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Effects of Family Interventions on Social Capital: The Role of Nuclear Family Orientation

Lukas Fellmann¹  | Eric D. Widmer² 

¹School of Social Work, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland, Muttenz, Basel-Landschaft, Switzerland | ²Department of Sociology, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

Correspondence: Lukas Fellmann (lukas.fellmann@fhnw.ch)

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ABSTRACT

Evidence stresses that family interventions mostly involve members of the nuclear family unit and therefore exclude other potentially significant individuals. This study hypothesizes that such a nuclear family orientation has unintended consequences for the development of family-based social capital in family interventions. This study was based on a sample of 48 parents enrolled in a family intervention program in Switzerland. Data were collected and analyzed at two time points using egocentric network analysis. The results showed that practitioners mainly involved parents and their children in the intervention. This nuclear family orientation was found to be associated with a significant decrease in network size and centrality of parents and an increase in network density. The results indicate that nuclear family orientation is detrimental to family-based social capital. Based on these results, practitioners should be aware of important family relationships beyond the household and more systematically involve them in family interventions.

1 | Introduction

A debate in child welfare services has addressed the indiscriminate use of the term *family* (Morris 2012; Morris et al. 2017). One main point of criticism in this debate is that family intervention programs use exclusive family definitions that are not sensitive to the families' own definitions. Exclusive definitions focus on nuclear family units comprising married parents and their co-resident children. By contrast, inclusive definitions consider significant family members beyond the nuclear family (Castrén and Widmer 2015). A large body of research has confirmed that family intervention programs tend to work with an exclusive family definition, resulting in the involvement of members of the nuclear family within the household (Sheppard 2004; Visscher et al. 2020). Family members who are non-resident but are considered important are rarely involved in family interventions (Laird et al. 2017). Based on the configurational approach to families (Widmer 2010), this

study hypothesizes that using exclusive family definitions when working with vulnerable families has unintended consequences for family-based social capital.

1.1 | The Consideration of Networks in Family Interventions

A large body of literature has suggested that the consideration of family ties beyond the boundaries of the nuclear family unit is a common practice element of family intervention programs, which is referred to as “networking” (Brady et al. 2018; Fraser et al. 1997; Metzger and Domeniconi Pfister 2018; Visscher et al. 2020). Networking can be classified into two domains. The first domain involves the *informal ties* of the service users, and it includes the maintenance, strengthening, activation, coordination, and extension of informal ties, such as with extended family members, friends, or neighbors. These relationships are often

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framed as a resource for service users, for example, as a source of emotional or instrumental support. The second networking domain comprises the ties of service users with *professionals*, and it includes collaboration with other professionals who work with the service users or referral of service users to other professionals, organizations, or authorities. Formalized help is usually more bureaucratic but also more predictable and liable than informal support. Research has shown that vulnerable families depend on formalized help, especially for information and advice, but in some cases, also for emotional support (Keim 2018; Lumino et al. 2016; McArthur and Winkworth 2017).

1.2 | A Configurational Perspective on Parenting

The need for networking in family interventions is stressed by overwhelming evidence of the association between the family's social environment, quality of parenting, and children's well-being (Garbarino 1982; Jack 1997). The configurational perspective on families emphasizes that the parent-child dyad is not isolated; rather, it is embedded in a larger family network consisting of a complex web of interdependent relationships beyond the household's boundaries (Widmer et al. 2013). In contrast to institutional definitions of family, such as the nuclear family or the household, the configurational approach accounts for one's own definition of family members and how they are interconnected. Therefore, family networks vary in size, composition, and relational structures (Widmer 2006).

Family relationships are sources of support, conflict, and ambivalence (Widmer 2010). Support includes emotional, instrumental, and informational resources that are accessible through family relationships (Widmer 2010). Family conflicts are closely linked to support, as they are often initiated by the general issue of the distribution of resources, such as time, love, money, and care within families (Widmer 2010). Ambivalence refers to the coexistence of solidarity and conflict in family relationships, which is associated with contradictory feelings, expectations, and forces (Connidis 2015). Research has particularly highlighted supportive relationships as a key factor in ensuring a high quality of parenting. (Armstrong et al. 2005). Research has suggested that social support is associated with more frequent (and positive) parent-child activities (Green et al. 2007), more pleasure and openness in the parenting role (Corse et al. 1990), an increase in parental self-efficacy (Suzuki 2010), and less punitive parental attitudes (McCurdy 2005). However, in most family intervention research, the term "parenting" refers solely to the relationship between parents and their children. In contrast, the configurational approach (Widmer 2010) understands parenting as a shared task among individuals who are part of a family network in which children are embedded. Owing to the interdependency of network ties, parenting goes beyond parental control and the parent-child dyad is just one of the numerous ties that can be crucial for children's development (Cochran and Brassard 1979). Therefore, family networks have both enabling and restricting effects on the quality of parenting. Such a conceptualization of family emphasizes the task of "networking" in family interventions in a new way. Involving family networks in family interventions not only enables practitioners to account for diversity in family configurations, but it also promotes collective processes in larger networks in favor of the child at risk.

