Defining Friendworks; Communication perspective on Social networks Types

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Abstract

This paper introduces friendwork as a new term in social networks studies. A friendwork is a network of friends. It is a specific case of an interpersonal social network. Naming this seemingly well known and familiar group of people as a friendwork facilitates its differentiation from the overall social network, while highlighting this subgroup's specific attributes and dynamics.

The focus on one segment within social networks stimulates a wider discussion regarding the different subgroups within social networks. Other subgroups also discussed in this paper are: family dependent, work related, location based and virtual acquaintances networks.

This discussion informs a larger study of social media, specifically addressing interactive communication modes that are in use within friendworks: direct (face-to-face) and mediated (mainly fixed telephone, internet and mobile phone). It explores the role of social media within friendworks while providing a communication perspective on social networks.

This paper introduces friendwork as a new term in social networks studies. A friendwork is a network of friends. It is a specific case of an interpersonal, ego-centric social network. Network of friends are recognized as an important source of social support (Caplan, 1974; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Milardo, 1987; Crohan & Antonucci, 1989; Wellman & Wortley, 1990), however, distinctively naming this seemingly well known and familiar group of people as a friendwork facilitates its differentiation from the overall social network, while highlighting this particular network’s attributes and dynamics.
My motivation for examining the meaning, justification and rationale of friendworks originates from a communication perspective. Following the investigation of the role of social media and particularly direct and mediated interactive communication modes (face-to-face, fixed telephone, internet and mobile phone), friendworks have been identified as an important, interesting and special group of individuals. Friendworks manifest distinct relations (Wellman & Wortley, 1990) which in turn generate distinct communication patterns (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998), hence embodying an appealing social group to focus on.

Addressing interpersonal social networks is the starting point in the examination of friendworks. It sets the context in which friendworks thrive. Therefore, a definition of social network is presented and its importance is considered from different perspectives. Discussing the value of social networks in general reflects the significance of the friendwork subgroup.

This new term requires developing an understanding of the two key concepts: friend and friendship. A Friend is defined subjected to four conditions: familiarity, personal relation, affection and voluntary interaction. Special attention is given to two proximity issues within this definition, namely spatial proximity and social proximity. While spatial proximity is achieved by face to face contact, social proximity is mediated by the use of telecommunications, allowing remote and mobile proximity; regardless of geographic limitations and while being on the move. Therefore, telecommunication devices that facilitate such proximity are highly significant in friendworks.

Moving from the focus on friendworks to a wider perspective highlights additional subgroups within social networks are highlighted. A typology of social networks is presented suggesting four additional subgroups including: family dependent, work related, location based and virtual acquaintances.

**Social Networks**

According to sociologist Claude Fischer, who investigated social networks and the social impact of the telephone in the United States (Fischer, 1975, 1982a, 1982b; Fischer & Oliker, 1983; Fischer, 1992), a social network is a social structure of:

individual's relatives, friends and associates, the set of people with whom an individual is directly involved... [People] whom we know and whom we can depend
on. [A social network] influences our success in life, our security and sense of well-being, and even our health (1982a, p. 2-3).

Litwin, (1996) a social gerontologist and social networks researcher defines social network as:

the collection of interpersonal ties that individuals maintain and that provide them with several possible benefits, such as the augmentation of self-concept, the fostering of feelings of belonging, and the provision of both cognitive guidance and tangible assistance in fulfilling the tasks of daily living. (p. 1)

These two definitions relate to social networks from the individual’s perspective who actively maintains relations with familiar people. Both emphasise the meaningful benefits of social networks as success, security, sense of well-being, health, feelings of belonging, cognitive guidance and tangible assistance.

