

Social work as a meso-level profession: towards network-oriented practice and research

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ABSTRACT

Social work practitioners and academics have long recognised that the various problems faced by service users are linked to the wider social structures in which they are embedded. Here, I argue that a network perspective enables us to advance the theory and analysis of the relational dimensions of social work practice. Network-oriented social work understands service users as network structures located at the meso level of society. First, this paper presents the benefits of locating service users at the meso level of society. Second, the key concepts fundamental to network-oriented social work are outlined. Third, this paper demonstrates how Social Network Analysis can be used to scientifically analyse the personal networks of service users. Network-oriented social work is helpful as a contextual framework so that the structural disadvantages of service users can be better understood, processed in social work practice, and scientifically analysed.

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Introduction

Social work has long developed an understanding of the various problems, difficulties, and needs faced by individuals, families, and communities in relation to the larger societal structures in which they are embedded (Moreau, 1979). This has translated into a variety of social work approaches. Some are located at the macro level, such as macro practice (Payne, 2021) or community work (Twelvetrees, 1991). Others are placed at the casework level, for instance, structural social work (Goldberg Wood & Tully, 2006), Person-in-Environment theory (Karls & Wandrei, 1994) or relational social work (Folgheraiter, 2004). While the former focuses more on policy and social change, the latter is concerned with casework involving individuals and groups. In fact, evidence regarding the link between larger social structures and individual or collective problems has rapidly increased in recent times, particularly through the use of research methods and theoretical advancements related to Social Network Analysis (SNA) (Fellmann, 2024; Lubbers et al., 2020; Rossier et al., 2023; Vacchiano & Spini, 2021; Widmer

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et al., 2018). These studies show that individuals' personal relationships relate to different dimensions that are associated with structural advantages and disadvantages such as access to resources, social capital, control, interpersonal conflicts, and normative forces. In SNA, references are often made to so-called personal or ego-centric networks. A personal network consists of a complex web of interdependent relationships (McCarty et al., 2019) that change over time (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005) and strongly influence an individual's life course (Hollstein, 2023). However, personal networks are not isolated from societal structures. Rather, they can be seen as junctures between the micro and macro level (Vacchiano & Spini, 2021). While micro level refers to processes in the context of an individual, such as behaviour or interaction, macro level describes societal structures and institutions. References to SNA are rather rarely found in social work research and practice. Some of the few works are those of Blakeslee (2012), Del Fresno García (2015), and Rice and Yoshioka-Maxwell (2015), which point out key connections between social work practice, research, and SNA. For some time now, albeit rarely, research has been conducted in which SNA has been applied in various areas of social work, including studies that examined the networks of service users (Fellmann, 2024; Giesbers et al., 2019), large professional support systems (Jones et al., 2024), but also those that focused on connections between social work organisations (Castillo de Mesa et al., 2024). In addition, interventions based on SNA principles and concepts were developed, implemented, and evaluated. Many of these network interventions are achieved by disseminating information via influential individuals within the network and aim to change behaviour within the target group. For example, peer-led social network interventions to promote adolescent sexual health (Mitchell et al., 2021) or HIV prevention among homeless youth (Rice et al., 2012) have proven effective. However, the further development of an intervention theory that refers to or is based on SNA at the casework level has stagnated. Therefore, in this paper, I present a network perspective for casework based on SNA principles and point out key concepts fundamental to such a perspective. I also show how SNA can be used to examine the personal networks of service users and how social work intervenes in them. Some key questions related to network-oriented social work are as follows: What are the properties of service users' personal networks? How are service users' personal networks linked with the problems they are facing? How can social workers foster positive change in personal networks to better achieve intervention goals? Social work can profit from a network orientation as it supports the successful progress of interventions by reducing the structural inequalities that service users face and hinder them from overcoming problems. Network-oriented practice and research are not meant to substitute other approaches or methods but provide a framework that locates social work interventions at the meso level of society. Network interventions are an effective approach to achieving desired outcomes in numerous social contexts and with different intervention goals (Valente, 2012). However, existing approaches cannot simply be adopted, because social work has specific working conditions, theoretical references, ethical guidelines, and working methods. Therefore, I propose how network interventions can be conceptualised specifically in social work.

