

**When a Love Story ends,
Which Biographies become relevant?**

Solsona, Montse

Demographic Studies Center, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

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(1) Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics, Autonomous University of Barcelona, msolsona@ced.uab.es

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SUMMARY

In this paper I present the results of a qualitative study carried out in Spain with family biographies of men and women who broke their union having had children. The biographic-ethnographic methodology chosen has been implemented in 26 in-depth interviews to 13 men and 13 women of a particular generation, social group and family situation: were all born around 1955, were all middle-class and had had children during the union. They were invited, by formulating five very general questions, to explain their family story on: 1) their own family, 2) the union disruption process, 3) the post-divorce trajectory, 4) the present situation and the goals they would still like to achieve, and 5) gender differences in the way these processes are perceived. The facts and perceptions put forward by our biographers allowed us to get to know to what extent divorce has become a turning point in their lives, which are the most relevant post-divorce biographies and to have an in-depth discussion on the changing meaning of family and emotional bonds.

Introduction

In this paper I present the results of a qualitative study carried out in Spain with family biographies of men and women who broke their union having had children. The main aim of this study, whose fieldwork was carried out in Spain in the spring of 2008, is to analyse the break-up processes starting from the facts and biographical perceptions which stem from the narratives told by the people who lived them. These facts refer to union formation, birth of children, union dissolution and new unions and subsequent fertility. Biographical perceptions collect and transmit the sense given by people to the union breakdown in their family biography (and other related biographies) and points out the elements which intervene in the way kinship relationships are redefined after all divorces¹. After divorce, there are no pre-existent established norms on how to preserve (or not) family ties (biological or those derived from these) born from the existence of children from before the union broke-up².

The designed biographical-ethnographic methodology

The methodology used is indebted with demographic biographical surveys designed in diverse countries, since the beginning of the 1980's, to apply specifically designed statistical methods to demographic analysis³. These surveys provide information on specific biographies like the labour career, the educational biography and family and residential changes⁴. In our case, the family life is taken as the back bone of our survey allowing interviewees to select the most important events in their lives and those which give sense to the story they are building around union formation, the birth of their children, the union disruption and the subsequent processes.

The thematic model⁵ of this research has two main analytical threads: family and gender.

The sample: derived from the pre-divorce trajectory

The existence of children before the union disruption has been taken as the common denominator of the research sample, because this allowed having a more homogenous initial scenario, from which many diverse post divorce trajectories could depart, and because we also believe that the redefinition of family ties is much more complex when there are children of previous unions.

No conditions have been established with respect the post union dissolution family trajectory (new unions, new maternities or paternities), nor in relation with the age of children (from babies to young adults), nor the type of union (marriage or cohabitation). However, to avoid any intervention during the most sensitive moments, a condition has been introduced: interviews had to take place 3 to 15 years after the event occurred. The people chosen to be

¹ I will make no difference between the terms union dissolution and divorce and use both of them to refer both to a marriage or a consensual union dissolution, as it is generally done in the demographic literature.

² According to the Estadística de Nulidades, Separaciones y Divorcios del Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 52% of the legally dissolved marriages in 2007 had underage children.

³ The principles of the demographic analysis of biographies are very clearly exposed in the already classical book by Courceau, D. & Lelievre, E. (1989).

⁴ In 1981 the INED (Institut National d'Études Démographiques) carried out a pioneer survey known as 3B which was based on three biographies, i.e. the family, the professional and the migratory ones (Courceau, 1985). The Encuesta Sociodemográfica, implemented by the INE in Spain in 1991, added a fourth one, i.e. education.

⁵ For a wider explanation of the thematic model concept please see Bry & Antoine (2004).

interviewed were born around 1955⁶, nearly the generation which pioneered the phenomenon in Spain. According to the last censuses, these are the generations with a highest percentage of divorcees. The choice to carry out the fieldwork in diverse Spanish metropolitan areas (Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, Sevilla) is based on the fact that the incidence of this phenomenon is higher in them than in other areas (Solsona & Simó, 2007).

As our intention was to focus on aspects related to relationships and not so much on the material ones, interviewees had to belong to a homogenous social group, that is to say, they should have the same education and economic level. Most of them have a university degree and develop their economic activity within the cultural or business areas. They are employees or belong to liberal professions in diverse branches of the tertiary sector (architecture, art, company management, teaching, research, publishing, public administration, etc.)

