# Ethnographic accounts of personal networks

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# A personal network approach to ethnography

## Theoretical implications and methodological challenges

### 1. The personal network concept

Why are ethnographers so interested in understanding how relationships work? During periods of accelerated social change, researchers usually wish to determine if individuals are isolated or receive care and support from others, what kinds of resources they have access to and under which conditions, or if others influence their life course. They might wish to know which types of people are in such networks (for instance, whether they are composed mostly of kin, friends, neighbors or acquaintances) and analyze the changes in their roles. By studying relationships, they are also able to understand the qualities of such ties, their composition, and their contextual diversity. However, the question remains: why are ethnographers so *obsessed* with configurations of relations more generally?

One possible answer is that interpersonal relations and social circles that constitute the fabric of society are not simply the result of practices of sociability (Bidart *et al.*, 2020). Rather, they form the very basis of those relational, transactional, and processual social worlds (Desmond, 2014) that are a key focus of ethnographic research. If we understand ties to be ontologically real entities (Small *et al.*, forthcoming in 2021) that bring social actors together in a state of mutual dependence and struggle, then the goal of fieldwork «is to show how things hang together in a web of mutual influence or support or interdependence [and] to describe the connections between the specifics the ethnographer knows by virtue of being there» (Becker, 1996, p. 56, quoted in Desmond, 2014, p. 554).

Although an emphasis on relational thinking goes back to the earliest days of ethnography, the last two decades have witnessed a «relational turn» (Desmond, 2014) across the social sciences, which has produced a series of exciting methodological and theoretical developments. Recent years have seen a rapid expansion of research focused specifically on personal (egocentric) networks, as demonstrated by publications such as *Egocentric Network Analysis* (Perry *et al.*, 2018), *Conducting Personal Networks Research* (McCarty *et al.*, 2019) and *Personal Networks: Classic Readings and New Directions in Egocentric Analysis* (Small *et al.*, forthcoming in 2021) as well as numerous sessions devoted to the topic at the annual Sunbelt Conferences of the International Network of Social Network Analysis.

This special issue makes the case for a more sustained ethnographic examination of social ties in network analysis, as there is still a gap in the knowledge about how ethnography might enable us to reveal, unveil and classify personal networks. While researchers from various disciplines have started to recognize these analytical and empirical lacunae, there has yet to be an in-depth, multidimensional discussion in sociological and anthropological research about social connections and their significance for both network analysis and qualitative research more generally.

Personal networks are practiced every day (Wellman, 2007). Personal networks are complex, dynamic entities that change over time: they get reconfigured, they dissolve, become diluted or remain dormant; they are partly coordinated with other ties and are partly in isolation (McCarty *et al.*, 2019). Personal networks offer an in-depth view into the social world of research participants, including contacts from any possible social circle and setting. Personal networks are a tool to analyze relationships that cross-cut social and spatio-temporal configurations.

This special issue, therefore, aims to contribute to the literature in two main ways. First, it combines a range of novel approaches to conceptualizing personal networks in different urban contexts across the Global North and Global South. The articles in this special issue all draw on the interdisciplinary field of qualitative social network analysis in order to understand a variety of micro- and meso-level phenomena, such as migration and mobility, health and well-being, entrepreneurship and livelihood strategies, and, in doing so, to highlight similarities and differences from various geographical contexts.

Second, the contributors' plural approaches illustrate diverse ways in which personal networks are formed, employed and shaped by social capital and support strategies, and delineate the central role of urban space in these relational mechanisms. The articles highlight the ways in which specialized ties promote social support and network capital (see Bruck; Cirillo; Lilius and Hewidy); the role of communities as networks with a focus on the social inclusion and mobility of marginalized groups (see D'Ingeo; Volpini); as well as linkages over time between life stage experiences, relationships and changes in social contacts (see Manzo). As the contributions show, personal networks rely on specific patterns of social interactions that provide ethnographers with the opportunity to systematically collect necessary information on relationships

and their characteristics. At the same time, such networks can act as a conduit for individual agency or channels for the reproduction of inequalities.

