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Georg Simmel's Contribution to Social Network Research

Betina Hollstein

Forthcoming in "Personal Networks: Classic Readings and New Directions in Ego-centric Analysis", edited by Mario L. Small, Brea L. Perry, Bernice Pescosolido and Edward Smith, Cambridge University Press.

Abstract

Georg Simmel (1858-1918) is widely recognized as an important forerunner of the social network approach. This chapter discusses the impact of Simmel's writings on the development of social network analysis and its relevance for contemporary research. I argue that Simmel's work was both more influential and more systematic than has usually been acknowledged. In the first part I trace Simmel's influence on social network analysis by distinguishing between a general structural perspective and the adoption of concrete ideas, particularly formulated in his chapters on quantitative aspects and the "web of group affiliations". In the second part the focus is on Simmel's concept of forms of sociation (*Formen der Vergesellschaftung*). I argue that reference to so-called basic structural properties such as group size, time or space is key to an analytical perspective that provides a specific explanation of how relationships and networks matter. The "power of structural properties" with respect to the dynamics of social relationships is illustrated by a qualitative study on changes in personal networks following the loss of the spouse. I close with implications for research into personal networks.

Keywords

Georg Simmel, Personal Networks, Egocentric Networks, Network Effects, Network Dynamics, Network Changes, Dyad, Triad, Group Affiliations, Widowhood.

I. Introduction

Along with Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel (1858-1918) is widely acknowledged as one of the most important forerunners of the social network approach. Going beyond Spencer, Simmel was the first to determine social interaction as the basic building block of sociology. As Simmel states in the first chapter of his major work, *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (1908; Sociology: Inquiries into the forms of sociation): “Society exists where a number of individuals enter into interaction.” He continues:

“A collection of human beings does not become a society because each of them has an objectively determined or subjectively impelling life-content. It becomes a society only when the vitality of these contents attains a form of reciprocal influence; only when one individual has an effect, immediate or mediate, upon another is mere spatial aggregation or temporal succession transformed into society. If, therefore, there is to be a science whose subject matter is society and nothing else, it must exclusively investigate these interactions, these kinds and forms of sociation.” (1971: 23-24 [1908: 5-6]).

In this way, Simmel expresses the core idea of the social network approach, which is to place the relations between actors and their effects upon actors at the center stage of analysis. According to Simmel, the problem and the object of sociology is to identify these forms of sociation, to systematically order them, to psychologically explain them, and to study their historical development (1971: 27 [1908: 7]).

Simmel subsumes very different phenomena under these forms of sociation, sometimes also called *Formen der Wechselwirkung* (forms of reciprocal influence): for example, modern marriage, a traveling acquaintanceship, secret societies, representation, competition, the stranger, the poor, gratitude, superordination and subordination. The articles selected for this volume represent such forms of sociation: The three essays “On the Significance of Numbers for Social Life: Introduction,” “The Isolated Individual and the Dyad,” “The Triad,” are all parts of the second chapter *Die quantitative Bestimmtheit der Gruppe* (The quantitative determination of the group)¹ of Simmel’s major work *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (1908). “The web of group affiliations” is the sixth chapter,

¹ All headings and subheadings were added to the English translation by the translator and editor Kurt H. Wolff (1950). In the original the chapter with 68 pages is subdivided by numbers only (Simmel 1908). Besides, original sentences, paragraphs, and chapters were considerably shortened (Wolff 1950: xx).

Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise, of the same volume, literally translated as the “intersection of social circles” or “cross-cutting social circles”.

Tracing Georg Simmel’s influence and determining the impact of his work on social network analysis more precisely is not an easy task. Although Simmel’s writings have been read and studied throughout the 20th century in Europe and the US, his work has been digested quite selectively (cf. Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976a; 1976b; Dahme 1981; Levine 1989; Frisby 2002). As Levine and colleagues pointed out in 1976, “Although literate American sociologists today could be expected to produce a coherent statement of the theoretical frameworks and principal themes of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, few would be able to do the same for Simmel.” (1976a: 814). Part of the reason for this “fragmentary picture” (ibid.)² is that Simmel’s work has been translated³ only in part and piece by piece in several waves. This is especially true for Simmel’s major treatise, *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Sociology: Inquiries into the forms of sociation; 1908), which is his most significant work for social network research. The *Soziologie* was translated into English in its entirety only ten years ago (2009), i.e. more than one hundred years after its first appearance (cf. Appendix A). Before then, only parts of it were translated, e.g. in 1902, 1921, 1950, 1955, and 1971. And with the exception of the three-page section *Exkurs über den Fremden* (Excursus on The Stranger) the major part of the 66-page chapter *Der Raum und die räumlichen Ordnungen der Gesellschaft* (Space and The Spatial Organizations of Society) was translated

