



Reconsidering “community liberated”: How class and the national context shape personal support networks

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Personal networks
Social support
Community liberated
Context
Inequality
Education

ABSTRACT

The “community liberated” thesis has been influential in describing contemporary social support systems. Specifically, “community liberated” argues that people do not seek support in their immediate neighborhood but rather entertain a network of far-flung ties to support-providing alters. This paper uses personal network data from six countries – Australia, Germany, the US, Austria, Hungary and Italy – to evaluate this argument and shows that the degree of liberation of one’s community is strongly linked to one’s socioeconomic status – specifically, one’s education level. Additionally, we describe strong country-level heterogeneity in the spatial dynamics of personal support networks and find national contexts to be moderating the effect of education on community liberation, especially in Italy and Hungary, thus suggesting network geographic dispersion to be linked to national economic structures and labor markets. The paper thus elucidates the effect of two different, yet related social contexts on personal networks: the class context and the national context.

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1. Introduction

The study of the decline and revival of community has kept sociologists busy since the very inception of the discipline. Much of sociologists’ focus and normative concern has been about the maintenance of social solidarity in the midst of large-scale social change brought about by industrialization, mass immigration, and urbanization.

A major advance in community studies has been the work of Barry Wellman on personal support networks. Rather than debating the metamorphoses of community in mass society as in much earlier theorizing, Wellman switched the focus of community sociologists to the individual’s social ties using survey data. This, along with the work of other community scholars like Fischer, has allowed sociologists to realize that, contrary to a long tradition of scholarship focused on the alienation of the individual city-dweller and the risk of anomie due to unprecedented division of labor, community is doing just fine in the form of geographically dispersed and segmented networks of personal intimates – the so-called “community liberated” model (Wellman and Leighton, 1979).

The literature on personal networks has thus denied the plausibility of a switch from a rural, place-bound and solidary

Gemeinschaft to an urban, diffuse and impersonal *Gesellschaft*, as originally envisioned in Tönnies’ (1957 [1887]) pessimistic account of modernity. In the process of salvaging the concept of community, however, students of personal networks may have indulged in an overly optimistic account of modern life. In a somewhat parallel development, the link between network structure, social capital and social (dis)advantage has been well established in large subfields of social network analysis (Coleman, 1988; Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 1999, 2002). This effort, aimed at relating networks to social inequality, has been largely absent in analyses focusing on personal networks. Wellman’s theoretical statements on contemporary personal communities, in particular, have been silent about a possible link between differentials in social resources and variations in the form and substance of such communities.

Additionally, much of the accumulated knowledge on personal networks has been drawn from North American survey data. Evidence from the General Social Survey has been crucial in describing the average American core discussion networks (Marsden, 1987, 1988), and the analytic building blocks of personal communities have been drawn from the 1977 Northern California Community Study (Fischer, 1982) and the two waves of the East York study (Wellman, 1979; Wellman and Leighton, 1990). While recent analyses focusing on the various contexts in which network processes unfold have documented the influence of physical geography (Grannis, 2009; Hipp and Perrin, 2009; Doreian and Conti, 2012; Papachristos et al., 2013), studies of personal networks done in other national contexts point to substantial differences in density,

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size and composition compared to the North American baseline (Fischer and Shavit, 1995; Grossetti, 2007; Bastani, 2007). In other words, there is evidence that social networks do not operate in a vacuum but are instead spatially embedded. These national variations remain poorly understood, however, due to a lack of analysis of large, comparative survey data.

In this paper, we empirically evaluate two key spatial dimensions of the “community liberated” argument – namely, the degree of geographic dispersion of one’s personal support network, as well as one’s degree of local social involvement – friendship with neighbors and the availability of assistance providers for small, local tasks like getting help when sick and getting help around the house.

Using nationally representative personal network data drawn from six countries that participated in the 1986 wave of the International Social Survey, we find educational attainment to be the strongest and most consistent predictor of both network geographic dispersion and local social involvement – educated people tend to entertain more spatially dispersed support networks and to be less locally involved. We also find considerable country-level heterogeneity, and show that the effect of education is strongly mediated by the national context. While we find partial support for Wellman’s “community liberated” model, this paper argues that community “liberation” is better thought of a gradual phenomenon enabled by socioeconomic resources and embedded in a specific national context.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: we first review the existing work on personal networks, inequality and the national context, and draw a series of hypotheses regarding social resources and variation in pattern of social support provision. After describing the data, we estimate a series of linear regression models on several measures of geographic dispersion and local social involvement. In the final section, we discuss the significance of our results for the comparative study of social support and propose potential mechanisms at work in influencing variation in personal support networks.