Personal networks as meso-level structures

The daily life of service users is interwoven with that of other people with whom we can have relationships of varying significance. This basic principle is referred to in the literature as ‘networked lives’ or ‘linked lives’ (Vacchiano & Spini, 2021). Individuals are, therefore, embedded in a complex and unique web of relationships, called personal network (McCarty et al., 2019). A personal network consists of stable and significant contacts that emerge into a structure characterised by routines and strong interdependencies (Vacchiano & Spini, 2021). These contacts include not only local relationships, but also those with people who are geographically distant or met exclusively online. While geographically distant relationships are often related to migration experiences (Herz & Olivier, 2012), online-based relationships are commonly associated with social media use among young people (DiGennaro & Dutton, 2007). Networks differ across individuals in terms of size, composition, and structural properties (Widmer, 2010) and are dynamic. Individuals are embedded in a personal network from birth. However, through the life course, some relationships might end, new ones are established, and others become stable over a longer period (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005). While some relationships are given (e.g. parents), others are more freely chosen (e.g. friends). The properties of a personal network affect individuals in many domains, both positively and negatively, over the course of their lives (Hollstein, 2023; Kadushin, 2012). Hence, recognising a personal network as a meso-level structure involves considering its connections with larger societal structures as well as its interdependence with outcomes at the individual level (Steglich et al., 2010). In this regard, a central argument is that individuals’ lives are interconnected, meaning that the experiences and actions of one person can influence the lives of others, and vice versa (Settersten, 2015). This mutual influence shapes emotions, behaviours, attitudes, health, and much more, extending far beyond close relationships. In recent years, studies have shown that such effects also extend to the digital realm, where meaningful relationships can develop with people with whom one communicates mainly or exclusively online (Castillo de Mesa et al., 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates an example of the personal network of a mother (Ego) undergoing family intervention. This example was taken from a Swiss study (Fellmann, 2023). It is important to note that personal networks are considered cognitive networks (Widmer,

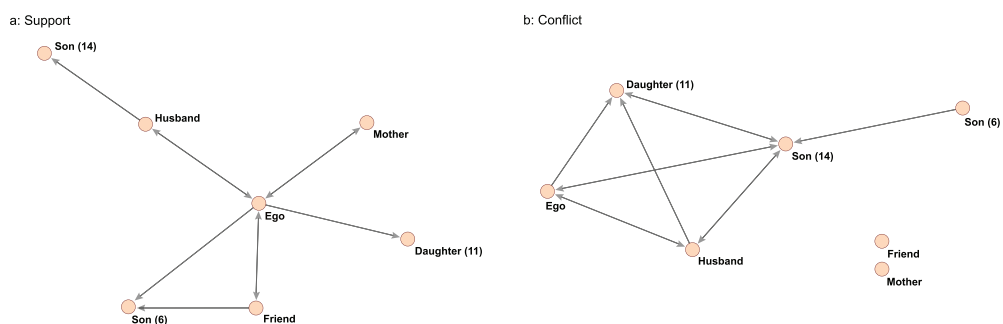


Figure 1. Egocentric network with supportive (1a) and conflicted relationships (1b).

1999). This means that personal networks are an individual's perception of who is important in their lives and how these individuals are linked. [Figure 1a](#) shows the supportive relationships, and [Figure 1b](#) shows the conflicted relationships. In [Figure 1a](#), the arrows represent the manner in which directional support is provided, and in [Figure 1b](#), the manner in which who often upsets whom.

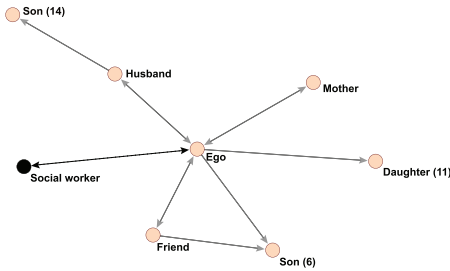
The personal network shown in [Figure 1](#) consists of seven network members. Ego named her three children, husband, mother, and friend as important people in her life. [Figure 1a](#) shows that Ego has a central position in support relationships. Most network members are directly connected to her while other members are hardly connected with each other, which means that she can moderate the flow of resources in the network. [Figure 1b](#) shows that Ego, the older son, daughter, and husband are connected through a dense pattern of conflicted relationships with each other. The younger son, mother, and mother's friend are hardly or not at all involved in conflicted relationships. As shown in [Figure 1](#), relationships in a personal network can be a source of support but also conflict. The concurrent presence of support and conflict refers to patterns of ambivalence in networks that can occur in many different forms (Widmer, 2010). In addition to support and conflict, networks are also related to values, norms, and beliefs that can influence individuals' lives positively and negatively (Kadushin, 2012; Widmer, 2010).

