



Identifying power elites—k-cores in heterogeneous affiliation networks



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ABSTRACT

Specifying network boundaries is fundamental in the study of social structures of elite networks. However, traditional methods do not offer clear criteria on either size or composition of the elite, and rely on numerous ad hoc decisions. A methodological framework that is inductive, reproducible and suitable for comparative research is proposed. First, a comprehensive dataset of the 5079 affiliation networks of all potentially powerful sectors in Denmark was assembled. Second, these heterogeneous affiliation networks were weighted to account for potential level of social integration. Third, a weighted modification of k-cores is used to identify a power elite of 423 individuals.

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Introduction boundary specification of the power elite

The word 'elite' is probably one of the most misused words in the sociological lexicon Scott (2003, 155)

The power elite, as described by C. Wright Mills (1956), consists of the key decision makers, heading up key institutional hierarchies in society. The empirical challenge when identifying this core group is a boundary specification problem (Laumann et al., 1983; Emirbayer, 1997): what should be regarded as key institutional hierarchies and who should be regarded as their key members? We propose and apply a research design that is capable of identifying the core of the power elite in a vast network of organisations in Denmark, including large corporations, government, state and public institutions, non-government organisations (NGOs), foundations, and social clubs and events. In doing so a key group is identified within a much larger network (as was also the methodological strategy of Bonacich and Domhoff (1981), Salzman and Domhoff (1983), Mintz and Schwartz (1981a,b); .

Thus, this article suggests ways to expand and improve upon the research designs in both the classical elite research, see Hoffmann-Lange (2006) and the design used in the classical studies of corporate interlocks (Allen, 1974; Sonquist and Koenig, 1975; Mizruchi, 1996), and interlocks between business, government, policy planning groups and the non-profit sector (Domhoff, 2013;

Moore et al., 2002) and takes advantage of both the wealth of data recently made available and new computational opportunities. We introduce an inclusion principle to reduce the impact of ad hoc decisions in the research design. Most often elite researchers use theories that are insufficiently precise to specify boundaries for which sectors, organisations and actors to include in the elite group. Because the affiliations included in the network were quite heterogeneous, we constructed a weighting scheme based on affiliation size to take the level social cohesion created into account. The second step addressed the boundary specification problem by applying a k-core clustering algorithm to the weighted affiliation network. This procedure for identifying the size and composition of a distinct national core elite is reproducible and is based primarily on empirical findings rather than theoretical concepts.

This methodological strategy is demonstrated in a study of Denmark by means of a vast network of 5079 affiliations and 56,536 positions, which is not quite 'big data' but 'data of the middle range'. By applying this approach we identified a power elite of 423 individuals in Denmark, along with 1094 additional members of 'the higher middle levels of power', 1661 in 'the lower middle levels of power' and 4071 in 'the periphery of the power network'. While our findings in many ways vindicate previous methods used for elite identification, the identified elite also differs and highlights particular inclusion criteria in different societies, while adding a comparative, replicable framework for identifying the size and composition of the power elite group.

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Background identifying elites

Identification of power elites or leadership groups, whether local or national, has traditionally followed one of four distinct strategies: the positional, the decisional, the reputational and the relational (Knoke, 1993). Much of the debate surrounding the superiority of any one of these methods is rooted in the theoretical stalemate between elitist and pluralist positions (Mintz et al., 1976). However, as Knoke (1993, 29) notes, ‘which actors belong to a national political domain cannot be specified a priori. They must ultimately be determined empirically’. As we shall see, despite their many proven strengths, none of these methods delivers criteria for exhaustively identifying the size and composition of a core group while at the same time avoiding the ad hoc decisions. Question like ‘are the power elite for instance a small circle of, say, 300 people or a larger group of up to 7500 individuals?’ or ‘is the size of the elite in some way correlated with the size of the country?’ – as seems to be an underlying assumption in most elite studies (Higley 2001, 189) – and ‘at what stage are all relevant elite members included?’ are primarily defined a priori. The question of elite boundary specification is answered in the methodological design, not empirical observations of elite practices.

Of the four strategies outlined, the positional method is still the most widely used (Hoffmann-Lange, 2006). The positional method does not offer a clear criterion for sector-inclusion, especially in comparative studies. For instance, although religious leaders are undoubtedly important in Iran, the same criterion does not necessarily apply in secular societies. Likewise, the importance of unions is clearly dependent on the specific variety of capitalism in a given society (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Secondly, the positional approach offers no empirical criteria for the sample size for each of these sectors (Hoffmann-Lange, 2006). For instance, a question like ‘what should the ratio of artists from the cultural elite to CEOs of the economic elite in the power elite of a given society be?’ is made based on the theoretically informed presumptions of the researcher. Thirdly; inclusion criteria within each sector also rests on theoretical preconceptions. Even among business leaders, where the size of each firm can be assessed by, for example, turnover, number of employees and assets (as done convincingly by Maclean et al. 2006), peculiar local arrangements of owners and management force researchers either to make ad hoc decisions or, worse, stick to rigid criteria, e.g. excluding or including management of all subsidiary firms from the analysis despite the relative autonomy of particular subsidiaries. This is especially the case when making comparisons across time, as shown in the recent debate between Carroll and Fennema (2002, 2004) versus Kentor and Suk Jang (2004, 2006) about how to select top global corporations across decades.

