

Social relations under the influence of globalisation, towards a social network approach

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1. Introduction

Social relations today are more than ever before influenced by a growing mobility of people and it has become a common experience for families and family members to be dispersed within a country or even across national borders temporarily or for good. However, people on the move are no longer detached from their communities of origin and communities are no longer limited to geographic locations. Instead modern technologies enable people to maintain links and close ties no matter where they are. This also holds true for other social relationships and in fact a growing number of our social links and contacts develop irrespective of our physical whereabouts.

Because of this analysing and studying local entities no longer captures the entire picture of peoples' social and family networks as will be argued in this text. This is why instead of analysing households, neighbourhoods and other communities we should make the individual the focal point of the analysis and study social relationships from the angle of the individual. In this way the family not only appears as one of the social nodes surrounding him or her, but also the importance of each network member and the role assigned to each individual can be highlighted regardless of physical proximity. It is then possible to measure the nodes of the network not only quantitatively, but also from a qualitative point of view. In addition, a network approach also shows an individual's access to different networks and thus the different kinds of support he or she can draw on through these links.

The last chapter outlines the benefits of the approach for intercultural communication and shows how it can be used when teaching in an international classroom.

2. The network approach to social relations

Families across the world have experienced many changes with regard to their structure and functions during the past thirty years. For example persistently low fertility rates among many OECD member states have led to smaller families. Dwindling marriage rates and higher divorce rates support this trend and lead to an increasing number of children growing up in sole parent or patchwork families..(cf. OECD, 2011) In the non-industrialised countries changes include a decrease in household members, a move away from large extended family, a rural-urban drift and migration of family members in particularly women (cf. Georgas, 2006).

Apart from changes in family structures the relevance of mobility and migration increased at the global level and is a growing phenomenon both, in scope and complexity. In 2010 alone,

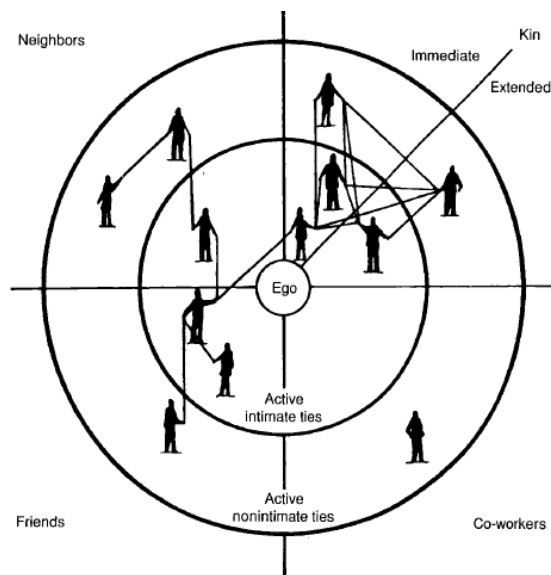
214 million people were considered to be international migrants representing three per cent of the global population. Adding internal migrants figures from 2009 indicate that one in seven people currently live outside their country or region of origin. Taking into consideration that these estimates do not include people who are migrating on a temporary or seasonal basis the number of people actually on the move is even higher (United Nations, 2012 p. 3).

Irrespective of the growing mobility of people, the family is and will remain the most basic and important social collective for any individual around the world. However, what needs to change are some of our commonly held views of families and family relations. One necessary perspective involves a shift away from looking at families in terms of their locality. Another one relates to the boundaries of what constitutes a family. Changing family patterns and living arrangements, mobility of single family members, divorces, remarriage and patch worked families all contribute to the fact that boundaries surrounding of what constitutes a family become blurred and are becoming less stable. And individuals are members of many different social units including friends, people from work and neighbours to name but a few which at times replace the function of a family.

According to Wellman (1990) this calls for a network approach. Analysing social relations using a network approach places the individual at the centre and analyses the family as part of an individual's community network. This means that the focus is on the person and those people he or she considers to be members of his/her immediate and extended family and other social groups. Such an approach accommodates for different family and social systems, individual preferences with regard to the density of links as well as the ties that are maintained virtually and therefore functions irrespective of the physical location. And such a network approach can be applied irrespective of the cultural context.

Wellman (1990 p. 196f.) argues that kinship networks are part and parcel of personal community networks or in other words, individuals are members of different collectives with the family being one of them. By using a network approach it is not only possible to assess the composition, structure and content of the personal and thus the kinship networks but also the density of the network itself and the ties and the exchange processes and support systems based on a common notion of solidarity, trust and commitment (cf. Chua, et al., 2011 pp. 110-111).

