Because they were there: Access, deliberation, and the mobilization of networks for support

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ABSTRACT

When people need help, what is the process through which they decide whom in their network to turn to? Research on social support has described a process that is deliberative in nature: people determine their needs, assess who in their network has the needed attributes—such as skill, trustworthiness, intimacy, and accessibility—and then activate that tie. Nevertheless, research in behavioral economics and other fields has shown that people make many decisions not deliberatively but intuitively. We examine this possibility in the context of social support by focusing on one factor: accessibility. Although researchers have argued that people weigh the accessibility of potential helpers as they do any other attribute, accessibility may be not only an attribute of the helper but also a condition of the situation. We develop a framework to make this question tractable for survey research and evaluate competing hypotheses using original data on an analytically strategic sample of ~2000 college students, probing concrete instances of social support. We identify and document not one but three decision processes, *reflective, incidental*, and *spontaneous* activation, which differ in the extent to which actors had deliberated on whether to seek help and on whom to approach before activating the tie. We find that while the process was reflective (consistent with existing theory) when skill or trustworthiness played a role, it was significantly less so (consistent with the alternative) when accessibility did. Findings suggest that actors decide whom in their network to mobilize through at least three systematically different processes, two of which are consistent less with either active "mobilization" or explicit "help seeking" than with responsiveness to opportunity and context.

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1. Introduction

When people need help, what is the process through which they decide whom to turn to? Much of the research on the "mobilization of support" has described a process that is deliberative in nature: people determine their needs, assess who in their network has the needed attributes, and then turn to that helper. While researchers have differed in how explicitly they theorize the process and how rational they believe people are, they have largely taken for granted that people follow some version of this process, wherein deliberation precedes action (Perry and Pescosolido, 2010, 2015). Rather than question the process, researchers have largely focused on which of the potential helpers' attributes people take into account,

attributes such as trustworthiness, skill, intimacy, and accessibility (e.g., Stack, 1974; Wellman and Wortley, 1989, 1990; Small, 2009, 2013; Perry and Pescosolido, 2010, 2015).

We examine one attribute that may give reason to reconsider that process—the relative accessibility of the potential helper. Accessibility, also referred to as "availability" or "proximity," is the extent to which a potential helper can be reached without difficulty. Research has shown that accessibility is important to how people get social support (e.g., Pescosolido, 1992; Domínguez and Watkins, 2003; Small, 2009, 2013). Furthermore, researchers have argued that people weigh the accessibility of potential helpers before asking for help as they do with any other attribute (Perry and Pescosolido, 2010).

Nevertheless, we see three reasons to believe that in the case of accessibility the process may differ. First, contrary to other attributes of potential helpers, the accessibility of an alter can depend on the situation. While situations cannot make alters more trustworthy or intelligent, they can make alters more accessible,

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since potential helpers may happen to be present in the context where ego is deciding to ask for help. Thus, to take accessibility into account, people may need to assess not merely their network but also the context of social interaction (Chua, 2012; Small, 2009; Doreian and Conti, 2012). Second, consistent with this notion, recent ethnographic studies have reported cases of people who asked for help from others whom they had run into largely unexpectedly, based on the dynamics of the context and leaving little room for deliberation. For example, in a study of evicted renters in Milwaukee, Desmond (2012) found that people asked for major favors (such as requesting to sleep on another's couch) of near-strangers they had run into at a bus stop or just met at a shelter. In his study of daycare centers in New York, Small (2009) found that mothers often asked for help on highly personal topics from other mothers they barely knew but happened to run into during pick-up and drop-off hours.[1] Third, the cognitive process underlying these actions may bear evidence to recent experimental research in behavioral economics and cognitive psychology. Studies have shown that, while at times people think carefully before making important monetary decisions, they often do not, instead acting intuitively and in ways inconsistent with rational behavior (Stanovich and West, 2000; Kahneman, 2011; see Simon 1997/1945). People often do not deliberate before acting.

While the ethnographic and experimental research is suggestive, few survey-based studies have examined the extent of deliberation actually involved in social support decisions: When people explain that they have turned to a helper because the latter was accessible, how much deliberation on alternatives was actually involved?

The answer is important because it lies at the heart of the role of agency in network analysis and of actor-based models of network behavior (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994). All social network models imply some conception of the individual. Actor-based models rightly emphasize that people are agents, rather than just subject to network forces, agents whose decisions affect the composition of and resources gained from their networks. Many such models assume that actors' behavior results from prior motivations of one or another type, implicitly positing that actors have reflected on their motivations before action (e.g., Lin, 1999, 2001; Snijders, 2005; cf, McDonald, 2010).[2] Nevertheless, at least in the case of social support, we do not actually know whether people consistently assess the attributes of network members before deciding whom to ask for help.