People choose their networks. Even if some of the relationships are imposed, they decide who to pursue, who to ignore or leave as casual acquaintances and who to neglect (Fischer, 1982a). People usually network with family, friends, work colleagues and neighbours (Wellman & Tindall, 1993). Friends tend to be intimate (Bryan, Fitzpatrick, Crawford & Fischer, 2001), while active neighbourhood and organizational ties tend to have non-intimate relations. Among the factors that will increase the chance of networking with others are: similarity - similar people provide social validation for a person’s beliefs and characteristics, for example: age, sex, marital status, social role, ethnicity, religion, personality, position, lifestyle and education (Byrne, 1971; Kalmijn & Vermunt, 2007), proximity - liking most people that a person sees most often (Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950; Zajonc, 1968; Greenbaum & Greenbaum, 1985), reciprocity – symmetric relationships (Hinde, 1979) and beauty and competence – preferring contact with people whom we consider as competent (Plickert, Cote & Wellman, 2007).

Social networks are “our greatest motives for action: to protect relatives, impress friends, gain the respect of colleagues, and simply enjoy companionship” (Fischer, 1982a, p. 3). Society is composed of social networks. Similarly, social networks are influenced by society; which has an active role in our choices of who to include in our social network, whether through social norms, expectations, values, roles or physical location (Fischer, 1982a). Communication (whether face-to-face or mediated via telecommunications) is a key factor in establishing and maintaining social networks (Bott, 1957; Aronson, 1971; Carey, 1988).
Studies from a variety of disciplinary perspectives show that social networks are important because they provide social support (Wellman & Tindall, 1993). Moreover, social networks are fundamental to social integration and emotional well-being (Agneessens, Waege & Lievens, 2006). Health related studies emphasize the direct impact of social networks on individuals’ physical and mental health status. For example, social support correlates with emotional strength, physical well-being, good health, lower stress and longevity of individuals (Thoits, 1982; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Sarason & Sarason, 1983; Thoits, 1983; House, Umberson & Landis, 1988; Lin & Ensel, 1989; Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins & Slaten, 1996; Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Solomon, 1997). These health and well-being benefits of social networks are especially important among the elderly (Crohan & Antonucci, 1989).

The structure of social networks is also important. Relationships within the network motivate flows of support, information and companionship. Social networks increase efficiency of actions (Putnam, 1995; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) and information is diffused more effectively with minimum redundancy (Putnam, 1995). Being connected to others empowers individuals and their networks and affects their productivity. Such attributes can be translated into economic value, hence highlighting the significant role of social networks in generating different forms of capital (Putnam, 1995). Social networks must exist for social capital to be generated. Communication within social networks produces and nourishes social capital (Coleman, 1988).

The sociologist Bourdieu (2002; 2006) is known for distinguishing between three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Economic capital is durable goods available for use as a factor of production. Cultural capital is forms of knowledge, skills or education, or any advantage that gives a person a higher status in society, including high expectations. Social capital is the relations within and between social networks. According to Coleman (1988), since social capital is generated from the relations between individuals through exchange, it is jointly owned. Additionally, social capital benefits individuals as well as the group as a whole, while encouraging cooperative behaviour (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Coleman (1988) identified three forms of social capital: obligations and expectations (which depend on the trustworthiness of the social environment), information channels (selectively open within social networks) and social norms (that facilitate certain actions while constraining others). These forms of social capital assist in highlighting some of the characteristics of different social networks that are discussed further on.
Friendworks

Social network is a dominant and a key social term. Nevertheless, it is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is very straightforward as the sum of the people one knows: “a social network consists of a finite set … of actors and the relation … defined on them” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 20). On the other hand, in-depth observation of the term reveals confusion, vagueness and wide generalization in analysing whether specific people are included or excluded from one’s social network and in understanding their defined relations with individuals. While it is quite obvious that certain types of relations (such as: family, friends, neighbours, work colleagues and peers) are included within one’s social network, there is vagueness regarding the inclusion of people with whom one might have more indirect and less defined types of relations, such as: acquaintances (including: the postman, the children’s teacher, the gardener, the bus driver, school children’s parents), distant family members, online friends and celebrities.

