People in Networks:
The Significance of the Social Environment
for the Functioning of the Individual

Edited by Bogdan W. Mach and Ireneusz Sadowski

Summary

This book provides Readers with the first results of the project "People in Networks: The Influence of the Social Context on the Individual and its Role in Shaping Social Structure," which has been carried out in the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in the years 2015–2017 and financed by a grant of the Polish National Science Centre. At different times, the following individuals have been a part of the research team: Xymena Bukowska (Collegium Civitas), John E. Jackson (University of Michigan, leading foreign collaborator), Bogdan W. Mach (Polish Academy of Sciences, principal investigator), Aleksander Manterys, Ireneusz Sadowski (Polish Academy of Sciences), Fiona Steele (London School of Economics), Andrzej Szpociński (Polish Academy of Sciences), Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński (Collegium Civitas), Jakub Wysmułek (Polish Academy of Sciences), and Alicja Zawistowska (University of Białystok). In the course of the project, the team has conducted a nation-wide study of ego-centered social networks, which has produced data on 3061 individuals aged 18 to 75, comprising 1201 personal networks of different size. The study of such a large, representative, networked segment of the society is a cutting-edge procedure in the Polish social sciences; and one which goes beyond the replication of any large-scale study conducted abroad. The data have been collected by the Centre for Public Opinion Research [Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (CBOS)] in 2016. Having analyzed the collected data, the team has established the size and nature of these networks and documented that social networks are significant correlates, and most probably, causal factors in the processes of formation and proliferation of sociopolitical attitudes and behaviors.

The Significance of the Research Project

The fundamental significance of the project consists in being the first Polish research undertaking in which, using respondents comprising a representative sample of the national population as a point of departure, the researchers could also reach individuals comprising the respondents' personal social networks—the social surrounding comprised of people (up to five persons not belonging to the family) who are tied to the respondents by way of lasting and significant ties and relations. The project, therefore, breaks radically with the model of a society as a cloud of human atoms. It is motivated by the belief that the further development of social sciences requires complex, large-scale studies, which are aimed at breaking with the atomistic model with respect to theory, methodology, and empirical praxis. Such studies—the units of data collection, the analysis, and the theorizing—are not about individuals, but clusters or "bundles," defined as individuals along with their social milieus or contexts.

The significance of the research project is tied to the fact that the knowledge accumulated by the social sciences is to a significant degree built upon the results of empirical analyses with the aim of counting, researching the distribution of, correlating, and aggregating into "social categories" the attributes of individuals, considered "atomically" as persons independent from one another in the same sense that elements of a well-performed random sample are independent from one another. Yet despite the predominance of "atomistic" approach in empirical analyses, most theories, be they normative or structural, find a crucial causal factor in the influence of the social environment. General explanations concerning individual behavior tend to refer to processes of diffusion driven by, for example, group pressures or simple imitation. The central role of a milieu in culture-oriented theories seems fairly common, but contemporary rational-choice theories also embrace the fact that egoistic calculation takes into account the value of membership or sense of belonging. "Atomistic" empirical research lags further and further behind the core theories of social sciences.

The Data-Collection Process

Face-to-face interviews were held with the main respondents (the egos) and all members of their personal networks (the alters). Detailed tests convey that both ego and alter samples are good "miniatures" of the Polish society. The questionnaires for the egos and alters were very similar, with the main difference being that the alters were not asked to point the interviewers to their own alters. The questionnaires contained less than 400 variables, and the average time of completion was 45 minutes for the egos and 41 minutes for the alters.

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Beside surnames, positions, and resource generators the questionnaires contained questions on the characteristics of the social background of the respondent, as well as their current socioeconomic standing. They also contained broad sets of questions on individual attitudes, competences, behaviors, and resources, mostly pertaining to sociopolitical dimensions. The subsequent segment of the questionnaire contained opinions on the network of which the respondents were a part. An important part of the questionnaire comprised questions with a view to constructing psychological variables.

The described main study was supplemented with a simple mass online study, in which everyone could locate themselves on several dimensions of social inequality and, by characterizing their contacts with individuals of different social standing, could determine their membership in a "networked social class." The data from that study have not yet been analyzed.

What is in the Book?

Following the introductory chapter describing the project and the data, subsequent chapters of this book contain the first analyses pertaining to the main respondents (the egos) and respondents belonging to their networks (the alters). And while the analyses refer to various different matters and do not make use of the networked and multidimensional nature of the collected data to its fullest potential, they nevertheless all analyze information volunteered by the egos and their alters. In this sense, though perhaps to a limited degree, they nonetheless constitute our authorial contribution to the "networked reconstruction" of knowledge on the modern Polish society.

In chapter two, "The Anatomy of an Inner Circle—Characteristics of Close Ties in the Polish Society," Alicja Zawistowska presents descriptive characteristics of close social ties in the Polish society. She explores how the "inner circle" forms and changes shape throughout its lifetime. The results suggest that Poles do not differ substantially in this respect from other societies and on average report having 2–3 friends that they confide with. There is an evident life cycle pattern, with long--lasting friendships forged at a young age, while a large share of friends are met in school or in the early stages of one's occupational career. A similar, though even stronger "age pressure" effect is observed in the case of meeting one's life partner.

