, gained its personal significance not in relation to the (internal) quality of the bond, but in relation to the self and her or his wider configuration in which certain positions were available. *Asymmetrical differences which exceed the expected level of balance in the specific setting invite tension, but to a varying degree in different settings and within certain relationship categories.* Here it is important to note that each bond has different features in which the asymmetries are related. Care relationships, for example, are expected to be asymmetrical with respect to the practice of care, but perhaps more symmetrical with respect to the personal significance of the other. Bonds with fellow sufferers are expected to be symmetrical regarding sharing and in the short-term, while family bonds allow a longer time span for reciprocity. When the expectations related to a specific setting (the social side) and the ones negotiated with the people involved (the particular side) have failed, conflicts materialize in relational processes and internal conversations. In the family setting, Finch and Mason (1993, 37) suggest that people try and find ‘the proper balance’ regarding independence and dependence in their relationships with family members. This can be seen as an effort to limit the intensity of asymmetry at the acceptable level in that specific setting.

Certainly, people also have different personal styles of relatedness²¹ and their significant relationships reflect these *personal* differences. However, another source of the asymmetry and subjectivity of the bonds is *structural*: while some configurations of relationships have openings for certain relationships (or ‘unattached valencies’ in Elias’ terms), others are more closed and have no positions available for new relationships. This was analysed in Sub-study IV, in which co-resident partnerships in the setting of immediate family appeared as the primary bonds that closed the intimate circle to other intimates (cf. Castrén 2008). The structural pressure to keep other intimates in more remote circles of intimacy may be linked to the personal situation: if one already has an intimate relationship (like a couple relationship), she or he is not likely to yearn as much intimacy from others – unlike a person whose configuration of significant others has no open space for intimacy altogether. This is a way in which different configurations of people pose a

²¹ I take up this question in my post-doctoral research project (2010-2012) in which I consider personal styles of relatedness and (embedded) agency in their own right, but also in relation to the social categories of class, gender and generation.

challenge to a relationship, as the participants may have different expectations regarding the relationship, depending on their particular situation. This is also why it may be difficult to construct symmetrical bonds across different life situations and why similarity in situation connects people in easier ways.

Although configurations of relationships both enable and constrain particular relationships (Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994), Sub-study IV shows that some people are more individualized and just do things in their particular ways, although within some (however loose) limits. They use agency in defining and maintaining alternative relationships even when they are subjected to structural constraints. I argue that ‘personal relationships’ between people should not be understood solely as ‘personal’ or ‘social’ bonds, but as dynamic processes of bonding in which both sides are present. The asymmetries of bonds originate from both sides. They are personal in their origin when tied to the subjective meanings of relationships and particular negotiations. They are social in their origin when linked to the different social embeddings of the selves. Reciprocity, however balanced to the setting and nature of the bond, still appears as a relevant feature in all areas of social life (also Mauss 2002[1950]). Drastic asymmetries become a source of disappointments, anger and conflict. Although the failed expectations of symmetry do not always generate actual relational processes, tension produces internal conversation and reflection which pinpoints the ‘the proper’ level and nature of symmetry of bonds in their specific settings.

7.5 Dynamics between bonding and individuality

I argue that the dialectic between being bound to others while at the same time maintaining a sense of individuality is central in personal relationships. Unlike Smart (2007: 28), I would not like to contrast ‘personal’ with ‘individual’, because at the micro-level of analysis it hinders the investigation of bonding processes, which involve both bonding and contrasts in which the self draws a boundary with respect to the bond. I discuss ‘individuality’ as a contextual and contingent feature in relational dynamics, not as a permanent substance arising from within the inner self. In order to understand relationality as more specifically manifested in personal bonds or selves we need to develop frameworks that allow us to grasp such dynamics. However, it does not have to mean individualism. The individualization thesis has been rightly criticized by empirical research that shows how clearly relationally people live. This research is in direct opposition to the individualistic notion of the self. In my view we do not have to choose between the relational or the individualistic stance, but set aside such a dualism and consider the ways in which selves relate to others without taking an a priori stance on the patterns of relational processes. My analysis suggests both connecting and contrasting dynamics as important for understanding relationality.

I find dialectics between the binding nature of bonds and individuality present in all personal relationships. Individuality in my analyses was manifested in relational

processes as different features the selves protected in relation to others from the search for (relative) autonomy, sense of unique self, and agency. These were sought after by the selves especially through the dynamics of contrast (see also Cooley 1957) and differentiation (see also Simmel 1950). Cooley (1957, 1967) proposes that self-feelings manifested in expressions such as 'I', 'me' and 'mine' that are applied with a strong sense to distinguish something as peculiar to us by contrast to others. This always implies relation to others, because the point of cherishing something as distinctively private takes place in a relational context and derives its meaning from the relation. What is contrasted as 'me' or 'mine' is something cherished by the self, not as 'not the separate, but the special' (Cooley 1957: 194). This is vividly apparent in the struggle for autonomy in the setting of the family of origin in which the parents expect social reproduction of the family and the children want to construct their own lives alternative to that of their parents. The life of one's own derives its meaning from the binding character of the bonds to something common.

The other dynamic of individuality is the one of differentiation. Although Simmel (1950: 417) did not discuss differentiation as a product of agency, but as a social development in modern society, its essential consequence for the self is the same: it loosens the 'jealous delimitation' and allows more autonomy for the self. Differentiation of intimacy across relationships in different settings and the maintenance of distinct circles of intimacy (the family and intensive friendships) was used to create at least some (relative) autonomy with respect to the family setting by a few alternative academic women in a phase of intensive mothering (see Sub-study IV). Sub-study I noted that even selves wounded by biographical disruptions make an effort to differentiate the kinds of support they receive from others, in order not to become fully dependent on anyone, not even their families. Another rationale for such differentiation is not to burden anyone too much and hence cause drastic asymmetry in relationships. The dynamic of differentiation is especially apparent after an acute situation that requires maintaining by others, when the selves have reclaimed some of their agency back. It is often mobilized into the search for new significant others with whom to share the emotional burden: fellow sufferers whose experiences match their own (see Sub-study I). I do not suggest such differentiation as voluntary, intentional, planned and under control, yet in the given circumstances it appears as an effort to protect and rebuild the self in contrast to others. I interpret this dynamic as one deriving not from an inherent individuality of the self, but the opposite: the search for the lost sense of individuality, something to cherish as one's own.

