



Friendship networks and the social structure of opportunities for contact and interaction [☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Partnermarktsurvey to analyze how the size and composition of individuals' friendship networks are associated with the opportunities for contact and interaction provided by individuals' immediate social environment. The size and composition of individuals' social environment are strongly reflected in the size and composition of their network of friends. Several properties of an individual's foci of activity help to transform mere contacts into opportunities for interaction. The paper suggests to combine macro-structural theory with micro-sociological theories about action and social capital.

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1. Introduction

Egocentric friendship networks often tend to be homogeneous with respect to sex, ethnicity, or education (Marsden, 1988). The size of an individual's egocentric network is an important indicator for his or her integration into society. Some authors have pointed out important implications of these tendencies for social stratification and for social closure of associations (Laumann and Senter, 1976). One major issue of research in this field is to develop and test a "supply-side theory of social structure" (Marsden, 1990) that explains patterns of egocentric networks with the social variability of opportunities.

Consequently, one major branch of theory that explains the choice of friends and the resulting composition of the egocentric network is based on Blau's theory of social structure. Due to his basic idea, the social differentiation of a population forms patterns of individuals' relationships that depend on the relative size of social groups and the intersection or consolidation of their constituting traits (Blau, 1977a, 1977b). However, contact opportunities will depend only slightly on the social structure of society as a whole, but more on the structure and size of an individual's immediate social environment (Feld, 1981, 1982; Fischer et al., 1977; Fischer, 1982; Marsden, 1990; Verbrugge, 1979). The process of making new friends might be structured in a much more selective and restrictive way by the several social contexts an individual is embedded in – the so-called foci of activity – than by macro-social structures (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1987). In addition, different foci of activity also provide different opportunities for transforming mere contact into a positively valued interaction (Stauder, 2008, 2014).

The impact of contact opportunities on friendship and, more generally, on network ties received some attention in previous empirical research. However, one major methodological problem still is how to collect information about the

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immediate social environment of individuals. In most cases, researchers relied on assumptions about how individuals with certain traits or social positions participate in foci (Fischer, 1982; Fischer et al., 1977; Marsden, 1987; Moore, 1990; Munch et al., 1997; Verbrugge, 1977). Other scholars postulate that certain types of foci are socially composed in a special way (Feld, 1982, 1984; Marsden, 1990; McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1987; McPherson et al., 2001; Mollenhorst, 2008; Mollenhorst et al., 2008a, 2008b; Schwartz, 1990; Verbrugge, 1977). In the most advanced approach, researchers measured the social composition of one central focus and concentrated on relationships emerging from that focus (Huckfeldt, 1983; McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1986, 1987). In contrast to these approaches, the Partnermarktsurvey (the German marriage market survey) contains data about the opportunities for contact and interaction that result from the various foci of activity the respondents are embedded in, such as neighborhood, job, school, doing sports, and leisure activities. The conceptualization of opportunities for getting acquainted used in the design of this survey distinguishes between opportunities for mere contact and opportunities for interaction. Opportunities for contact refer to the number and social composition of a respondent's regular contacts in all those social situations that constitute his or her social environment. Opportunities for contact may be transformed in opportunities for interaction, when the social environment helps to foster interaction with the several contacts. There are properties of a focus that do not necessarily depend on its social composition, but primarily result from the social activity organized around the focus (Esser, 2000, pp. 256ff). These properties, like, for example, communicational patterns, vary according to the activity organized around the focus. Thus the individual's social environment might be more or less efficient in transforming contact into interaction (Stauder, 2008, 2014). In addition, the Partnermarktsurvey asks respondents about the size and composition of their egocentric network of friends, both measured independently from the measures for opportunities.

The aim of this paper is to explore this unique data set according to hypotheses that are derived from Blau's structural theory and focus theory and to analyze how the size and the composition of an individual's friendship network are associated with the opportunities for contact and interaction provided by the individual's immediate social environment. Thus, it contributes to a more elaborate "supply-side theory" of network formation, because it accounts for the composition of the social environment and for its interactional structures as determinants of network size and network structure.

In the following sections, theory (Section 2) and previous research (Section 3) on the association of the egocentric network with opportunities for contact and interaction are briefly reviewed. Some hypotheses already tested with other research designs and several new hypotheses are derived from structural and focus theories in Section 4. In Section 5, the Partnermarktsurvey, its innovative survey instruments, and the strategy for the subsequent data analysis are presented. Section 6 reports on the results about the association of size (6.1) and composition (6.2 and 6.3) of individuals' friendship networks on the one hand and the opportunities for contact and interaction provided by individuals' foci of activity on the other hand. Statistical interactions between opportunities for contact and other properties of the social environment in their effect on the friendship network are explored in order to describe how those properties transform potential contact into potential interaction. In addition, the section briefly discusses how contact opportunities arising from different types of foci of activity influence the friendship network. Finally, Section 7 discusses the findings in order to contribute to a supply side theory of network formation and to outline the path to more refined methods of data collection and analysis.

2. Theories and implications

2.1. Structural theory

The major notion that social structure provides an opportunity structure constraining individual action is based on Blau's macro-structural theory. Blau principally assumes that individuals form relations more frequently with similar individuals, because people with similar social positions draw on similar social experiences, occupy similar roles, and have similar traits and values (Blau, 1977a). His basic idea is that the social differentiation of a population forms patterns of individuals' relationships (Blau, 1977a, 1977b). Given the aforementioned assumption of "homophily",¹ the probability for relationships with similar others depends on the relative size of social groups and on the extent that belonging to a group with respect to one trait determines belonging to a group with respect to another trait (consolidation vs. intersection of parameters).

Central parameters in this approach are the heterogeneity of society with respect to nominal attributes and inequality of society with respect to ordinal attributes (Blau, 1977b: 35). An individual's set of traits determines his or her social position in the multidimensional social space (the so-called 'Blau-space'). If parameters are consolidated, a close position with respect to one attribute determines a close position with respect to another attribute. And the closer two individuals are positioned in this multidimensional space – in both a geographical and a social sense – the more likely is contact and hence a relationship between them. Macro-structural conditions will influence real contact opportunities only when the individual's social

¹ In the literature, two notions of homophily are discussed: According to the first notion, the word "homophily" is used to characterize an observed similarity between two associates, and there is much empirical evidence showing similarity between associates. According to the second notion, "homophily" denotes a mere preference for similar others. Homophily as an observed similarity thus may be the result of a homophily as a preference. McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1987), for example, use the term "homophily" in the first sense. They differentiate between "induced homophily" as an observed similarity that is caused by the social composition of the group that is embedding the analyzed dyad on the one hand, and "choice homophily" as an observed similarity that is not induced by group composition and hence should result from individual preferences on the other hand. In contrast to their use of the term, in the present study, I use the term homophily – in the original meaning of the Greek word – as an assumed preference for similar others.

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