A network, as presented in [Figure 1](#), is not isolated in society, but enmeshed with a larger social structure (Scott, 2017). This stresses that problems that are often considered individual (e.g. addiction) or dyadic (e.g. parent-child conflict) are rooted in larger webs of relationships that go far beyond the control of an individual. An important question that needs to be clarified in this context is which network-based concepts explain the occurrence of problems that may require the intervention of social work. According to Zhao and Garip (2021), two network mechanisms are of central importance. First, personal networks influence individuals in different domains of life (e.g. child development, job seeking, health behaviour, academic success). This effect begins with the birth of a human being (Cochran & Brassard, 1979) and continues into old age (Sauter et al., 2023). Individuals' embeddedness in personal networks throughout their lives is often referred to as the convoy model of social relations (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). Second, personal networks are socially homophilic. Homophily is a selection process in which people are more likely to connect with people who are similar in terms of socioeconomic status, behaviour, and personal characteristics (McPherson et al., 2001). Homophily can lead to segregation in society, where similar people form clusters and are closely connected to each other while there is little connection between the clusters (Zhao & Garip, 2021). Thus, processes of homophily are associated with societal inequalities (Vacchiano & Spini, 2021) and therefore, with the distribution of resources and opportunities.

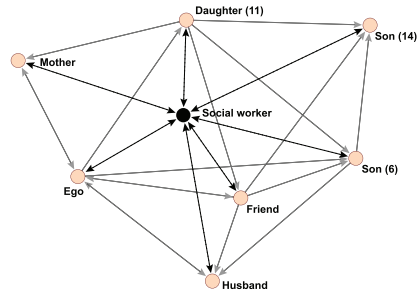
Network-oriented practice in social work

Network-oriented practice assumes that social inequality mechanisms must be considered in interventions to achieve long-term success. This fundamental assumption has implications for the conceptualisation of social work interventions, which I will specify in this section.

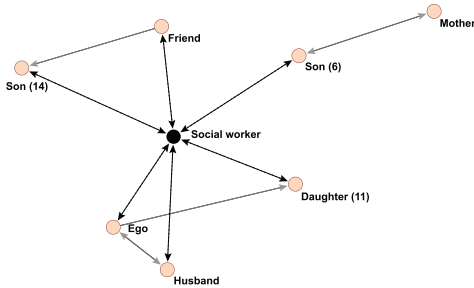
a: Single working relationship in a centralised network



b: Multiple working relationships in a dense network



c: Multiple working relationships in a three component network



d: Multiple working relationships in a two component network

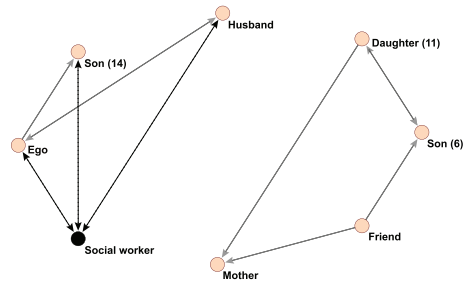


Figure 2. Four types of network intervention patterns. Note. Gray lines = Supportive relationships between network members. Dotted lines = Working relationships between the social worker and network members.

Network intervention patterns

The first specification concerns working relationship. As personal networks consist of a set of relationships, a working relationship is not an isolated relationship, but is embedded in a social structure. The connections between a social worker and the members of a network vary in terms of number and quality. This creates unique intervention patterns. Figure 2 shows various configurations of a personal network with support relationships, but with the added component of the working relationship. In Figure 2a, the social worker has only one working relationship (with Ego), while Figure 2b–d are more complex in their patterns, as they consist of several working relationships. Linking personal networks with a social worker through working relationships makes it possible to observe the structural position of the social worker in the intervention pattern. A working relationship does not have to be positive per se, but it means that there is interaction between the social worker and network member. This enables the network member to take on an active role in the intervention. Applying this network perspective, it is evident that social workers are part of the personal network of the service user. However, what makes the social worker different from other network members is the hierarchical relationship in terms of institutional power and temporary role. These structural positions of social workers in networks may have different consequences on the trajectory of an intervention.