² Something that also seriously impacted the reception of Simmel’s work is the fact that Parsons did not include the chapter he had written on Simmel in the *Structure of Social Action*, focusing on Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber only. As Levine et al. state: “The impression given by this authoritative volume was that Simmel was not a figure with whom serious students had to reckon” (1976a: 820).

³ Some notes on translations that might have added to the problems in reconstructing Simmel’s contribution and doing him justice: E.g., Simmel’s central theoretical term *Formen der Vergesellschaftung* has unfortunately been translated also as “forms of socialization” (Simmel 1902). Later, Wolff (1950: lxiii) consistently used the term “sociation”, which seems more accurate. In the case of *Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise*, translator Reinhard Bendix changed the literal translation “the intersection of social circles,” which he considered an “almost meaningless” geometric analogy (Simmel 1955: 125) into “the web of group affiliations”. As Walter pointed out, the translator “missed a great deal of Simmel’s meaning, which is conveyed indirectly by analogy and metaphor as well as by direct language” (1959: 153), arguing that the literal translation is most appropriate. Similarly, Simmel’s basic term *Wechselwirkung* has sometimes been translated merely as “interaction”. Instead, the literal translation “reciprocal influence” seems to be more accurate in that it stresses the mutual effects on the participating actors.

only in 1997.⁴ The piecemeal way in which Simmel's ideas entered the Anglo-Saxon world, together with the "bewildering variety of topics" (Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976a: 814), might have contributed to negative stereotypes of his work as "unorganized" (ibid.), "unsystematic" (Caplow 1956: 489), or essayistic.

In the following I will argue that Simmel's work was both more influential and more systematic than has usually been acknowledged. In describing the reception of Simmel's work and his influence on network research I will distinguish between analytical perspectives drawing on Simmel's writings, especially as developed in his *Soziologie* (1908), and the adoption of concrete ideas and hypotheses formulated by Simmel, particularly in the chapters on quantitative aspects of social relationships (*Die quantitative Bestimmtheit der Gruppe*) and the "web of group affiliations" (*Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise*). In the subsequent section I will focus on analytical perspectives contained in Simmel's work on social forms that have not been taken up systematically so far, but that could fertilize the study of ego-network research in particular. In the final section, I will point out some directions for future research into personal networks.

II. Analytical perspectives and channels of influence

With his *Beziehungslehre* (general science of relationships) Leopold von Wiese (1924/1929) coined the term *Formale Soziologie* (formal sociology), explicitly building on Simmel's concept of form. However, his attempt to build a systematic classification of forms beyond historical variations, and in later versions even without individual actors, had little impact within the discipline (cf. Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976a, Häussling 2010). But in speaking of *Geflechte des Sozialverkehrs* (web of communication) and *Netze von Linien zwischen Punkten* (nets of lines between dots) von Wiese was perhaps the first to specifically make use of network analytical terms (von Wiese 1924/1929).

Other well-known theoretical approaches that explicitly drew on Simmel's work were social exchange theory (Homans 1961; Blau 1964) and conflict theory (Coser 1956; Coleman 1957), both emphasizing different aspects of reciprocal influence among social actors. Small-group

⁴ Even this translation omits important parts, specifically three excurses (cf. Appendix A) and the final 15 pages on how certain social relationships and reciprocal influence translate into spatial configurations. The complete chapter was translated only in 2009.

research, too, referred frequently to Simmel's writings, especially his ideas on dyads and triads (see below).

