Editorial

On the Role of Space, Place, and Social Networks in Social Participation

Gil Viry [1],*, Christoph van Dülmen [2], Marion Maisonobe [3], and Andreas Klärner [2]

[1] School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, UK
[2] Thünen Institute of Rural Studies, Germany
[3] Géographie-cités, CNRS, France

* Corresponding author (gil.viry@ed.ac.uk)

Abstract

Recent literature recognises the importance of situating social networks in spatial contexts to better understand how space, place, and social networks interact and are co-constituted. Despite this call, the mainstream literature in social network analysis pays relatively little attention to spatial dimensions of social networks and remains largely disconnected from the vast body of research on spatial networks in geography and cognate fields. This thematic issue is one step towards advancing this research agenda by examining how such an approach relates to issues of social inclusion and social participation. It includes a selection of studies that focus on the relation between space and social networks across a wide variety of research fields and contexts. Contributions use original, often mixed-method approaches and multiple perspectives for capturing the role of space and people's experience of place in network formation through physical, cultural, and geographical dimensions. We conclude this editorial by briefly suggesting areas for future research.

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue "On the Role of Space, Place, and Social Networks in Social Participation" edited by Gil Viry (University of Edinburgh), Christoph van Dülmen (Thünen Institute of Rural Studies), Marion Maisonobe (CNRS), and Andreas Klärner (Thünen Institute of Rural Studies).

1. Introduction

The idea for this thematic issue emerged when we were organising sessions on the spatial dimensions of social networks at the International Network for Social Network Analysis (INSNA) Paris Sunbelt Conference in July 2020. The success of this event and the stimulating conversations with colleagues motivated us to develop this issue. It is ironic and telling that these conversations and the subsequent collaboration around the role of space on social connections occurred remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrating that, while physical co-presence facilitates emotionally-based relationships, scientific collaboration and intellectual stimulation can also happen online.

After outlining the theoretical stakes of this issue (Section 2), we briefly introduce the eight contributions

and their approaches (Section 3) and conclude by giving potential directions for future research (Section 4).

2. Social Networks in Spatial Contexts

Recent literature recognises the importance of situating social networks in spatial contexts to better understand the interplay between space, place, and patterns of connections between actors (e.g., Small & Adler, 2019; Ye & Liu, 2018). As Neal (2020, p. 369) recently writes in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Networks*: "Just as people are embedded in networks of different types of relationships, they are also embedded in physical space: They live somewhere, they work somewhere, and they form relationships somewhere." This "somewhere" affects the preferences and opportunities for social actors to develop and maintain specific networks, whether it is

through spatial configurations (e.g., a room layout or meeting places within a neighbourhood), connectivity (e.g., the global network of cities), demographic composition (e.g., urban segregation), or the cultural norms in particular places (e.g., a monastery).

This call is part of a wider project in the network literature claiming that social network analysis (SNA) studies need to pay more attention to the importance of contexts, including a better integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods (Crossley, 2010; Froehlich et al., 2019). This call is also in line with the spatial or mobility turn in the social science and humanities arguing that research should move away from considering fixity and propinquity as the norm and pay more attention to issues of space, place and mobility (Urry, 2012). Thinking space in network formation has a long history going back to classic network studies in social psychology, social anthropology, and sociology, such as Festinger et al. (1950), Mitchell (1969), Feld (1981), and Fischer (1982), who were all concerned with how space shapes social networks.

Despite this call, the mainstream literature in SNA pays relatively little attention to spatial dimensions of social networks and remains largely disconnected from the vast body of research on spatial networks in geography and cognate fields, such as architecture, transport and urban studies. This is particularly true in quantitative SNA, where the role of space in tie formation, when studied at all, has often been analysed through the unique lens of physical distance (or proximity)—usually as something "from the outside" to overcome, rather than as an inherent characteristic of relationships (e.g., long-distance relationships), networks (e.g., transnational families), and spatial environments (e.g., metropolitan areas). While this research has demonstrated that physical co-presence (and therefore the ability to be mobile) continues to strongly structure personal networks in the age of internet-based telecommunications (Mok et al., 2010; Preciado et al., 2012; Spiro et al., 2016), it is commonly influenced by a traditional notion of space as fixed and containing networks; its "impact" on networks being often limited to a Euclidean distance between network members. There are of course important exceptions with studies that focus on mobile populations, such as international migrants, or specific places of interest (e.g., poor neighbourhoods, schools) and place-based relationships (e.g., neighbours). Qualitative and mixed-method SNA studies have usually been more concerned with space when they analyse how the social, cultural, historical context of a place influences the relationships and processes taking place within networks (Bellotti, 2014; Froehlich et al., 2019). However, we argue that important questions and approaches for analysing how social networks and spatial contexts intersect need further development.