Figure: Model of a personal network



Source: Chua, et al., 2011 p. 102

According to the model developed by Barry Wellman, there are, apart from the kin network, three other major areas of social relatedness in a person's life: friends, neighbours and people from work. These also form communities or collectives, who are understood as observable units of individuals that are socially bound together (cf. Chua et al. 2011 p. 102).

According to this model every individual is surrounded by an inner circle of people from these four central networks with whom he or she maintains active intimate ties and an outer circle of active non-intimate and thus looser ties. In such a network membership is defined by the ties a person has with the focal person or ego. Members of the respective collective are linked to other members of the network which is indicated by the threads. For example a close relative of ego may also be a friend of a friend of ego. Generally speaking, links or ties can be assigned to different forms of relationships, e.g. emotional bonds, regular contacts, common interests or mutually agreed practices.

When a personal network is analysed, the most common concern and interest relates to its composition, structure and the content or function of the relationship. The question of composition basically answers questions such as the importance and relevance of the network parts. The question of structure refers to the density of ties and interconnections among network members. The last aspect relates to the content or the function of the network, in other words the resources and support which can be activated through the network.

3. The family network

The kinship or family network is distinct and yet forms part of the personal community network. The fundamental difference between a family network and all other networks is that the family network is linked to kinship which influences the nature of the network and its structure. (Wellman, 1990 p. 203). The kinship network is also special because it is created by birth and the family is the most central and salient reference point in people's lives worldwide. Virtually everybody acknowledges having a family and a thirty nation psychological study highlighted that the inner core of the family network tends to consist of immediate family members with the closest bonds existing with the mother, next the siblings and last with the father (Georgas, et al., 2006 p. 233).

However, these are generalisations and applying a network analysis would show details and structural variations. For example it would highlight the range of kin considered to be part of the inner circle, which may or may not include all siblings, mother and father or grandparents, uncles etc., depending on ego's particular feelings of emotional attachment. It would also reveal a preference either for a culture of relatedness and interdependence or self-actualisation and independence, since the model allows for the consideration of a range of kinship ties from an individual perspective. And it would also be capable of taking into account structural changes within the course of people's lives for example due to birth, marriage, divorce, illness and death.

The kinship network also plays a special role because we are born into it and at least during our formative years it has a strong influence on our value system. All other networks develop at a later stage in life and are more or less based on choices, whereby aspects such as shared interests, likes, common background and history and personal affinities form the basis for developing close ties. What needs to be taken into consideration is that increasing opportunities for digital interaction facilitates the growth of these networks, support their sustenance and make it possible for people to maintain networks which are very complex.

If we compare kinship and other social ties, kinship ties tend to be particularly strong in relation to solidarity, cohesiveness, trust and commitment, whereas other networks tend to be more instrumental and less affective with a particular focus on companionship, emotional support and knowledge sharing. Family networks also tend to be the most reliable networks, followed by ties among intimate friends. In kinship networks, structural connectivity and normative amity keeps members together even when there is a lack of sympathy, whereas friendship ties need continuous reaffirmation. This however is not to say that intimate friends may not provide the broad and reliable support typical of immediate relatives (cf. Wellman, 1990 p. 218). Neighbour and workmate networks tend to be looser as members may move away or break up the relations over small disputes and not feel obliged to re-establish links.

Because they are voluntary in nature, the boundaries of these networks are also fuzzier than those of the kinship network. (cf. Wellman, 1990 p. 197).

4. Strong and weak ties

The structure of the network and the density of the ties between members play a fundamental role in the flow of resources which can be accessed through the network. Kinship or family networks are tentatively channels of emotional support and the confidence associated with 'belonging', and thus characterised by the function derived from social capital or the emotional security of being loved and cared for. (Fellermann, et al., 1993) Family ties also have an instrumental utility associated with a multitude of exchanges such as goods and services circulating within the network. These exchanges may be based on bartering, gift giving, and borrowing, recycling and sharing with the typical understanding that support is not necessarily built on immediate reciprocity. For example children's assistance to their aging parents may or may not be 'repaid' or in one form or another reciprocated. (Fellermann, et al., 1993)

Granovetter (1973; p. 1361) draws a distinction between weak and strong ties whereby the strength of a tie can be measured by a combination of the time spent interacting, the emotional intensity, the intimacy and the reciprocal services that characterise the link. According to Wellman (1990 p. 203), there is a tendency that friends maintain weak ties and are thus more likely to be found in low-density networks and kin are more likely to be a high density network and thus maintain strong ties. The members of such a network are likely to be in touch with one another and thus emerge as a 'closely knit clump of social structure' (Granovetter, 1983 p. 202). According to Wellman's model the density of a network has two dimensions. Generally speaking relatives tend to maintain stronger ties than friends, although ego also often has a group of intimate active ties within their circle of friends and some active, non-intimate ties on the outskirts of the network.

