Social network building: Combining qualitative interviews with egonet analysis.

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Abstract:
What social relationship sustains people’s cultural and leisure activity? To what extent do cultural and leisure activities provide a context for people to build social contacts, skills and networks in pursuit of nothing more than sociability? This paper develops a combination of qualitative and social network analysis methods to address these questions.

Qualitative, in-depth interviewing allows social researchers to explore the range of activities a respondent (ego) is involved with, information about these involvements (frequency etc.) and the respondent’s valuation of the activity. If researchers want to understand these activities in a social context however, they need information about the respondent’s companions in the activity. The methods described in this paper flow from a concern to understand cultural and leisure activity as an active part of respondents’ social network building and maintenance.

This paper argues that there are exceptional advantages to be gained from combining qualitative interviewing and social network analysis (specifically the form known as ‘Egonet’ research). These include the construction of rich detail regarding the personal networks of individuals; the ability to explore the multiplexity of complex relationships; the ability to compare complex relationships; and the adaptability of the format to other areas of research, such as social capital research.

Introduction.
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(frequency etc.) and the respondent’s valuation of the activity. If researchers want to understand these activities in a social context however, they need information about the respondent’s companions in the activity. At a minimum we need to know the alters the respondent shares the activity with. We can also begin to explore how the shared activities contribute to the building and maintenance of relations between ego and their alters. Social network researchers use the term ‘ego’ and ‘alter’ to identify the participant providing the data (‘ego’) and the people in their networks (‘alter’-ego).

The need to study a respondent’s immediate social environment is highlighted in some research contexts more than others. The studies of STDs or infections from needle sharing, for example, are areas where interpersonal connections and networks are a primary research interest (Morris, 2004). Social capital research is an interesting middle case. Health type surveys assess at an individual level the impact of social capital. This comes from the individual’s social networks so that any study of the formation and maintenance of social capital requires investigation of relations within the individual’s immediate social context and wider community.

The methods described in this paper flow from a concern to understand cultural and leisure activity as an active part of respondents’ social network building and maintenance. This involves more than just the shift from a consumer psychology of leisure participation to a sociology of consumption, it assumes that building and maintaining interpersonal relations within the horizon of a person’s total social network is a major part of people’s lives and the arena of their social action. Our concern has been to map the way in which joint and collective cultural and leisure activity is an active way of promoting this sociability (Cardon and Granjon, 2005; Degenne and Forse, 1999).

The methods developed for this research are a combination of qualitative interviewing and social network analysis (specifically the form known as ‘Egonet’ research). The current project builds upon previous research into Star Trek fans that triangulated statements about their social use of Star Trek discussions and activities with their actual sharing of this interest across their social circles. The success of this earlier project encouraged the development of a single semi-structured interview made up of parts with distinct purposes. A cultural and leisure activity generator is conducted to identify which activities the individual has an interest in. A name generator is
conducted to map the extent of the individuals’ personal network. A ‘generator’ is a set of questions designed to elicit as many possible answers as possible, a ‘name generator’ therefore aims to elicit as many names of the participants alters as possible. The list of alters is examined to determine socio-demographic characteristics and to clarify the nature of the relationship between the individual and all alters. The final and crucial step links the list of cultural and leisure activities to the list of alters. Thus the group of alters associated through each activity is clearly identified.

**The constitutive components of the method: Qualitative interviewing and Social Network Analysis.**

Qualitative methods are common in sociological research, and many excellent texts are available for the reader should they wish to learn more. Social network analysis is not a common method of research for the majority of sociologists, and combining qualitative research with social network research is unusual. Therefore we present a brief overview of the personal network analysis known as ‘Egonet’ research before discussing how the two methodologies were combined.