When identifying elites by decision-making criteria (see e.g. Polsby, 1960; Dahl, 1961), the problem of specifying elite boundaries becomes a problem of identifying significant decisions. Four primary problems remain when identifying elites through looking at decisions. First, what is the criterion for inclusion of ‘significant issues’ (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962)? Secondly, how does one rank the elite without very clear guidelines for preferences, relative importance and the expectations of chances of success for different groups (Domhoff, 2007; Mintz et al., 1976)? Third, as Domhoff’s (1978) thorough and critical re-examination of Dahl’s analysis of political processes shows, failure to include all institutions and actors in the entire process leading up to the decision can lead to severe flaws in the analysis. Fourth, the power of a group to exclude issues from decision-taking, what Anthony Giddens, (1972) refers to as decision-making, is not taken into account.

The reputational approach faces ad hoc decisions in the selection of persons who evaluate the powerful and thus specify elite boundaries. Hunter’s (1953, 219) ambition for the reputational approach

was to identify the powerful group according to the level of power attributed to it by other key members of the community power structure and thereby find ‘the same group of people attacking policy problems over and over’. Thus, the informants’ preconceptions of power—and their inclination to hide or enhance their own privileges and importance—can lead to identification problems.

These issues regarding identification of the size and composition of the power elite has been addressed by applying the relational approach using social network analysis. By combining the positional and reputational approaches, the relational approach draws on the Simmelian notion of social circles to find a central circle of policy makers within the elite (Kadushin, 1968). The circle is identified by prominent members naming others as key policy discussion partners, thus allowing the inclusion of power brokers overlooked by the researcher. In this tradition, inclusion in the central circle of these power networks is viewed as an indicator of the power structure and membership of the elite social circle (Alba and Moore, 1978; Higley et al., 1991; Moore, 1979). Identifying social circles—informal groups without clear leadership (Kadushin, 1968)—‘not only identifies collectivities with an important type of internal structure, but also leaves open the possibility that they do not exist, and thus that a network is fragmented’ (Moore, 1979; 680). Furthermore, the tendency for members of the core group to interact with each other rather than with their respective constituencies can be used as an indicator of social closure within the power elite (Bovasso, 1992). Hence, the socio-metric approach can offer an empirical definition of the size and composition of one or more core groups, allowing identification of both pluralist and elitist power structures.

Within this framework, elites are a social group tied through internal cohesion, where internal reputation plays a central role. This is similar to the inner circles of American and British business elites studied by Useem (1984). However, when applied to national elite networks, as in the excellent study by Moore (1979) on data from the American Leadership Study, this method suffers from two challenges. First, it requires a very high response rate among the elite respondents to ensure the inclusion of all ties and to identify the social circles, because these are based on the extent to which cliques overlap, which is highly sensible to missing data (Knoke 1993). Secondly; the respondents name policy discussion partners within the field in which they deem themselves most influential, in effect moving the socio-metric approach very close to the reputational approach of Hunter (cf. Kadushin 1968, 693). This leads to a focus on the issues subject to decision-taking, whereas decision-making, through consensus within the elite social circles, is more likely to be overlooked. A bias towards the field of politics is therefore probable.

The use of inclusion in power networks as a vantage point should not be discarded because of these issues of the relational approach. These networks offer insights into the balance of power of societal institutions. As Mills (1956) argues the power elite is made up by the overlapping social circles of a group who simultaneously holds command positions in top institutional hierarchies (see also Denord et al., 2011). Hence the proportion of individuals in the core of the elite networks who are occupied within a sector can serve as an indicator of the relative strength of a sector within a society. To make a tie with another power broker is also to recognise the legitimacy and value of the other’s power resources, resources which are primarily based on the institutions and organisations of the individual (Scott, 2008). As the possibility of exchanging power resources is key to holding an elite position (Khan, 2012), the level of inclusion in these networks is a strong indicator of which institutional hierarchies other elite members hold in high regard. Individuals outside of these elite networks may wield other power resources (e.g. capability to mobilise the masses, attract media attention or amass economic capital), but have not yet been invited into—or

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