In the dynamics of individuality three features figure in varied ways: the sense of uniqueness (subjectivity of experience), agency and a search for (relative) autonomy. I do not develop an elaborate notion of individuality as part of relational dynamics here, but save it for the final chapter of the dissertation. Herein, I only note that it is important not to set aside individuality that derives its meaning from the binding and shared side of the bonds. The bonded dynamics in relation to which the dynamics of individuality respond take different forms as well. In the context of

support in biographical disruption they appear as concern, but sometimes also as social control that in fact all social settings exercise, although not always overtly. In my analysis of personal relationships family appears as the setting most occupied with control. The extent to which a bond is bonded and the extent to which it allows expressions of individuality may originate from relationship categories and their cultural expectations, but also from personal negotiations. The intensity of the bonded side of the bonds implies a certain level of interdependency of those involved, a concrete social tie between certain particular people. This is one way in which the 'social' of the social bond materializes into something tangible. The extent to which it tolerates expressions and actions of individuality reveals a great deal about the social in that specific setting.

7.6 State of the bond

The sixth keyword that is turning the sociological gaze to a focal point in personal relationships is the state of the bond. In this sense it has best been captured by Scheff's (1997) model of the social bond which is based on the concept of attunement as mutual understanding between participants. Scheff considers the bonds to be one of the three states: attunement, engulfment and isolation. Attuned bonds are secure and involve a balance between the viewpoint of the self and the other. He suggests that threats to secure bonds come in two different formats; either the bond is too loose (isolated) or too tight (engulfed) respectively. Isolated bonds result from mutual misunderstanding, distance or rejection, while in engulfed bonds an individual is subordinated to the other and accepts the other at her own expense by rejecting parts of herself. (Ibid. 76–77.)

In my study, I have both used Scheff's model, and pointed out some of its limitations. I have used it in particular in the analysis of bonds between the self and fellow sufferers in Sub-study III. I have criticized it for its therapeutic vocabulary and its ethos that suggests that ('normal') bonds contain a distinct self and a distinct other with a notable boundary between the two where the balance takes place. I have argued that such a notion is not perceptive of personal bonds in different settings that may entail care, love or support. Personal bonds involve long-term commitments and should hence be seen as processes in which different states take place over time. Actually this leads us back to the question of asymmetry that some settings and relationships tolerate more, while others less. In what time span the balance between dependence and independence can be negotiated within the frame of a specific bond tells a lot about its nature. Scheff (1997, 218) suggests that certain stabilized patterns of behaviour that appear as constraining result from the types of (particular) relationships. He has to be given credit for creating a model that enables the analysis of particular patterns of social life according to the nature of particular bonds involved. It proved to be insightful in the analysis of bonds in the setting of peer support in which the essence of the bond is short-term reciprocity. What is more, even in the context of long-term bonds, identifying the current state of a bond

(without examining it as a whole) helps to pinpoint the ongoing and unfolding dynamics between bonding and individuality. However in my view they can be understood in the context of the bond as a whole, including its history and position in the configurations of all significant relationships. My own analysis suggests that, in addition, certain consequences to the relational self are linked with the different states of her or his significant bonds. However, I want to add that especially the clashes between the states of the bond and expectations in specific settings of them are consequential, releasing the tensions into notable relational dialectics. This is what makes the state of the bond a generative focal point in the light of relational analysis.

However, I would like to denude Scheff's terminology of social bonds from its therapeutic ethos and attach it back to the social theory tradition. Deriving from Elias, Scheff (1997: 78) suggests his three states as states of *interdependence* (attunement), *dependence* (engulfment) and *independence* (isolation). I prefer these terms²² as they are more fluid and leave more space for both subjective and social meanings as attached to any given states within certain relationship categories in specific settings, configurations and bonds. They are also free from a therapeutic ethos that prioritizes certain state over others, as I want to highlight that different expectations regarding interdependence, dependence and independence are inevitable and ordinary. For example, it is ordinary that a child, an aged person or a seriously ill person is dependent on others that are not in turn dependent on her or him. This calls for love and personal ethics that in some relationships are expected to be present (e.g. parenthood, loving partnership or marriage), while in other relationships, e.g. between distant acquaintances, is unexpected and would transgress the level of intimacy of that relationship. It is also important to note that interdependence, dependence and independence are not mutually exclusive categories. An interdependent bond finds each person, from her or his subjective viewpoint, dependent on the other, and different phases may stress different states of the bond, as Scheff also notes. However the contribution of these more neutral terms is that they do not presume the self as a substance with certain boundaries, and yet they allow us a look into the 'black box' of the social bond in an empirically attuned way. The 'social' of the social bond materializes in different temporal and relational contexts as different states which derive their meanings from those contexts. Among the classics, Tönnies (2002) elaborated the different bases of the bond as community-based or society-based (see discussion in Chapter 3), to which Schmalenbach (1967) added the category of communion. Tönnies (2002: 242–243) also elaborated further the nature of 'social relationship or a bond' as one that 'implies interdependence': where the 'will of the one person influences that of the other, either furthering or impeding, or both'. However unlike Scheff (1997), he or any other theorist has not offered empirically-attuned concepts for the analysis of this interdependency between particular people. Analysing the question of the social

²² I am not convinced Elias would himself propose this kind of a model, as Scheff (1997: 78) appears to, but in the context this an irrelevant question.

bond from the empirically identified states of the bond is relevant, because the different states of the bond in relation to the settings in which they take place generate different processes of sociological interest. When the expectations and the states of the bond clash, the tension between the social and the personal emerges. The states of the bonds have different consequences both personally and socially, but they should be considered embedded in the settings from which they arise.