1.3 | The Activation of Social Support in Family Interventions

Only a few studies have addressed the impact of family interventions on family ties beyond the nuclear family unit; these ties are usually referred to as the support network of the family. For example, a synthesis of 27 evaluation studies of intensive family support programs located mostly in the United States (Dagenais et al. 2004) found only four papers that examined the effects on support networks. In three out of these four studies, the family support networks improved through the intervention by increasing the diversity and availability of resources, but the fourth study did not show any significant effects. More recent studies regarding the effects of family interventions on networks of service users have shown divergent findings. One study conducted in the United States (Tyuse et al. 2010) and one in Spain (Byrne et al. 2012) found positive effects on the families' support network, as well as on their access to community resources. A study that was carried out in Australia found that parents were more open to accepting help from their friends, as well as from professionals (Fernandez 2004). Moreover, a study in the United States has found that parents improved their ability to access formal services (Berry et al. 2000). Contrary to these positive findings, studies in the United Kingdom and Belgium have found that support networks did not improve through family intervention (Sanders and Roach 2007), nor did families feel less socially isolated (van Puyenbroeck et al. 2009).

A quasi-experimental study conducted in Germany showed that the intervention approach is important in achieving changes in support networks. This study analyzed the differences between parents who were provided with a traditional home-based family intervention approach and an experimental group that received a family network intervention approach (Friedrich 2008). The family network approach aimed to promote parents' individual abilities to build up and use social resources and to improve their social integration. These goals were addressed using a resource-oriented consulting method. Although perceived social support was significantly higher in the experimental group 9 months after the start of the intervention, the reason for an increase in perceived social support in the experimental group remained unclear, and neither the network size nor the composition changed significantly during the intervention. Activating support networks also affects the outcomes of family interventions. A review of 37 studies showed that building a support network is a crucial factor in the success of an intervention (Lee et al. 2014).

The study of Byrne et al. (2012) gives more detailed insights into this effect. A significant predictor is not only the amount of support that parents received, but also its timing and form. The study concludes that informal support has a positive effect on intervention outcomes regardless of whether parents receive support at the beginning or end of the intervention. However, the provision of formal support only had a positive effect when it was provided at the beginning of the intervention; the authors' explanation is that linking parents with formal support at the start of the intervention satisfies their multiple needs and motivates them to take part in it.

Research has indicated that an overemphasis on formal support increases the likelihood of psychological distress in vulnerable

families (Radey et al. 2020). These families, using multiple services simultaneously, become frustrated because professional help is not properly coordinated. Parents feel as they must tell their story over and over again, which results in a low perception of continuity regarding professional services (Morris 2013). Therefore, the involvement of a high number of professionals increases the likelihood of a fragmented formal support network (Sousa 2005). In this regard, current research has suggested that informal support is an effective buffer against stress emerging from formal support services (Radey et al. 2020). Overall, the activation of informal support benefits the outcomes of family interventions, whereas the effects of professional service use are more ambivalent.

1.4 | Networking in the Light of Social Capital Theory

Research on social capital in personal networks has made it possible to move one step further toward understanding network practices in family interventions and their effects on families. Social capital refers to the actual or potential resources that stem from a durable social network of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu 1986). In contrast to the literature on social support, which has usually focused on specific dyads (mostly spousal or parental support), social capital research has focused on the structural dimensions of relationships among a large set of significant network members. The use of social capital theory in family research allows families to be analyzed in their relational context (Aeby et al. 2014; Widmer 2006, 2007). In this respect, the distinction between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital is particularly important (Woolcock 2001).

Bonding social capital is present in networks with a high density of supportive relationships between network members and similarities in their social identities. In such networks, the level of trust and safety is high, as are the number of obligations and normative control (Szreter 2004). In networks with a high level of bonding social capital, support is provided collectively rather than dyadically (Widmer 2007).

