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A personal network approach to ethnography: theoretical implications and methodological challenges

by Lidia Katia C. Manzo¹

The personal network concept

Why are ethnographers so interested in understanding how relationships work? During periods of accelerated social change, researchers usually wish to determine if individuals are isolated or receive care and support from others, what kinds of resources they have access to and under which conditions, or if others influence their life course. They might wish to know which types of people are in such networks (e.g., are they composed mostly of kin, friends, neighbors, or acquaintances) and analyze the changes in their roles. By studying relationships, they are also able to understand the qualities of such ties, their composition, and their contextual diversity. However, the very question remains: why are ethnographers so *obsessed* with configurations of relations more generally?

Perhaps it is because interpersonal relations and social circles that form society’s constituent matrix are not simply the result of practices of sociability (Bidart et al., 2020). Rather, they form the very basis of those relational, transactional, and processual social worlds (Desmond, 2014) that ethnographic research fully embodies. Most basically, if ties are ontologically real entities (Small et

¹ Lidia Katia C. Manzo, Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Via Conservatorio 7, Milano, 20122 – Italy (IT). lidia.manzo@unimi.it

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al., 2021), by analyzing how social actors exist in a state of mutual dependence and struggle, as Desmond suggests,

[t]he point of fieldwork becomes then to describe a system of relations, “to show how things hang together in a web of mutual influence or support or interdependence or what have you, to describe the connections between the specifics the ethnographer knows by virtue of being there (Becker, 1996, p. 56, quoted in Desmond 2014, p. 554).

Although an emphasis on relational thinking goes back to the earliest days of ethnography, the past two decades have witnessed a “relational turn” (Desmond, 2014) throughout the social sciences, producing some of the most exciting methodological and theoretical developments in recorded history. Recent years have seen a rapid expansion of research focused specifically on personal (egocentric) networks, as evidenced by new books such as *Egocentric Network Analysis* (Perry et al., 2018), *Conducting Personal Networks Research* (McCarty et al., 2019), the abovementioned *Personal Networks: Classic Readings and New Directions in Egocentric Analysis* (Small et al., forthcoming in 2021) and multiple sessions at several annual conferences of the *International Network of Social Network Analysis (Sunbelt)* devoted to the topic.

This special issue aims to make the case for more ethnographic examinations of social ties in the studies of network analysis, as there is still a gap in the knowledge about how ethnography might permit the revealing, the unveiling, and the classifying of personal networks. Researchers from various disciplines have started recognizing these analytical and empirical lacunae, even though socio-anthropological research lacks an in-depth, multidimensional discussion of social connections and their significance for both network analysis and for qualitative research more generally.

Personal networks are practiced every day (Wellman, 2007). Personal networks are complex, dynamic entities that change over time; changing in content, dissolving, being diluted, or lying dormant, being partly coordinated with other ties and partly in isolation (McCarty et al., 2019).

Personal networks offer an in-depth view into the social world of research participants, including contacts from any possible social circle and setting. Personal networks are a tool to analyze relationships that cross-cut social and spatio-temporal configurations.

This special issue, therefore, aims to make two main contributions to the literature. The first one is to collect and bundle a number of (novel) conceptualizations to disclose personal networks in different urban contexts around the world. With the selected papers, we strive to conceptualize a new theoretical tool in the interdisciplinary field of qualitative social network analysis in order to understand a variety of micro- and meso-level phenomena, such as migration and mobility, health and well-being, entrepreneurship and livelihood strategies, among others. As for cities, we will look for examples from the Global North and Global South, which shall allow us to tease out the similarities and differences between various contexts.

Building upon the realization of this first aim, the second one is to draw together a number of insights on the toolbox of material, discursive and socio-spatial strategies, and on the practices of the ethnographic accounts of personal networks, on the basis of the various cases presented. Without having the pretension to build a comprehensive theory from our cases, the offered conceptual pluralism of the issue is likely to disclose various ways in which personal networks are formed, employed, and shaped by social capital and support strategies, and describe how the use of urban space plays a central role in these relational mechanisms. The contributions illustrate the role of specialized ties in promoting social support and network capital (see Bruck; Cirillo; Lilius and Hewidy) or communities as networks with a focus on social inclusion and mobility of migrants or minority groups (see D'Ingeo; Volpini), as well as linkages over time between life stage experiences, relationships, and changes in social contacts (see Manzo). As the contributions show, on the one hand, personal networks rely on specific patterns of social interactions that provide ethnographers with the opportunity to systematically collect necessary information on the relationships and their characteristics. On the other hand, such networks might act as a conduit for individual agency or channels for the reproduction of inequalities.