- The first pattern shows a social worker connected to only one network member (Ego). Therefore, the intervention effects diffuse through this individual in the network. In this specific case, Ego has a very central position, which means Ego can moderate the transmission of intervention effects, for instance, by passing on information. In this pattern, social workers find it difficult to understand network-related problems because there is only one working relationship, and this creates limitations in understanding the characteristics of the network. In addition, the social worker hands over a lot of responsibility to Ego.
- In the second intervention pattern, the social worker has ties with a high share of network members in a network where many members are interconnected through supportive ties. In this intervention pattern, the social worker is expected to have a low direct influence on the network because the intervention meets a normatively more solidified structure. However, dense networks are also characterised by well-coordinated support and a large share of reciprocal ties, which allows for more collectively supported decisions.
- The third pattern shows a social worker who is also connected to many network members who are themselves only loosely connected. If the social worker were to be removed from the network, three separate components would remain. Therefore, the social worker has a very central position, which makes it easier to influence network members or components, because they can control the flow of ideas, information, and resources. Therefore, the social worker has a bridging function.
- In the fourth pattern, the social worker is connected only with one component of the network. In contrast to the third pattern, the social worker does not combine the components but joins one. Hence, the effects of the intervention cannot reach other components through network ties. This pattern could be considered problematic from the perspective that the social worker forms an alliance with a component. This excludes the other component from the intervention.

Key concepts for intervention

When establishing working relationships with multiple network members, intervention becomes complex in terms of the relationship patterns it creates. As social workers create connections with network members who relate to each other, these working relationships are interdependent. This implies that the working relationship with one network member influences the working relationship with other network members and vice versa. This makes interventions complex in terms of their relational consequences. The following three concepts help to understand what social work intervention might potentially cause in terms of changes in a personal network.

Interdependency

According to Elias (1978), attitudes and behaviours can only be understood in relation to the network in which they are embedded owing to the interdependent nature of human relationships. As network members fulfil some of each other's needs, individuals are dependent on one another, even if they are not aware of it. These interpersonal dependencies go beyond obvious ones, such as practical support or money transfers, and include both emotional and cognitive dimensions. Shifts in dyads, such as the formation

of cooperation between two network members, can create tensions in other relationships within a network. Such effects extend beyond the control of a single network member or social worker. Several dyads in networks form complex chains of interdependencies in networks (Widmer, 2010). Therefore, changes in a small number of dyadic relationships during an intervention can influence the larger configuration of a network. These effects are crucial to the course of an intervention as they impact important dimensions of personal networks such as patterns of support and power relations (Widmer, 2010).

Unintended consequences

A personal network consists of a stable and established set of interconnected relationships characterised by interactional routines. Hence, if a network undergoes changes because of a social work intervention, it does so in its own way. Therefore, it is likely that the intervention causes a network dynamic associated with ‘unintended consequences’ (Scott, 2017, p. 158). They are unintended as they were not planned from an intervention perspective. Therefore, they can be positive or negative. As social workers operate under imperfect knowledge regarding the conditions in which they act, the consequences are only controllable to a relatively small extent. They have limited knowledge regarding the connections of service users with their larger social context and the dynamics they trigger in a network. Furthermore, service users are not simply passive actors but also actively contribute to changes in these social relations with their own intentions (Widmer, 2010). Which in turn can influence the actions and decisions of social workers. Therefore, the relationship between social workers and networks is reciprocal.

Focused organisation of social ties

According to this theory, there is a relationship between the formation of personal networks and so-called foci (Feld, 1981). A focus can be different things such as activities, persons, or places. When people share a focus, they are more likely to be tied together because their activities are organised around the shared focus, resulting in a denser network. In the framework of Feld’s theory, a function of social workers is to support network members in setting or redefining foci, which is expected to foster structural changes that contribute to overcoming difficulties. However, creating such foci is associated with varying degrees of voluntariness in social work interventions. If the degree of voluntariness is low – for example, in the context of child protection – it is more difficult to negotiate relationships because people are forced to participate. This can lead to interpersonal constraints and conflicts, making the task of creating foci challenging for social workers.