Finally, in the spring of 2007, four previous pilot interviews (two to men and two to women) in which the interview guidelines were tested, were carried out. Then, a year later, in the spring of 2008, 13 men and 13 women who fulfilled all the previous conditions and had no relationship between them were interviewed. Each of the 26 interviews lasted for about two hours.

The interview: a monologue and more than one picture

Ethnographic methodology is used for the fieldwork. That is to say, a direct study of people who have been through a union breakdown is made with in-depth interviews. Our intention is to understand the meaning which the biographer gives to selected events in his/her biography and particularly those related with family ties and emotional bonds.

This ethnographic methodology is applied with a biographical approach in which the interviewee (the main actor) selects the most significant sequences of his/her life course, like in a photomontage. A few questions are used as a connecting thread to impulse a calm monologue on the union dissolution process, the emotional experiences after it and all those biographical events which give sense to the selected life episodes. The stories which our male and female interviewees tell about their families are only guided by five questions from which several others “crutches” depend. The latter were only used to be able to ensure a common thematic body in all the interviews. The following paragraph contains the main five questions:

1. Tell me about your own family
2. Tell me how did you live the union break-up process
3. How have things gone after breaking-up?
4. How do you feel about your present situation?
5. Do you think men and women follow different paths after they have broken-up?

The interviewer speaks as little as possible; she does not even ask for explanations about what is being said. Her role is limited only to suggest some subjects and to build graphic material on the interviewee’s genealogy and life course while they (re)construct their life. As it will be soon observed, this material can be used by interviewed people to give coherence to their story.

The interview starts by explaining the study’s aim so that the respondent can keep in some part of their mind the reason why they have been selected and the main objective of the research, i.e., the reconstruction of family trajectories after a union dissolution. The

⁶ They are people born between January the 1st 1948 and December the 31st 1968; that is to say, they were between 40 and 60 years old when they were interviewed.

conversation is initiated by saying to the interviewee “Tell me about your own family”. The answer is nearly always: which family? My family of origin? The one I have created? At this moment, the respondent realises that there is no standard predetermined answer and starts talking on their biography. The interviewer only listens while drawing in a fieldwork notebook the main people who configure the more or less complex family constellation. (Figures 1 and 2 show simplified versions.) She notes down the sex, the link with ego and the way in which the emotional bonds or family ties are mentioned, if they come up, only turning to the following crutch: do you have strong emotional ties with anybody else who you can consider as your own family?, if it necessary.

The picture stating to appear in the family relationships and emotional bonds diagram with the first answer (tell me about your family) is completed throughout the interview, building at the end the self-perceived family configuration of each of the interviewees.

When a long silence suggests that the respondents thinks that they have finished answering the first question, they are invited to put dates on the most important events in the union and its dissolution process with the intention to draw a lifeline⁷ in which the most significant events in the family biography (union, marriage, birth of children, union disruption, new union...) are represented. Being able to graphically visualise their biography often leads the interviewee to evoke other crucial events in their life from the more distant past (perhaps childhood) and to talk about other life dimensions. Figure 3 gives a specific example helping to obtain deeper comprehension of the way in which the procedure works. Events in the family biography are written down in the main lifeline. When a certain aspect takes particular relevance, a new parallel line is drawn for that particular biography: their children’s biography, their ex-partner’s biography, dwelling, job or education changes, etc. Therefore, the interviewee narrates through the whole interview one only retrospective story, sometimes defining the limits between life stages.

The intention behind the second question, “tell me how did you live the union break-up process”, is to know how ego perceives the process of breaking-up by talking about their degree of empowerment in the decision making and by making reference to the effective dissolution of emotional bonds taking into account the gain and loss feelings attached to it. Some of the crutches used in the in this second question are: tell me on how did you take your decisions: alone, but with someone else’s decisive intervention? How did your children, other relatives and close friends react? Did the breaking-up and grief processes last for long; did it take long before you felt that the links were completely broken and a new space was created?

With the third question, how have things gone after breaking-up? our aim was to get to know how did the new family ties and emotional bonds fit in with those which the interviewee had before breaking-up, using the following crutches when necessary: How did your emotional, tenderness, love and sexual needs end up? When building a new couple, what would you ask/have asked them to be able to live again with another person? What relationships have you established with your ex-partner?

The fourth question is more general: How do you feel about your present situation? Which would be the issues which you consider as unsolved? Here again answers normally have more to do with emotional and family relationships than other aspects in their lives.