Weak and strong ties have their benefits and drawbacks. People thoroughly enmeshed in a small densely knit community may focus too much on what is happening within their in-group and fail to understand that their lives are also influenced by forces beyond their perception and control. Whereas people maintaining weak ties are likely to move in different circles and thus also have access to different types of information, intimate groups with close ties will show a lot of overlaps and the same information is likely to circle around (cf. Granovetter, 1983 p.202 ff.). This is what Wellman (1990 p. 204) calls 'inbreeding' of information and opinions. A person with few weak ties and many strong ties lacks the exposure to different perspectives, information, and activities and thus may even find it difficult to integrate into modern society (Granovetter, 1983). Weak ties are also important because a person who is

not thoroughly enmeshed in a network has the resources to develop links to networks outside of ego's network. He or she thus can be a crucial bridge to other networks which are important for information dissemination and sharing of resources. This effect is accentuated with modern communication systems which have made it so much easier to develop and maintain large networks.

The advantage of strong ties is that the resources they provide are easily accessible and incentives for providing assistance to other members are greater (Granovetter, 1983 p. 209). Especially in countries with poor state support, strong ties are of particular importance as they provide access to social services and economic support through the network in times of need (cf. Granovetter, 1983 p. 212). There are indications that the density of family networks is influenced by the overall family size, structure and norms that prevail in the kinship systems. Family norms and values are for example linked to the preference for an independent or interdependent family model and the strength of the notion of the independent self within the family (cf. Kağitçibaşı, 2011).

Another key difference when comparing kinship relations to other types of social bonds is the type of resources that are exchanged. Generally speaking kinship members will be expected to exchange gifts, emotional support, child care, and care in times of illness and help with household chores (Wellman, 1990 p. 212). And kin are usually expected to provide support without expecting something in return or without basing it on any informal conditions. This contrasts with the general idea of friendship networks that not only require maintenance but also reciprocity. (Wellman, 1990 p. 210). Quoting Fischer, who says that we '...typically have a good time with friends but turn to relatives in a crisis', Wellman (1990 p. 213) maintains that limiting friendship to sociability and kin to supportiveness would be an oversimplification. However, kinship does influence the nature of the ties and links among members, which is not to say that shared interests, strength of tie and the proximity to each other do not play a role (Wellman, 1990 p. 216)

5. Applying the network approach

The network approach shows how kin and kinship ties fit in with other personal community networks and thus takes a wider view of our social relationship networks. This in turn is a starting point to understand behaviour patterns of the network members and how an individual's actions have consequences for other people in the network. A network approach also highlights how many ties a person maintains in the different networks, how dense these are and overall how prominent the kinship network is compared to other social networks. By analysing such a network it is thus possible to capture significant variables that affect a person's behaviour.

A person's network is like a spider web and a network analysis shows the ties between the different nodes and duration, frequency and stability of interactions between network members. These variables are influenced by the cultural environment, the exposure to different settings, personal preferences and the position within the lifecycle. However, instead of generalising about cultural influences on behavioural patterns, the network approach caters for individual differences and is able to depict cultural changes as well as personal histories. The network model can thus be used for an individual level analysis.

Developing a personal network in a classroom environment is able to raise the awareness of student's own networks, its size, density of the ties and the resources which can be made available through the network but also the resources they are expected to be made available to other members of their network. Such a self-awareness of network nodes can then be used to discuss behavioural implications. In a second step comparing networks among students may bring out structural as well as functional similarities and differences which can equally be used to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of having dense and loose ties.

Depending on the questions asked, a network analysis can also highlight changes across time, e.g. showing how interconnectedness changes depending on the stages in the life course and also the nature of support and the role a person plays. When carrying out a research in East York, half an hour away from downtown Toronto, Wellman and Wortley (1990 p. 562f.) for example distinguished between emotional assistance, social support in form of companionship as well as instrumental support referring to small services. Whereas emotional assistance included advice with family and major emotional aid, small and large services including lending and giving items as well as child care and long-term health care provision, financial aid including small loans and gifts and companionship the discussion of ideas, doing things together and participating together in organisations. Such distinctions are of course depending on the research aim and design. In a student's context interesting research questions related to support could be who they can turn to when in financial difficulties, for emotional as well as support needed to prepare for the exams.