Any personal network begins with its most important component, the ego. This term refers to the person being studied; all relationships within the network are made between the ego and the alters. The essential part of Egonet research is to compile a comprehensive list of alters, using a name generator. A name generator is simply a set of questions that ask ego to recall the specific people in their social networks, using anonymous but distinct identifiers. Typical questions include ‘who are the people that you feel close to?’; ‘who would you ask to look after your house while you were away?’ and ‘who do you talk to about financial matters?’ Once this has been accomplished it is often useful to gather some kind of socio-demographic information about the list of alters, such as their age, gender, occupation and relationship to the ego.

This is the bulk of an average Egonet study; it provides data on the people that the individual associates with and how these associations were formed. But there is a great deal more that can be done with this method, when it is combined with qualitative interviews.
Triangulating in-depth interviews and Egonet data: The Star Trek study.

In 2005 a small pilot study was conducted into the experiences of ‘everyday’ Star Trek fans; ‘everyday’ fans were those who did not engage in the kinds of activities linked to the ‘Trekkie’ subculture, such as dressing up to attend conventions, learning Klingon or membership in a fan club. Each of the respondents was asked a short set of questions about their interest, how they became interested and why, whether their interest had a social significance, and experiences and attitudes of being a fan. The respondents were then given an Egonet survey, and as a final question were asked which of their alters they discussed Star Trek with.

Despite a small sample size this combination of methods effectively highlighted the behaviour of the respondents in including or excluding Star Trek in their social interactions. The Egonet data showed a wide variety of results, the number of close alters in any network ranged between five and fifteen people, and the percentage of these close alters that were included in discussions of Star Trek ranged between twenty and one hundred percent. When the results were analysed with the qualitative interview data they showed three clear patterns of behaviour.

The fans we dubbed ‘private’ had very low percentages of including their close friends in discussions, between twenty and thirty three percent. In the qualitative interview they talked either about activities that are solitary (collecting memorabilia, reading novels) as their main activity of choice, or stated that their group of friends was highly unlikely to be interested in discussing Star Trek and thus they had never broached the subject.

The fans we dubbed ‘discreet’ included between forty and eighty percent of their close friends in discussions of Star Trek. In the qualitative interview these respondents had the highest awareness of negative stereotyping of ‘Trekkies’, they were most likely to be sensitive to which of their close friends were accepting of an interest such as Star Trek and made selective choices based on that perception. However, chaining of the Egonets (overlapping the Egonets of respondents’ that know one another) demonstrated that the discreet fans chose not to discuss Star Trek with close friends who were involved in discussions with other respondents. This seemed to indicate that the selection of close friends to involve in discussion was based on personal choice and not the receptivity of the close friend.
Finally, the fans we dubbed ‘social’ included between eighty and one hundred percent of their close friends in discussion. These fans were aware of negative stereotyping of ‘Trekkies’ and even shared these attitudes, but they liked to talk about Star Trek, even with close friends who were not themselves fans. Interestingly the social fans showed little interest in the activities that are usually conducted alone, such as collecting, making models or reading.

This typology was only made possible through triangulating the methods of social network analysis and qualitative interviewing. By themselves the qualitative interviews did not clearly define patterns of behaviour; respondents across the three descriptive categories had similar attitudes and similar patterns of activity. By themselves Egonets demonstrated a range of networks with different scales of inclusion. However, by triangulating the qualitative data with the Egonets it became possible to interpret why the respondents chose to include alters in discussions of Star Trek or not. The combination gave insights neither set of interviews gave on their own.

**Triangulating in-depth interviews and Egonet data: The current study.**

The current research aims to expand upon the pilot study in a number of ways. The main research questions ask ‘what informs the choice of cultural and leisure activities?’ and ‘what role do cultural and leisure activities have in social relationships?’ These questions are well suited to qualitative interviews, and the interviews for this research are conducted in much the same way as a semi-structured interview would, with the added step of conducting an Egonet survey throughout. The following section details how these two methods are combined in order to be conducted concurrently.