In certain circumstances, when studying social behaviour, it could be useful to break down the holistic social network concept to focus on behaviour nuances, motives for actions and their outcomes (i.e., the different type of capital that is facilitated). The need for precision when it comes to discussing social network types became immediately apparent in a pilot focus group conducted early in my research into social networks and mobile phone usage. Participants failed to understand the term social network which seemed to be obscure and not at all self-explanatory. As a result, I provided a description and examples for the term, hence intervening and directing the participants’ line of thought. From the pilot focus group, it was evident that participants’ most intensive everyday communication was with family and friends. This communication pattern is evident in existing everyday mobile phone studies (Sørensen, 2006; Wajcman, Bittman, Johnstone, Brown & Jones, 2008) as well as in fixed telephone studies (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992). This finding led the research to focus on one particular subgroup of people, rather than on an overall social network and specifically question how the mobile phone is used to mediate friendship networks rather than social networks in general. Friendwork was the succinct term that I developed in the context of my early fieldwork to describe the particular subgroup of interest to me and which I theorize in further detail here.

Friendwork is proposed here as the set of people with whom an individual maintains a friendship relation. A friendwork is one specific type of social subgroup; however, different types of subgroups intersect and overlap. In order to understand the composition of
friendworks within other social networks, a typology of social networks is useful and is discussed shortly.

A friendwork incorporates friendship relations from one’s family, childhood, studies, work, neighbourhood, church, politics, shared recreation and other daily life situations. Within a network, a variety of social ties can be found: intimate friends, ones to socialize with, others to share a particular interest, or casual recent friends. A friendship network is open to friends leaving and new ones entering. Not everyone knows everyone else, but most people know of each other (Trimberger, 2005, p. 229).

When defining networks of friends, one must be familiar with the meaning of a friend. Though basic and meaningful terms in human nature, friend and friendship are ambiguous concepts subject to many definitions and related to various practices (Fischer, 1982b). While most researchers (and people in general) take these concepts for granted, both will be defined as they are crucial to the understanding of the context, the orientation and the motivation of this research.

Fischer (1982b) who studied the meaning of friend among Californian adults, found that although the term was very commonly used, there was no consensus on its meaning. Friend was found to be “a residual label, a description applied to almost all associates for whom no more specific title is available” (p. 305). Relatives were typically not referred to as friends. People also tended to label friend others they were in contact with (such as: a neighbour, a colleague and a partner). Similarity in age and long acquaintance with associates were common features of friendship. Friendship ties also tended primarily to be voluntary relations of sociability which involved visiting, going out, discussing shared pastimes and participating together in an organization. Friendships did not appear to involve a great extent of material exchanges. Close friends primarily described intimate relationships (discussing personal matters, seeking advice), as well as sociability and material aid (especially “being available for a sizeable financial loan”). In addition, Adams and Allan (1998) suggest that friendship is culturally dependent and people use the term differently in different cultural communities.

Following Fischer’s (1982a; 1982b) findings and for the purposes of this paper, a friend is a familiar person with whom one holds a personal relation of affection through voluntary interactions. Friendship is a personal and voluntary relationship of affection with a familiar person.
According to this definition, four main conditions apply when defining a person as a friend: familiarity, personal relation, affection and voluntary interaction. The first criterion, familiarity, has been constantly challenged and updated following the progress of telecommunication technology, particularly the internet. A familiar person in the pre-internet era was someone an individual knew as a result of face-to-face interaction. Knowing a person suggests that one would be able to recognize the other’s face, look and voice, as well as know some details about the other’s personality and background. Face-to-face interaction implies that friends are geographically proximate people, or people who shared physical proximity in the past. I regard this type of closeness as spatial proximity. Recent studies still prove that spatial proximity is a significant factor in social relations (Mok, Wellman & Basu, 2007), particularly in friendships (Baym, Zhang & Lin, 2004). However, today, when online communication in many societies is ubiquitous, the meaning of a familiar person might be extended to include virtual relationships and virtual friends, thus redefining proximity as a social rather than spatial parameter. I refer to closeness which is established only via the agency of telecommunications as social proximity. I choose to differentiate between familiarity in the real world, which originates from face-to-face encounters (in spatial proximity situations) even when they might lead to mainly social proximity situations later on, and familiarity in the virtual world, which involves social proximity exclusively. Subsequently, when referring to types of social networks, this differentiation leads to defining two separate subgroups; the friendwork and the virtual acquaintance network. The latter is discussed in further detail shortly.