Network boundary specification

When interventions are viewed from a network perspective, the question arises as to how social workers can work effectively and ethically with networks, rather than focusing on individuals. According to the Relational Social Work approach (Folgheraiter, 2004), social workers should not manipulate or coordinate a network to conform to the practitioner’s or other authorities’ ideas. Therefore, it is essential for networks to have a high degree of freedom when developing solutions. Social workers’ core task is to support network members in interacting and developing their coordinated actions.

Owing to the relationality of social problems, collectively appropriate solutions most likely arise from networks rather than from a single individual. Social workers must ensure that all people affected by the problem of concern or who can potentially contribute as a resource are included in the intervention process; otherwise, some people will be favoured in the development of solutions, while others will be excluded. However, this confronts social workers with the so-called ‘boundary-specification problem’ (Laumann et al., 1983). This problem addresses the question of where the boundary of a particular network lies. This problem has been discussed primarily in research on networks, but is also of great importance for social interventions. A social worker needs a ‘definitional focus’ that makes it possible to draw the boundary of the network in which the intervention is to take place or where the effects of the intervention are to be reached. In principle, a distinction can be made between the ‘realist’ and ‘nominalist’ approaches. In the realist approach, individuals define the boundary themselves, whereas in the nominalist approach the boundary is predefined. According to Laumann et al. (1983), the boundary of a network can be set by actors, relationships, or events. Inclusion via the ‘actor’ criterion can mean that individuals are involved in an intervention via their membership in a formally constituted group, such as ‘household’ or ‘nuclear family’. Inclusion via the ‘relationship’ criterion could be achieved by including people who have a high frequency of contact and are therefore deeply involved in each other’s lives. Finally, inclusion via the ‘event’ criterion could take place via the inclusion of individuals associated with a child abuse report, for instance. In the context of social work practice, establishing a network boundary may be an ongoing task rather than a one-off decision at the start of an intervention. Furthermore, strategies for creating a definitional focus are likely to be a combination of different approaches to achieve the most optimal boundary for an intervention.

A guiding framework for social workers

If social work interventions are understood as meso-level interventions, a framework is required to guide social workers in their network-oriented practice. Hawkins and Maurer (2012) emphasise the importance of social capital as a fruitful concept for social work. They argue for a multidimensional view that includes bonding, bridging, and linking social capital as reference points for social work practice. The distinction among these three types of social capital is based on the work of Woolcock (2001). A major advantage of this distinction is that the types of social capital can be linked to characteristics of personal networks:

- Bonding social capital refers to a high density of supportive relationships in networks and network members’ similarities in social identities. Higher density is linked with safety, cohesion, trust, and well-coordinated support (Kadushin, 2012). However, higher levels of bonding social capital are also linked to normative control and redundancy regarding knowledge (Widmer, 2010), which might be a barrier to the desired changes in the context of social work interventions because normative forces are too strong or knowledge and skills are lacking.
- Bridging social capital is related to relationships with people who do not share the same social circle and are less similar in terms of social identity and

sociodemographic characteristics (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Bridging social capital creates access to more exclusive pools of resources that go beyond those located in bonding social capital, and therefore promotes self-sufficiency, individualisation, efficiency, and feelings of competence. However, bridging social capital comes with the disadvantage of losing a certain degree of safety and embeddedness (Kadushin, 2012). In social work interventions, bridging social capital is useful for providing service users with access to alternative normative contexts or resources that can contribute more effectively to desired changes.

- Linking social capital refers to relationships between individuals and representatives of formal institutions (e.g. teachers, doctors, social workers). The main function of linking social capital is to create opportunities for access to information, resources, and expertise beyond the community level. Linking social capital requires a trusting relationship with the representatives of a formal institution. However, the relationship is organised vertically owing to their institutional power and therefore differs from bonding and bridging social capital (Woolcock, 2001). Linking social capital is especially necessary when specialised help or access to institutional resources is required, which cannot be provided by other people in the network.

These types of social capital have both advantages and disadvantages. However, variations in the combination of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital have been shown to be associated with a range of outcomes, some of which are more favourable than others for the development of an individual's life (Widmer, 2010; Woolcock, 2001).

Network-oriented research in social work

The scientific examination of service users' personal networks and the effects of social work interventions on them are central to the provision of effective interventions. The description, analysis, and visualisation of network-oriented social work are closely linked to the methods of SNA. SNA refers to the analysis of social structures. It provides scholars with vocabulary and a large set of measures for the relational analysis of relationships between actors such as individuals, groups, and organisations (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). In SNA, relationships are not properties of individuals but rather systems of their own that result from the links between individuals or other actors. These relational systems are called 'networks' in SNA terminology. To achieve this, SNA uses 'relational data' rather than 'attribute data' (Scott, 2017, p. 4). While attribute data focus on the attributes of individuals, such as their attitudes, behaviour, level of education, and health, relational data refers to the relationships between individuals, groups, and organisations.

