Postponement of parenthood, a comparably low number of children, and voluntary childlessness are characteristic features of Western societies (see Chapter 2). Researchers often refer to processes of modernization and individualization when explaining fertility decline. Focusing on a cultural explanation for individual behavior, they describe the modernization process as representing fundamental changes in norms and values, and increasing the autonomy of the individual: individuals are confronted with a growing number of opportunities and fewer restrictions by their social environment, as well as with the increasing necessity to shape “their own life” (Beck, 1995). In line with the individualization thesis the argumentation often starts with the observation that – relative to the past – individuals today are increasingly set free from “traditional” bonds, from social structures common in industrial societies. Note that “traditional” is not defined as classic sociologists would, in terms of religious or estate bonds in pre-modern times, but in terms of class and family bonds as well as gender roles (Volkmann, 2000). However, individuals do not necessarily become disengaged; traditional bonds can be replaced by new types of bonds (Beck, 1986). The increase in individual autonomy has led to a decrease in formerly ubiquitous living arrangements and an acceptance of a variety of different ways to organize one’s life. Having children is no longer self-evident, but has become a matter of choice. Moreover, having children is just one option among many others, and these alternatives are often regarded as incompatible with having children.

This release from traditional bonds can be translated in the language of network research as follows (see Chapter 1 on the community question): it is a change from dense networks, including a large share of kin; to rather sparse networks, including more contacts that are “chosen” as friends. My analysis has shown a broad range of network densities (from 0.18 to 0.8938), and a large variety in the share of kin (from 0.09 to 0.6239) among my respondents. The network

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38 A density value of 0 indicates that none of the network partners is in contact with the other; while a density value of 1 indicates that all network partners are in contact with each other.

39 In this case, 0 would indicate that there is no relative in the network, while 1 would indicate that all network partners are kin.
measures, as well as their relationship to fertility intentions, have been described in detail in Chapter 5. Here, I want to put focus on the aspect of being engaged in rather “traditional” versus “individualized” networks. Placing all networks into a coordinate system, designating on the x-axis the network density, and on the y-axis the share of kin, provides us with the following graph (Figure 24).

*Figure 24:* Distribution of networks according to their density and share of kin

Most networks are either dense and include a large share of kin, or they are sparse and include a low share of kin. Those networks that do not fit into this scheme are almost exclusively located on, or are very close to, a median value of 0.56 for the density and 0.31 for the share of kin (dotted lines). There is only one clear outlier: a woman’s network which is dense (density: 0.69), but includes only a low share of kin (0.25). From the interview we have learned that she is embedded in a dense clique of friends, but there are conflicts among her kin, so she did not include many relatives in her network chart. Including the respondents’ fertility intentions provides the following compelling overview (Figure 25).