7.7 Embeddedness of bonds in wider configurations

As the final keyword to open up the ‘black box’ of the social bond, I consider the embeddedness of bonds in wider configurations which structure the processes of bonding. I argue that in order to really understand a social bond it is not enough to examine it as a dyadic relationship (Elias 1978; also Adams & Allan 1998). Configuration of interdependent people inevitably affects the ways in which any specific relationship can be realized or actualized. I identify two kinds of *configurational logic which both enable and constrain particular bonds* (Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994). The first is the configurational logic identified by Eve (2001) in his article “Is friendship a sociological topic?”. It proposes that formation of new relationships is constrained by pre-existing relationships that already are important. Eve argues that the bonding process is more likely to select new relationships that enable maintenance or enrichment of existing ones. Castrén (2008) takes the point further and considers bonds in relation to the *hierarchy of loyalties* that constrain relationships. A concrete example of this is the dynamic that the primary position of the partner creates (see Castrén 2001; also Castren & Lonkila 2004). This logic was especially apparent in the formation of the most intimate relationships (Sub-study IV), in which co-resident partnership was identified as an ordering principle pushing other intimates into more remote circles of intimacy. This configurational logic materializes the cultural expectation that no other intimate relationships are maintained parallel to the partner (excluding children). This dynamic is structural at the micro-level, as the intimacy structure in the family setting is exclusive. It has no openings for other equally intimate relationships.

The other configurational logic I found is more ‘self-driven’, as it derives from the personal bond and our innate ethic to care for a wounded intimate (see Sub-study I). This logic is manifested in the way in which others mobilize themselves to support the self in need. It shows the particular bases of bonds in which the commitments of others to the specific self are the driving force of processes of bonding. Although certain people are culturally expected, based on their relationship category, to care for each other in times of need, the webs of relationships do not directly structure people to do so. However, as pointed out earlier the nature of each bond does not develop in isolation, but interdependently, based on other relationships. The ways in which other relationships respond to the situation affect pressure to take responsibility for a wounded intimate or exempt from it. For example, in situations of absent or unsupportive families, friends have more pressure

to step in and support the wounded than in situations where the family acts as a safety net. However, in the absence of family, friendships also have a configurational opening to become intimate and negotiated into a personally significant relationship. This is how the embeddings of the bonds work both as constraints and enablements.

The selves also exercise agency in their configurations of significant others to attain relative autonomy (however limited) in relation to the others on whom they have become dependent. Differentiation of different kinds of bonding (maintaining and empowering especially) across different relationships in a situation of need is an example of this. Another example is provided by Sub-study IV in which some select women by agency shape their intimate configurations to fulfil their own need, as opposed to their families. These are considered in more detail in section 7.5 as dynamics of individuality.

The embeddedness of specific bonds in the wider configurations of people is a focal point worthy of consideration, as configurational constraints and the nature of embeddings is likely to generate dynamics that deconstruct ‘the social’ of the social bond into tangent transactions between people – something actually happening between particular people. Cues to these constraints and enablements are to be found in competition between different relationships, jealousy, collisions and other tension, as well as in loneliness, openings (lack of some culturally central positions such as partnership, see Sub-study IV) and open valencies enacted in the search for people to form new relationships (see discussion in Chapter 3). It is through such particular enactments that ‘the social’ and its tension with ‘the personal’ becomes something actual.

I have revisited the question of the social bond in the light of the analysis and suggested seven focal points of the social bond that generate dynamics to be analysed in personal relationships. They also help to deconstruct and specify how ‘the social’ of the social bond becomes actualised, confronting personal significance and negotiations between particular people. Often the social derives its meaning and connotations from those specific settings and expectations that arise from those settings. In Chapter 3 I asked whether social bonds should be seen as substances or as processes or transactions. Now I am ready to commit myself on the ontological question of the bond. Bonds certainly exist in the world. They have real ontology, but I argue that their ontology is particular and should be seen as worldly and contextual. Actual bonds are in a constant process of formation and are in addition contingent and open-ended.

In this and the preceding chapter I have elaborated on the social in light of the analysis as embedded in specific settings and involving more specific focal points or dimensions that are also empirically evident. We denote most of them as ‘social’, in contrast to ‘individual’, ‘particular’ or ‘personal’. When manifested in relational dynamics they do clash with the personal. Linking research and theory creates

empirically-grounded means for explaining *the social as quality of bonds*. In this sense and sociologically speaking, the particular processes of bonding may be more or less 'social' – that is more or less embedded in certain settings and particular configurations of interdependent people that are more or less structured by cultural expectations (relationship categories in action). What I mean by categories here, then, is not sociological or universal categories, but categories in action and their contextualized life in the world. The danger of general social theory and general categories is that they fail to depict the the liveliness of the world, but become incorporated into the imaginaries of both societies and sciences; we see that this has transpired with the concept of individual (Elias 1978; Ourossoff 1993).

In course of the research process I became sceptical of the ability of empirically-attuned general theory of the social bond to be useful in analysis, because different settings, configurations, processes of negotiations and personal styles of relatedness each take place in specific contexts. The gap between general theory and empirical research is too wide to produce a fruitful discussion or interplay. However, I propose that the preceding focal points, identified by linking research and theory, act as more specific foci when considering the question of the bond relevant to understanding *any* personal relationships. They are admittedly general, but intentionally so; leaving it up to the analysis as placed in specific contexts to determine the nature of the social bonds – not as one universal question, but as many.

8 Conclusion: The relational self

It is now time to conclude the study and commit myself on the question of the self as social. During the research process I felt a need to refine the general and abstract concept of social self in order to better grasp the real life connections and formations that take part in the (ongoing and changing) constitution of selves. Cooley and Mead as theorists of the social self were occupied in unravelling the common logic and social genesis of the self. In their analyses, ‘others’ appears mainly as an abstract group of people or as ‘the generalized other’ (Mead 1934) as opposed to those particular others to whom selves are currently bound. Their theories of the social self did not have an interest in staining their concepts with the messy relations of the empirical world. In contrast, I am specifically interested in the messy and incomplete processes which the ongoing bonds between people in the context of the study appear to be. To distinguish myself from the abstract approach to the relationality of the social self, I felt a different concept was needed. *I have settled on the concept of relational self that accentuates the self as one in relationships with others. However, in addition to suggesting ‘self-in-relation’, it also refers to the relational formation of the self.* The personal relationships I have studied have not been treated as a category of relationships, but as those *particular relationships* research participants have indicated as personally significant to them.