Bridging social capital, on the other hand, relates to networks with an increased number of people who do not belong to the same social circle and are less alike regarding their sociodemographic characteristics and social identity (Szreter 2004). Bridging social capital enables individuals to act as brokers between otherwise unconnected individuals or groups by mediating the flow of information and other resources (Granovetter 1973).

Linking social capital covers relationships with representatives of formal institutions (e.g., social workers). Compared to bonding and bridging social capital, these relationships are organized vertically. Representatives of formal institutions have expertise and institutional power, which place them in higher hierarchical positions (Szreter 2004). A key function of this type of resource is to create opportunities for access to resources and information beyond the community level (Woolcock 2001).

Research has suggested that all three types of social capital play important roles in parenting. As indicated by Burt (2001), effective parenting requires bonding and bridging social capital.

Bonding social capital provides children with strong ties, guidance, safety, and collective support. Bridging social capital enables parents to link their children with resources to which they would not otherwise have access. Therefore, parents can more easily link their children to other social circles and provide them with extended possibilities for cognitive and social stimulation or effective support. The importance of linking social capital has also been emphasized in the context of parenting, for example, for children's academic achievement. Parents who have close relationships with their children's teacher(s) can coordinate school-related support more easily (Terrien 2006). Hence, linking social capital is not antagonistic to bonding or bridging social capital but complementary. As Whittaker and Garbarino (1983) stress, informal helpers cannot simply substitute professional helpers, such as psychologists, healthcare providers, or social workers, nor is the reverse possible.

1.5 | Purpose of This Study

To date, most researchers in family intervention research have disregarded measures of social capital as crucial resources for families (Furstenberg and Hughes 1995; Widmer 2004). The aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which family interventions impact the critical features of social capital produced by family, using detailed measures from a sample of families facing an intervention. Considering the predominant use of an exclusive family definition in child welfare, this study hypothesizes that the intervention has unintended and mostly negative consequences for family-based social capital. Exclusive family definitions force family members to solve parenting issues within the nuclear family unit instead of activating resources embedded in the relationships that go beyond the household's boundaries. Such interventions are expected to create more bonding social capital on the one hand, which makes the parents' personal networks more closed and homogeneous. On the other hand, it is hypothesized that bridging social capital will decrease and thus weaken parents' access to other social groups. These effects are expected to appear in the network composition, network size, and relational structures. The operationalization of family definitions is achieved by analyzing the involvement of network members in the intervention and is defined as *informal networking*. This allows for a detailed reflection on which individuals are considered significant family members by the practitioners. Furthermore, it is expected that practitioners will create linking social capital to compensate for resources that are not otherwise available to the family and address issues that require specialized support. This is defined as *formal networking*.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Participants

The population of this study includes parents enrolled in Social Pedagogical Family Support, which is the most frequently used home-based family service in the Swiss child welfare system (Wetzel et al. 2020) and has existed in Switzerland since the 1980s. This intervention addresses families where the child's well-being is at risk and takes place in the families' living environment. The intensity, duration, and intervention goals

depend on the needs of the service users; therefore, it is an intervention with a low level of standardization compared to other home-based services. It consists of parent counseling, joint discussions, reflections with the family members, as well as activities with children. The main goal is to support families to develop and practice new strategies for coping with challenging situations and ensure the child's well-being.

The present study had a longitudinal design, with two waves of interviews with the same respondents taking place between June 2018 and October 2019 in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The study participants were recruited directly through 18 providers of Social Pedagogical Family Support, without the involvement of child welfare authorities or social services. The social pedagogues were asked to inform every parent about the study at the start of a new family intervention and invite them to participate. Participation in the study was voluntary. The participating parents signed an informed consent outlining the roles and rights of each party, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time. They were informed that no study information would be forwarded to the authorities or recorded in the case files. To preserve the anonymity of the study participants, data were collected by social pedagogues working with the families. The parents received 40 Swiss francs as compensation for their participation in the study.