This lack of attention to space in the network literature is particularly surprising when we consider that human geographers have long replaced the once-dominant notion of "container space" with an understanding of space as a relational phenomenon between people, objects, and places. From this perspective, social networks are no longer conceptualised as "contained in space" but in co-constitution with physical space. Network formation is a spatially-embedded and dynamic phenomenon in which space has structural effects on the way people develop and maintain specific network patterns through various mechanisms. At the same time, social actors are constituting spaces by interlacing different places through their social relationships and practices (see, e.g., Massey, 2005).

Social networks bear the traces of the successive places, groups and contexts through which individuals navigate and in which they have woven ties that remain active today. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of social networks (their size, structure, composition, etc.) and network processes (homophily, centrality, clustering, etc.) requires researchers to examine the relationships people, groups, and contexts have with places and what (and who) flows between these places. This not only means analysing how characteristics of spatial environments influence social relationships but also how, in turn, social relationships influence space, including how individuals and groups (bodily, sensory, and emotionally) experience places and spatial mobility depending on the relationships they are building there, what meanings they attach to places and spatial mobility, and how these experiences shape their social relationships and networks.

3. Multiplicity of Approaches

This thematic issue provides a selection of articles that focus on the relation between space and social networks across a wide variety of research fields. The issue starts with three contributions where the authors develop original approaches to examine personal networks in spatial contexts, either by looking at the geographical locations of the connections developed (Bidart et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2022) or the everyday places visited by the participants (van Dülmen & Klärner, 2022). The following five articles focus on specific spatial contexts and how the characteristics of places and people, and the connections between the two (through, e.g., sense of place, spatial appropriation, place attachment), shape the formation of social ties and networks (Baggetta et al., 2022; Beckmann et al., 2022; Le & Kolleck, 2022; Resler et al., 2022; Schubert & Brand, 2022). Spatial contexts examined are diverse, ranging from micro-spaces (city allotment gardens in Resler et al., 2022; meeting spaces of civil society organisations in Baggetta et al., 2022), meso-level spaces (residential centres for asylum-seeking adolescents in Schubert & Brand, 2022; cultural and arts education centres in Le & Kolleck, 2022; urban places and neighbourhoods in Beckmann et al., 2022; cultural meeting places in van Dülmen & Klärner, 2022), to macro-spaces (employment areas of

two countries in Bidart et al., 2022; inter-city distances in Liang et al., 2022).

Examining spatially-embedded social networks and socio-spatial processes involves conceptual and methodological challenges. What dimensions of spatial contexts and spatial scales are relevant? How to visualise social networks in space? How to analyse similarities, differences, and interconnections between the space in which people perform their daily activities and the space in which their social relationships develop? The collection of studies presented in this issue shows that capturing the role of space as a complex and multidimensional system requires multiple perspectives, both qualitative and quantitative methods. Many contributions use original combinations of methods, suggesting that there is no golden approach but various ways of approaching these issues, depending on the research questions addressed, the type of social relationships and spatial contexts examined, and the scale at which space is considered. Methods commonly used in SNA are often mixed with less conventional methods in creative ways: GPS tracking and two-mode analysis of people and places (van Dülmen & Klärner, 2022), qualitative content analysis and exponential random graph models (Schubert & Brand, 2022), systematic social observations (Baggetta et al., 2022), qualitative interviews with egocentric network hierarchical mapping (Le & Kolleck, 2022), or name-generator surveys and data-reduction techniques (Bidart et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2022; Resler et al., 2022, additionally including qualitative interviews in the studies by Bidart and colleagues and Resler and colleagues, specifically).

4. Issues of Social Inclusion and Areas for Future Research

Situating networks in spatial contexts aims to understand network phenomena better, including those related to issues of social inclusion and social participation. We see three areas where such an approach may be especially fruitful. One is the interaction between risk factors of social exclusion at the spatial and network levels. Well-known spatial factors of social exclusion, such as area deprivation, lack of spatial mobility, or local stigmatisation, may not have similar effects on everyone, depending on the relationships people have in and beyond this space. For instance, the lack of accessibility among some individuals may be partly compensated for by the greater spatial mobility of their network members. A second area is the relationship between area-based and individual-based social capital and the extent to which resources at one level spread to the other level. The increased availability of network "big" data at the scale of entire populations offers promising opportunities in this regard. A third area is the relationship between places and social networks in their cultural dimension. Meanings people attribute to social relationships, stories, identities, and roles are intrinsically linked

to their experiences of place and the cultural norms in these places. In turn, the constitution of space and places, as well as their perception, are inextricably linked to how the social relationships that individuals or groups have with each other are spatially embedded. To gain a better understanding of these links, and thus of social networks more generally, further SNA studies that innovatively integrate space are needed.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Baggetta, M., Fulton, B. R., & Caplan, Z. (2022). Space and interaction in civil society organizations: An exploratory study in a US city. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(3), 307–318.