Less obvious but presumably more influential with regard to the development of social network analysis was Simmel's impact on what Linton Freeman has called "structural thinking" and the study of patterns of interaction. As Freeman put it, "Perhaps the most explicitly structural perspective adopted by any of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century social thinkers was displayed in the work of Georg Simmel" (Freeman 2004: 15). To trace this kind of influence, it must be remembered that Simmel's writings have been widely acknowledged in American sociology from its earliest days. In their attempt to justify and legitimate the new discipline, American sociologists drew especially on German scholars, and on Simmel's published work in particular, as well as his lectures at the University in Berlin (cf. Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976a). In the analysis of Levine et al. it was mostly through the efforts of Albion Small, founder of the *American Journal of Sociology* (*AJS*), and Robert Park, who had studied with Simmel in Berlin and became a leading figure in the Chicago school, that Simmel's writings were disseminated early on. Between 1896 and 1910, nine papers by Simmel were published in *AJS*, including "The number of members as determining the sociological form of the group" (1902a; b). Further, Park and Burgess's *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921), with its broad impact on disciplinary identity, contained ten chapters written by Simmel, more than any other author's. Most of Simmel's chapters in Park and Burgess focus on types of relationships and reciprocal influence, such as "social interaction as the definition of the group in time and space", "visual interaction", "conflict as a type of interaction", "types of conflict situations", or "the reciprocal character of subordination and superordination" (ibid.).

Above all, it was through these channels – personal contact with Simmel, the leading sociological journal, an influential introduction to sociology, and contact with the Chicago school – that several scholars became fascinated by structural thinking and the study of patterned social interaction; these scholars would later become central figures in the development of social network analysis. In fact, Simmel's influence can be traced in most of the scholars whom Linton Freeman (2004) identified as key figures in the development of social network analysis, not only in its beginnings in the 1920s and 1930s, but also during the "dark years" (ibid.) between these early beginnings and the "second Harvard thrust" (ibid.), the "break-through" of social network analysis in the 1970s.

According to Freeman (2004), it was first and foremost the anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner who - influenced by Durkheim and Simmel's writings - became a protagonist of the "first Harvard thrust" (ibid.) in the late 1920s and 1930s, impinging on Elton Mayo's team to focus more on structural aspects in the seminal study on the Western Electric Company, and afterwards conducting the Yankee City Study, a study on interpersonal networks with explicit focus on "reciprocal influence" (Warner and Lunt 1941). This approach in turn influenced e.g. George Caspar Homans and his work on small groups, as well as Edward O. Lauman's work on social distance and social stratification (cf. Freeman 2004).

But it was not only the first Harvard thrust, regarded as one important birthplace of modern social network analysis, that seems to be rooted partly in Simmel's writings. According to the meticulous reconstructions by Levine and colleagues (1976b), the two Central European immigrants, Jacob L. Moreno and Kurt Lewin, were also exposed to Simmel's work and were more influenced by it than it is usually recognized⁵. Considering this, it appears that the two "birthplaces" of social network analysis were not independent, as Freeman (2004: 20) suspected, but indirectly linked through reference to Simmel. Moreno was the inventor of sociometry, and Lewin the founder of *Gestalttheorie*, "field theory" and "topological psychology" and one of the fathers of modern experimental social psychology, who taught Alex Bavelas, Harold Kelley and John Thibaut, among others.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the University of Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, and the New School especially, became centers of reception of Simmel's work (Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976a; Freeman 2004). Robert K. Merton in particular influenced several of his students and colleagues with Simmel's structural thinking. As Charles Kadushin recalled, Merton "had his seminar students read Georg Simmel line by line, among other matters explicating the ideas of triads and social circles." (Kadushin 2012: xi). Among those who later developed key

⁵ "Moreno, whose sociograms afforded the first graphic realization of Simmel's call for a geometry of social relations, at least acknowledged some indebtedness by citing Simmel as the first sociologist to have theorized about interpersonal relations and to have conceptualized certain aspects of sociometry. ... Comparable indebtedness is harder to determine in the case of Lewin, who characteristically cited only the experimental findings of other scholars, never any sources for his general ideas. That Lewin may have been influenced by Simmel is suggested, however, by the fact that Lewin took courses in philosophy at the University of Berlin between 1910 and 1914, shortly after the publication of *Soziologie* (Simmel 1908) and at a time when Simmel's popularity as a lecturer in philosophy was considerable, as well as by the point-for-point parallelism between the basic assumptions of Lewin's field theory and Simmel's sociology In addition, Lewin's close associate and translator, Fritz Heider, was well aware of Simmel's work and cited it regularly." (Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976b: 1115).

concepts in social network research were Peter Blau, James Coleman (who taught Ronald Burt and Scott Feld), Charles Kadushin, and Ronald Breiger. It was especially these scholars who later explicitly referred to Simmel's work, selected for this volume.