Data collection

The collection of personal network data is divided in three steps. First, the respondents are asked to read a so-called name generator, for instance, *Who are the people who were very important to you in the past year, even if you didn't get on well with them?* Based on the name generator, the respondents create a list of people who are important to them. Second, the respondents are asked to provide information regarding their relationships with the people listed (e.g. type of relationship,

frequency of contact, geographical distance) as well as information on these people (e.g. age, gender, profession). Third, the respondents are asked to indicate the relationships among the people listed. For example, a respondent may be asked to indicate who would support whom in this list of people, including the respondent. Using this procedure, information regarding the ego-alter (ties between the respondent and network members) and alter-alter relationships (ties between network members) is gathered. As only one person is asked about their personal network, this type of network is referred to as an ego-centric network. Therefore, it is a cognitive representation of how a person is embedded in a web of important social relationships.

Data analysis

The analytical methods and formal indices offered by SNA facilitate the analysis of the size, composition, and structural properties of networks as well as the structural position of individuals in networks (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Commonly used network indices are as follows:

- Network composition refers to the composition of a network in terms of the roles that its members have (e.g. mother, father, friend) and their attributes (e.g. age, gender, and social status). Network composition ranges from homogeneous (many network members with the same role) to diverse (many roles and attributes). The analysis of network composition provides information regarding the diversity of resources in personal networks and can therefore be used as an indicator of homophily.
- Network size is the number of members in a network, counted with or without ego. Size is also used to count the number of network members per component or specific subset of a network. Network size usually refers to the number of individuals important to Ego. However, this does not mean that all individuals provide Ego with support. Although a larger network offers more resources, it is associated with a higher risk of negative influences (Antonucci et al., 1998). Moreover, network size is significantly associated with numerous health outcomes such as depression (Webster et al., 2022).
- Network structure refers to the pattern of a network in terms of its ties. The commonly used indices are density and reciprocity. Network density measures the degree to which network members are connected. In a dense network most, if not all, network members are connected through a relationship. Density can be used as a measure of bonding social capital (Aeby et al., 2014) because it implies similarity and cohesion among network members. Indices of reciprocity focus on the measurement of social exchange, which is linked to the distribution of power and creation of trust and solidarity (Molm, 2010).
- Structural position refers to the embeddedness of a network member. Centrality indices or in- and out-degree are often used in this regard. The structural position of a network member has both advantages and disadvantages. Centrality indices of network members (e.g. betweenness centrality) can be used as a measure of bridging social capital (Aeby et al., 2014) as they show the degree to which an individual

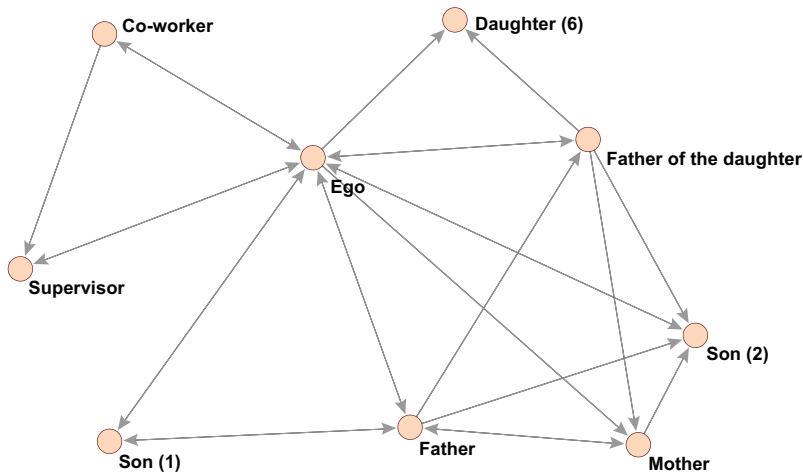


Figure 3. Egocentric network with supportive relationships. Note. Network size = 9. Network density = 0.35. Arc reciprocity = 0.64. Betweenness centrality of Ego = 0.59. In-degree of Ego = 6. Out-degree of Ego = 8.

connects different groups of individuals who are otherwise not connected. In- and out-degree refer to the number of incoming and outgoing ties of a specific network member. For instance, the number of network members who provide Ego with support (in-degree) and the number of network members who are supported by Ego (out-degree).