Beckmann, M., Knüttel, K., Petermann, S., & Stefes, T. (2022). The role of spatial context in shaping adolescents' peer relationships. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(3), 262–272.

Bellotti, E. (2014). *Qualitative networks: Mixed methods in sociological research*. Routledge.

Bidart, C., Maisonobe, M., & Viry, G. (2022). Analysing personal networks in geographical space beyond the question of distance. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(3), 233–247.

Crossley, N. (2010). The social world of the network. Combining qualitative and quantitative elements in social network analysis. *Sociologica*, *1*. https://doi.org/10.2383/32049

Feld, S. L. (1981). The focused organization of social ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *86*(5), 1015–1035. https://doi.org/10.1086/227352

Festinger, L., Schachter, S., & Back, K. (1950). *Social pressures in informal groups; a study of human factors in housing*. Harper.

Fischer, C. S. (1982). *To dwell among friends: Personal networks in town and city*. University of Chicago Press.

Froehlich, D. E., Rehm, M., & Rienties, B. C. (Eds.). (2019). *Mixed methods social network analysis: Theories and methodologies in learning and education* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429056826

Le, T. H. T., & Kolleck, N. (2022). The power of places in building cultural and arts education networks and cooperation in rural areas. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(3), 284–294.

Liang, X., Lee, S., Chen, H., de la Peña, B., & Andris, C. (2022). Characteristics of jetters and little boxes: An extensibility study using the Neighborhood Connectivity Survey. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(3), 221–232.

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. SAGE.

Mitchell, J. C. (1969). *Social networks in urban situations: Analyses of personal relationships in Central African towns*. Manchester University Press.

Mok, D., Wellman, B., & Carrasco, J. (2010). Does distance matter in the age of the Internet? *Urban Studies*, *47*(13), 2747–2783. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042098010377363

Neal, Z. P. (2020). The spatial dimensions of social networks. In R. Light & J. Moody (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of social networks* (pp. 368–383). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190251765.001.0001

Preciado, P., Snijders, T. A. B., Burk, W. J., Stattin, H., & Kerr, M. (2012). Does proximity matter? Distance dependence of adolescent friendships. *Social Networks*, *34*(1), 18–31. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2011.01.002

Resler, M. L., Ramos Lobato, I., & Candy, S. (2022). "We don't meet [any]where else, just here": Spatiality of social capital in urban allotments. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(3), 273–283.

Schubert, D., & Brand, A. (2022). "Whom should I talk to?": Role prescription and hierarchy building in supervised living groups. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(3),

295–306.

Small, M. L., & Adler, L. (2019). The role of space in the formation of social ties. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *45*, 111–132. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073018-022707

Spiro, E. S., Almquist, Z. W., & Butts, C. T. (2016). The persistence of division: Geography, institutions, and online friendship ties. *Socius*, *2*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023116634340

Urry, J. (2012). Social networks, mobile lives and social inequalities. *Journal of Transport Geography*, *21*, 24–30. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2011.10.003

van Dülmen, C., & Klärner, A. (2022). Places that bond and bind: On the interplay of space, places, and social networks. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(3), 248–261.

Ye, X., & Liu, X. (2018). Integrating social networks and spatial analyses of the built environment. *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science*, *45*(3), 395–399. https://doi.org/10.1177/2399808318772381

About the Authors

Gil Viry is a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Edinburgh. His teaching and research interests are in spatial mobility, family and intimate relationships, personal networks, and social integration over the life course. His recent research has focused on the spatial dimensions of personal networks. He has been convening the Social Network Analysis in Scotland (SNAS) research group since 2013.

Christoph van Dülmen is a sociologist and research assistant in the project Social Disadvantage in Rural Peripheries in Eastern Germany and the Czech Republic at the Thünen Institute of Rural Studies. His doctoral research focuses on the interactions between social networks and everyday mobility and their effects on patterns of social inequalities, the interactions of social and spatial inequalities in rural peripheries, and the integration of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Marion Maisonobe is a junior researcher in geography at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). She studies the spatial diffusion of knowledge and the geography of flows, exchanges, and sociabilities at multiple scales. Using network analysis and information visualization methods, she seeks to make her approaches more accessible and reproducible. She is in charge of the development of the NETSCITY web application for mapping science data.

Andreas Klärner is a sociologist and senior researcher at the Thünen Institute of Rural Studies. He is co-head of the project Social Disadvantage in Rural Peripheries in Eastern Germany and the Czech Republic. His research focuses on rural poverty, political polarisation, civic engagement, and the importance of personal social networks. He is a proponent of using mixed-methods approaches.