## 2. Theoretical implications of personal networks

While not a theory, personal networks have theoretical implications. The methods and analytical focus of researchers today often reflect theoretical positions that were made one or more generations ago. Georg Simmel's conceptual writing at the turn of the 20th century laid the theoretical foundations for dyadic and triadic analysis, and for the study of intimacy, secrecy, brokerage and much more (Small *et al.*, forthcoming in 2021). In particular, he introduced the dimension of «social circles» (Simmel, 1950): a set of individuals and bonds that produce norms, opinions and specific knowledge likely to influence habits, thinking, and life choices (Bidart *et al.*, 2020).

In addition, many network researchers have been influenced by the work of the urban ethnographers of the Chicago School (Park *et al.*, 1925), who regarded the city as a space of human intercommunication or a «network of networks» (Hannerz, 1991) and characterized by collective and specific practices, such as Italian American «street corner society» (Whyte, 1943), the lives of Jewish migrants (Wirth, 1928), and the study of solidarity networks among temporary workers and hobos (Anderson, 1923). These pioneering works influenced several generations of ethnographers (e.g., Gans, 1962) who would themselves go on to develop scholarly thinking on egocentric networks (Granovetter, 1973).

This special issue points to the importance of re-engaging with these early works. Miranda Lubbers and José Luis Molina González point out that not only do personal network researchers rarely use ethnographic approaches, but their engagement with ethnographic literature is relatively limited. They argue that ethnography deserves more attention in personal network research, both as a methodology and as a body of literature, given its unique perspective on individuals' social relationships. In their words, this «scant engagement is unfortunate because ethnography offers a unique perspective on social relationships that complements other methodologies». Although long-term participant observation in natural settings is the hallmark technique of ethnography, other methods typically accompany it, such as semi-structured interviews, life histories, focus groups, archival data, kinship diagrams, maps, graph theory and metrics. If such techniques help ethnographers to build a holistic representation while increasing its validity through methodological triangulation, then personal network graphs should also provide an important contribution to ethnographic research. And yet, they rarely do. Lubbers and Molina González aim to correct this omission by discussing four network features that ethnography can help to better understand: (1) meaningful relationship categories; (2) individual agency in networks; (3) network dynamics and (4) systemic and institutional embeddedness. As they underline, just as ethnography can contribute to personal network research, so personal network analysis is equally valuable for ethnography.

Similarly, Nicole Pangborn calls for a more complementary ethnographic examination of social ties in the analysis of social networks. Pangborn states

that such examinations should take into account the risks of a solely quantitative analysis, that might effectively flatten the dynamism and emotion contained within a social bond's substance and thereby miss key information about how such dynamism can affect the structure of the network itself. To demonstrate the usefulness of an augmented approach – one in which quantitative network analysts might use the insights of hypothesis-generating qualitative work – Pangborn redefines in symbolic interactionist terms each component of Mark Granovetter's definition of strong ties. Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, Thomas Scheff, and Robert Emerson, she delves into an in-depth qualitative examination of Granovetter's definition, namely, (1) intimacy; (2) emotional intensity and (3) reciprocal services. Pangborn's discussion allows us to consider how «immaterial» resources are transmitted over social ties. She notes:

> «Ethnographers can become "close to [participants] while they are responding to what life does to them" (Goffman, 1989, p. 125), and are firmly in a better position to see a social network for what it is – an "evolving social world", full of "meanings, conventions, resources, resource distributions and sedimented histories", rather than just a structural network of links between vertices whose meanings are defined by the researcher (Crossley, 2010, p. 3)».

The six empirical articles in this special issue offer intimate, theoretical insights of personal networks that are defined, conceptualized and practiced in interactions. They each engage in different ways with three thematic areas, which represent both a connection to tradition and an emerging agenda: (1) contexts and biographies; (2) social capital and support and (3) agency and constraints.

## 2.1. Spatio-temporal contexts responsive to biographical changes

A new generation of scholars has shown that the context of social interaction is essential to the operation of network processes. For these scholars, contexts are multiple and overlapping, and can range from the spatial and organizational to the urban, cultural and online (Small *et al.*, forthcoming in 2021). A contextual approach toward conceptualizing personal networks as dynamic systems that are responsive to biographical changes enhances our understanding of the substance of relationships as made of the «experiences, memories, emotions, trust, and changes that have accumulated over time» (Bidart *et al.*, 2020, p. 301).