In relation to the question of the social bond, I deconstructed ‘the black box’ of the social bond and extrapolated generative focal points in which the social manifested itself in relational dynamics of personal relationships. In such a viewpoint, the social appears as variegated and contextualized states, but more than anything in the context of the study, it emerges in confrontation with the personal – whether in forms of personal significance, experience, negotiations or agency. In relational dynamics it is the structuring force that patterns personal relationships into certain more or less consistent forms, whether as the subject of resistance or resignation. It appears that the concept of social presupposes an opposition, one that since the time of the sociology classics has been known as either ‘individual’ (Tönnies 2002; Weber 1947) or ‘individuality’ (Durkheim 1968[1933]; Simmel 1950). I understand ‘relational’ as all the movement between the social in this sense and the personal (in this general sense I prefer the term ‘personal’, as it is more open-ended than ‘individuality’). I discuss that part of selves which is formed of particular ‘relations’ that are in a constant state of fluctuation. In the context of the study, the relational self is an open-ended sociological question in which ‘relational’ as part of the self refers to particular bonding processes between selves and those significant others that have an accentuated role in the formation of the self. I believe a link between the qualitative research on relational selves and theorizing on the self as social have valuable insights to offer to one another. In the following section, I explain how the notion of the relational self I propose is a specific perspective on the social self as Cooley (1957, 1967) and Mead (1934, 1967) saw it. I then consider some notions of relational identity, because it resembles the way I understand the

relational self. I conclude by considering the relational self as dynamics between bonding and what I call ‘individuality’.

I do not propose individuality as an asocial part of the self, but as an emerging feature, a transaction, which draws its character from the relational dynamics in which it is manifested. Individuality is then placed in specific temporal and relational contexts. The process in which it emerges is dialectical in a similar sense as it is at the level of the social bond (see the previous chapter), only here it is a process of *self-formation*.

8.1 From general to particular relationality: the relational self as a specification of the social self

In the second chapter of the study, I discuss the self as social, relying in particular on the classic perspectives of Cooley and Mead. While Cooley (1957, 1967) was occupied with analyzing the social self in the light of experiences and feelings and the looking glass reflection in relation to others, Mead (1934) considered the genesis of self in social interaction. Mead wanted to reveal the universal features of the social self (da Silva 2007: 7, 60). Although he pointed out that self is an ongoing (social) process that presupposes interaction with others, he did not really discuss empirical selves in terms of their ongoing relations to others. Even if the relational self is herein used as a general term, empirically it is formed in relation to *particular others*. This is the difference I want to emphasize and examine in more detail.

Although Mead’s (1934) theory does not consider selves as particulars, it offers an elegant distinction between the two states of the self, the ‘I’ and the ‘me’, one that can be fruitfully utilized for the analysis of relational selves. Within the social self, it is the phase of the ‘I’ that is capable of mobilizing itself to novel and creative action. This corresponds rather well to the notion of agency as something residing within the self (cf. Weber 1947). In Sub-study I, I interpreted selves wounded by biographical disruption in light of Mead’s terminology as ones with stagnated ‘I’s, which left them in the socially determined state of the ‘me’. However, as their expected course of life is disrupted by unexpected events even habitualized action is stagnated. Charmaz (1983) has captured a phenomenon resembling this intensity as ‘loss of self’. In the case of biographical disruption it was only after being maintained by others that the stagnated ‘I’ recovered enough to take an innovative course of action. This often involved an active search for new significant others, fellow sufferers, and a reorientation to the remaining constitutive others in order to find sense in life. To understand the dynamics and the fusion of the self and the other in constitutive bonding, I drew from Cooley’s (1967: 824) idea that loving someone intensively or for a long period of time makes it likely that this someone will become asserted as part of the self. I also looked to Elias’ (1978, 135–135) notion of emotional valencies fixed to certain people for inspiration. When these bonds are torn apart, the self does not only experience a loss, but is left severely wounded.

The relational self is not uniformly social. Both Cooley and Mead consider individuality to be part of the social self. Their contribution to my analysis is the way in which they incorporate individuality into the social – or in my case the relational. For Mead, individuality is not crushed by the social. Rather he maintains that the social is constitutive of individuality, as ‘the individual is what he is, as a conscious and individual personality, just in as far as he is a member of society, involved in the social process of experience and activity, and thereby socially controlled in his conduct’ (Mead 1934: 255). He does not provide consider the tension between the individual and social sides of the self, nor the one stemming from distinct embeddings or contrasting interdependencies of the self and others. This is due to Mead’s focus on ‘the generalized other’ in which others are in seen in unison (Burkitt 2008). However, his notion of the ‘I’ incorporates agency – the ability to innovate action – into the notion of the self (Gronow 2008).

Cooley’s (1967: 823–4) social self seeks both to receive life from others and to individuate it. In intensive emotional bonds, the self (when loving someone) is impelled to receive life from others. Yet the self also protects its own boundaries. Cooley suggests ‘self-feeling’ as the phase of self that in community life protects whatever is the self’s own (‘mine’) from others. However individualistic the self-feeling is, it draws its meaning specifically from the (relational) contrast of whatever is common with others. In Cooley’s theory the social self then has a delimiting side that defends a certain part of its experience from others. (Ibid.)

With respect to Mead’s (1934) social self, the relational self, to my understanding, can be seen as that part of the (social) process of self-formation which Mead addresses in general terms. My analysis addresses the ongoing process that *continue* to be in motion in relation to particular significant others. Cooley’s (1967) analysis of the social self is more attuned to the sometimes contrasting dynamics between bonding and individuality within the self. I draw insight from his elaboration of these dynamics in a later section when illuminating the role of individuality in the relational self.

The concept of relational self has also been used in social psychology to elaborate the self-concept as having three fundamental self-representations: the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self (e.g. Sedikides & Brewer 2001). It is suggested that people seek to achieve self-definition and self-interpretation (i.e. identity) in terms of their unique traits (the individual self), in terms of dyadic relationships (the relational self), and in terms of group membership (the collective self). The individual self is activated by the motive to protect and enhance the person psychologically by distinguishing herself from others. This corresponds to Mead’s ‘I’ (cf. also Cooley’s notion of contrast). The relational self is achieved by assimilating with significant others. It is based on personalized bonds of attachment, such as the ones analysed in this study. It defines the position of the self in significant relationships and has the motive of protecting and enhancing the significant others and the relationships itself. The collective self is achieved by inclusion in large social groups, contrasting the in-group with relevant out-groups. It is hence based on impersonal bonds to others derived from common (and often

symbolic) identification with a group. (Ibid.) The relational self and the collective self together correspond to the Meadian 'me'.