In the first wave, 70 parents from 70 different families were interviewed. However, 13 dropped out after the first wave because the intervention ended before the second wave of data collection; six withdrew from the study, and three did not complete the questionnaire of the second wave. The sample used for the analysis included respondents who provided valid measures in both waves ($N = 48$ parents). The sample consisted of 87.5% mothers and 12.5% fathers, with 47.9% being single parents; 41.7% of the parents did not have Swiss citizenship. Parents had an average age of 35.8 years ($SD = 8.1$) and had 2.2 children ($SD = 0.9$). The average age of the children was 9.5 years ($SD = 5.5$). More than one-third of the parents (37.5%) were referred to the family intervention on a compulsory basis and the rest on an agreed basis. According to the social pedagogues, the main problems in the families (multiple choice) that put the child's well-being at risk were limited parenting skills (63.8%), insufficient childcare (42.6%), and family conflicts (38.3%). The child's problems, such as school problems (27.7%), problems with their social behavior (25.5%), or developmental issues (23.4%), were indicated less often. The average time between the measurement at the start of the intervention and the second measurement point was 199.4 days ($SD = 32.4$). In this period the social pedagogues visited the families 28.9 times ($SD = 13.9$, range = 8–67 times), with an average duration of 113.3 min ($SD = 35.0$, range = 60–240 min) per home visit.

2.2 | Measures

Personal network data were collected with the Personal Network Method (Widmer et al. 2013). The data collection process can be broken down into three steps. First, the parents had to read the following name generator: *Who are the individuals who, over the past year, have been very important to you, even if you have not gotten along well with them?* Then, they could list a

maximum number of 14 important people in their lives. In a second step, the parents provided information about their relationships to the people they listed (e.g., relationship type and frequency of contact), as well as information about these people (e.g., age and gender). In the third step, parents were asked to state who would support whom in this list of people (including the respondent) in case of small problems or a crisis. The network data were collected with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire.

The networking activities of social pedagogues in the family intervention were covered with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire at the second measurement point. Therefore, social pedagogues named all members of the parents' personal network that they had included in the intervention, as well as all other people who were not part of the network. Based on this information, two networking domains were operationalized. The first domain covered all people involved in the intervention who were part of the parents' personal network (informal networking). The second networking domain included all professionals involved by the social pedagogue (formal networking).

To examine how informal and formal networking affected the parents' personal networks, analyses with three different sets of personal network members were performed (see Figure 1 for a graphical representation). The first set is technically known as the parents' *in-neighborhood*, which consists of all network members who directly support the parent, whereas the *out-neighborhood* of the parents covers all people in the network who directly receive support from the parent. Third, the *full network* contains the parents' full personal network, including all network members. To analyze the impact of networking domains on the parents' personal networks, multiple linear regression models were used, which consist of three independent variables: the percentage of personal network members involved between t_0 and t_1 (informal networking), the number of professionals involved between t_0 and t_1 (formal networking), and the baseline score of the dependent variables. To operationalize informal networking, the percentage value was used instead of the absolute number, as it allows to control for the size of the personal network. The dependent variables for these three sets of networks are the change scores (t_1 minus t_0) of the network size, density, and betweenness centrality.

2.2.1 | Size

The network size is the number of individuals in the network, including the respondent. The network size for the *in-neighborhood* subset includes only the number of members providing support to the parent (including the parent) and vice versa for the *out-neighborhood* subset.

2.2.2 | Composition

The network composition refers to the relationship statuses of the network members (e.g., brother, mother, or friend of the respondent). A network's composition ranges from homogeneous to heterogeneous. In a homogeneous network, only few statuses are present, while a heterogeneous network contains many different statuses. For each status, we calculated how often it occurs (e.g., number of friends) and how large the

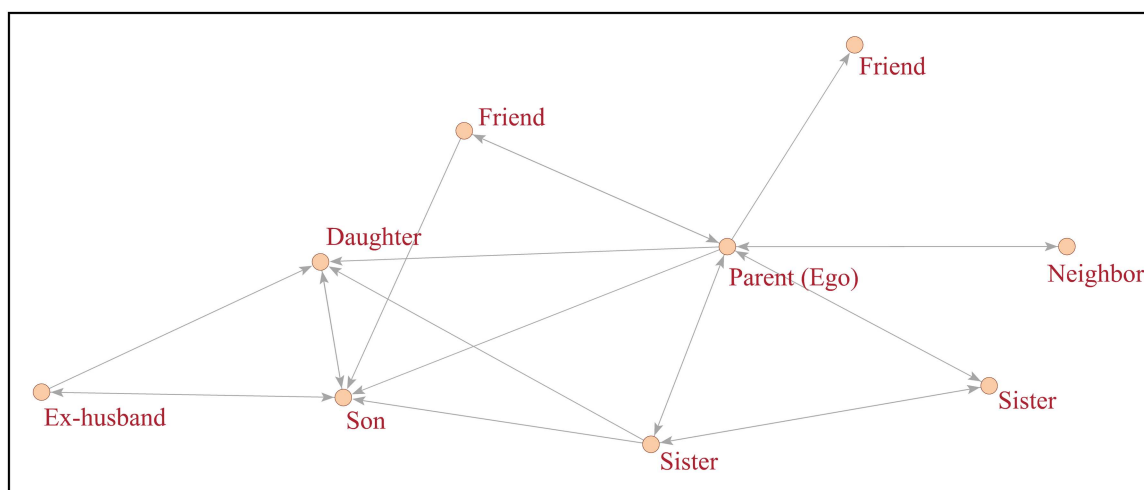


FIGURE 1 | Example of a personal network at the start of the family intervention. Note: Network size = 9; Density = 0.29; Respondents' betweenness centrality = 0.34; In-neighborhood size = 5; Out-neighborhood size = 8.