Theoretical implications of personal networks

Personal networks while not a theory, have theoretical implications. The methods and analytical focus of researchers today reflect many theoretical positions made one or more generations ago. Georg Simmel's conceptual writing at the turn of the twentieth century laid the theoretical foundations for dyadic and triadic analysis, and for the study of intimacy, secrecy, brokerage, and much more (Small et al., 2021). Particularly, he introduced the dimension of "social circles" (Simmel, 1950), a set of individuals and bonds that produce norms, opinions and specific knowledge likely to influence habits, thinking, and life choices (Bidart et al., 2020).

In addition, much of the work of network researchers was influenced by that undertaken by the urban ethnographers of the Chicago School in the first half of the twentieth century (Park et al., 1925). They regarded the city as a space of human intercommunication, a "network of networks" (Hannerz, 1991) that was characterized by collective and specific practices, such as life in the Italian American street corner "society" by Whyte in 1943, the lives of Jewish migrants (Wirth, 1938), and the study of solidarity networks among temporary workers and hobos (Anderson, 1923). These pioneering works influenced several generations of ethnographers (e.g., Gans 1962) who would themselves go on to develop scholarly thinking on egocentric networks (Granovetter, 1973).

This special issue points to the importance of re-engaging with these early works. Having argued that not only do personal network researchers rarely use ethnographic approaches, but their engagement with the ethnographic literature is also relatively limited, Miranda Lubbers and José Luis Molina González further argue that ethnography deserves more attention in personal network research, as a methodology and in terms of literature, for its unique perspective on individuals' social relationships. Using their words, this "scant engagement is unfortunate because ethnography offers a unique perspective on social relationships that complements other methodologies". Although long-term participant observation in natural settings is the hallmark technique of ethnography, they explain, other methods typically accompany it, such as semi-structured

interviews, life histories, focus groups, archival data, kinship diagrams, maps, graph theory and metrics. If these complementary techniques already help ethnographers to build a holistic representation, while increasing its validity through methodological triangulation, then personal network graphs could also greatly complement ethnographies. However, they rarely do. The work of Lubbers and Molina González aims to correct this omission by discussing four network features that ethnography helps to understand: (1) meaningful relationship categories; (2) individual agency in networks; (3) network dynamics; and (4) systemic and institutional embeddedness. While their paper focuses on ethnography's contributions to personal network research, personal network analysis is equally valuable for ethnography.

Similarly, Nicole Pangborn calls for a more complementary ethnographic examination of social ties into any analysis of social networks. Pangborn states that such examinations should take into account the risks of a solely quantitative analysis that might effectively flatten the dynamism and emotion contained within a social bond's substance, and thereby miss key information about how such dynamism can affect the structure of the network itself. To demonstrate the usefulness of an augmented approach, one in which quantitative network analysts might use the insights of hypothesis-generating qualitative work, Pangborn redefines in symbolic interactionist terms each component of Mark Granovetter's definition of the strength of a tie. By using the work of Erving Goffman, Thomas Scheff, and Robert Emerson, she delves into an in-depth qualitative examination of Granovetter's definition of tie, namely, (1) intimacy; (2) emotional intensity; and (3) reciprocal services. Pangborn's rigorous analysis really let us thinking about how "immaterial" resources flow over social ties that the ethnographer found comfort in. Using her words:

[e]thnographers can become "close to [participants] while they are responding to what life does to them" (Goffman, 1989), and are firmly in a better position to see a social network for what it is; an "evolving social world," full of "meanings, conventions, resources, resource distributions and sedimented histories," rather than just a structural network of links between vertices whose meanings are defined by the researcher (Crossley, 2010).

On top of this complexity, the empirical articles in this special issue offer theoretical insights “first hand from the inside” of personal networks defined, conceptualized and practiced in interactions. These directions can be summed up in three themes, which represent both a connection to tradition and an emerging agenda: (1) contexts and biographies; (2) social capital and support; and (3) agency and constraint.

Spatio-temporal contexts responsive to biographical changes

A new generation of scholars have leaned heavily into context, showing that the context of social interaction is essential to the operation of network processes. Context, to these scholars, has been spatial, organizational, urban, cultural, online, and more (Small et al., 2021). Such a contextual approach toward conceptualizing personal network as dynamic systems that are responsive to biographical changes leads to an understanding of the substance of relationships as made of the “experiences, memories, emotions, trust, and changes that have accumulated over time” (Bidart et al 2020, p. 301).