The underlying assumption of the three self-representations is their coexistence within the same individual, and that all of these are social. Interestingly, Sedikides and Brewer (2001) ask whether the individual, the relational and the collective self are close partners, bitter opponents or indifferent acquaintances. In the social psychological understanding, the relational self is only that phase of the self that in Cooley's (1967) terms receives life from others and is committed to the maintenance of significant bonds. Although I find the idea of multiple selves interesting, analytically speaking, it is rather confusing that all three self-representations are depicted as (distinct) selves 'within a self'. I find the idea of the self with different (relational) phases (Mead 1934) a more appealing conceptualization. Also from my viewpoint, equating selves with cognitive self-representations is problematic, as the focus on disruptive events so vividly shows.

8.2 The relational self and identity

I consider briefly discussion on identity as relational, because some variations of the notion of identity come close and are useful to my notion of the relational self. Although research and theorizing of identity is a messy, scattered and polyphonic field, it has been proposed as one of the cornerstones of individualization theory (Giddens 1991; see also Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 161). For Giddens (1991: 74–80), for example, self-identity is a continuous and all-pervasive reflexive project for which the individual is herself or himself responsible. The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future and, as a coherent phenomenon, presumes a narrative of the self. Giddens' actualization of the self is linked to individualized notions of balance between opportunity and risk, and the authenticity of the self. The self-identity is internally referential rather than bound to others. (Ibid.) As Smith and Sparkes (2008) point out, Giddens' notion of self-identity involves a thick individual side and a thin relational side.

Later sociological perspectives have emphasized identity as a much more relational subject, close to the way I understand the relational self. For Lawler (2008: 2) identity is relational: it is loosely defined as involving identification of the self with some, while 'dis-identifying' with others. Both social categories (such as gender) and important bonds, especially with parents, are sources of identification (ibid.). However, the bonds that have already been incorporated in the identity have at least to some extent become a part of the organization of self, which is not likely to transform into something different instantly, as lived interdependencies may do to the less organized parts of the self, such as experience. Identity can thus be understood as a (cognitive) sense of self or some side of it that is relationally constituted, but not necessarily interdependent on particular ongoing bonds. Interpreted in Mead's terms, identity is part of the 'me' that is reflected upon by the 'I'. The identity is part of the 'me' that the 'I' has already gained awareness of.

However, the incomplete formations of the self have not yet been internalized into the 'me', but are in a state of fluctuation.

My focus on disruptive events and experiences draws attention to the relational dynamics more intensively than some other focus on relational selves might have done. In a disruptive situation the self has fallen on others. The bond is in a state of dependence. The relational self as an ongoing process is not fully conscious of itself. It is not fully aware of self, nor is it in control of its own actions. Rather the self has lost the ability to be an object to herself. The relational self is embedded in chains of interdependency that in contemporary times are typically too complex to form a harmonious whole, i.e. 'the generalized other' in unison (cf. Mead 1934).

In stark processes of transformation such as biographical disruption, the relationality of selves becomes accentuated, even vividly so. Calhoun's (1991) definition of identity pinpoints the essential difference between identity and the relational self. He sees identity as a 'relatively stable construction in an ongoing process of social activity' (ibid: 59, 52). I would replace 'social activity' in the definition with 'ongoing interdependencies' that are less organized than activity. Whereas selves respond to these events immediately, identities do not transform at once off guard, but take time to unfold through processes of identification. In disruptive events it is the constitutive and relational 'reality' of selves that breaks down. The relationality of the relational self is then messier than the one of identity, because it is in flux, while the relational identity is already somewhat stabilized (although not invariable). Regarding identity, one aspect of disruption may be the unexpected and stark gap between the existing identity and the altered reality that no longer match. Loss of self (Charmaz 1983) may in part be caused by a loss of grounding of a constitutive identity. Instead the relational self can be seen to refer to the whole person, consisting of ongoing personal experiences, concrete and internalized bonds with significant others, and multiple identities (although they are not investigated here).

8.3 The relational self as dynamics of bonding and individuality

My analysis suggests that significant others enable selves in several important ways. Others give 'the purpose' and 'a reason to go on' a very personal sense of meaning in life. They anchor selves to relationships and configurations that become the centre of their *own* lives and even an integral part of the selves (as happens in constitutive bonds). Sometimes selves are almost fully dependent, at the mercy of others. These others maintain wounded selves, who in disruptive events would not always make it without them, or withdraw when support is expected. Significant others hold the possibility to empower (or disempower) selves. Sometimes others just are 'there' somewhere in the background in a sympathetic or isolated way. They may reject selves and put them down, either consciously or without even knowing it. These aspects are all parts of the bonding processes I have elaborated on at length. They are not only associated to the self, but are an integral part of its formation. In the

context of personal relationships that are narrated as ‘close or otherwise important’, the self is interdependent on others due to their special significance. This interdependence may derive from bonded or isolated states of relationships and their configurational organization, but the analysis shows it is there.

Mason (2004: 177) studied selves as relational in the context of residential histories and considers selves in the light of their ‘highly relational’ personal narratives, built as they are through relationships people had and connections they had made with other people, especially family and kin. Mason suggests that in order to understand embedded practices and identities of selves we need to keep the ‘processes of relating’ in focus in equal measure to the individual or self. Relational selves in her view are not individuals with relationships (as Giddens proposes), nor ‘selves in relation’, but specifically ‘relational selves’. This does not mean that people are always kind, considerate or fully cognizant of the needs of others. Relational practices may be warm and supportive, but they may also be full of conflict or even oppressive. In addition, the extent to which different selves are relational differs from one person to another. Based on the empirical insight from her study, Mason points out that in the process of theorizing individualized selves, the individualization theorists lost sight of the connectivity of social relations, identity and agency. Personal narratives do not depict an individualized narrator, but are filled with relational content and suggest relational selves. (Ibid.)

I draw from Mason’s insight into relational selves, but extend the discussion based on my analysis. Mason’s criticism of the individualized notion of self is in line with earlier criticism from Norbert Elias (1978) on the concept of individual that has in fact been central to sociology since the classics. The principles of Elias are important to my own argument, as his focus is on the explicit interdependencies of people, as opposed to Cooley and Mead, to whom others seem more like an abstract category than flesh-and-blood particular people.