2. Background

2.1. The “Community Liberated” argument

In between the tenants of the “community lost” perspective describing the potential breakdown of social solidarity in the anonymous and transient environment of the industrial city, and the optimistic scholars of the “community found” tradition studying tightly knit urban villages, Wellman’s major contribution has been to shift the analytic focus of community studies away from the neighborhood (see Wellman and Leighton, 1979 for a detailed description of both traditions). Using survey data about East Yorkers’ sources of social support, he found that, far from being either isolated or immersed in institutionally integrated urban villages, his respondents received ample amount of support from a diverse array of intimates living in other parts of the city or the country (Wellman, 1979; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). In particular, Wellman found that only 13% of his respondents’ sources of support were located in their neighborhood and that East Yorker’ relationship with their neighbors remained fairly superficial. Additionally, his respondents’ overall network density was fairly low (0.33) and their sources of support rather specialized: those available to help in situations of emergency (e.g. close kin members) tended to be different from those helping with everyday matters (e.g. friends and co-workers). In other words, we receive “different strokes from different folks” (Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Wellman summarizes the defining features of contemporary, liberated communities in an introduction to a 1999 volume on personal networks around the world: ties to one’s intimates are

“narrow, specialized relationships” (rather than multiplex ties), they form “sparsely knit, loosely bounded networks” (rather than dense networks), that have “moved out of neighborhoods to be dispersed networks that continue to be supportive and sociable” (rather than concentrated networks) (Wellman, 1999, 23–28).

The increasing availability of communication technology and long-distance transportation, as well as a general increase in material well-being for most North Americans have together contributed to making spatially close and tightly bounded personal communities less crucial for survival, thus doing away with the communal neighborhood (Wellman, 1999; Espinoza, 1999). In later work, Wellman outlined how new technological changes – namely, the Internet and communication device such as mobile phones – enabled “networked individualism”, the postindustrial type of community in which “people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members” (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 12).

Those new modes of forming and maintaining ties, however, suppose resources and objects – personal cars, the use of planes and, more recently, the Internet and mobile phones –, the access to which can vary strongly both within North America – due to social inequality – and across different countries – due to uneven levels of economic development, different transportation infrastructures, and variation in physical geographies or institutions such as labor markets. Thinking of community liberation as a context-bound, resource-based process thus constitutes a crucial starting point in relating personal networks to inequality as well as the national or regional setting in which they unfold.

2.2. Inequality and personal networks

2.2.1. Inequality and network range in previous work

Early work on network range using data from the 1977 Northern California Community Study and the 1965 Detroit Area Study showed strong correlational evidence between high income and education level, and access to a pool of geographically diverse, unrelated alters (Verbrugge, 1979; Campbell et al., 1986). Analyses of personal network range using the 1985 Social Networks module of the General Social Survey yielded a similarly strong, positive association between network range and socioeconomic status. Those with large, segmented, geographically widespread networks – a liberated personal community in Wellman’s words – are more likely to be white, to have graduated high school and have above average family income (Campbell et al., 1986; Marsden, 1987; Huang and Tausig, 1990).

Fischer’s (1982) study of personal networks in Northern California, in particular, established an association between the key variables of “community liberated” and socioeconomic status. About personal network density, Fischer noted that the key factor was the diversity of his respondents’ spheres of activity: “If one’s network is drawn heavily from one or two contexts, it will be dense [...]. It underlines the importance of opportunities to form ties outside the basic contexts; without such opportunities, people end up with dense ties” (Fischer, 1982, 146). Access to different, unrelated contexts is a function of socioeconomic status: “education, affluence, and mobility allow individuals to make and maintain relations with people from various specific contexts” (*ibid*, emphasis in the original text). Relatedly, Fischer found that the single most important predictor of the geographic dispersion of intimates was the respondents’ education level (Fischer, chapter 13). Specifically, college graduates had, on average, two thirds fewer local relatives and four times as many distant non-kin as did respondents who did not graduate from high school (Fischer, 1982, 159). Respondents’ income also positively affected the distance that separated them from their associates (Fischer, 1982, 175).

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