



Network cohesion and social support

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the effects of personal network cohesion on different types of social support using two dimensions of cohesion: network closure (defined as a tightly knit set of actors around the ego) and cliquishness (defined as the extent to which an actor is connected with a number of cohesive sub-sets of alters). Data were obtained from a personal networks' survey conducted in Catalonia (Spain), which was completed by 441 adults and gathered information about exchange of social support in networks made of 30 alters. A multilevel analysis disentangles the effects on support of these two structural dimensions at the network-level from compositional effects at the network and tie-level. The results show that network closure does not play a relevant role in support once confounders at the network and tie levels are controlled for. However, cliquishness has a significant association with labor-related support and housing support, net of statistical controls. Implications of these results in network research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A sizable research literature about social support has developed over the past few decades. Despite the diversity of extant approaches, substantial advances in its conceptualization can be highlighted. First, social support is considered to be the relationship-based practice of an assisting nature (Song et al., 2011). Second, social support has been defined as a multidimensional phenomenon: the seminal work of House (1981) distinguished between emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal support. Lin et al. (1986: 18) distinguished between instrumental and expressive support on the one hand and actual and perceived support on the other. Other scholars have addressed social support in light of the contexts in which it occurs, such as everyday situations as opposed to emergencies (Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Third, by limiting the concept of social support to the flow of specific content across ties, research has distinguished it from its relational preconditions (availability of ties) and from its social outcomes, such as health, well-being or status attainment (Berkman and Glass, 2000; Song et al., 2011; Walker et al., 1993; Wellman and Gulia, 1999).

In this paper, we assume the relational and multidimensional nature of social support and focus on a fourth advancement in the

understanding of this phenomenon: the role of the network structure, and particularly cohesion, in fostering support (Haines et al., 2002; Walker et al., 1993; Wellman and Frank, 2001; Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). We particularly focus on two dimensions of personal network cohesion: overall network closure (defined as tightly knit personal networks) and cliquishness (defined as the extent to which an actor is in contact with a number of cohesive sets of actors). The goals of the article are (1) to discuss and explore the concept of network cohesion and the distinct dimensions in which it is expressed in personal network structures, and (2) to analyse the extent to which these two dimensions are related to different types of social support, i.e., the exchange of information or assistance for solving problems related to: (a) personal concerns, (b) health, (c) labour, and (d) housing.

Following previous suggestions regarding the need of expanding the range of network concepts and measures to improve understanding of the determinants of social support (Haines et al., 2002: 286), we specifically demonstrate that the overall network closure does not sufficiently account for the structural effects of network cohesion on social support. The local sub-group structure within personal networks needs to be taken into account, because the extent to which an actor is connected to multiple cohesive sub-sets of alters plays a significant role on certain types of support.

The article is divided in five parts. In the following section we review the literature on the factors that lead to the exchange of social support. Section 3 focuses more specifically on the structural dimensions of network cohesion and their association with

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social support; we present our theoretical approach and the specific objectives in this section of the paper. Then we present the data and measures used for the analysis. Section 5 addresses, in the first place, a factor analysis of structural network measures aimed at identifying two distinct dimensions of network cohesion and, in the second place, multilevel regression models are used to analyze their associations with different types of support. The paper closes with a discussion of the structural effects of networks and their implications on network research.

2. Factors that lead to social support: from actors and ties to a network-level approach

Research that analyses how personal networks are related to social support has commonly dealt with three types of explanatory factors: actor properties, tie properties and network properties (Wellman and Frank, 2001).

The first group of explanations is related to the characteristics of the givers and receivers of support. For instance, research has found that women are more likely than men to provide emotional support (Hogan et al., 1993; Plickert et al., 2007; Vaux, 1985; Wellman and Wortley, 1990) and that age is also associated with a variety of types of support (Haines et al., 1996; Plickert et al., 2007). Regarding country of origin, de Miguel and Tranmer (2010) found that immigrants in Spain were more likely to exchange material support with Spaniards, whereas accommodation and informational support were more likely to be exchanged with other immigrants. The extent to which actors have access to social resources also explains their ability to exchange support; for example, urban residents and employed individuals are more capable of providing information about jobs than rural residents and individuals outside of the labor market (Trimble, 2012). However, this rationale may not be applicable to socioeconomic status: while people with a high status may have more resources to share, they may have less of a need to rely on networks because of their better access to formal sources of support (de Miguel and Tranmer, 2010). Thus, research results regarding the effects of socioeconomic status on social support are mixed (Plickert et al., 2007; Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