Last but not least an individual based analysis can be contrasted with culture related national differences e.g. by using the dimension of individualism and collectivism investigated closely by Hofstede (1980, 1991) and Triandis (1990). Broadly speaking collectivism refers to a social pattern typical for cultures who place emphasis on group membership and who stress the importance of maintaining group cohesion and a harmonious interdependence with the members of their in-groups. In contrast, individualism refers to a social pattern typical for cultures that place emphasis on independence and being unique and who favour a self-

concept focusing on them as an independent self rather than them being a member of a social entity (cf. Singelis, et al., 1995). It thus refers to the extent to which a society treat individuals as autonomous, or as strongly embedded in their social groups. The dimension is viewed by many scientists as a powerful if not the most powerful and influential dimension to explain behavioural differences across cultures (cf. Triandis 2001).

The dimension reflects the answer to the universal problem of how to regulate the relation between the individual and the group. According to Hofstede (cf. 1997, p. 53) most countries in the world can be labelled collectivistic with some countries scoring lower and others higher. Collectivistic countries include Japan and other Asian countries as well as Latin American as well as many southern European and African cultures. In contrast the American culture, many western European cultures and Australia can be termed individualistic. Further, Hofstede measured country scores and thus their degree of collectivism and individualism. (cf. Hofstede, 2001)

Generally speaking and referring to the research results by James Georgas (cf. Georgas, et al., 2010) and his colleague who inter alia compared families from collectivist and individualist cultures, large family networks are usually related to the notion of relatedness. For example in the Greek and Greek-Cypriot societies, indicative of collectivist cultures, the family network was more extended (with grandparents, uncles/aunts, and cousins) and the extended family regularly communicated with each other. In contrast, the individualistic cultures, the three Northwestern European family groups, limited regular communication to parent-child networks. Based on these results the researchers expanded their sample to 16 countries and gathered questionnaire information from a total of 2,587 people. They found very significant differences among the cultures in terms of emotional distance, geographical distance, meetings, and telephone communication and as anticipated, found out that collectivistic cultures, despite geographical distance, were much more likely to maintain emotional closeness and communication than individualistic ones.

In a multicultural classroom introducing the concept of individualism and collectivism and the corresponding country level scores enables students to differentiate between a micro-level and a national level analysis. It can show that despite the shortcomings and the valid criticism¹ linked to the dimension, locating national cultures along the line of collectivism and individualism remains a useful starting point for understanding broad cultural differences. At the same time it can generate the discussion around the issue of a growing cultural diversity

¹ For example McSweeney (2009, p.305ff.) strongly criticized that Hofstede based his findings on people working for IBM and thus limited his sample to a single multinational corporation and thus a group with very specific interests and outlooks. He thus raised the question of whether the results can be representative of nations. Another and much more profound criticism refers to simplifying culture by classifying countries along four (later five) dimensions (Kirkman, et al., 2008 p. 47f.).

within countries as well as cultural changes as a result of modernisation and help to sensitize students towards differentiating between the cultural and the individual level of analysis. It allows for both, the view from afar linked to the idea of a broad and generalising image and it allows to zoom in, a picture used by Bolten (2012) to support viewing things from different perspectives.

6. Conclusion

A social network approach allows for a broader understanding of human interaction than the concept of studying localised communities and bounded groups. This is not to say that local communities are no longer important, but our notion of community is changing in the context of modern communication technologies and the potential they provide in terms of communication volume, complexity, speed and boundless interaction. It is a flexible approach which is able to take note of the reconfiguration of the networks as needs and circumstances arise and alter. People build, rebuild and adjust their networks according to changes in their living circumstances, for example when moving jobs or getting married. Communication and culture is always dynamic, and this way of describing interconnections does justice to this inherent truth.

The personal network approach introduced by Wellman is an instrument which can easily be applied at the classroom level and, depending on the research interest, can bring out differences in the size of networks, the density of ties and function of the participating members. Such an analysis can be used for a discussion about network structures and their influences on behavioural patterns. It can also be contrasted comparing the results with those of entire nations considering the dimension of individualism versus collectivism. However, what needs to be kept in mind is that carrying out such a network analysis shows a situation at a certain point in time and that a personal network is dynamic regardless of the fact that family networks tend to be pretty stable. And as network membership changes so do roles and obligations and thus behaviour.

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