⁷ They are like the lifelines which demographers draw in the Lexis diagrams, identifying the time reference of events in three ways (age, calendar year and generation). Our lifelines are however drawn horizonatilly. They start the year the interviewees were born, at age zero, and end at some moment in the spring of 2008, or in other words, at the interviewee’s present age.

The fifth question, “do you think men and women follow different paths after they have broken-up?”, intended to confirm or reject statistical regularities in the gender patterns of post-divorce trajectories⁸. Even though, in practically no cases, our male and female biographers wanted to confirm our general thoughts, they have contributed by offering us many elements on the diversity of post-divorce trajectories, independently from the fact they were being carried out by men or women.

Finally, to close their stories on very sensitive experiences in their lives in a soft and enjoyable way, we asked interviewees to associate out loud certain words on basic concepts in their monologue like love, sexuality, emotional bonds, being at home, their children, parents, etc, with colours, forms and music. To say the truth, at first we had not thought of doing it, but in the first pilot interviews I already noticed that, in some way, strong unpleasant memories which did hurt were woken up. I think that introducing this final game was a good idea.

In summary, during the interview, we used on top of the five questions three other additional resorts: 1) the diagram drawing family relationships and emotional bonds 2) multiple biography lifelines and 3) the game of words.

How to analyse a family constellation universe and multiple biographies

These semi-structured interviews collect two types of information: facts and interpretations. With the interviewee interpretations drawn in the family relationships and emotional bonds diagram we determine the household composition at the moment when the interview was carried out, the members of his or her own family, possible partner or partners and other emotional bonds or friendship ties and therefore being able to build a global configuration of his or her emotional world, made up of both relatives and non-relatives.

The most significant events (facts) in the family biographies of each interviewee are recorded on the lifelines, taking the moment of the union dissolution as a reference point: emancipation, dating experiences, partnerships, union constitution, birth of children, union break-up, formation of new unions (sexual, emotional, cohabitation or not, marriage), further children, if any, etc. They are normally facts, but sometimes the boundaries between both are quite fuzzy. In other words, the same facts can have several interpretations. For example each of the people involved in a romantic or sexual relationship can have their own perception regarding the kind of bond being established: steady, sporadic, etc.

Interpretations, the sense which the biographer gives to the events lived come from interviews themselves. Therefore, to analyse the interviews which have been entirely transcribed⁹, we have taken a thematic perspective¹⁰ aided by ATLAS-TI¹¹, a programme specially designed for textual analysis. Using this point of view means renouncing to trying to find out the meaning or sense to each of the 26 biographies (with multiple biographies) collected. Instead, we will take

⁸ The mentioned regularities refer to men’s higher propensity to remarry and have children from new unions. Carles Simó & Jeroen Spijker (2009) found this marital pattern in Spain, Austria, Finland, France, Germany and the Czech Republic, while they found no differences in the post-divorce gender behaviour pattern in Belgium, Norway and Estonia.

⁹ Each of the interviewees has received the complete interview transcription as an acknowledgement to their cooperation.

¹⁰ See Blanchet & Gotman (1992).

¹¹ Here, I would like to acknowledge Laia Ferrer’s insistence, as a technical researcher of the project, in using this programme because of the codification system advantages. Therefore, my direct knowledge of the 26 biographies, as I carried out the interviews personally, can be put into order and presented in a more systematic way.

into account different aspects of significant elements in all the discourses adding them all up and integrating them. The main aim is to reveal the explanatory factors or those which are better connected with the family biography and particularly those involved in the process of breaking-up and the period after that. Discourses, in this way, allow to know the importance given by biographers to the events occurring throughout their biographies (family and other related ones); they permit to identify biographical conflicts making a difference in their life course and allow to give sense to the superposition of multiple biographies which define interrelated times with different rhythms giving a different tone to each life stage. And therefore it is crucial to have and analyse the graphic material for it.

There are two analytical axes in this study which repeatedly appear throughout the narratives: family and gender. Interviewees are invited to make continuous reference to them during their monologue and get involved in their emotional biography giving the highs and lows of this trajectory, very often making specific reference to their ex-partner's parallel trajectory.

Results on the dissolution process and the multiple biographies

In the following paragraphs I present some first thoughts emerging from the narratives and the collected graphic material (diagrams and lifelines) on the emotional bond dissolution process and the post-divorce relevant biographies.