This special issue contributes to the mapping of personal networks in this larger variety of spatial urban context by offering fieldwork studies on Debre Markos (Ethiopia) and Morogoro (Tanzania), Helsinki (Finland), Manchester (UK), Milan (Italy), Salvador (Brazil), and Tallahassee (US). Authors point to the continuing importance of space in the formation of social ties, on diffusion, and on group practices. Dalila D’Ingeo offers a particular U.S. perspective on how racial residential segregation constrains adolescents’ food habits, and limits their access to fresh food, defining community gardens as “bridges” which empower the local youth and expose them to different cultures and culinary traditions. Echoing Simmel’s point about the importance of physical propinquity (1950), Lorena Volpini found that the (spatially grounded) residential arrangement of stilt housing in the Brazilian slum of Alagados, physically connected to the coast in rows by oscillating wooden bridges, like networks of shelters over the water, shaped the reproduction of

grassroots activism and organizations. On the other side of the world, Amanda Bruck addresses the gendered dynamics of the British policies of austerity by examining how economically vulnerable mothers in the North West of England form supportive ties in two NGOs: a food bank and a women's center. Building on a case study in Helsinki, Finland, Lilius and Hewidy show how in ethnic enclaves, food entrepreneurs activate personal networks and knowledge of the restaurant scene to attract a large Finnish clientele, including people from their "white" city center neighborhoods. Romantic relationships are an intrinsic part of people's life histories and are histories in of themselves. Such an intersection of emotions, memories and past experiences becomes evident in the Italian case presented by Lidia Manzo in which young adults engaged in mixed unions discuss the development of their intergenerational networks of support over the course of their intimate relationships.

Social capital and support strategies

Theories of social capital have been linked to positive macro and micro-level outcomes: economic growth and development, democracy, better quality governance, less crime, health, subjective well-being or life satisfaction, educational achievement, finding jobs, and child welfare (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988a, 1988b; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). At the individual level, social scientists have long studied how people access and mobilize resources embedded in their personal networks, for both expressive and instrumental purposes. Furthermore, since the mid-1970s, social support has been one of the focus of personal network research, and personal network methods have become the primary approach for these studies (McCarty et al., 2019). The concept of social support refers to social resources that persons perceive to be available or that are actually provided to them in the context of both formal and informal helping relationships to cope with major life stressors or daily needs. Specifically, Barrera (1986) noted the importance of the sources of support in terms of different categories of social ties with lay people (e.g., family members, friends, neighbors), and the

types of support, including emotional, instrumental, companionship, informational, and esteem support.

Various contributors to this special issue emphasize the ways in which personal networks are intertwined with the concept of social capital and wider support strategies. Through the lens of temporalities, Bruck investigates the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged mothers who rely on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for material, and subsequently emotional support. NGOs establish institutional trust, or vertical social capital, enabling mothers to foster horizontal social capital and to form durable bonds that are so essential for lessening their experience of social isolation and stigmatization. Similarly, Silvia Cirillo shows how, in the absence of institutional social protection, female domestic workers in Ethiopia and Tanzania create their own strategies of survival outside of formal channels, eventually providing each other with various forms of support. Despite the fact that these bonds may appear weak in terms of intensity and durability, and so easily interrupted, they can also be intermittently activated in times of need. The contribution of Lilius and Hewidy directs attention towards how ethnic entrepreneurs are important nodes in social networks, drawing together clients from different ethnicities. Their work demonstrates the role of such businesses in bonding and strengthening social capital within a particular ethnic group or bridging social capital by drawing more people into the network.

Individual agency and social constraint

The role of individual agency and creativity in describing how individuals are shaped by the precise structures of their externally-defined relationships deserves extra consideration (Pangborn, this issue).

Two observations can be made in this regard. First, contributors to this special issue highlight the fact that apparently “thin” forms of agency, enacted under constraining contexts where few opportunities are available, may become “thicker” when social capital resources are mobilized in

personal networks. In her ethnographic study of the self-building process of the Alagados slum community in Salvador, Volpini illustrates how kinship ties are “fabricated” by dwellers during the very process of self-building. More importantly, the intertwining of houses and kinship, as peculiar socio-cultural processes endowed with symbolism, advances their sense of agency, not the idea of an essentialized culture of subsistence among the urban poor. The “dark side” of individual agency in personal networking becomes visible in the contribution by Cirillo, in which she argues that for female domestic workers, network resources turn out to be both enabling and constraining. Their experiences of discrimination and marginalization with regard to pay, working conditions and legal rights, as well as verbal, physical and sexual abuse, however, made these women employ various forms of agency and resilience to improve their situations.