In chapter three, "Convergence of the Level of Education in Biographically Defined Social Circles," Ireneusz Sadowski explores the homophily of close ties and compares bonds with family and friends. Social similarity measured by educational status is relatively high with parents, spouses, and friends, while less so with siblings (which, nota bene, coincides with the intensity of contacts), showing that mecha-

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nisms of social choice can breed (gross) homophily similar to that produced by direct influence.

In chapter four, "Measuring Influence in Political Networks," John E. Jackson, Bogdan W. Mach, and Ireneusz Sadowski on the basis of an analysis of diads comprising an ego and their alter present a method which may be used to capture interpersonal influence in social networks. The data analyzed pertains to sociopolitical attitudes and voting choices in the 2015 elections. Analyses show that the original research design of the "People in Networks" project allows for the transparent parametrization of the interdependence of voter choice. The results suggest that while individuals are independent in their choices, they clearly—more or less consciously—coordinate their votes. This conclusion strengthens the comparison with counterfactual data.

In chapter five, "Labor Market or Labor Networks?," Ireneusz Sadowski looks at how contemporary Poles acquired their jobs. He theoretically compares the degree to which the connection between an individual and their work position is made by impartial and commonly available sources of information (labeled a "labor market"), and the degree to which the connection is made by personalized, informal flows of information in networks of social ties. This is not a new determination, as it refers to both prior international and Polish research. Nevertheless, it allows us to confirm and have a more detailed view of some relations, offering a view into e.g. specific market sectors in Poland. One of the important contributions is the evidence that the work situation of ego respondents is correlated with the work situation of their alters. This directly shows the "epidemiology" of unemployment risks, that is, the strong structural interdependence of job-related prospects in social networks (which goes beyond a shared place of residence, i.e. a common objective work availability).

In chapter six "Cultural Practices, Social Relations, and Social Networks," Aleksander Manterys and Jakub Wysmułek analyze the meanings and dimensions of cultural capital. By referring such capital to the notions of class and status groups, they also relate to the performative aspect of cultural capital in the form of cultural practices. This analysis is performed with a view to classifying the significance and potential of key analytical categories. In the empirical part of the chapter, the authors distinguish between four basic types of cultural practices, conventionally denoted as "high culture," "sport culture," "entertainment culture," and "community culture." Concepts defined in this way were subsequently used to analyze the similarities and differences in their popularity among pairs and groups of friends. The results suggest that the most popular practices from the groups "entertainment culture" and "sports culture" have a "bridging" function. On the other hand, milieus that participate in "high culture," but also in "community culture," are more elite in character, while the groups themselves are characterized by greater cohesion of shared cultural preferences.

Chapter seven by Andrzej Szpociński, titled "The Significance of the Past in the Context of Social Relations and Networks," is a sort of empirically grounded essay on the relations between participation in social networks, memory of the past, and social integration. Without calling into question claims pertaining to the integrative functions of the past on a macro level, the author asks whether social memory has similar functions on the micro level, or whether the fact that individuals remain in close (friendly, intimate) relationships results in the appearance of, or itself is conditioned by, similar opinions on and evaluations of the past. Studies to date on social memory were unable to reach this dimension of reality, as they located respondents in advance in the role of members of large communities (national, regional). The author points to the fact that events from the recent past function in a twofold manner. In the first instance, they are a normal recollection of past events; in the second, they are a recollection of past events imbued with additional meanings—secondary semantization in the form of e.g. an effective representation of group identity. Only in the second case is the recollected past an important factor in shaping interpersonal relations. Significant convergence in opinion between alters and egos is found only in the case of memories on events which had undergone secondary semantization.

Chapter eight by Jakub Wysmułek is titled "Sentiments in Networks: Attitudes toward Refugees in Poland" and pertains to testing a number of hypotheses on the factors influencing negative attitudes toward immigrants. Significant focus in these hypotheses is put on the functioning of individuals with similar attitudes toward the issue of refugees in networks. The study points to political choices and the age of the respondents as the two most significant factors in this regard. As is the case in Western Europe, the conservative and nationalist worldviews of some of the respondents correlate with negative attitudes toward immigrants. However, while such attitudes are most common among the older generation of Europeans, in Poland the most severe animosity toward refugees is exhibited by the youngest respondents.

Chapter nine, „Methods and Challenges in Survey Studies of Social Circles" by Michał Bojanowski, is a short guide on the issues pertaining to the methodology of researching mass social networks. The author shows the specificity and the unique nature of the "People in Networks" study, locating it in the context of the main issues of network analyses and examples of other studies. This allows us to gain good insight into both the possibilities and the limitations of using data obtained in the course of this particular study.

The publication is bookended with a short chapter titles "Perspectives on Further Analyses," written by Bogdan W. Mach, Aleksander Manterys and Ireneusz Sadowski.