III. Key concepts in social network analysis

Small-group research, which was especially prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, drew extensively on Simmel's work. E.g. Theodore Mills (1953) and Theodore Caplow (1956) developed complex sets of hypotheses on dyads and triads and conducted laboratory experiments, confirming and specifying Simmel's propositions. As mentioned above, psychological protagonists of small-group research, Jacob Moreno, Kurt Lewin, and Fritz Heider, also knew Simmel's work, and Heider especially, an associate of Lewin and developer of *balance theory* (1946), cited Simmel regularly (cf. Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976b). There are several indirect linkages from Simmel's work to the development of the concepts of *structural balance* and *transitivity*. For example, Cartwright and Harary (1956) built their graph theoretical formulation of structural balance on Heider's cognitive theory, which was then further advanced and generalized by James Davis (1967).

In his concepts of *brokerage* and *structural holes* Ronald Burt (this volume) in particular referred to "autonomy generated by conflicting affiliations" as formulated in Simmel's web of group affiliations (Burt 2005: 17), and also to Simmel's work on the triad: "The tertius is literally an entrepreneur ... a person who adds value by brokering connections between others" (2005: 17-18). Referring more closely to Simmel's typology, Obstfeld (2005) distinguished between the two strategic orientations of the *tertius gaudens* and the *tertius iungens*, i.e. the third who joins, in his study on organizational innovation, social skills, and agency in firms. On the other hand, David Krackhardt (1998), drawing on Simmel's distinction between dyads and triads, predominantly focused on structurally embedded ties and coined the notion of *Simmelian ties*, emphasizing their strength and 'stickiness'.

Simmel's writings on dyads and triads are still triggering empirical research, for example on the outcomes of third-party intervention (Collett 2011), on differences in cohesion between dyads and triads (Yoon, Thye, and Lawler 2013) or on graph constraints on the triad census in diverse species (Faust 2010).

Simmel's view of modern society as consisting of loosely connected social circles of relationships, and the modern individual as standing at the intersection of cross-cutting social circles,

have likewise inspired important network studies and key concepts. The notion of social circles, conflicting affiliations, and overlapping subgroups has stimulated conceptual work on latent class membership (Kadushin 1966), clique structures, interlocking directorates, and *affiliation* or *membership network analysis* (Breiger 1974), today mostly known as *two-mode networks*. Peter Blau (1977) advanced the *homophily* principle to a formal macrostructural theory of the influences of population structure on intergroup relations, work that later triggered the concept of *Blau space* (McPherson and Ranger-Moore 1991; see also McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, this volume).

Finally, Simmel's considerations on modernization and social change, formulated in the web of group affiliations, were taken up in important empirical studies on social networks and social stratification in urban settings (Laumann 1973; Wellman 1979; Fischer 1982; this volume), and also stimulated conceptual contributions on the structure of social networks and new patterns of the forms of sociation in the digital era (Pescosolido and Rubin 2000).

IV. A closer look into forms and interactions between form and content: How forms matter and how they change

In the following, I will argue that Simmel's work was much more systematic than is usually acknowledged and that there is even more to gain from his writings than "structural intuition" (Freeman 2004), an alertness to patterned interaction, or a treasure-trove of seemingly unconnected ideas and hypotheses. We must go beyond these impressions and look more closely into Simmel's theoretical concept of form, and in particular his distinction between form and content. This distinction, mainly deriving from Simmel's effort to define the subject matter and unique features of sociology, turned out to be responsible for some inaccurate views of his work in the wider discipline and negative appraisal of him as a pure formalist⁶.

In determining forms of sociation as the object of sociological research, Simmel explicitly distinguishes between such "forms" and what he called "content" (Simmel 1908). To Simmel, "content" pertains to factors motivating individual action, such as drives, interests, purposes, and dispositions (ibid.). According to Simmel such individual motivations may explain why individuals enter interaction, yet they do not determine the dynamics and

⁶ E.g., Theodore Abel coined the term "formal sociology", Albion Small described his sociology as "social morphology", and Emile Durkheim called his conception of social group an "empty trivial cast" (cf. Frisby 2002: 141, 149).

outcome of interaction. To be sure, forms do not exist irrespective of content. However, form and content may vary independently of each other and must therefore be analytically distinguished (ibid.).