The interview is recorded throughout, including for those parts that are focussed on filling out a survey form. This is to allow the researcher to explore issues and follow up on points of interest as they arise, and to record the details of the interviewee’s responses to all aspects of the interview. The Egonet survey is completed as the interview progresses, into an Excel spreadsheet template that has been created before the interview stage. The transcription is then used with the Egonet survey for analysis, providing complementary sets of data on the areas of interest.
The first set of questions asks the respondent about their choice of cultural and leisure activities, with questions such as ‘what do you like to do to relax?’ and ‘do you have any hobbies?’ The questions are designed to elicit as many cultural and leisure activities regularly engaged in by the interviewee, and are expected to produce a list of between 6 and 20 activities. These activities should not be work related, though this does not preclude the respondent making money from these activities. This method of eliciting cultural and leisure activities is at odds with other studies, which more often ask the respondents to identify whether they have participated in specific activities, such as attending the theatre or a dance performance (Scott-Lennox, Blau and Reid, 1993) or going down to the pub for a drink (Warde, Tampubolon and Savage, 2005). The goal of our procedure is to have the interviewee provide a personalised account of their interests and pursuits, which can later be classified using the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ ‘Australian Culture and Leisure Classifications’ (ABS, 2000).

The second set of interview questions ask three questions that are intended to provide a guide to how the interviewee views the importance of their particular leisure and cultural activities, as well as demonstrating the practicality of engaging with these activities on a regular basis:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is [activity] to you?
2. How frequently do you engage in [activity], either by yourself or with others?
3. Which activities would you prefer to do more often, given the opportunity?

Measurement of personal value is a standard tool of sociological research and present in numerous studies of this sort (Marsden and Swingle, 1994). By individually valuing each activity the interviewee is free to place a high or low importance on all items, without having to make a relative judgement about the relational values of the activities.

Section three is the substantial qualitative section of the interview. The answers are explorations of three activities: the most important activity nominated; an activity nominated as being conducted often, different from the first; and an activity that the interviewee nominated they would prefer to do more often, different from the first and second.
The fourth set of questions involves the mapping of the interviewees’ social networks, through a name generator. The name generator uses a short list of questions designed to stimulate the interviewee into providing a comprehensive list of their significant social contacts (alters). The questions used in this study include ‘who are the people close to you?’ and ‘who are the people that you work with whom you consider to be friends?’ The names generated then define the relationships with the interviewee. We collect socio-demographic information on each of the alters as well as some questions about social capital.

The name generator questions aim to elicit alters who interact with the interviewee on a social basis. Other studies (Fischer, 1982; Fischer and Shavitt, 1995) use multiple questions that elicit many types of ego-alter relationships. We focus on alters who are important to the respondents’ social, cultural and leisure activities. Thus for example, family members who are ‘close’ in practical terms, but not in social terms, may not be mentioned.

Section five involves gathering sociometric data on each of the alters, providing information on the age, gender, occupational and ethnic composition of the network. These aspects of the network composition can be used to explore a number of issues related to the homophily or heterogeneity of networks and cultural/leisure consumption. Most explorations of network homophily focus upon a single category: race (Mollica, Gray and Trevino, 2003), gender (Eder and Hallinan, 1978) or age (Feld, 1982) for example. The author is aware of only one study that uses multi-relational data, using age and marital status (Kalmijn and Vermunt, 2006). The data in this research provides a greater level of detail into exactly how heterogeneous social relationships are.

For each relationship we also ask the respondent to identify whether the alter is a friend, a family member, an acquaintance, a colleague, or something else. The respondent is asked how this relationship began. For example a colleague from work will be identified as a ‘work colleague’, a friend made at high school will be a ‘school friend’. This process aims to uncover how the interviewee has built their network. Finally, the interviewee is asked to value the strength of their relationship with the alter, using a scale of 1 to 5. The interviewee is instructed that a ‘1’ is an acquaintance and a ‘5’ is a very close relationship, but it is a matter of individual interpretation how this is applied.
These questions illuminate how each alter is valued by the interviewee. An analysis of the closeness of the relationship and the similarity in sociometric categories provides another measure of the homophily of the network. The subjective valuation of each ego-alter relationship can also be assessed against the reported frequency of engagement in activities, indicating whether the value of their relationship is related to their importance in social engagement or is derived from other factors, such as ability to provide access to social capital resources.