The second condition of the definition of a friend is a personal relation that involves one-on-one interactions. Therefore, celebrities, public figures, and non-physical entities (such as deceased, fiction heroes, or religious figures) are excluded from being friends. In general, people whom individuals get to know via mass media cannot be regarded as their friends. Additionally, reciprocity is an associated factor of personal relations, though not mandatory. Most personal relations involve reciprocal interaction. The personal relations criterion is also challenged by modern communications technology, when online communication (emails, forums, social networks sites) allows one-to-many relations. This paper focuses on one-to-one relations only.

Affection is the third mandatory criterion in defining a friend (Fischer, 1982b; Boyd, 2006). It refers to a supportive behaviour which involves a feeling of fondness, liking, esteem or trust. This is a personal feeling and not necessarily mutual. As long as individuals identify affective relations towards others, these others are regarded as their friends. Consequently, if social relations lack supportive behaviour, they cannot be considered friendships.
Finally, voluntary interaction emphasizes that a certain activity concerning the other is done by one’s own free will (Plickert et al., 2007), which means a self motivated decision not influenced by financial or political incentives. Social norms (such as the moral obligation to support family members) might also influence people to act against their own will. Such cases also cannot be considered voluntary interactions.

Each person can be regarded as a friend even though s/he might have additional social relations with the other. This includes a kin, peer, work colleague, mentor, neighbour or an alternative relation. This notion is particularly significant when considering the social relation of immediate kin to individuals. The above definition of a friend may enable some family members to also be identified as friends.

**Types of social networks**

Based on literature, I have realised that there is no widely agreed typology of social networks. Several related social studies use unique criteria for network typologies. The following mentioned typologies share three characteristics: they are comprised of humans only (and not mixed humans-systems networks), they represent social networks from the individual’s point of view (ego-centric) and they focus on the nature of the relationships.

Tönnies (2002 [1887]) was the first to identify two types of social groups: gemeinschaft and gesellschaft. Gemeinschaft is a group of people who are primarily obligated to the group’s collectivity and then to their own self interest. In this group, the individuals’ behaviour is governed by well known norms. This category explains well traditional societies and the family represents its most obvious example. In contrast, Gesellschaft refers to organizations in which the individual’s self interest precedes the importance of the larger association. Additionally, these organizations lack the level of shared norms. Gesellschaft is maintained through individuals acting in their own self interest and better describes modern societies. While Tönnies’ paradigm classifies two basic types of social networks that tend to be too general for the proposed research needs. Of the two social structures, gesellschaft would be the more relevant approach for this paper. Another early typology of social networks by Barnes (1954) suggests three categories of social relations: formal organizations, unstable associations and interpersonal links. My research concerns the third one.
Litwin (2001), who researches interpersonal environments among an elderly populations, distinguishes between five network types, indicating the dominant relations within one’s social network:

1. The *family-dependent network*, a small grouping that relies primarily on close family members.
2. The *locally integrated network*, a large grouping that includes relationships with family, neighbours, and friends.
3. The *local self-contained network*, a small and mostly neighbour-based network.
4. The *wider-community-focused network*, a large and primarily friendship-centred group.
5. The *private-restricted network*, a group characterized by an absence of local kin, and only minimal ties with neighbours.

Though Litwin’s typology presents important aspects of social networks, there is the issue that it assigns only one type of network to a person excluding more complex descriptions of social networks that are a mixture of relation types. As it is focused on supportive networks of the elderly population it lacks the types of social networks that capture non-supportive or neutral social relations especially among younger populations.