This special issue contributes to the mapping of personal networks by focusing first and foremost on the spatial urban context. The articles are based on fieldwork studies in Debre Markos (Ethiopia) and Morogoro (Tanzania), Helsinki (Finland), Manchester (UK), Milan (Italy), Salvador (Brazil), and Tallahassee (U.S.). The authors point to the importance of space for the formation and diffusion of social ties as well as for group practices. Dalila D'Ingeo offers a particular U.S. perspective on how racial residential segregation constrains adolescents' food habits and limits their access to fresh food, and considers how community gardens function as «bridges» that empower local youth and expose them

to different cultures and culinary traditions. Echoing Simmel's point about the importance of physical propinquity (1950), Lorena Volpini discusses how the residential arrangement of stilt housing in Alagados in Salvador – lined up in rows and physically connected to the coast by wooden bridges – shaped the reproduction of grassroots activism and organizations. On the other side of the Atlantic, Amanda Bruck addresses the gendered dynamics of British policies of austerity by examining how economically vulnerable mothers in the North West of England form supportive ties in two organizations: a food bank and a women's center. Meanwhile, building on a case study in Helsinki, Johanna Lilius and Hossam Hewidy examine how ethnic food entrepreneurs in the city's suburbs activate personal networks and knowledge of the restaurant scene to attract a Finnish clientele, including young middle-class residents of city center neighborhoods. Finally, Lidia Manzo's study of intercultural couples in Milan explores the intersection of emotions, memories and past experiences in young adults' discussions of the development of intergenerational networks of support over the course of their intimate relationships.

## 2.2. Social capital and support strategies

Theories of social capital have been linked to positive macro- and micro-level outcomes, such as economic growth and development, democracy, better quality governance, less crime, health, subjective well-being or life satisfaction, educational achievement, finding jobs and child welfare (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988a; 1988b; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Social scientists have long studied how individuals access and mobilize resources embedded in their personal networks, for both expressive and instrumental purposes. Furthermore, since the 1970s, social support has been a key focus of personal network research, and personal network methods have become the primary approach for these studies (McCarty *et al.*, 2019). The concept of social support refers to social resources that persons perceive to be available or that are actually provided to them in the context of both formal and informal helping relationships to cope with major life stressors or daily needs. Barrera (1986), for example, noted the importance of the sources of support in terms of different categories of social ties with lay people (e.g., family members, friends, neighbors), and the different types of support (e.g., emotional, instrumental or informational).

Various contributors to this special issue emphasize the ways in which personal networks are intertwined with the concept of social capital and wider support strategies. Through the lens of temporalities, Bruck investigates the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged mothers who rely on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for material and emotional support. NGOs establish institutional trust, or vertical social capital, that enable mothers to foster horizontal social capital and to form durable bonds that are essential for lessening their experience of social isolation and stigmatization. Similarly, Silvia Cirillo shows how, in the absence of institutional social protection, female domestic workers in Ethiopia and Tanzania create their own strategies of survival outside of formal channels and, in doing so, provide each other with various forms of

support. Despite the fact that these bonds may appear weak in terms of intensity and durability, and are easily interrupted, they can also be intermittently reactivated in times of need. Lilius and Hewidy's contribution draws our attention to how ethnic entrepreneurs act as important nodes in social networks that draw together clients from different ethnicities. They demonstrate the role that businesses play in bonding and strengthening social capital within a particular ethnic group or bridging social capital by drawing more people into the network.

## 2.3. Individual agency and social constraints

The role of individual agency and creativity in describing how individuals are shaped by the precise structures of their externally-defined relationships deserves extra consideration (Pangborn, this issue).

Two observations can be made in this regard. First, contributors to this special issue highlight the fact that apparently «thin» forms of agency, enacted under constraining contexts where few opportunities are available, may become «thicker» when social capital resources are mobilized in personal networks. In her ethnographic study of the Alagados slum community in Salvador, Volpini illustrates how kinship ties are «fabricated» by dwellers during the process of self-building. Rather than reinforcing the idea of an essentialized culture of subsistence among the urban poor, the peculiar intertwinement of houses, kinship and associated symbolism advances their «community voice» and sense of agency. The «dark side» of individual agency in personal networking is evident in Cirillo's contribution. She argues that network resources for female domestic workers turn out to be both enabling and constraining. Their experiences of discrimination and marginalization with regard to pay, working conditions and legal rights, as well as verbal, physical and sexual abuse, however, made these women employ various forms of agency and resilience to improve their situations.