In addition to the calculation of these network indices, a unique strength of the network approach lies in its possibilities for visualisation, which come from its close connection with SNA. **Figure 3** shows a network graph with directed support relationships with the corresponding network indices shown in the caption.

Illustrative studies

Studies in the field of social work that have applied SNA methods can be roughly divided into three categories. First, studies that analysed service user's personal networks. Second, studies that examined how personal networks predict variables of interest. Third, studies that used personal networks as explanatory or outcome variable with regards to social work interventions.

Two examples for descriptive studies are as follows: Giesbers et al. (2019) examined the family networks of individuals with mild intellectual disabilities living in community-based or residential settings. This study used several network measures to analyse the structural properties of emotional support relationships, such as network size, density, average degree, arc reciprocity, in- and out-degree, and betweenness centrality. The study provided insights into the patterns of emotional support provision in the family networks of individuals with mild intellectual disability. Valenzuela-Garcia et al. (2021) analysed the size and structural features of the personal network of individuals experiencing multiple exclusion homelessness in Spain who were service users of a charity. The results

revealed that the personal networks were relatively small and consisted of a disproportionate number of professionals.

Two examples for explanatory studies are as follows: In a study by Fellmann (2024), the personal networks of parents enrolled in a family intervention in Switzerland were analysed, and their associations with behaviour and school-related problems of their children were examined. This study used the network indices of composition, density, and betweenness centrality regarding both support and conflict relationships to predict child-related problems. Marion et al. (2017) studied how the personal networks of young people transitioning from residential care to adulthood were associated with educational or professional activities and the existence of a housing plan. The results revealed that having a youth worker as an important member of a personal network significantly increased the likelihood of being involved in educational or professional activities.

Two examples for impact studies are as follows: First, one study analysed the effects of a family intervention program in Switzerland. It involved observing the intervention effects on interpersonal conflicts in parents' personal networks (Fellmann, 2023). The results showed that high levels of trust between practitioners and network members were associated with a decrease in conflict density and reciprocity. This study generated new findings on how family interventions trigger complex dynamics in conflict patterns associated with the multiple working alliances that practitioners build during the intervention. Second, Gesell et al. (2016) examined the effects of a group intervention delivered to parents with children at risk of developing obesity. The results showed that creating relationships between the parents participating in the group intervention increased their feelings of cohesion. This study provides new insights into the group dynamics that occur during group interventions, which are crucial for the change in attitudes and behaviours of service users.

Future research directions

To date, the application of SNA methods in social work research is rather limited. Consequently, it has not yet been possible to develop a discourse from which a foundation for social work research could emerge. Hence, there is a lack of empirical studies designed and developed in the discipline of social work that use SNA methods to examine disciplinary-specific issues. Accordingly, fundamental questions must first be answered. For example, questions like 'which research questions in social work are suitable for SNA', or 'which theories are appropriate to describe and discuss SNA research in the terminology and concepts of social work'. This debate is necessary to achieve meaningful applications and results for the scientific discipline and the practice of social work. Finally, social work research must also address the personal relationships in the digital realm, as online interactions are part of many people's everyday life. Therefore, SNA could be combined with methods specialised for the digital realm, such as netnography (Kozinets, 2010).

Conclusions

This paper aimed to present a network perspective in social work practice and research that emphasises the embeddedness of service users at the meso level of

society. This perspective stresses the need for social work to address the social inequalities linked to service users' problems more effectively through network-oriented practice. Personal networks are not simply a structure in which service users are embedded, but a boon and bane at the same time. Network-oriented practice understands personal networks as a requirement for individual development; therefore, they should not be ignored by practitioners. A major strength of the network perspective is its close relationship with SNA, which allows for the examination of personal networks and the effects of social work interventions within larger societal structures. However, to date, there has been a dearth of studies on the personal networks of service users. Therefore, further research is required in at least two domains. First, more empirical studies are required to better understand the links between service users' personal networks and specific problems. Second, future studies should examine the effects of different intervention patterns on personal networks. Such knowledge would help to develop practical methods within different fields of social work.

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