Therefore, I offer an alternative typology of social networks. Characteristics of social networks used in this typology include: types of network members (family, friends, locals, colleagues, acquaintances), network size (small – 1 to 10 people, medium - 10 to 20, large – over 20), spatial proximity (required for maintaining the relation: mandatory, optional, not relevant), voluntary interaction and type of support as suggested by Agneessens, Waeghe and Lievens (2006) including: emotional support, instrumental support and companionship.

Table 1 shows this typology of social networks types and their key attributes. It includes the *friendwork*; the particular type of social network proposed in this paper. Each of these network types is discussed in further detail below.

Table 1: Types and attributes of interpersonal social networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Type of support</th>
<th>Spatial proximity</th>
<th>Voluntary interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family dependent</td>
<td>family</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>Emotional companionship instrumental</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friendwork</strong></td>
<td>friends</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>Emotional companionship instrumental</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
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<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work related</strong></td>
<td>colleagues</td>
<td>flexible</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location based</strong></td>
<td>familiar locals</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>companionship instrumental</td>
<td>mandatory</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virtual acquaintance</strong></td>
<td>online acquaintances</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>Emotional companionship</td>
<td>not relevant</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Global</strong></td>
<td>all acquaintances</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>Emotional companionship instrumental</td>
<td>not relevant</td>
<td>(mostly) yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most intimate network is the *family dependant* network comprised of immediate kin only (husband, children, parents, siblings) and therefore is a closed group consisting of only a few members. Members might not be proximate, though often they live nearby. This network potentially ensures all types of support; primarily *instrumental*; assistance in everyday activities or financial support in times of need, but also *emotional*; mental assistance including intimate and crucial decisions, and *companionship*. Proximity is optional for present relations. Social norms encourage family members to support each other. The aspect of voluntary interaction is ambiguous; on the one hand, some people feel they are obligated to support their family, others might feel differently. Support and obligation to family members are encouraged by social and cultural norms which are also reflected in government policy (Cochran, Larner, Riley, Gunnarsson & Henderson, 1990), though to some extent are subject to personal interpretations. The dominant attribute of this network is the *intense support* originating from genetic relatedness.

The second network is the *friendwork* comprising all people considered friends from an individual point of view. Therefore, different people, including kin, peers, colleagues and neighbours can be found in this network. On average, this network consists of around 15 people (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman & Rainie, 2006). Friendworks grant all kinds of support. However, different people might provide different social support. Close friends are most likely to supply all three types of support, while more distant relations might ensure emotional support or companionship only. Spatial proximity is crucial in establishing friendship, but once set, even when members are distant, relations can be maintained via telecommunication.
technologies. Based on the definition of a friend, voluntary interaction is mandatory. The dominant attribute of this network is the significant support from the individual’s perspective.

The next type is the work related network. Most adults are part of the labour force and are surrounded by people in a similar situation, motivated by financial incentives. This is the dominant attribute of this network and makes a significant impact on the characteristics of developed social relations. Network members are work colleagues, clients and service providers, usually working in spatial proximity, though possibly distant. Accordingly, the network size is flexible and might include few, dozens or hundreds of people. The official support provided by this network is instrumental, aimed at promoting shared financial targets. Sometimes relations might evolve to friendships. Principally providing one type of support (instrumental), this network is the less beneficial for individuals, from a social support perspective and is defined by business decision makers and in most cases is not subject to the individual’s free will.

The fourth type is the location based network which consists of all the familiar people one meets, hangs out with and knows, in the local area of residence. Therefore kin, friends, neighbours and also service providers and acquaintances might be part of this network, comprising altogether a potentially large network. The main difference between this network and a friendwork is the type of support, often characterized by instrumental support and companionship, lacking the aspect of emotional support which is mandatory in friendworks. Spatial proximity is the dominant attribute of this network. Participation in a local network is usually voluntary.