As mentioned in the introduction, Simmel subsumes under the forms of sociation quite different phenomena, such as gratitude, family formation, the stranger, or the “tertius gaudens”. What has not been systematically acknowledged is that Simmel further decomposes the forms to the level of several, as I would call them, *basic structural properties* (Hollstein 2001), of which aspects of quantity is only one group. Altogether, seven different structural properties can be reconstructed, which Simmel systematically investigated in his *Soziologie* (ibid.): *aspects of quantity*, with number (dyad, triad) and relative size of a group (smaller and larger groups) and with the number as the principle for organizing groups; *spatial aspects*, with boundaries, spatial fixation (i.e. whether a relationship has its own location or not), spatial distances, and movement within space; *time-related aspects*, with the length of experienced and anticipated duration of a relationship; *degree of freedom to enter / quit a relationship* (e.g. relationships by choice, such as friendships, or given, such as kin); *extent of knowledge* about one another; *degree of similarity or equality*, with regard to external circumstances or individual characteristics, the latter being based on “organic similarity” (like status or gender) or “rational similarity” (such as similar interests); and *degree of institutionalization* of a relationship, such as legal regulation and different types of reciprocity (ibid.).

The *specification* of these structural properties – for instance, whether a relationship is a dyad or a triad, whether a relationship has its own location, or whether a relationship will be of long or short duration – has certain effects on individual actors: it opens up particular *opportunities*, but also exerts certain *constraints* (Hollstein 2001). For example, in a dyad (see Simmel, this volume), as opposed to larger groups, actors have a lot of influence on the character and individuality of the relationship, a factor that also accounts for a sense of the irreplaceability of the relationship. At the same time, because there is no “superstructure” (ibid.) beyond the two partners, the dyad basically precludes that those involved can avoid taking responsibility for the relationship. Further, immediate contact and intimacy are more likely to develop in a dyad than in a larger group, but in the long run the dyadic relationship also entails the risk of “triviality” (ibid.).

Regarding spatial aspects (Simmel 2009: 543-620), for example, a boundary always entails disambiguation: the boundary objectifies both membership (who belongs to a group and thus their unity), and non-membership (who is excluded). A boundary separates those on this side

from those on the other side, at the same time emphasizing the commonality of belonging to the same kind of entity (community, state etc.). Another aspect of space, spatial fixation, refers to whether a social unit is tied to a specific location (such as family, state) or whether it is spatially indefinable (e.g. friendships). A specific location represents the social entity and its unity. The exclusivity of space imparts the uniqueness and singularity of the association, at the same time entailing crystallization of communication among members and exclusion of those not belonging to this relationship.

With regard to time-related aspects: It is easier to redefine oneself in a relationship established just recently, than in one that has existed for some time. Further, a larger degree of institutionalization of a relationship supports expectations of duration, thus of security as well.

Most of the *forms of sociation* Simmel investigated in *Soziologie* (1908) are specifications of these basic structural properties. Sometimes they are specific *combinations*, as in the case of *Der Fremde* (The Stranger), who combines aspects of space and time: The stranger is someone who recently arrived and will stay. This is quite different from a guest who just arrived and will leave soon, or a traveling acquaintanceship where through the specific combination of movement in space (interaction of only short duration outside the familiar context) personal talk is more likely to unfold than with people whom you can anticipate seeing again.

The specifications of the basic structural properties, as well as combinations thereof (i.e. “forms of sociation”), represent solidified patterns of interaction that, although initiated by individual actors, may in turn affect and constrain their actions and even contradict their intentions (Simmel 1908; cf. Hollstein 2001: 60-113). By systematically elaborating the *effects of these structural properties and their combinations (forms) upon actors*, Simmel provides a specific theoretical *explanation* of how relationships and networks matter. The forms are initiated and established by individual actors, but the forms in turn also affect the actors in ways they might not have anticipated.