percentage of the status is in the network (e.g., percentage of friends). Network composition was used to measure linking social capital by calculating the number and percentage of professionals in the respondents' personal network.

2.2.3 | Density

The density of parents' personal networks was used as a measure of bonding social capital (Widmer 2006). Network density is the number of actual ties in a network divided by the total possible number of ties, resulting in a number between 0 and 1. For the in-neighborhood subset, the density measure considers only the number of possible ties between the network members who directly support the parent (including the parent) and vice versa for the out-neighborhood subset.

2.2.4 | Betweenness Centrality

Bridging social capital was operationalized by calculating the respondents' betweenness centrality (Widmer 2006). Betweenness centrality indicates how often a person lies on the shortest path between two other persons. Therefore, individuals with high betweenness centrality have both brokering and bridging functions. The standardized measure of betweenness centrality, which ranges between 0 and 1, was computed (Widmer 2006).

Figure 1 shows an example of a mother's personal network at the start of the family intervention. The parent (respondent, also referred to as ego) cited her two children, her ex-husband, two friends, two sisters, and her neighbor as important people in her life. The arrows in the graphs indicate the direction of the support provision. Thus, the respondent supported seven network members and received support from four.

3 | Results

3.1 | Personal Networks at the Start of the Intervention

The 10 most frequently cited people in the personal networks were their own children (79.2%), mother (77.1%), friend (62.5%),

sibling (56.3%), father (50.0%), partner (47.9%), ex-partner (22.9%), parent-in-law (16.7%), sibling-in-law (12.5%), and cousin (8.3%). Thus, parents' networks mainly included members of the nuclear family, extended family, in-laws, and friends. Few parents included work colleagues (6.3%), neighbors (6.3%), or professional helpers, such as social workers (4.2%), legal aids (4.2%), and doctors (4.2%) in their personal networks.

At the start of the intervention, the average size of parents' network was 9.0 people ($SD = 3.4$), including the parent. The smallest network consisted of three people and the largest of 15. The support density was 0.38 ($SD = 0.27$) on average, and parents' betweenness centrality was 0.21 ($SD = 0.19$). When only considering the *in-neighborhood* subset, the average size was 5.2 ($SD = 2.6$) with a density of 0.58 ($SD = 0.32$) and a betweenness centrality of 0.32 ($SD = 0.35$). The size of the *out-neighborhood* subset was on average 6.9 ($SD = 3.7$), with a density of 0.45 ($SD = 0.28$) and a betweenness centrality of 0.24 ($SD = 0.22$).

3.2 | Description of Networking Activities

Regarding the informal networking domain, in addition to the respondent, a total of 144 persons were involved in the intervention. On average, the social pedagogues involved 3.0 individuals ($SD = 1.5$, min. = 0, max. = 7) of the parents' personal network, which was 45.7% of the personal network members ($SD = 27.3\%$, min. = 0%, max. = 100%). Table 1 shows the 10 network members most frequently involved in the family intervention and the percentage of cases in which the person was cited in the parents' personal network. For example, in 21 of 48 cases, the respondent's partner was involved in the intervention. The second column shows that, of all cases in which a partner was present in the respondent's network, 84% were involved in the intervention. The table also displays the absolute number of network members involved across all cases by status and the percentage by status. It is important to note that the list in Table 1 was cut after 10 relationship statuses, although other statuses also had a count of one. The table indicates that the intervention focused on the respondents' nuclear family members. The children (62.5%) and partners

(14.6%) of the respondents constituted together 77.1% of all network members involved in the family interventions. The respondents' close family members, such as their mother, father, or siblings, were far less involved. Although friends were frequently present in the personal networks (62.5%), two friends were involved by the social pedagogue only in one intervention.