The second group of explanations comprises the characteristics of ties. At this level of analysis, researchers have primarily focused on three elements: the accessibility of the contact, the strength of the relationship and the similarities between the ego and alter. First, the accessibility of ties may increase mutual awareness of needs and facilitate the delivery of aid (Plickert et al., 2007). In this regard, Wellman and Frank (2001) found that a combined measure of accessibility (frequency of contact and physical proximity) was associated with support. However, other authors have argued that some types of support, such as emotional or financial support, are relatively less dependent on physical contact and that some groups, such as immigrants, primarily rely on transnational social ties for these types of support (Herz, 2015; Plickert et al., 2007). The relevance of tie strength in the provision of social support was addressed by Homans (1961) and has been largely developed by network researchers who demonstrated that strong ties are particularly related to expressive support, instrumental support and emergency support (Herz, 2015; Wellman and Frank, 2001; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Finally, the homophily principle (McPherson et al., 2001) suggests that individuals who are similar to each other tend to have similar needs and interests and relatively high empathetic understandings, which may facilitate the exchange of social support (Wellman and Wortley, 1990). However, and inversely to the homophily principle, relationships across social categories may provide complementary resources and access to diverse sources of support (Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

A third group of explanations focuses on the network-level. This approach assumes that the presence of third actors affects the nature of dyadic relations and, thus, the social support one can access or provide is affected not only by the properties of single actors and ties but also by a network effect. However, research that analyses network effects on support often does so by measuring support as a network-level variable, e.g., the number of ties providing support (Wellman and Gulia, 1999) or the perceived availability of support in the network (Ashida and Heaney, 2008; Seeman and Berkman, 1988). This approach does not allow to disentangle network-level effects from tie-level effects. Only when a multilevel framework is adopted the analysis can remain at the tie-level while taking also into account the properties of the network. This multilevel approach was adopted by Wellman and Frank (2001) and, more recently, by Herz (2015).

At the network level, researchers have focused on the composition and structure of the networks in which support is being exchanged.

For network composition, aggregate measures at the level of the alter or at the level of the tie (e.g., the proportion of females or the mean frequency of contact) and measures of specific network characteristics can be analyzed, such as network size and network diversity. With respect to aggregate measures of tie and alter properties, Wellman and Frank (2001) showed that the probability of an extant tie providing support is both a product of certain properties of the tie and a product of the aggregate measures of these properties for the overall network: for instance, while accessible alters (with whom there is a frequent contact or are living nearby) provided more support, if the mean accessibility of the network is accounted for, the probability of each alter providing support is even higher. Regarding network size, previous research analyzing support as a network-level variable has demonstrated that a higher number of members in a network increases access to emotional support (Seeman and Berkman, 1988; Wellman and Gulia, 1999); nevertheless, using a multilevel approach Wellman and Frank (2001) showed that egos who have a smaller network of intimates are more likely to receive support from each of them. Finally, network diversity concerns intra-network variation, and the reasoning behind relating it to social support at the network level is derived from the similarity/dissimilarity debate (see Wellman and Wortley, 1990). This debate argues that contacts within or without social groups constitute two different forms of social capital (Adler and Kwon, 2000; Putnam, 1997, 2000). As previously mentioned, while ties with those who are different may provide access to various and more interdependent sources of support, a network with relatively more similar ties may foster supportiveness because the network's members have shared interests and needs (Putnam, 2000; McPherson et al., 2001). Wellman and Gulia (1999) used a composite index of network diversity that included marital status, employment status, religious affiliation, ethnicity, network members' ages, educational similarity between the network members and the respondents, and socioeconomic status. They found a positive and significant effect of diversity on providing all types of social support (companionship, minor services, major services, and emotional support).¹ Similarly, Lin and Ao (2008, as cited in Song et al., 2011: 120) found that employees receive more informational support when their personal networks have a higher range (i.e., the difference between the highest and the lowest status positions in the network), extensity (i.e., the number of distinct positions) and upper reachability (highest accessed positions).

¹ However, as Campbell et al. (1986) and Huang and Tausig (1990) pointed out, network diversity is a multidimensional concept, and different dimensions can be associated with access to different social resources. Moreover, beyond diversity, access to high status alters is another important aspect in resource access.

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