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Gender and homophily: Differences in male and female association in Blau space ☆

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Abstract

Homophily, the tendency for similar individuals to associate, is one of the most robust findings in social science. Despite this robustness, we have less information about how personal characteristics relate to differences in the strength of homophily. Nor do we know much about the impact of personal characteristics on judgments of relative dissimilarity. The present study compares the strength of age, religious, and educational homophily for male and female non-kin ties using network data from the 1985 General Social Survey. It also compares the patterning of ties among dissimilar alters for both sexes. The results of this exploratory effort indicate that males and females are almost equally homophilous, although religious homophily exerts a stronger influence on females than males. Males and females do, however, differ in their tendency to associate with certain types of dissimilar alters. Education is essentially uniform for both sexes, religious difference is more important for females than males, and those over sixty or under thirty are less different from the middle categories of age for females than for males. The results suggest that males are able to bridge larger areas of social space in their non-kin interpersonal networks and likely accumulate greater social capital as a consequence.

Keywords: Homophily; Heterophily; Networks; Log-linear models; Log-multiplicative models; General social survey; Gender

1. Introduction

Homophily, or the tendency for demographically similar people to associate with each other (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954), is one of the most robust findings in social science (McPherson et al., 2001). The seemingly simple observation that like associates with like, or that birds of a feather flock together, is deeply significant, providing the foundation for theories of social structure (Blau, 1977; McPherson, 1983; McPherson, 2004),

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serving as a core assumption in the development of sampling techniques (Heckathorn, 2002), and informing a number of empirical studies (e.g., McPherson and Ranger-Moore, 1991; McPherson et al., 1992; Popielarz and McPherson, 1995). While there is little debate over the importance of homophily, several approaches have been taken to explaining the origin of homophily. By and large most explanations can be classified as one of two types: structural homophily and choice homophily.

Structural homophily, an explanation favored by researchers such as Blau (1977), accounts for homogeneity in association through social constraint. Individuals are channeled into particular social locations by processes larger than themselves and, as a consequence, are surrounded by those who are similar. Because many individuals only have access to those who are similar to themselves most friendship networks are relatively homogeneous. As a result many friendships are, for example, educationally homogeneous for the simple reasons that many persons make friends in the workplace and type of work is strongly related to education.

In contrast, choice homophily accounts for homogeneity in associations through the simpler mechanism of preference. Specifically, choice homophily often claims (McPherson et al., 2001) that those who are dissimilar are more difficult to interact with than those who share common knowledge and as a result the rewards of interaction will not exceed the costs by as large a margin. We might then expect an educated white male to avoid speaking with a less educated black female not because he finds her unpleasant but simply because their lack of shared experience gives them little or no foundation for a relationship. Regardless of whether these preferences reflect difficulty or true choice the end result is the same: when given the opportunity, individuals will conserve similarity in their relationships and avoid difference.

In combination the powerful forces of structural homophily and choice homophily produce startling homogeneity in individual associations. Structure restricts the pool of available associates ensuring that choice can only operate on a limited set of options, while choice ensures that what little opportunity for diversity that remains is mostly foregone. Despite the vast sea of difference present in American society, most individuals live their lives on small islands of sameness. The effects of homophily resulting from these twin processes are profound, impacting mental health (Ellison et al., 1997), marital longevity (Yamaguchi and Kandel, 1997), and even career prospects (Ibarra, 1992, 1995; Renzulli et al., 2000).

Yet, upon closer examination it is evident that we do not, quite, understand homophily. We know that an array of forces drive individuals into association with those like themselves (McPherson et al., 2001), and we even know that homophily is a more or less significant force for a variety of characteristics (Marsden, 1987, 1988), but we have less information on factors that might influence homophily itself within a single dimension.[1] Given the massive importance of homophily for life outcomes we should be concerned with how homophily can play a greater or lesser role in determining association patterns under a variety of circumstances. Beyond the substantive relevance there are also concrete methodological reasons to be concerned with variations in the strength of homophily. Homophily has typically been thought of as a gravity-like force—equally strong for all persons within a given dimension (Cook and McPherson, 2003)—and this conception has been used to construct new methods of sampling (Heckathorn, 2002). If homophily does not behave in a smooth gravity-like manner, however, methods based upon it may well produce incorrect results and biased samples. In order to use homophily to its fullest extent we must first fully understand it. Particularly we should endeavor to understand both the "strength" of homophily as well as the nature of "social distance".

The strength of homophily, or the regularity with which individuals are brought into association with others like themselves, is known to vary according to the dimension under study. Thus, education may be subject to greater homophily pressures than is religion. It is possible, however, that the strength of homophily is dependent on factors other than the dimension under study and thus does not behave in a gravity-like way.[2] Different types of people may experience religious, educational or racial homophily as more or less constraining. For example, a member of a fundamentalist religious sect may experience sexual homophily as a much more powerful force than a member of a more liberal religious tradition. In this case, the power of hom-

[1] I use "dimension" in place of Blau's (1977) term "parameter" to avoid confusion during the discussion of my models. No substantive difference between Blau's term and my own is intended or implied.

[2] Attempts to study this possibility include Marsden, 1987 and McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1982.