The effects of forms upon individuals can be described on two levels, referring to the *performance* of relationships and networks and to their *dynamics*. First, the forms, understood as combinations of the specifications of structural properties of relationships, define the range of potential functions that relationships can be expected to perform for individuals. At the same time, this range of functions is limited. In this sense, we may speak of a “*structurally limited range of utilization*”, determining what a relationship can potentially provide, what is difficult for it to provide, and what it cannot provide at all (Hollstein 2001). Table 1 gives an

Table 1: Basic structural properties of forms of sociation, specifications, and potential effects on individual actors (performance)

Basis structural properties	specifications	possible functions according to Simmel (1908), examples
Quantity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - dyad - triad - small group - large group - number as principle for organizing groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - responsibility for relationship, irreplaceability of relationship, immediate contact, intimacy, individuality, risk of triviality - intensification (mediator), threat of exclusion, outsmarting (<i>tertius gaudens</i>), ruling (<i>divide et impera</i>) - promotes individuality of the group, facilitates socializing - promotes individuality and freedom of members - division of labor, social control
Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - boundary - spatial fixation (of members, objects if interest) - spatial distance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high - low - movement within space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - objectifies membership (exclusion/ inclusion), tension between commonality and separation - singularity, significance, sensual affirmation of the group unity, centralization, exclusion - need for mediated communication, enables idealization, cost factor in emergencies - good accessibility, quick and direct contact, idealization difficult, inappropriate intimacy - isolates, individualizes, facilitates redefining of oneself, leaving milieu of origin behind, promotes intimacy and openness
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - experienced (past) duration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - short-term - long-term - anticipated (future) duration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - short-term - long-term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - facilitates redefining of oneself - promotes familiarity, common experience, closeness, sense of belonging - enables intensity and emotionality, uncertainty - promotes stability, security, risk of resigned compliance ("letting oneself go")
Freedom of choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - relationship given (e.g. kin) - relationship by choice (e.g. friendship) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - natural belongingness, sense of security, identity, risk of forced adaptation and social control, potentially hindering individualization - possibility to choose, but also need to choose, voluntary nature, uncertainty, promotes individualization
Knowledge about one another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Degree of knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high (vondor) - low (discretion) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - personal exchange, requires / facilitates trust, closeness, belongingness, risk of disregard, breach - impersonal exchange, respect (re. secret of the other)
Similarity/Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Similarity/Equality regarding external circumstances or individual characteristics (demographic, attitudes) - Dissimilarity/Inequality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - commonality, common foci, promotes exchange, closeness - strangeness, emotional distance
Institutionalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Degree of institutionalization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high (e.g. through legal fixation or norms) - low 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stability, sense of security and belongingness, predictability, inflexibility, difficulty to quit - instability, non-binding nature, flexibility

overview of such possible effects upon individual actors described and discussed in Simmel's *Soziologie* (1908 [2009]).⁷ Note that this representation does not suggest categorical differences in terms of an either/or juxtaposition; the differences between certain specifications (small groups vs. larger groups, short-term vs. long-term aspects etc.) are often only a matter of gradation. Thus, for instance, a partner being very candid in a relationship (specification of the structural property knowledge about one another) runs a higher risk of experiencing disregard than in a relationship that may be marked by discretion, but where respect is not precluded.

Second, once established by actors with differing goals, interests, and preferences ("content") such forms cannot easily be changed by an actor. Forms might display inertia or develop a "life of their own", possibly counteracting intentions and interests of the participating actors.

The "power of structural properties" with respect to the dynamics of social relationships can be illustrated by some results of a qualitative study in which the long-term changes in ego-centered personal networks after the death of a spouse were investigated (Hollstein 2002). In this study widows and widowers were found to have frequently terminated relationships with other couples once their partner passed away. This phenomenon concerns acquaintances not vested with much emotion, but also friends, i.e. alteri considered emotionally significant. The analysis of the interviews showed that abandoning relationships with other couples did not happen by chance, but followed certain rules. The transformation of a form of two couples toward a form in which the remaining couple faces a single individual implies specific changes in the nature of the get-together that under certain conditions could threaten the continuation of the relationship.