The main argument is that family is not a noun but a verb, that is to say, that its configuration is permanently being reconstructed throughout a person's life. Divorce is a turning point which not only brings changes in the family biography but also to other dimensions. Analysing unions with children, it was expected and actually observed that the latter had a central role, both in the perception of the interviewee's own family and in his/her multiple post-divorce biographies.

It should be noted that the age and social group targeted was very specific. That people in the sample became adults while Spain opened itself to the world and was undergoing significant social and family changes. That they were invited to tell their life stories when they were already adults and talked about, for example, their first union decades after it took place. Finally, it should be taken into account that even though both men and women keep on having very strong ties with their children from their first union and practically all talk about new more or less stable emotional and sexual relationships, only two women out of the 26 interviewees (all reached by the snowball method) had had children from the second union. This suggests that when there are new maternities, and particularly new paternities¹², and ties with children of the first union are maybe weaker, it is not attractive to tell one's own biography.

Breaking-up a union, a long process

It is said that death is the only thing in life which hits in one blow¹³. It is very difficult to establish precisely the event which marks a union's end, except in the case of widowhood. Separation, stopping being together, is a long process constituted by multiple events: degradation of couple relationships, parallel lives, absence of sexual relationships and separate

¹² Some biographers have mentioned men who do not want to talk because having broken ties with their first children is so painful that they cannot look back.

¹³At present, this is also debatable as life has been extended and widowhood can arrive through a long announced death due to an illness.

beds, intervention of family and close friend's, de facto separation and residence in different houses, negotiation on taking care of children, separation of the estates, legal proceedings, etc.

According to our 26 male and female biographers, in love and disaffection stories, neither transitions nor states are clear (Antoine et al., 2006). Separation is a long process during which emotional bonds between the two people get increasingly weaker and sexual activities get transformed. The process of dissolution starts long before the couple's physical separation and may last until long after it.

When the key events in the union disruption process are drawn in lifelines with the intention locate them in time, it can be observed that the rupture, seen as a crisis period, adopts different forms and intensities in each biography. In some cases, it is a discontinuous process, with several temporary break-ups and in other cases the crisis settles in only one but definitive time.

When this process is very long there are transitions, changes of state that can be reversed, like for example in temporary dwelling separations. The way people concerned argue it is that the members of the couple do not agree on whether to separate. This leads to a series of strategies which maintain the relationship in an apparently stagnant situation. However, outbursts of latent dissatisfaction keep sporadically coming up. Angela's story illustrates this first model. She explains that the seduction manoeuvres were full of threats with respect the relationship with their children. When balancing dissatisfaction and maternal responsibility, the latter won, at least in her case.

An early age union repeatedly appears as a "determinant" of divorce in the continuous crisis types. Alejandra got married when she was 18 and the crisis lasted as long as the union. In some occasions, people get married without really making a conscious decision about it and later they realise that relationship is lacking something essential. This is the case of Julia and that of Miguel.

Another different kind of crisis, continuous and intense, arises when a person, after living a long period of together with some without questioning anything, discovers that their situation is not what they were really looking for. In some occasions, as in Eva's case, our biographers could identify the factor which triggered the change: a passion. At other times the decision to break-up comes from a chronic situation, unbearable, senseless, without love, in which the interest for the other person is no longer there and in which the person starts to no longer recognise herself.

For women, physical separation often means definitively breaking emotional bonds. Generally speaking, even though the children's father is a person for whom no harm is wanted, he is a person with whom there is no longer anything. For some men, ties seem to be never broken for ever. It is a mixture of sense of responsibility, of protection, of right to administer the women's life, of property. It is sometimes difficult for them to renounce to their former role, even when they have started another relationship. However, this possessiveness feeling can also be formulated by women: "I divorce from you, but you are mine".

Family biography and other related ones

In former studies on the determinants of divorce we built explanatory models in which the dependant variable was divorce and the other circumstances (labour, educational and residential) were biographies which determined the family one. A synthetic version of results

can be seen in Solsona & Simó (2007). In this qualitative study we also observe what occurs in the following period.

Divorce is a biographical knot, a key inflection point dividing life in two. This is how our male and female biographers feel about it. It is the end of a stage and announces the beginning of another¹⁴. It is both a deep crisis and a great opportunity. In Cristina's words "It has been the hardest blow I have received and also the strongest impulse". Divorce is not only the *result of*, but a *catalyst for*. An impulse for innovating in the professional sphere, doing those studies which have been left aside, taking care of oneself, looking for a satisfactory sexual relationship, making a journey which was left several times or fighting for the house of one's dreams. And obviously for having a new partner and/ or more children, expanding one's own family or building a new one.

