



Personal networks of prisoners prior to incarceration: A comparison with the general Dutch population



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ABSTRACT

This study examines inmates' core discussion network prior to their incarceration. The core discussion network consists of the immediate social circle of relatively strong ties. The aims of the study are twofold: (1) to describe inmates' core discussion network prior to their incarceration in terms of network structure, relationship quality and embedded socio-economic resources; (2) to compare inmates' core discussion network with the core discussion network of the general Dutch population. Data are analyzed from the Prison Project ($n = 1909$) and the Survey of the Social Networks of the Dutch ($n = 394$). Compared with the general Dutch population, prior to incarceration, prisoners generally have a core discussion network that is similar to or even better with respect to network structure and relationship quality. However, prisoners' core discussion network members seem to lack socioeconomic resources.

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1. Introduction

From the social network literature it is known that an individual's personal network is important for improving life circumstances (see, among others, Berkman and Syme, 1979; De Graaf and Flap, 1988; Podolny and Baron, 1997; DiMaggio and Louch, 1998). Several studies have shown that network members are important for getting a job (De Graaf and Flap, 1988), finding a house (DiMaggio and Louch, 1998) and staying healthy (House et al., 1988). The part of the network that seems particularly important in improving life circumstances is the so-called 'core discussion network'. The core discussion network refers to the people with whom a person discusses important personal matters. These network members can be seen as the confidants 'who make up the immediate social circle' of people (McPherson et al., 2006, p. 356). Research has shown that the core discussion network consists of both family and non-family members and is characterized by relatively strong and close relationships (Fischer, 1982; Marsden, 1987; McPherson et al., 2006). It has been argued that these confidants function as a 'safety net' and play an important role in affecting people's norms and behavior (Marsden, 1987).

To date, research on personal networks has mainly focused on relationships held by the general population. However, in the field of criminology the importance for offenders of their personal network has been emphasized as well (see also Warr, 2002). Criminologists have argued that several characteristics of the personal network are related to criminal behavior. This relationship can go two ways. On the one hand, it has been argued that the personal network may encourage criminal behavior, for instance, by means of a social learning process (e.g. Haynie, 2001; Piquero et al., 2005). People with an overrepresentation of criminal norms and behavior patterns in their network are more likely to learn criminal attitudes and skills from

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their network members (Sutherland, 1947; Burgess and Akers, 1966). On the other hand, it has been suggested that the personal network may discourage criminal behavior, and may protect people from delinquency (see, among others, Vitaro et al., 2000). People with stronger (conventional) bonds would refrain from criminal behavior because they are afraid of losing these bonds and because they experience more social control (Hirschi, 1969).

Currently, however, most studies on delinquents' personal networks have examined delinquents' peer networks during teenage years or adolescence (e.g. Agnew, 1991; Matsueda and Anderson, 1998; Haynie, 2001; Weerman, 2011). Research on *adult* offenders and the nature and functioning of their personal network is limited. Moreover, research on delinquents' relationships outside the peer network is limited, while other relationships such as relationships with family members, neighbors or acquaintances may be important as well.

To bridge this gap in knowledge, the present study examines the core discussion network of adult offenders. More specifically, we will examine the core discussion network of prisoners in the six months prior to incarceration and compare their network to the core discussion network of the general Dutch population. This paper addresses two principal research questions: (1) *what does the core discussion network of prisoners look like prior to their incarceration*; (2) *to what extent does the core discussion network of prisoners differ prior to incarceration from the core discussion network of the general Dutch population*?

To answer these research questions we use data from two large-scale studies: (1) the Prison Project (Prison1) and (2) the Survey of the Social Networks of the Dutch (SSND2) (Völker et al., 2007). Prison1 contains retrospective data about the social networks of 1909 Dutch inmates who entered pretrial detention between October 2010 and April 2011. SSND2 contains social network data of 998 people who are representative for the Dutch population in 2007/2008. In both data sets, the name generator/interpreter method was used to gather information about respondents' core discussion network (see also McCallister and Fischer, 1978; Van der Gaag, 2005). This method results in detailed information about each network member, since all network members are identified first, after which several questions are asked about each of these members and about their relationship with these members.

The present study contributes to the literature on prisoners' personal networks in a number of ways. First of all, to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the core discussion network of prisoners and of delinquents in general. In light of the importance of core discussion network members in providing help and influencing behavior, the core discussion network may play a crucial role in affecting prisoners' life circumstances before, during and after imprisonment, as well as (ex) prisoners' (criminal) behavior. Secondly, criminological research that makes use of the name generator/interpreter method in order to collect detailed network data is scarce. Thirdly, we will elaborate on theoretical insights both from the fields of criminology and sociology and we will formulate hypotheses regarding differences between the core discussion network of prisoners prior to incarceration and the core discussion network of the general population. To date, there has not been any research comparing prisoners' networks with that of the general population. Research on network differences may give us insight into the factors that stimulate criminal behavior. Fourthly, we will use multilevel analysis techniques to study prisoners' core discussion network. The use of multilevel models to examine hierarchically structured network data is increasingly common in the general social network literature, but is still rarely used in criminological research on delinquents' personal networks.

2. Theory and hypotheses

In this section we will elaborate theoretical perspectives from both the field of criminology and the general social network literature in order to gain insight into and to explain network differences between prisoners prior to incarceration and the general Dutch population. One of these theories we draw upon is the Social Capital Theory. This theory has caught the attention of an increasing number of researchers over the past decades (e.g. Bourdieu, 1980; Coleman, 1990; Portes, 1998; Flap, 1999). Although there is still discussion about the exact definition of social capital, researchers agree on the fact that social capital refers to resources embedded in the personal network that can be used to attain individual goals (Flap and Völker, 2013). The degree to which relationships create social capital is assumed to depend on several conditions. For instance, it has been argued that social capital increases when network members are more willing to help, have more possibilities to provide help and have more resources themselves (Flap and Völker, 2013). People with more social capital are considered to be more able to attain their individual goals. Note that there is also a collective dimension to social capital, which applies to larger entities such as neighborhoods, schools or even countries. We will focus here on micro level social capital in the network of individuals.

Elements of social capital often described in the literature are network structure and relationship quality (Flap and Völker, 2013). Several researchers have argued that network characteristics such as network size, network density – i.e. the degree to which network members know each other – and the quality of the relationships are related to the information provided in the network as well as network members' possibilities and willingness to help (e.g. Granovetter, 1973; Coleman, 1990; Burt, 1992). In the field of criminology, there is an ongoing debate regarding the question whether or not delinquents have social skills to start and maintain strong relationships with other people. The two conflicting perspectives underlying this discussion are the Social Ability Perspective and the Social Inability Perspective (Hansell and Wiatrowski, 1981). Both perspectives come to different conclusions about the network structure and the relationship quality of delinquents.

First of all, the Social Inability Perspective argues that delinquents lack the social ability to invest in relationships with others. This perspective is based on Hirschi's Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi assumes that all people are 'nat-

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