Second, the relationships examined in this special issue are quite obviously dynamic, as they emerge, evolve, decline, come to an end, start up again, change, and take on different qualities (Bidart et al., 2020). For Italian mixed couples, Manzo explains this development on the basis of the shift from a given family to chosen kin (friends) for the purposes of both well-being and lifelong support. Exploring in detail all the microprocesses that are at work in the constant construction of personal networks, young adults establish distance from unsympathetic families to reclaim the intimate and independent dimension of intercultural romantic partnerships. We are witnessing how agency comes into play as couples decide to leave their kinship behind for a public affirmation of “families of choice”.

Methodological challenges

The personal network approach views relationships from the standpoint of a focal individual (*ego*) actively managing his/her ties with alters. This perspective is different from that employed in the complete networks approach, which observes an entire set of ties, such as in a neighborhood, workplace or organization (Chua et al., 2011). Researchers studying personal networks often collect network data using name generators. Depending on the approach they support, they can be divided

into three categories: (1) generators based on interactions; (2) generators based on the importance of certain links; and (3) generators based on exchange².

The interactive approach identifies the persons encountered the most frequently over a specified period of time. It usually captures social activity rather than a set of strong ties, and it is cognitively demanding. The affective approach is used to elicit the names of people with whom respondents feel the closest, or most intimate with, or who are the most important to them. A method based on this approach was designed by Kahn and Antonucci (1980) for their well-known work on the social convoy theory. As represented in Figure 1, on a picture with three concentric circles and the word “you” in the centre, respondents listed the names of important people in their lives according to how close they felt to them. The inner circle was for “people to whom you feel so close that it is hard to imagine life without them.” The middle circle was for “people to whom you may not feel quite that close but who are still important to you.” The outer circle included “people whom you haven’t already mentioned but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be placed in your personal network.” The circle diagram provided researchers with a highly interactive method that illustrated the hierarchical construction of the name generator, thereby reducing the research burden on participants.

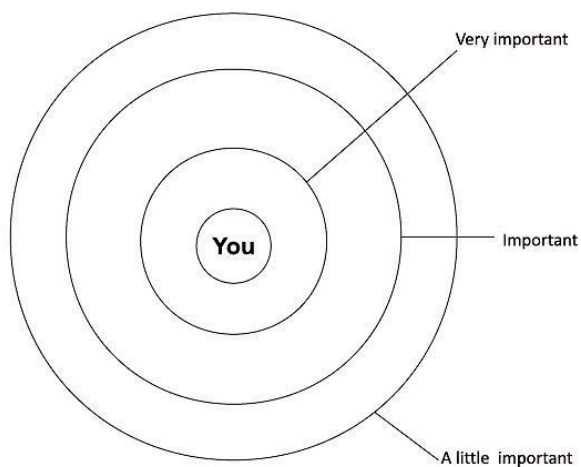


Figure 1. The Kahn and Antonucci (1980) convoy model diagram (in McCarty et al. 2019, p. 80).

² See McCarty et al., 2019 for a comprehensive examination.

Finally, the exchange approach is commonly adopted in studies on social capital or social support to provide information on the persons likely to procure various resources (for instance, emotional, instrumental, and informational support).

In this special issue, mixed methods are most apparent in the contribution of Dalila D’Ingeo. Her article on Black adolescents’ experience of food insecurity and systemic racism in the United States combines traditional anthropological methods, such as participant observation and qualitative interviews, with social network analysis. As D’Ingeo shows, semi-structured questions can be integrated or used as a follow-up to create a more engaging and interactive research environment for young participants, to discuss their food habits in relation to the people with whom they are connected and the social contexts they are engaged in.

However, many qualitative research studies into personal relationships do not chart or map those networks explicitly. Often, they choose relatively open and participatory methods to elicit them with either paper-and-pencil techniques or software that allows the construction of the network on screen. The contribution of Cirillo, dealing with female domestic workers’ lived experiences in Africa, elicits personal networks from a biographical angle. Drawing on life history interviews, as well as participant observation and focus group discussions, her analysis represents the narratives that women produce through which they give meaning to their lives as they unfold both in the isolation of the workplace and also alongside other female domestic workers who are bonded by ties of mutual support. Volpini also explores the specific spatialized practices of mutual support and the social organization of slum dwellers in Salvador using a retrospective technique to ask what interlocutors remembered and could relay about the self-construction of the neighborhood and grassroots organizations. Her work tackles personal networks from a “dwelling perspective” (Ingold, 2000) in order to show that networks of neighborhood associations function like networks of houses in the context of everyday living operations and grassroots politics in Brazil.