As I have said earlier on, with the use of lifelines, the elements of the narratives which are key to the family biography (new unions, new children, etc.) can be identified. Events with which association or causal relationships can be established in other vital dimensions (work, studies, residential changes...) can be also located. And finally, links with other events (not taken into consideration in surveys of three or four biographies), on which I will focus in the following paragraphs, can also be established.

Among the related biographies, children's central role in the divorced mothers and fathers lives outstands clearly (Castrén, 2008). Nearly everything in life is influenced by children's needs and experiences, particularly during their childhood and adolescence. For example, establishing a new union can be put aside or even rejected because children are given absolute priority. Even though this does not mean renouncing to establishing new stable relationships, the idea of forming a new common residential unit with a partner is rejected. Despite men do not normally live with their children, this is even a more common option among them.

The ex-partner's trajectory is also very present in our male and female biographer's narratives, either through the relationship with children or independently from it, adopting diverse tones: comparison, rivalry, vigilance or respect, affection, backing.

In second place, there is the health biography, which, as we know, is usually a priority in everybody's life. It can be focused on ego's health, on that of children, on the parents' one or the ex-partner's. When it is centred on ego's health, it touches physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health. The underlying vulnerability which all individuals have comes out in this crisis situation and it is convenient to take care of oneself to avoid any further harm. This vulnerability is felt harder among men because they have lived exclusion experiences, during marriage (sexual), and after divorce (difficult contact with children) which they had never imagined. For example, Tomi says "there are people who lose their heads, and I am not at all surprised". However, often tools like therapies and support groups are searched to increase comprehension of the break-up process and learn how to face it.

In third place there are love and sexual stories. These are independent from the family biography formed by couple relationships formalised and socialised within the group of people nearest to it and belong to their shared intimacy. Love stories are not shared; they belong to

¹⁴ Caroline Laborde, Eva Lelièvre & Géraldine Vivier, (2007, page 572) find through the "Biographies et entourage" survey, that being divorced (or widowed), particularly in the case of men, increases the probability to articulate life in a higher number of biographic periods than the mean, by contrast with being married.

the private intimacy in very diverse senses: as a way of satisfying emotional needs, as a way of fighting against isolation, as something natural in life¹⁵.

Finally and linked to the former to a certain extent, after a union break-up, some people, both men and women, give a lot of importance to preserving their own space, a totally private one. This would be the reason why, even though they maintain sentimental and sexual stable relationships, they do not deliberately take the following step, i.e. to live under the same roof. This completely private space may be located in the home which is shared, permanently or sporadically, with children. But in any case, its colonisation is vetoed to the new partner.

Open conclusions

Some precise questions still do not have an answer. When does the union dissolution start? Does the process have an end? Can we establish the moment at which the emotional bond with the ex-partner is finally broken? If the way in which this bond is broken is so difficult to capture when there are children, talking about the causes and determinants is even more speculative. Some of the triggering factors can be distinguished (a passion, discovering an infidelity) but not the actual *determinants*. However, textual analysis gives evidence that the ultimate cause moving any person initiating a divorce is probably *being*, after a crisis period in which self identity is questioned, *themselves once again*. This study shows that, rather than being the result of biographical changes (labour, educational, residential) divorce is a biographical inflection point, the moment at which another life stage is initiated and triggers changes in areas to which biographical surveys normally pay little attention, those related with children, health, love and having one's *own room*, among others.

Union dissolution is a good example of how fuzzy states and transitions, and also time and space are (Antoine & Lelievre, 2006). Transition between marriage and divorce cannot be clearly dated; marriage contains divorce before and after breaking-up, and vice versa. As Louis Henry (1993) states and our research illustrates, divorce is a dimension of marriage and constitutes an institution¹⁶ in itself. The existence of children from before the union which has broken-up stops us from talking about family dissolution¹⁷. In post divorce, new family and emotional bonds are structured around children. These also have a strong influence the decision on whether to constitute a new union, and as they sometimes live in diverse spaces, the space which affects other relationships is also fuzzy. New couple relationships, love and sex, often take place outside the household and the family frontiers.