The fifth type of network, the virtual acquaintance, emerged as a result of the massive diffusion, adoption and everyday use of the internet (Haddon, 2004). It consists of online users a person is in mediated contact principally via the internet (without ever meeting face-to-face). This phenomenon was originally associated with online forums (Kendall, 2002) and nowadays is particularly widespread through online social network sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Linkedin. The term used in social network sites for these social relations is friends. Though similar, there are crucial differences between friend as has discussed so far, and the social network sites’ version of this term. Virtual acquaintances are familiar to the person, to some extent. Their attributes might not correlate with the attributes of the real-life individuals they represent. Based on the internet characteristics, infrastructure and applications, this network can consist of dozens, hundreds or thousands of people. Exclusively internet-based familiarity usually involves virtual companionship, non-physical instrumental assistance (mainly information) or/and some emotional support. Support is
limited, in comparison to real-life relations (Boyd, 2006), as a result of internet characteristics such as lack of a physical dimension and unsubstantiated credibility (Baym et al., 2004). Spatial proximity is not relevant. Interactions are purely voluntarily and commitment to online others is usually lower than in real-life situations (Boyd, 2006). These relations are ‘weak’ social ties (Marsden & Campbell, 1984) because they are easily established (or forsaken). However, though virtual acquaintances are regarded as a distinct social relation and not included within the friendworks category, they could evolve into friendship relations subjected to the four friendship conditions (familiarity, personal, affectionate and voluntary). Due to such cases, there might be overlap between these two subgroups. The dominant attribute of this network is the online communication mode which significantly impacts on social relations.

The last group is the global network and consists of all the people an individual is familiar with in-person. A global network is one’s social network. It is the sum of all the mentioned types of networks. Dunbar (1992) suggested that on average, the number of individuals within one’s social networks is 150. This represents the cognitive limit of the number of people with whom any person can maintain stable social relationships, the kind of relationships that go with knowing who each person is and how each person relates socially to every other person. However, the inclusion of the online acquaintance network within one’s social network significantly expands the potential number of contacts.

The relationship between the different subgroups within one’s social network is displayed in Figure 1. As mentioned, some of them overlap hence including some people within more than one subgroup. This diagram suggests that the friendwork subgroup might interact with all the other groups within an individual’s social network. As this is a general description, variations of subgroup size, overlapping degree and proximity between the groups should be taken into consideration when customizing this diagram at the individual level.
Figure 1: The relationships between interpersonal social networks

Conclusion

This paper presents *friendwork* as a new term, in order to directly address a distinct and meaningful subgroup within interpersonal social networks. A discussion regarding the significance of social networks, their contribution to social support and their role in creating social capital sets the rationale for focusing on this particular subgroup. Friends and friendships, two fundamental friendworks-related concepts, are examined. Though these terms are somewhat vague and subjected to various definitions, their importance is evident, hence reinforcing the consequential role of friendworks in the modern society.

One way to learn more about social networks, subgroups and particularly friendworks is to examine communication patterns. Derived from the notion that friendworks are a distinct subgroup, distinct communication patterns apply. Additionally, based on the significant role of friendworks in people’s lives, communication with friends comprises a significant segment...
within one’s everyday overall communication (Moyal, 1992; Wajcman et al., 2008). These perceptions suggest an interesting field of research: communication patterns within friendworks.

While communication is a fundamental aspect and a major facilitator of any relationship, its importance is revalidated when considering telecommunications. In modern society, mediated interactive communication, such as the telephone, the internet and the mobile phone, facilitates the extension of existing relationships as well as enables creation of new, mainly virtual, social ties (Boase et al., 2006). Moreover, the growing accessibility and variety of communication methods increases diverse and more complex usage patterns. People use communication methods differently in different contexts (such as: who they communicate, in which methods, when, for how long, in what frequency and for which purposes).

The communication perspective presented in this paper is a launching point to understand wider social phenomena. Exploration of communication patterns within friendworks would lead to a better comprehension of people’s behaviour, needs, motivation, deficiencies and self perception.

Nevertheless, this is an initial analysis of social networks from a communication perspective. There is a need to empirically test and revisit the discussed typology, the subgroups mentioned and particularly friendworks, in order to examine their relevancy in other areas of research including psychological, economic, political and cultural contexts.

References