Researchers have also used free-style drawings to elicit networks that interviewees produce on their own with practically no guidelines being provided which draws on the idea to use the potentiality of visual methods (Pink, 2013) to understand informants' processes of meaning-making" (Reyes, 2016). In this approach, participants are asked to draw their social network on a blank sheet of paper, in a complete unstructured way (for an example, see Figure 2). From this perspective, Manzo proposes the method of hand-drawn personal network maps as stimuli to narrate her research on intercultural romantic relationships among young adults in Milan. Using a think-aloud technique during the interview, she asked the couple to clarify ways in which their network members provided support at a practical, emotional or financial level.

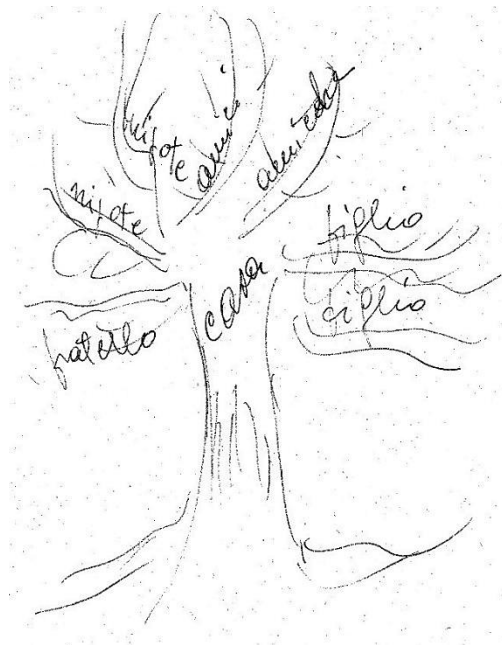


Figure 2. A free-style drawing used to elicit personal networks revolving around the participant's home. Interestingly, the home (*casa* in Italian) has been represented as the trunk of a solid tree, through which relationships with children, siblings, grandchildren and friends, belonging to -more or less- closer branches, are "unravelling". Source: author's personal archive.

Centering personal networks in ethnographic research

Personal network analysis and visualization, combined with ethnographic interviews and participant observation, have the potential to insightfully research creatively integrating ethnography and social network analysis. The combined research approach is based on the assumption that it is due to ethnography that we characterize ties, as it makes possible

the revealing of the motivations behind the action of forging ties, the consequences of those actions, and the reasons for starting and ending relationships. Ethnography allows the identification of the attributes of the social links and thus characterizes the nature of the networks as support, leverage, or both (Maya-Jariego, and Domínguez, 2014, p. 170).

In this sense, the information about the composition of networks is gathered ethnographically in a rich and complex fashion due to the extended contact time between researchers and the community of participants. These ethnographic accounts of personal networks accurately display social relationships as they come and go, thus demonstrating their dynamism and mobility (Ibid.).

Despite its paucity in this specific area, ethnography has much to offer to personal network researchers, Lubbers and Molina González argue. Indeed, researchers have found that better results are often achieved through combined approaches, and that bringing together the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative strategies holds the promise of compensating for their respective weaknesses (Hollstein, 2014). Despite the limits,

mixing social network analysis with qualitative methods and various forms of visualization is a fruitful area of research, which can simultaneously take into account the structural possibilities and constraints embedded in personal networks, and the subjective ways in which people perceive and describe such possibilities and constraints (Bellotti, 2016, p. 15).

It does suggest, however, that ethnography is not simply an “add on”. This special issue has brought to the fore that qualitative analysis affords us a greater and more nuanced grasp upon issues which are of central importance to personal networks. Accordingly to Crossley, “a comprehensive and robust analysis demands that we allow these elements back in” (2010, p. 31), and ethnographic practice is one important way of doing so, as – at the end of the day – “qualitative and quantitative forms of analysis belong together” (Ibid., p. 32).

The eight articles in this special issue have developed out of a two-session panel on «Ethnographic Accounts of Personal Networks» organized at the Seventh Italian Society for Applied Anthropology Conference in Ferrara in December 2019. The rationale for the panel stemmed from my research *obsession* for personal networks and an interest in exploring how ethnography could make network research more robust to contextual differences which previously brought me to the Autonomous University of Barcelona to participate at the 10th Course on «Theory, Methods and Applications of Personal Networks» of the egolab-GRAFO during the summer of 2019. I would like to thank all the scholars I met in this journey and the editorial board of *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* who provided incredibly helpful comments, particularly Nick Dines and Gianmarco Navarini for their precious and long-standing support during the (academic) time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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