Elias (1978) provides a critique of the concept of individual that from the viewpoint of this study is very compelling. I first discuss it in some length, and then elaborate on how the self is involved in a transaction in a relational process, which appears as what I call ‘individuality’. Elias describes the concept of individual as *homo clausus* ‘me in my closed box’ (ibid. 130), and criticizes sociology for confusing ‘fact’ with the ideal (see also Ourossoff 1993; Carsten 2004). Elias believed that the idea of the isolated individual conveys a mental image: we are brought up to become independent and self-reliant, cut-off from everyone else, eventually believing and feeling that we actually are. Even the fact that people feel that they are ‘inside’, as opposed to others in the ‘outside world’, does not mean that there is an inner (individual) self with a core and substance. Sociological concepts typically split the world into the inside and outside. Elias (1978: 117) felt Weber (1947) drew a line between the individual and the social, creating an impression of a static and individualistic person that Elias believed was a myth. He points out that each person is always in a process of ‘becoming’ (ibid. 120).

Elias wanted to replace *homo clausus* with the concept of ‘open people’ who have open emotional valences directed towards other people. For Elias people are

not just open, but also firmly connected to others, as ‘I-we’ images are an integral part of the self. When they are broken of, as in an incident of loss of a loved one, the survivor does not only lose the other, but also part of him- or herself. Although Elias does not use the concept of relational self, nor discuss the question of the self in length, his viewpoint is very close to my own in the analysis. I interpreted the experiences of loss in the light of his notion of emotional valencies (Sub-study I). However, in the vocabularies of Elias (1978) Mason (2004) and Smart (2007), the contrast between the notion of selves as relational and as individualized may obscure the sight of the emergent phases of individuality altogether – however relationally formed – in the flux of relational processes. This requires further elaboration of the ‘relational’. I focus here more specifically on the dynamics of bonding and individuality.

Basing on the analysis *I propose individuality as an important phase of the relational self*. When suggesting that sociologists should focus on the processes of relating as much as on the individual or the self, Mason (2004) implicitly implies that individuality is an important aspect of (relational) selves. She refers to ‘relational individualism’ when discussing the ways in which people (bread-winner men exclusively in Mason’s study) talked about exercising individual control or agency, but in the interests of others (ibid. 175). This is one way, in which individuality may be seen as part of relationality. Such relationality of the self in a way incorporates significant others into himself and then acts as an individual guardian of others. However, the micro-level analysis of interdependency suggests ‘individuality’ to be part of almost any process of bonding. *As relational selves derive their character in relations to others, so does individuality* in the sense that I understand it. *It derives its character from relational processes as a transaction, a dynamic, set into motion by the self*.

Individuality appears as an important part of the relational dynamics in which the selves *actively* reach out to *connect* with others, and *contrast* something as their own, something special (such as certain experiences) in order to protect or construct a sense of unique self or relative autonomy. This is also done via *differentiation* of close bonds into separate spheres of bonding. Active attempts to connect with others were most visible in the search for new significant others among their fellow sufferers to share the fateful experiences of the self (see Sub-studies I & III). Dynamics of contrast were visible especially in the grown children’s struggle for autonomy in relation to their parents (Sub-study II) and in the contrast in which the intimacy of the couple was protected by a clear boundary in relation to outsiders (Sub-study IV). Differentiation was apparent both in attempts to create distinct circles of intimacy for the (relational) self (Sub-study IV) and in the way in which the wounded selves of Sub-study I differentiated their dependent relations to others. All these dynamics involve agency, but not in relational isolation. Rather agency here is one arising in relations with others – sometimes as assisted by them and sometimes as ‘co-agency’ – but always, I argue, grounded by bonds with others.

The relationship between bonding and individuality is a complex and ambiguous one. I illustrate the dynamics between bonding and (relational) individuality by

citing an interviewee (quoted in Sub-study IV). This 38-year-old woman, a wife and mother, verbalizes the ambiguous and blurred boundaries between the self and her intimates in the formation of relational self:

‘I really feel like drawing my husband and child as half inside me, because it somehow describes it ... they are so close ... I’m someone there inside myself, where no one else belongs, but it would feel strange to draw my family members outside myself. [So there is no clear boundary?] No, there isn’t. ...It’s like they are always there, no matter where you go. Friends and other people are separate, but they are part of the same. I can’t get rid of them. They are a part of me, but it doesn’t mean they are me.’

Like this woman, some people in the study (all academic women in this sample) were ‘individualized’ in a deeply relational and interdependent way. They make a distinction between the state of the bonds with family and friends, but still cite friends or other people among their most intimates, together with their families. I interpreted the maintenance of distinct circles of intimacy outside the firmly bonded family settings as an active effort to loosen the close bonds to loved ones, and to protect the self from becoming fully bonded fused with the family (see Sub-study IV). This dynamic of individuality is inherently relational in two ways. Through the bonds of love and close association, family members have become asserted as a part of the self (cf. Cooley 1967: 824). They cannot be ‘gotten rid of’, not even when they are separated. In order to remain ‘someone’ other than them, the self in the context of certain bonds draws a boundary within herself protecting a private area of the self from others. In Cooley’s (1957: 194) terms it is something that the self cherishes as its own, as something private and special, but not separate from the outside world (cf. Simmel’s notion of the qualitative individuality, 1950). This dynamic of individuality is interdependent on the processes of bonding rather than an asocial and fixed part of the self. The ‘private’ space of the self is not self-referential either, which brings us to the second way in which individuality is relational and contextualized. The space within the self that is protected as private in the context of one bond is in examples like the one above opened to other intimates. Namely, when actively differentiating bonding across a wide pool of intimates, the self remains profoundly interdependent while at the same time protecting itself from fusion with certain bonds and maintaining some autonomy in relation to these bonds.

The quoted woman had three other intimates parallel to her immediate family – these all reflected the different sides or ‘identities’ of the self. A similar kind of differentiation of dependent bonding by wounded selves was found in Sub-study I. In such dynamics the relational self emerges in relation to a wide pool of significant others to whom the bonds are differentiated. This can be interpreted as what Simmel (1950: 78–79) identifies as the modern tendency toward differentiation. The individual seeks her or his self as if she or he did not yet have it: the others are ‘stations on the road on which the ego arrives at itself (ibid. 79). In Meadian terms a

similar dynamic can be seen as the process of adopting the attitudes of others, but in the context of this study not as those of ‘the generalized other’, but differentiated others with many voices.