The second observations is that the relationships examined in this special issue are clearly dynamic, insofar as they emerge, evolve, decline, come to an end, resume, change and take on different qualities (Bidart *et al.*, 2020). In her study of Italian mixed couples, Manzo explains this dynamism on the basis of the shift from a given family to chosen kin (friends) for the purposes of both well-being and lifelong support. Exploring in detail all the microprocesses that are at work in the constant construction of personal networks, young adults establish distance from unsympathetic families to reclaim the intimate and independent dimension of intercultural romantic partnerships. Agency comes into play as couples decide to leave their kinship behind for a public affirmation of «families of choice».

## 3. Methodological challenges

The personal network approach views relationships from the standpoint of a focal individual (*ego*) actively managing his/her ties with alters. This perspective is different from that employed in the complete networks approach, which

observes an entire set of ties, such as in a neighborhood, workplace or organization (Chua *et al.*, 2011). Researchers who study personal networks often collect network data using name generators. Depending on the approach adopted, these can be divided into three categories: (1) generators based on interactions; (2) generators based on the importance of certain links and (3) generators based on exchange[1].

The interactive approach identifies the persons encountered the most frequently over a specified period of time. It usually captures social activity rather than a set of strong ties, and it is cognitively demanding. The affective approach is used to elicit the names of people with whom respondents feel the closest, or most intimate with, or who are the most important to them. A method based on this approach was designed by Kahn and Antonucci (1980) for their well-known work on social convoy theory. Respondents arranged the names of important people in their lives on a diagram consisting of three concentric circles with the word «you» at the centre (see Figure 1). The inner circle was for «people to whom you feel so close that it is hard to imagine life without them». The middle circle was for «people to whom you may not feel quite that close but who are still important to you». The outer circle included «people whom you haven't already mentioned but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be placed in your personal network». The circle diagram provided researchers with a highly interactive method that illustrated the hierarchical construction of the name generator, thereby reducing the research burden on participants.
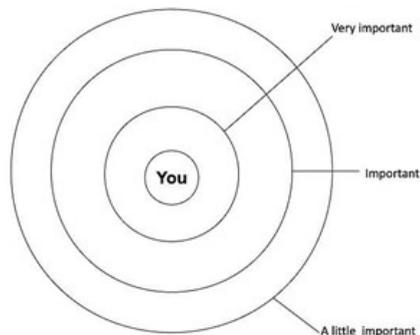


Fɪɢ. 1. The Kahn and Antonucci (1980) convoy model diagram (in McCarty *et al.*, 2019, p. 80).

Finally, the exchange approach is commonly adopted in studies on social capital or social support to provide information on the persons likely to procure various resources such as emotional, instrumental and informational support.

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[1] See McCarty *et al.*, 2019 for a comprehensive examination.

In this special issue, mixed methods are most apparent in Dalila D'Ingeo's contribution. Her article on Black adolescents' experience of food insecurity and systemic racism in the United States combines traditional anthropological methods, such as participant observation and qualitative interviews, with social network analysis. As D'Ingeo shows, semi-structured questions can be integrated or used as a follow-up to create a more engaging and interactive research environment for young participants, to discuss their food habits in relation to the people with whom they are connected and the social contexts they are engaged in.

However, many qualitative research studies of personal relationships do not explicitly chart or map networks. Often, they choose relatively open and participatory methods to elicit them with either paper-and-pencil techniques or software that allows for the computer-assisted construction of the network. Cirillo's study of female domestic workers' lived experiences in Africa, elicits personal networks from a biographical perspective. Drawing on life history interviews, as well as participant observation and focus group discussions, her analysis engages with the narratives that women construct in order to give meaning to their lives both in the isolated context of the workplace and alongside other female domestic workers who are bonded by ties of mutual support. Volpini also explores the specific spatialized practices of mutual support and the social organization of slum dwellers in Salvador by using a retrospective technique that encouraged interlocutors to draw on memories of the self-construction of the neighborhood and grassroots organizations. Her work tackles personal networks from a «dwelling perspective» (Ingold, 2000) in order to demonstrate how networks of neighborhood associations function like networks of houses in the context of everyday living operations and grassroots politics in Brazil.