Because accessibility differs from other attributes, examining it provides a critical test. If people do deliberate even when motivated by the helper's accessibility, then the standard view of the process has been justified. If they do not, however, then even the notion that accessibility is a "motivation" tied to the helper rather than a condition tied to the situation needs re-evaluation. It would suggest that the decision-making process is systematically different in different circumstances, calling for research on network mobilization to

(a) pay heed to work in behavioral economics that has successfully undermined rational-actor assumptions about how people make decisions that still inform much of network research (see Stanovich and West, 2000; Kahneman, 2003, 2011; Kroneberg, 2014), and (b) take into greater account the growing evidence that situational context, not just network structure, matters for network action (see Mollenhorst et al., 2008, 2011; Small, 2009; Chua, 2012; Doreian and Conti, 2012; Sailer and McCulloh, 2012).

The following study examines the question posed above. We do not propose that accessibility is the primary factor in the mobilization decision. Respondents to our survey (described below) reported that accessibility was important in up to 39% of their last support decisions. Accessibility is clearly only one of many attributes playing a role in the decision, and others are often more important. Instead, we focus on accessibility because of the analytical leverage it provides. Furthermore, we note that, based on not laboratory but survey research, our study cannot pretend to describe what goes on in actors' minds. Instead, we aim to push survey data to their limits, to help understand the real-world implications of two competing models of how accessibility shapes actors' behavior, as a tool for theory building.

Specifically, we test whether the relative accessibility of the potential helper is associated with the extent of prior deliberation about whom to ask for help. We develop a framework to make this question tractable, and evaluate competing hypotheses using original data on an analytically strategic sample of ∼2000 college students, probing concrete instances of social support. We first document that, for the three kinds of help examined, students reported being driven primarily by the accessibility, skill, or trustworthiness of the helper between 86% and 90% of the time, depending on the kind of help. We find that decisions differed in their degree of deliberation, and that respondents did not appear to weigh accessibility as they did other factors when seeking or getting help, instead engaging in a different decision-making process altogether. Findings suggest that actors decide whom in their network to mobilize through not one but at least three systematically different processes, two of which are consistent less with active "mobilization" or explicit "help seeking" than with responsiveness to opportunity and context. We begin by reviewing the literature on accessibility and the mobilization of support.

2. Accessibility

2.1. Scope

Before reviewing the literature, we clarify our scope. The potentially relevant research is vast, capturing elements of the separate literatures on "help-seeking decisions," on the "activation of social ties," and on the "mobilization of social capital" (Granovetter, 1973; Stack, 1974; Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Bearman and Parigi, 2004; Smith, 2007; Small, 2009; Lin, 2001). Furthermore, it is likely that actors practice different decision-making processes for different modalities of support. For example, how people seek help when venting about personal matters may differ from how they seek help when dealing with an illness. We cannot hope to address all of them in one study or even to propose a model that would claim to encompass all situations. Instead, we narrow our focus in three ways.

First, we focus empirically on social support involving everyday short-term problems that can be addressed over the course of a single interaction. Thus, we do not address support involving long-term or recurring conditions such as chronic illnesses (see Pescosolido, 1991; Perry and Pescosolido, 2010), or support around problems rarely addressed over a single interaction, such as unemployment (see Granovetter, 1973; Smith, 2005, 2007). Second, our study cannot cover all aspects of the decision to ask for help,

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[1] Research on information-seeking has found similar patterns. Granovetter (1974) showed that job seekers often asked for help from sources they barely knew but whom they happened to run into.

[2] The literature on social capital and jobs has depended on this assumption. Lin defines social capital as "investment in social relations with expected returns" (1999:30), and offers this view of the decision process: "Individuals engage in interactions and networking in order to produce profits" (1999:31). Actors rationally assess what they can get from whom, and thus are acting only after strong deliberation. There are similar assumptions in actor-based models of network evolution. For example, Snijder's (2005) model specifies an objective function wherein people decide which tie to add or drop based on whether it maximizes subjective utility. "The basic idea of the actor-oriented model is that, when actor *i* has the occasion to make a change in his or her outgoing tie variables. . ., this actor selects the change that gives the greatest increase in the so-called objective function plus a random term" (Snijders, 2005:225). Again, there is deliberation before network action.