The sixth set of questions ask the interviewee to indicate whether they think there are strong levels of social capital in their relationship with their alters. Methods for measuring social capital vary considerably depending upon the study. One approach that seeks to quantify the different forms of social capital in a standardised form involves applying a ‘resource generator’, which combines the elements of a name generator and a position generator. The resource generator used by Van Der Gaag and Snijders uses thirty seven questions to identify whether the interviewee has access to a social capital resource (Van Der Gaag and Snijders, 2005: 12-13). These questions are in the form of ‘Do you know anyone who…’, and are followed by, for example, ‘can provide a place to stay for a week if you have to leave your house temporarily’. The questions in this set were constructed with reference to this Resource Generator, but are designed to be more general in the form of social capital they examine. Van der Gaag and Snijders identified four areas of social capital that they were interested in exploring: prestige and education, political and financial skills, personal skills, and personal support (Van Der Gaag and Snijders, 2005: 17). Four of the questions have been included in this research in a modified form, addressing each of these areas, along with a general question in the form of ‘is there anyone who would go out of their way to help you?’ These questions have been included to measure the access of the interviewees to social capital. The modifications in this research provide information on the distribution of social capital throughout the network, and the redundancy of resources. Van der Gaag and Snijders argue that access to social capital through multiple alters has rapidly diminishing returns, and that the burden of collecting a comprehensive map of social capital resources in personal networks is an unreasonable demand on researcher and subject, and elected to record only the closest alter for each resource (Van Der Gaag and Snijders, 2005: 3-4). However, by utilising a selection of questions from the resource generator they
can be incorporated into the research on social networks to measure the distribution of social capital with relative ease, and analyse the robustness of the access to social capital should the network change.

Section seven links each activity to each alter, as the interviewee is asked to assign a coded value between 0 and 5 indicating the frequency of participation. This data describes the multiplexity of relationships within personal networks, demonstrating which categories and combinations of activity are engaged in with family or friends, or both. The interviewee is asked if there is a group of people who engage in each activity, which can be used to derive the alter to alter relations without the time consuming burden of asking about each separate relationship. This set of data can be used to describe the fabric of social relations, as it provides a picture of the unfolding of everyday existence at an individual, interpersonal and group level. Further, this information can be used to derive information about the homophily or heterogeneity of social groups, with reference to categories of leisure and culture consumption.

Conclusion.

The interviews conducted in this research result in data on 1) the sociometric composition of social network across multiple aspects, which can be used to explore the heterogeneity of social networks; 2) the range and complementary nature of leisure and culture consumption amongst the target group; 3) the range and distribution of social capital resources through personal networks; 4) the use of culture and leisure activities in dyadic relationships and amongst social groups; 5) the heterogeneity of social groups engaged in a range of culture and leisure activities; and 6) the relationship between social interaction across the range of interests of the interviewee and their access to social capital resources.

The strength of this method for future research lies in the mutability of its components. For example, the cultural and leisure activity generator can be adjusted for research into specific activities, or changed to focus on other areas, such as work. The name generator could be expanded to encompass the larger networks people inhabit, or refined to focus on family, or membership in organisations. The social capital questions could be expanded should the research be more concerned with social capital resources in personal networks. This article provides the framework for
a method that explores the fabric of social relationships at an individual level, but its utility for future research is limited only by the researcher’s imagination.

Footnotes:
1 This research project is being conducted by Daniel Chamberlain with the assistance and supervision of Malcolm Alexander, in the school of Arts, Media and Culture at Griffith University. The paper is sole authored, but is written in the plural to identify this research as a joint collaboration.

References: