



Personal networks in Saudi Arabia: The role of ascribed and achieved characteristics



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ABSTRACT

This study examines how ascribed characteristics (gender and nationality) and achieved characteristics (SES) are related to the extensity and occupational resources of personal networks in Saudi Arabia. Using large-scale survey data from Jeddah, results show that networks of women are smaller and less occupational resourceful, due to fewer non-family connections. Non-Saudi have more non-family ties and resources, but less resourceful family members. Higher SES individuals have larger and more resourceful personal networks. The study suggests that achieved status is more important in getting access to a wider variety of social ties and a more resourceful network than ascribed categories.

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1. Introduction

The literature on the consequences of personal networks for various domains in life is rapidly growing. Studies have shown that people find jobs through their networks and that information obtained via personal ties reduces search costs (Granovetter, 1973, 1974; Lin, 1999). Social networks also affect social support, happiness (Kroll, 2011), health outcomes (Smith and Christakis, 2008), trust and collective action (Putnam, 2000) and educational attainment (Coleman, 1988). The literature on social networks consists of a wide range of questions, concepts, theories and approaches about how connections and the information, support, and influence they bring with them, affect people's life chances (Burt, 2005; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Lin and Erickson, 2008; Putnam, 2000; Van der Gaag, 2005).

Precisely because personal networks have such important consequences, the study of individual differences in networks has been high on the agenda as well. One area of research has focused on the size, or extensity, of personal networks. In his research on trends in personal networks in the U.S., Putnam (2000) provided evidence to suggest that in the past decades informal connections among American citizens tend to decrease, as well as levels of civic engagement. This 'bowling alone' hypothesis has been a topic of debate in

subsequent studies, with some research being in line with the thesis and showing an increase in social isolation (McPherson et al., 2006, 2009), while other studies showing counterevidence for this thesis (Fischer, 2009; Paik and Sanchagrin, 2013; Wang and Wellman, 2010). Importantly, it has been found that there are strong individual differences in the size of personal networks, with some people having very small networks and others having very many connections (DiPrete et al., 2011).

Another line of research focuses not so much on the extensity of the network, but rather on the socio-economic resources that are embedded in the networks. Specifically, this research area studies individual differences in the 'occupational resources' that can be accessed in personal networks (Lin, 2000; McDonald, 2011). Why are some people befriended with a lawyer and professor, whereas others are not? Findings show that there are strong individual differences in how many people are known within the personal network who hold such high-status positions, as well as with informal connections to people with other occupations, such as carpenters (Behtoui, 2007; Cross and Lin, 2008; Lai, 2008; Li et al., 2008; Lin, 2000; Lin and Dumin, 1986; Lin et al., 2009). When people know more high-status people in their network, or when they know a more diverse set of occupations, they are said to have more economically resourceful networks (Van der Gaag, 2005; Van der Gaag and Snijders, 2005; Van der Gaag et al., 2008).

The aim of the current study is to contribute to the literature on individual differences in the *extensity* of personal networks and the *occupational resources* embedded in those networks. We elaborate on work that has studied correlates with these network

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dimensions, such as race/ethnicity, gender, education, and marital status (Behtoui, 2007; Erickson, 2004; Lin, 2001; Van Tubergen and Volker, 2015). Findings on these correlates have been rather inconsistent, however. A case in point is gender. In their study of 557 respondents aged 21–64 years old and living in the United States, Cross and Lin (2008) found no inequalities between men and women in occupational network resources. Li et al. (2008), who examined 1559 respondents in the United Kingdom, could not find gender differences in network resources either. Also Behtoui (2007, 2008), using data on 2349 employed people residing in Malmö, Sweden, found no gender differences. On the other hand, however, a survey conducted in 1999 in Holland among 1007 respondents showed that access to resourceful networks was higher among males (Volker et al., 2008). Thus, although most studies do not find gender differences in occupational network resources, some studies do. The puzzling, inconclusive, pattern of gender differences is illustrative of findings on access to occupational network resources.

We elaborate on existing literature in two ways. First, earlier work mostly studied either the size of the *overall* network (McCarty et al., 2001) or examined only a specific *part* of the personal network, such as the core discussion network (Burt, 2005; McPherson et al., 2006; Fischer, 2009). We differentiate between the extensity of *various networks*, i.e. connections to family and non-family (friends, acquaintances, and work/school ties). We make theoretical progress, by developing hypotheses on differential effects, which could advance our understanding of inconclusive patterns found in earlier work that studied the overall network.

Second, with respect to the occupational resources in the network, empirical work has often relied on the position generator question ‘do you know someone with occupation X’ (Lin, 2001; Lin and Erickson, 2008), without differentiating by the *source* of the occupational ties. Here, we again study differences across family and non-family ties and formulate hypotheses on these differentials. By doing so, we aim to get a better understanding of why some studies find differentiation across social categories (e.g., gender, nationality, ethnicity, SES), whereas others do not. The central argument proposed in this study is that access to network resources is dependent on which specific type of the personal network is studied (i.e., family, friends, and acquaintances).

The context of this study is Saudi Arabia, a country without a strong tradition of survey research. The data from our study come from a unique, large-scale, survey conducted in 2014 among parents in Jeddah, which is the second largest city in the Kingdom. Despite not a nationally representative survey, it is the first to study personal networks in this country and thereby contributes to our cross-cultural understanding of the extensity and resources embedded in social networks.

Within this context, we study the role of gender and nationality and compare their influence to socio-economic characteristics, i.e. education, employment and income. We take into account these ascribed and achieved characteristics, as two different dimensions that determine individual differences in the size and resources of networks (Cf. Chua, 2013; McDonald, 2011). Within the context of Saudi Arabia, the study of gender and nationality vis-à-vis the achieved characteristics of education and employment is particularly interesting. The Kingdom is known for its traditional values, gender separation in public settings, and occupational limitations for women (Al-Rasheed, 2013; House, 2012; Kucinskas, 2010). What are the consequences thereof for the relationship between gender and personal networks?

Saudi Arabia also has many foreign workers, and nationality might be an important boundary maker for personal networks as well. We also study the role of socio-economic status, as it is often considered as a way toward gaining access to high-status networks (Lin, 2001). We therefore study the role of gender, nationality and socio-economic status simultaneously (Cf. Chua, 2013), which

allows us to study the importance of ascribed vis-à-vis achieved characteristics. The research question we aim to answer is: To what extent are ascribed characteristics (gender and nationality) and achieved characteristics (socio-economic status) associated with the extensity and resources of the personal networks of parents in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia?

2. Theory and hypotheses

We develop hypotheses on the relationship between gender, nationality and socio-economic resources on the one hand, and the extensity and occupational resources of personal networks on the other. The theoretical model that relates these ‘social categories’ and network outcomes is presented in Fig. 1. We rely on general tie-generating mechanisms that have been proposed and tested in the literature on adolescent friendship networks (Wimmer and Lewis, 2010), marriage (Kalmijn, 1998) and individual differences in personal network resources (Van Tubergen and Volker, 2015).

First, scholars have emphasized that meeting *opportunities* shape people’s personal network (Blau et al., 1982). The settings in which people participate (e.g., work, neighborhood) constrain the available pool of people with whom one can interact. This can set limits to the number of people with whom one can interact and thus potentially shape the size of personal networks. In addition, such settings are often unequally distributed across social categories (e.g., ethnicity, gender) and consequently determine the composition of personal networks (Chua, 2013).

Secondly, within the available pool of contacts, it is argued that people have a preference for interacting with others who are similar to themselves (Byrne, 1971). This *homophily* mechanism is argued to happen both along cultural dimensions (e.g., lifestyle, religion, norms, values) and socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., education, income). Thus, network-formation is driven by dyadic similarity, *ceteris paribus* resulting in homogenous personal networks.

Thirdly, various *third parties*, such as family members, peers and communities, often impose social norms about social interactions with members of other groups and possibly sanction norm-deviant behavior (McPherson et al., 2001). Such third parties, also called gatekeepers (Chua, 2013), can also prohibit or interfere with participation in certain settings, institutions and organizations, thus affecting people’s opportunity space. Chua (2013: p. 1237) argued that “the link that binds ascriptive categorizations and inequalities in social capital as largely institutional”. Thus, because of unequal access to organizations and other institutions, ethnicity and gender are thought to be related to inequalities in social capital.

We use these three general tie-generating mechanisms (i.e., opportunities, preferences and third party control) to derive and develop our hypotheses on the size and resources of personal networks. In doing so, we differentiate between the number and resources of family and non-family ties, as this difference is argued to be of key importance.

2.1. Gender

We expect to see gender differences in both the extensity and occupational resources of personal networks. Saudi Arabia is a more-traditional, male-dominant, patriarchal society, with high levels of gender inequality (Al-Rasheed, 2013; House, 2012; Kucinskas, 2010). Many women stay at home, do household work and predominantly interact within the family setting. Opportunities for participating in public settings (e.g., work, school) can be hampered for women due to third party control. For example, with few exceptions, sports are not allowed for women. Men engage in family matters, but they also have more responsibilities and activities outside the family setting, i.e. they are expected to do paid

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