Concerning the formal networking domain (Table 2), the professional most frequently involved in the family intervention was the child deputy (66.6%), whose function is to help parents take care of their child by providing practical support and advice, which is a child protection measure based on the Swiss Civil Code Art. 308 (2021, CC, 1907/2021). The second most frequently involved professional was the child's teacher, who was cited in 50% of the cases. Other school-related professionals, such as school social workers, school principals, school psychologists, and remedial teachers, were cited less often than teachers. Nonetheless, the results showed that social pedagogues primarily involved school-related professionals in their interventions. This result indicates that social pedagogues mainly activated formal supports for children rather than parents. Overall, the social pedagogues involved 3.3 professional helpers on average ($SD = 2.7$, min. = 0, max. = 13).

3.3 | Effects of Networking on Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

According to the hypotheses regarding changes in the parents' family-based social capital, informal networking should positively affect bonding social capital and negatively affect bridging social capital. These predictions were tested using multiple linear regression models with network size, density, and betweenness centrality as dependent variables. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the dependent variables, which are change scores.

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to analyze the correlation between the change scores of the network indicators, as well as the two intervention variables, which are informal and formal networking (Table 4). The results show that the changes in numerous network indicators between t0 and t1 are intercorrelated within and between the three network sets.

Table 5 presents the results of the multiple linear regression. Informal networking has a significant negative effect on the number of personal network members directly supporting the

TABLE 1 | Personal network members of the respondent involved in the intervention between t0 and t1.

	Number of cases where term was cited by the social pedagogue ($n = 48$)	Percentage of cases when term was cited in the personal network (%)	Absolute number of network members involved	Percentage of network members involved
Child	41	93.2%	90	62.5%
Partner	21	84.0%	21	14.6%
Ex-partner	7	77.8%	7	4.9%
Mother	6	16.7%	6	4.2%
Father	4	20.0%	4	2.8%
Sibling	4	16.6%	4	2.8%
Parent-in-law	2	25.0%	2	1.4%
Friend	1	03.3%	2	1.4%
Neighbor	1	33.3%	1	0.7%
Cousin	1	25.0%	1	0.7%

TABLE 2 | Professional helpers involved in the intervention between t0 and t1.

	Number of cases where term was cited ($n = 48$)	Percentage of the 48 cases where term was cited (%)
Child deputy	32	66.6%
Child's teacher	24	50.0%
Child's psychologist	7	14.6%
School social worker	6	12.5%
School principal	6	12.5%
Referring agency	6	12.5%
Child's remedial teacher	5	10.4%
School psychologist	4	8.3%
Caregiver in the children's day care center	4	8.3%
Respondent's psychologist	4	8.3%

TABLE 3 | Descriptive statistics of the dependent variables.

	In-neighborhood		Out-neighborhood		Full network	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Size	0.10	2.68	0.54	3.34	−0.40	3.06
Density	−0.01	0.39	0.00	0.22	0.01	0.22
Betweenness centrality	0.07	0.34	0.04	0.27	0.02	0.24

Note: The variables are change scores (t1 minus t0).

TABLE 4 | Pearson correlations of change scores of the social capital indicators and networking variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 IN size	1									
2 IN density	0.023	1								
3 IN betweenness centrality	0.281	−0.253	1							
4 ON size	0.601***	0.185	0.407**	1						
5 ON density	−0.049	0.476***	−0.240	−0.056	1					
6 ON betweenness centrality	0.480***	−0.206	0.727***	0.407**	−0.281	1				
7 FN size	0.551***	−0.064	0.247	0.614***	−0.269	0.350*	1			
8 FN density	0.172	0.679***	−0.273	0.204	0.619***	−0.310*	−0.297*	1		
9 FN betweenness centrality	0.554***	−0.207	0.616***	0.427**	−0.242	0.837***	0.174	−0.102	1	
10 INT informal networking	0.124	0.192	0.004	−0.121	0.367*	0.052	0.054	0.161	−0.026	1
11 INT formal networking	−0.309*	0.154	−0.123	−0.278	0.034	−0.321*	−0.245	0.113	−0.228	−0.115

Abbreviations: FN, full network; IN, in-neighborhood; INT, intervention; ON, out-neighborhood.

* = $p \leq 0.05$.

** = $p \leq 0.01$.

*** = $p \leq 0.001$.

TABLE 5 | Multiple linear regression models predicting change in social capital indicators between t0 and t1.

