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Voices Unheard: Exploring the Absence of Discussants in Network Studies

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Understanding the size and distribution of networks has been a key focus in social network analysis. One widely used tool in surveys for collecting information on the size and distribution of networks is the "name generator" (Marsden, 1987). Previous research has shown that respondents report a low number of alters or, in some cases, an absence of them altogether. These findings have led to several interpretations, including the possibility that the lack of discussants is due to interviewer or wording effects. Additionally, it has been suggested that these results imply that individuals may be socially isolated (e.g., McPherson et al., 2016). From a comparative perspective, this study examines the sociodemographic and social factors associated with the likelihood of individuals not reporting discussants. Our research uses data from the Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP), which includes information from 41 surveys conducted across 22 countries. This study focuses on two specific name generators: whom they talk to about important issues, and whether they discuss political matters with them. Our preliminary results show that certain sociodemographic and social interaction factors can reduce the likelihood of individuals not reporting discussants, such as age, being married, and having a job. However, these factors vary across countries and change over time. To shed further light on this issue, this study also focuses on the CNEP surveys conducted in Italy and Chile over different periods (Italy: 1996, 2013; Chile: 1993, 2017, 2021). The composition of the conversation networks in these countries is described in detail, followed by a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the name generator. By understanding the potential limitations of this approach, researchers can develop strategies to improve data collection and analysis. Additionally, by acknowledging the possibility of social isolation, scholars can better understand the challenges some individuals face in several contexts.

Keywords

Name generator; ego networks; comparative analysis; social isolation

Topics

• Egonetworks and applications

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