In the previous example, the self uses agency to shape her bonds with others, more specifically to differentiate between the tightest bonds. In other situations differentiation of bonds may simply be a social circumstance originating from the disembedding of social structures that produce unwanted individuality forcing people into either agency or isolation. The configurational analysis of intimate relationships shows such disembedding of selves outside intimate partnership that in some contexts make the individualization claims regarding the disembedding of social structures plausible (cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991). Individuality as a micro-level disembedding appears as a by-product of the lack of social integration. Hence individuality should not be equated with intentional action only. In situations where the disembedding of constitutive bonds occurs, agency can and must arise to actively connect the self with others or ‘individuality in relation’ turns into isolation. (See Sub-study IV.)

At the level of subjective experiences disruptive events accentuate individuality. By breaking the habitual they force the self into deliberate reflection, the sense of self as an object for herself or himself alone (cf. Mead 1934). In light of my study, individuality at the level of relational self is comparable to what I have said about the dynamics of individuality at the level of the social bond. *Individuality of the relational self appears in three formats in the flux of relational processes: as a sense of unique self (via subjectivity of experience), as agency and as (a search for) autonomy.* All these aspects become burning issues in the incident of a disruptive event. I consider the sense of unique self that is grounded on the subjectivity of experience and agency, which in the context of dependent bonding is used to attain relative autonomy in relation to specific others, but also to reach out for others.

The effort to attain a sense of self as unique is often a source for contrast and distinction from others. But from the subjective viewpoint it is an ambivalent question, as Simmel (1950: 79–81) points out. Most selves need the encouraging awareness that others are like them. However, the sense of unique self, ‘qualitative individuality’ may also be strong enough to contain the capability to bear the unique and lonely quality of the self, which is incomparable to others. (Ibid.) In the case of disruptive events the unique sense of self turns from a treasured self-feeling (Cooley 1957: 194) to a painfully lived suffering, a lonely burden of the self. Both these sides of the individuality of experience generate relational dynamics: *the cherished uniqueness of the self generates contrast in relation to others, while the unbearable individuality of experience drives the self to reach out for others. The way and the extent to which these dynamics take place are interdependent on those specific relationships and circumstances in which the selves are embedded.* It is as Cooley (1967) so convincingly points out, even the most forceful outburst of self-feeling, such as crying ‘mine’ or ‘my own’ draws its meaning from relations with others and what is shared with them.

From the phenomenological or existential viewpoint, individuality does not have to arise from something ‘actually’ unique. It entails the felt subjectivity of all experience, even when similar to the experiences of others. Each person alone has access to her or his subjective experiences (Schutz 1932, also Mead 1934: 33). She or he must feel her or his own experiences subjectively as embodied in the body-self, however relational or common these experiences may be. They cannot be directly shared with others. When individuality emerges in the agonizing experience of suffering, the sense of uniqueness – individuality – often becomes unbearable. The selves are drawn to others, often to their fellow sufferers hoping to find out their felt individuality is not unique, but something that others in similar circumstances share. The relief selves get from this realization is so vivid that it is narrated time after time as a basic element of an empowering experience. It is as if the selves cannot cope with their individuality and escape it by seeking others with whom to ‘reassemble’ the self – not as unique, but as similar. In suffering the sense of unique self, the qualitative individuality of experience then often generates bonding, active connecting initiated by the self. This calls for further discussion of both agency and individuality in the context of relationality.

How can agency be understood in relational terms, as it should in the light of the analysis? To grasp agency as an embedded one, it is vital to keep its meaning open and contextualized (cf. Honkasalo 2008). Emirbayer & Goodwin (1994: 1442–43) have suggested an elegant notion of embedded human agency as entailing ‘the capacity of socially embedded actors to appropriate, reproduce, and potentially to innovate upon received cultural categories and conditions of action in accordance with their personal and collective ideals, interests and commitments’.

I have been inspired by the notion of *small* or *minimal agency* (Honkasalo 2006; 2008) that characterizes the small actions that people tend to perform during a heightened sense of insecurity in order to preserve their social world and its significant bonds. As opposed to seeing agency as the political or moral autonomy of the subject, also minimal agency refers to the relational and embedded existence of people and understands action in relational rather than in individualistic terms as ‘holding on to the world’. (Ibid.) Minimal agency is linked to disruptive events, because it is often what conveys people along to their future lives after disruptions. Such agency is expressed in the saying ‘living one day at a time’ (Lillrank 1998). It is ‘like breathing, a process of intermittent phases, where the acts of inhaling and exhaling are equally necessary’ and in which some phases appear as passive (Honkasalo 2009: 64). *In relational processes, agency is manifested in the act of receiving others and bonding, but it is also active connecting, contrasting or differentiating.* In Meadian terms, it is the re-emergence of the ‘I’, the relational individuality, from the state of disruption, however assisted, maintained or embedded it may be.

Agency of relational selves is then both enabled and constrained by bonds and configurations of them. Although agency is about the capacity of actors, it is embedded especially in those bonds that serve as constitutive to the self and typically hold the primary positions in the configurations of personal relationships.

The state of the bond appears as a source of relational dynamics, also of agency, that derives its meaning from the particular context. In a fully bonded state of dependence and fusion of the self and the other, there is no need to reach out to the other (but perhaps to contrast), while in an independent or isolated state of bonding, there is no point in making a contrast (but perhaps to connect). In both cases agency is relationally formed. Likewise agency is embedded in specific social settings. In the setting of peer support, agency may appear as an attunement to the self's sense of the uniqueness of her or his experience (in comparison to those specific others in the group), and manifested, for example, as an ability to relinquish 'fellow sufferers'. In the family setting, the very same act that may risk the bonds is different as they are both 'categorically' and personally expected to endure. Agency of this sort would require a fiercer sense of qualitative individuality and often also the support of significant others outside the family setting. In the context of negotiable relationships also personal commitment may be an act of agency, although certainly not all bonding is in reach of agency.

I have opened up the question of agency of relational selves in the context of personal relationships as tied to experience, relationships and social settings in which it arises. In its embeddedness agency is also related to the personal styles of relatedness, but this is a question that I shall consider further in my post-doctoral research project.

The relational self can be seen as a process consisting of different phases. These can be conceptualized as the 'I' and the 'me' of Mead in a relational process in which bonding (the 'me') and individuality (the 'I') take turns in relation to one another. However, as the analysis shows, these phases cannot be seen as purely social and as purely individual, as the 'I' also acts to bond with others. Both of these relational phases specifically arise in relation to each other and derive their meaning from these dialectics in which the structuring social and the personal (as something subjectively significant) configure. *Relational selves emerge in rather open-ended processes in which bonding and individuality are interdependent phases that both are vital. Relational selves gain their individuality both in terms of agency and the subjective experience of self not in a vacuum, but as embedded in those relationships that are especially significant – personal – to them. In these bonds selves confront the variegated social as both constraining and enabling them. Individuality is hence not a fixed, but a fluid and relational quality of the self.*

The particular relationships in which the self is embedded may not be her or his fate, but their role in the constitution of the self and its integration into social life more generally is too central to be ignored in sociological discussions. From the viewpoint of micro-level analysis it almost seems, as if the problem of social integration of people into society had shifted from the institutional level to that of particular relationships – a question worth pondering. Differentiation of significant bonds may also be interpreted from this angle: selves differentiate their bonding in

order to ground the self on structures less vulnerable than single bonds. This links my analysis to the wider sociological debates on 'community' and individualization.

I took up the concept of the relational self as a response to the criticism of the concept of individual, but both of these concepts stand to become 'black boxes' that lose their attunement to the (particular) processes of the self. As the social bond, *I propose the relational self is best seen as an open-ended sociological question, and not a category*. Relational selves may or may not have inner selves, but their 'reality' is experienced, interpreted and manifested as indeterminate phases of open-ended relational processes. It can never be fully grasped, but I argue that my study has depicted a 'real' (however small) phase of the relational selves of the study. Just as the processes of these selves have already moved on since the time of their sharing, I suggest the relational self too is a concept to be considered with considerable fluidity.

Epilogue

I will finish my study by briefly discussing the ambivalence of what I call the social ontology of individuality – the common expectation imposed on selves in society – and the relational micro-level reality of relational selves. My study suggests that there is an inevitable and existing ambiguity between the social expectation of individuality and the relational self, one burdening the personal lives of people. At the micro level the manifestations of individuality draw their meaning in relation to the state of bonding as part of fluid and interdependent relational processes in which individuality is not a fixed feature of selves. However, at the societal level autonomy and agency of selves are presupposed as the prerequisites of citizenship and citizen rights. These presuppositions work as the means of governance not only in personal relationships, but in the current understanding of people and the politics manifested in the rhetoric of communities, projects, contracts, partnership and self-responsibility (Sulkunen 2009: 161). This was apparent also to the subjects of my study who struggled to attain the respectable individuality and control over their lives. The expectation of individuality as a capability to make the right choices in your personal life and to take part in social life as a respectable agent was a source of shame and self-deficit for people in phases of dependence. It was burdening for people who already were burdened by wounding personal experiences. The selves wounded by disrupted events were further wounded by the sense of becoming non-citizens, hidden and isolated rather than shared. Indeed, many people explained to me in detail how they carefully protected their vulnerability from even many of their intimates. Many of them withdrew from social situations in which their loss of control, manifested as unemployment, illness, divorce, depression or infertility, could possibly become a topic. Or they pretended to be something else, something more respectable. Individuality appears as a category with social ontology in society – one which figures in the everyday encounters and personal relationships of people, but also in societal and medical practices which presuppose agency and self-responsibility.

To point out the generality of the problem posed by the social ontology of individuality, I give an example of its materialization in a medical practice. Although the ontological status of individuality is not explicitly analyzed in Meskus's study (2009), she arrives at the question of ambivalent individuality from the genealogical viewpoint in the context of prenatal screening. Prenatal screening of genetic or congenital disorders is a routine procedure in Finnish maternity care, offered to all parents to enable them to make 'informed choices'. The internet peer group discussions make it apparent, however, how the parents struggle with the situation, not wishing to claim the responsibility for the fate of their (perhaps disabled) child. However, assuming the social ontology of individuality, the medical practice narrows down their options to being irresponsible or incapable parents in managing their lives or to being responsible agents quite literally willing to take the life of their children into their own hands. However, 'something pours over', as the forced individuality is not capable of grounding the choice. (Ibid.)

In the previous example the unbearable burden of individuality is forced on people in a medical practice as a form of governance, but my study shows that also 'mere' personal suffering 'pours over' and draws people to search for bonds in which to share the burden. Examples of the ambivalence between the social ontology of individuality and relational reality of selves are numerous. People suffering from depression or other mental issues are in principle offered support, such as rehabilitation by the state, but applying for it requires agency that most people do not possess in the state of depression. Moreover, the support is in practice offered only to those people who might reclaim their agency and become productive citizens, leaving those in the most desperate need out. People in need of the reassurance of others and taking part in peer support are paradoxically expected to possess the autonomy to leave a group that is not offering them the kind of reassurance they personally need. People suffering from an acute loss have to be diagnosed 'ill' to be excused from work. These are all examples in which the social practices and expectations completely ignore the relational character of selves that may be denied, but not denuded.

In my sample of 37 Finnish women and men, the only narratives with bounded sense of individual selves were those from people suffering from a lack of sense in life, often diagnosed as depression. I do not know how accurately the diagnosis managed to grasp the different experiences of isolation, shame, loneliness and sense of deficiency that these people had, but they were the only ones *in principle* possessing 'autonomy' enabled by the absence of constitutive bonds. However, in other narratives it was the existence of such bonds which brought people the sense in life, although tying them firmly to an interdependence preventing (individual) autonomy.

Based on my analysis I want to suggest then that selves are not only relational in some loose sense to be reconciled with individuality as the primary phase of their existence, but that bonding and being bound is part of what selves essentially are. Disruptive events denude selves from their constitutive bonds and generate forced individuality that largely manifests itself as loss and emptiness. Contemporary societies may offer their citizens therapy and support groups in which selves may attempt to claim or reclaim their individuality and to meet the social expectation of individuality better, but the phases of dependence are inevitable and cannot be fixed. Although in the relational dynamics of personal relationships both bonding and individuality appear as interdependent phases, at the level of social ontology, the predominance of individuality over bonding creates a gap with real consequences. People suffer not only from whatever difficulty they have had to confront, but also from their relationality that from the viewpoint of that social ontology appears as pathological. It is striking how poorly societies and sociology have been able to incorporate bonding and vulnerability into their understanding of human life. I hope my elaboration of the relational character of selves will contribute to challenging the category of individual, one that in the context of personal relationships is nothing more than a fallacy.

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