Researchers have also made use of interviewees' free-style sketches to elicit networks that build on the potentiality of visual methods (Pink, 2013) in order to understand their processes of meaning making (Reyes, 2016). In this approach, participants are asked to draw their social network on a blank sheet of paper, in a completely unstructured way (for an example, see Figure 2). In her contribution, Manzo proposes the method of hand-drawn personal network maps as stimuli to narrate her research on intercultural romantic relationships among young adults in Milan. Using a think-aloud technique during the interview, she asked couples to clarify ways in which their network members provided support at a practical, emotional or financial level.
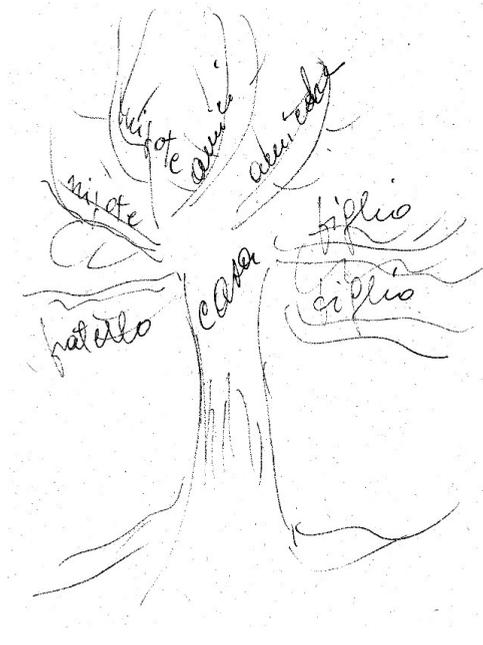
Fɪɢ. 2. A free-style drawing used to elicit personal networks revolving around the participant's home.

Note: Interestingly, the home (*casa* in Italian) has been represented as the trunk of a tree, through which relationships with children, siblings, grandchildren and friends are «unravelled» along different branches.

Source: author's personal archive.

## 4. Centering personal networks in ethnographic research

A combination of personal network analysis and visualization with ethnographic interviews and participant observation has the potential to make a more creative and insightful contribution to research. An integrated approach is based on the assumption that ethnography enables us to reveal

> «The motivations behind the action of forging ties, the consequences of those actions, and the reasons for starting and ending relationships. Ethnography allows the identification of the attributes of the social links and thus characterizes the nature of the networks as support, leverage, or both» (Maya-Jariego, Domínguez, 2014, p. 170).

The information on the composition of networks can be considered ethnographic insofar as it builds on the complex relationship and extended contact time between researchers and the community of participants. Ethnographic accounts of personal networks are thus able to capture the dynamism and fluidity of social relationships (Maya-Jariego, Domínguez, 2014).

Despite the paucity of such accounts, ethnography has much to offer to personal network researchers, as Lubbers and Molina González argue. Indeed, researchers have found that better results are often achieved by combining approaches. Bringing together the strengths of quantitative and qualitative strategies can compensate for their respective weaknesses (Hollstein, 2014). As Elisa Bellotti observes:

> «Mixing social network analysis with qualitative methods and various forms of visualization is a fruitful area of research, which can simultaneously take into account the structural possibilities and constraints embedded in personal networks, and the subjective ways in which people perceive and describe such possibilities and constraints» (Bellotti, 2016, p. 15).

All of this suggests that ethnography is not simply an «add on». This special issue underlines the ways in which qualitative analysis affords us a greater and more nuanced grasp of issues that are of central importance to personal networks. According to Crossley, «a comprehensive and robust analysis demands that we allow these elements back in» (2010, p. 31), and ethnographic practice is one important way of doing so, as – at the end of the day – «qualitative and quantitative forms of analysis belong together» (Crossley, 2010, p. 32).

The eight articles in this special issue develop out of a two-session panel on «Ethnographic Accounts of Personal Networks» organized at the Italian Society for Applied Anthropology Conference in Ferrara in December 2019. The rationale for the panel stemmed from my own personal *obsession* with personal networks and an interest to explore how ethnography might render network research more attentive to contextual differences, and which had led me to participate in the Autonomous University of Barcelona's egolab-GRAFO summer school on «Theory, Methods and Applications of Personal Networks» in the summer of 2019. I would like to thank all the scholars I met during this journey and the editorial board of *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* who provided helpful comments, particularly Nick Dines and Gianmarco Navarini for their precious and enduring support against the (academic) backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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