	In-neighborhood		Out-neighborhood		Full network	
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Size						
Informal networking	−0.030*	0.012	−0.049***	0.012	−0.041***	0.012
Formal networking	−0.242(*)	0.123	−0.289*	0.124	−0.217(*)	0.119
Baseline score	−0.498***	0.125	−0.580***	0.090	−0.614***	0.095
Density						
Informal networking	0.002	0.002	0.002*	0.001	0.001	0.001
Formal networking	0.024	0.015	0.009	0.008	0.008	0.009
Baseline score	−0.835***	0.130	−0.619***	0.073	−0.541***	0.089
Betweenness centrality						
Informal networking	−0.003(*)	0.002	−0.002*	0.001	−0.003**	0.001
Formal networking	−0.014	0.015	−0.018	0.012	−0.013	0.010
Baseline score	−0.554***	0.120	−0.734***	0.147	−0.768***	0.137

Note: The dependent variables are change scores (t1 minus t0).

* = $p \leq 0.05$.

** = $p \leq 0.01$.

*** = $p \leq 0.001$.

(*) = $p \leq 0.10$.

respondent (*in-neighborhood* size), as well as the number of network members supported by the respondent (*out-neighborhood* size). Additionally, formal networking significantly decreases *out-neighborhood* size. Furthermore, informal networking has a positive effect on *out-neighborhood* density. Higher network density indicates that network members who

are supported by the parent also support each other more than at the start of the intervention. In addition, informal networking has a negative effect on the respondents' betweenness centrality. Hence, parents have less control and influence in their personal network. In the *full network* models, informal networking has a negative effect on the respondent's network size

and betweenness centrality. The baseline scores all have a significant negative effect on the dependent variable. This is a common effect when using change scores as dependent variables in regression analysis, which is referred to as “regression toward the mean” (Allison 1990). It describes the phenomenon in which an extreme value at the baseline is followed by a value closer to the mean at the next measurement point. Thus, the significant effects of the baseline value in the regression models should not be interpreted as intervention effects. The effects of these regression analyses did not lose significance when controlling for number of children, relationship status (partner/no partner), number of siblings, level of education, and employment status (employed/not unemployed).

3.4 | Changes in Linking Social Capital

According to the third hypothesis, the family intervention was expected to increase linking social capital. This hypothesis was tested by analyzing the change in the number and percentage of professionals in the parents' personal network between the first and second wave of data collection. The results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test (Table 6) showed a significant increase in the percentage but not in the number of professionals in the personal networks. A higher percentage of professionals in the network indicates that they become more important in relation to other network members. However, the results show that an increase can only be seen in few cases, as the value has not changed at all for most respondents.

4 | Discussion

The main assumption of this study was that practitioners use exclusive family definitions in family interventions. The descriptive results regarding informal networking practices verify this hypothesis. Although the results show that parents' personal networks were diverse in terms of their composition, the social pedagogues mostly involved members of the nuclear family unit. Other potentially significant individuals, such as extended family members or friends, were only involved in very few cases, which confirms the results of other studies examining somewhat comparable family interventions (Laird et al. 2017; Sheppard 2004; Visscher et al. 2020).

The results show that more extensive informal networking is linked to a slight increase in the respondents' bonding social capital. On the one hand, this could be considered a positive effect as it indicates that children are cared for more closely by a set of interconnected adults, who are able to coordinate support for the child among themselves owing to the higher density of

the network (Aeby et al. 2014). Conversely, greater bonding social capital indicates a closed, homogeneous, and exclusive network. Considering that bonding social capital refers to networks in which people consider themselves to be similar in terms of their social identity, values, and norms (Szreter 2004), changes in parenting practices are less likely to occur because the potential for innovation is rather small. This can perpetuate conditions that put the child's well-being at risk (Geens and Vandenbroeck 2014). This effect becomes more evident when considering that informal networking is associated with a significant decrease in network size; therefore, parents have fewer people to turn to in times of crisis or when family tensions occur, which can cause higher levels of parenting distress (Ayala-Nunes et al. 2017). For children, the increase in bonding social capital might lead to experiencing feelings of more safety and guidance but also being controlled and pressured because they lose autonomy. Considering that families receiving child welfare interventions are already under increased observation and pressure, reducing network size and increasing bonding social capital seems to do more harm than good.