Biographical analysis has given priority to time so that the life transitions can be drawn and the order and causes of events, determined. The narratives of our male and female biographers show that family life with blood relatives, in-laws and close friends, takes place in diverse spaces. To increase our knowledge of family and emotional bond transformations it is essential to go beyond the conceptual artifice of family-household and search the intersection between time and space.

¹⁵ For more information on the transformation of intimacy see Anthony Giddens (1992).

¹⁶ See the pioneering work of Christine Delphy (1982) where she says that she reveals the true nature of marriage.

¹⁷ The lawyer Montserrat Tur (2007, page. 53) says "Even though ties within the couple can be legally broken, the presence of children from the union, stops the eyes of the law regarding a broken family as anything other than a family".

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Figure 1. Example of family's configuration at the interview. Joan Miquel.
 Family: biological and friends. One person household and one parent family during the week end.

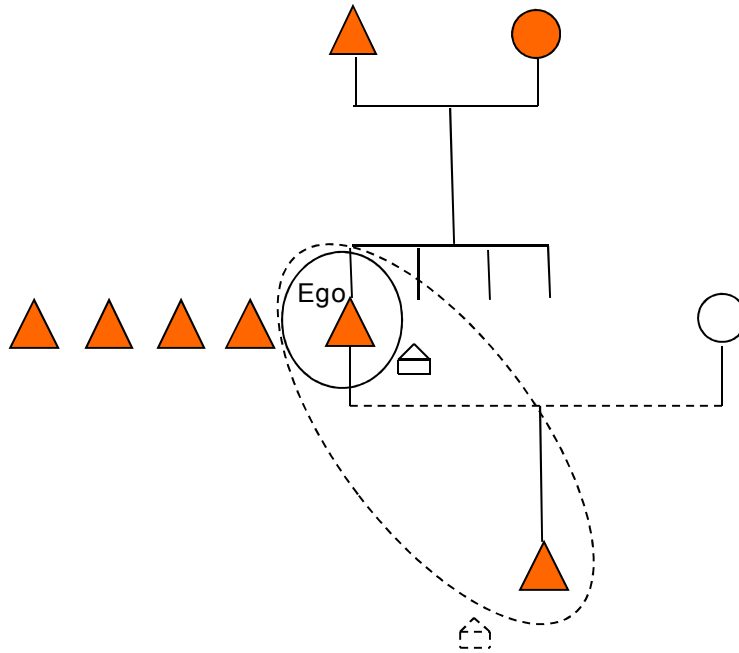


Figure 2. Example of family's configuration at the interview. Alejandra.
 Family: biological ties, ascendants y descendants. Household: lives in a couple with her children from both unions.

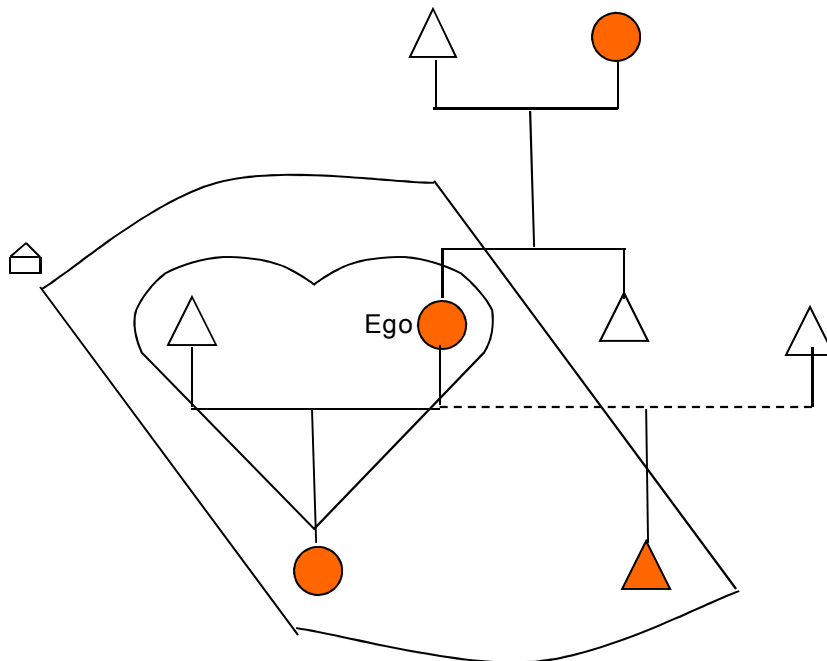


Figura 3. Example of family biography and other biographies in *lines of life*