Furthermore, informal networking is associated with a significant decrease in bridging social capital, which is an effect that family interventions may wish to prevent. Bridging social capital enables access to a greater pool of resources (Burt 2001) that might help develop new coping strategies and reduce negative social dependencies. In child welfare interventions, bridging social capital could be of exceptional value because the urge for change or adaptation to secure the child's well-being is high. Ties with individuals who experience life differently can function as facilitators of different perspectives on parenting. Research has shown that bridging social capital is an important resource for children growing up in burdened families. For instance, positive relationships between children and adults who do not share the same struggles are considered a protective factor for children (Walsh 2002). Additionally, a decrease in bridging social capital reduces the parents' possibilities to act as brokers for their children. Research has shown that the type of social capital depends significantly on the type of alters cited in personal networks; for instance, friends are significantly associated with bridging social capital (Widmer 2007). Friendship ties could be of unique value for parents receiving a family intervention because they might be less conflicted than other ties. Supportive friendships play an important role in reducing parenting stress (Wang et al. 2020) and promoting positive maternal behavior (Crnic and Greenberg 1990). Hence, the significant decrease in bridging social capital is an unfavorable effect of the nuclear family orientation generated by interventions.

Overall, these findings confirm the main hypothesis of this study that the use of exclusive family definitions has

TABLE 6 | Wilcoxon signed rank test results.

	t0 median	t1 median	Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Ties	Z value	p	Effect size r
Number of professionals in the personal network	0	0	1	6	41	−1.930	0.054	0.20
Percentage of professionals in the personal network	0	0	1	7	40	−2.383	0.017	0.24

unintended effects on the parents' social capital. To compensate for these effects on bridging and bonding social capital, this study hypothesized that linking social capital would become more prevalent in parents' personal networks. Although social pedagogues involved more formal than informal ties in the intervention, there was only an increase in linking social capital in few cases. This result indicates that most parents do not count professionals as personal network members even though they might play an important role in their lives during such an intervention. Research has shown that linking social capital is most likely to be created when the emphasis is on the human connection between the service user and the professional helper rather than on the working relationship (Barker and Thomson 2015). This requires a relationship of trust to be established. In the context of child welfare interventions, professionals act on the one hand as supportive people, but on the other hand they also have a controlling function, especially when families must take part in the intervention involuntarily (Burman 2004). These circumstances might make it more challenging to build up linking social capital in family interventions.

4.1 | Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the sample size of the present study was small ($N = 48$). When the sample size is too small, the likelihood of not detecting small effects increases (Type II error); this might have limited the detection of the small effects of networking on parents' social capital. To nonetheless take marginal trends in the data into account, p -values up to an alpha-value of 0.10 were considered. However, this solution has its clear limitations. The second is the restricted complexity of the regression models. Because social pedagogues primarily involved members of the nuclear family in the intervention, it was not possible to split informal networking into a nuclear and non-nuclear family orientation. The distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear family orientation would have allowed for more conceptual clarity and better evidence for the main hypothesis of the present study. A third limitation is that the intervention effects were measured 6 months after the start of the intervention rather than the end. Fourth and finally, there is an inherent challenge due to the egocentric network measurement of social capital. Due to the patterns of interdependence that characterize any personal network, changes in different types of social capital are inter-related, making it difficult to determine the actual intervention effects. Future studies could solve this methodological problem by including additional measures of these types of social capital. Studies on interventions using personal networks based on larger samples are welcome as they would allow to address most of these limitations.

5 | Conclusion and Outlook

Overall, this study contributes to the discourse on family concepts in child welfare (Morris 2012; Morris et al. 2017) by exploring the effects of a nuclear family orientation in family intervention. The current research on family configurations highlights the need for flexible family definitions (Widmer 2010).

Against this background, a nuclear family orientation prevents practitioners from accounting for family diversity. The use of exclusive family definitions results in important people not being included in the intervention, which negatively affects family-based social capital.

Based on these results, it is recommended that practitioners be aware of parents' significant family relationships beyond the nuclear family unit and grant them a central importance in their family interventions. Social network analysis provides practitioners with flexible tools to visualize and assess the personal networks of parents and other family members. Analyzing personal networks reveals how parents are embedded in their social environment and points out the resources that could be activated within the intervention. As practitioners have only temporary ties with parents, the intervention should focus on sustainable solutions by creating a lasting and multifaceted support network for families.

Author Contributions

Lukas Fellmann: development of the research instruments, data collection, data analysis, drafting of the manuscript. **Eric D. Widmer:** development of the research instruments, drafting of the manuscript, critical revision of the manuscript.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this kind of research in Switzerland. The university where this research was conducted formally confirmed compliance with ethical standards. In addition, the national research funding agency approved and granted the recruitment procedure of the study participants.

Consent

Detailed information about the study was provided to all participants, from whom written consent was obtained at the start of the research, including the option to opt out of the study at any time with no consequences.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data is not shared for ethical reasons.

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