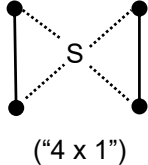
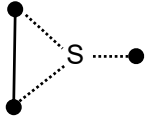
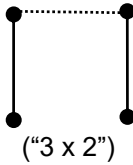
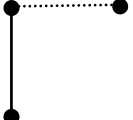
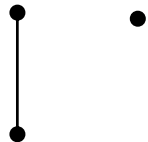
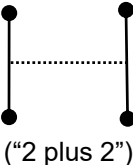
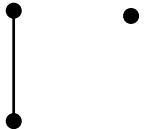
When couples associate, three constellations with different foci can be distinguished (Hollstein 2002; see table 2):

First, the group may be connected by way of a *common interest* in a certain topic or activity, serving to frame the meetings (e.g., a private literary circle or friends involved in a sports club). In light of the common theme, the fact that it is two couples who are meeting is pushed to the background. Structurally, this form of sociation consists of four individuals. In our

⁷ For a detailed discussion confer Hollstein (2001). Simmel's elaborations on the effects of forms on individual actors might have been partly responsible for some critics to cast aside his work as "psychologism", which was but another inadequate label.

study, after the loss of one partner it did not make a difference for the existence of the relationship that it was reduced to three.

Table 2: Forms of sociation of two couples and their stability following widowhood

Content of relationship	Structure of form of sociation during marriage	Change in structure following widowhood	Stability of relationship following widowhood
interest in subject matter (acquaintances)	 ("4 x 1")		stable
directed toward person (individualized friendship)	 ("3 x 2")	(a)  (b) 	stable unstable / termination
focus on socializing (acquaintances, situational friendships)	 ("2 plus 2")		unstable / termination

Legend: subject matter: S ; couple relationship: ●—● ; other relationship: ●.....●

Second, the get-together of two couples may be built on close personal friendships; a form of relationship I have called "*individualized friendships*". Such friendships are founded on common experience (e.g., having attended the same college), interests (e.g., in music), or views. These friendships create cross connections between couples, as for instance if two former

classmates meet along with their spouses. After the loss of a spouse, the question of whether one of the friends or one of the two spouses would drop out becomes crucial. In the first case, the relationship fell apart; in the second case, the two friends continued to meet.

Third, there are relationships where couples get together without sharing a specific common interest or being involved in individualized friendships beyond the couple relationship. The main purpose of the meetings is to *socialize*. This may involve acquaintances or so-called “situational friendships”, which are not as tied to a specific person as is the case with individualized friendships. In the four-persons-get-togethers, the couple relationships structurally dominate the situation. Occasionally, other “coalitions” may emerge, mainly along the lines of male and female. Apparently, gender roles serve as grounds for bonding. What we saw in this study was that once one of the partners dropped out, the whole relationship caved in. It appeared that if no other strong bonds exist, such as a common topical interest, the structure of “two plus one” prevailed and took effect irrespective of the intentions of the involved actors. This arrangement accentuates the couple being a couple just as it underscores the single not being a couple reinforcing the single person’s aloneness. Such a constellation is likely to incite jealousy in the couple and instill a sense of being superfluous in the single person (“feeling like the odd one out” – respondent; Hollstein 2002). Light-hearted socializing tends to become impossible. For these reasons, relationships among couples, especially, tend to break up following widowhood, or rather, they quietly faded away. This takes place behind the actors’ backs: Often the interviewees themselves did not really understand what had happened, and described it as particularly disturbing when it concerned couples whom they had considered friends, or when it concerned several or even most relationships of their personal network. But even if it was just acquaintances, the loss of sociability with couples was not easy to endure (ibid.).

Thus, this structural change, the transition from a relationship of two couples to a constellation involving “a couple and a single”, affects the nature of the get-together in specific ways, which under certain conditions may lead to termination of the relationship. We found this to be the case whenever the relationship to the other couple was not marked either by a strong common interest in a certain topic or activity or by a close (individualized) bond⁸.

⁸ This situation takes on a different note in the case of family relationships. Contrary to relationships outside of the family, families do not necessarily disintegrate even if the bonds have no close personal or thematic foundation. The fact of belonging to a *common family* may be viewed as a third connecting factor in itself, thus, as functionally equivalent to thematically or personally based bonds.

Referring to the significance of structural properties, the results of this study advance Simmel's considerations on group size for dynamics in the associations of two couples. Finally, they exemplify how structural properties of existing relationships interact with subjective interests and orientations, explaining severance of relationships to couples following the loss of the partner. In order to understand the mechanisms of a successful transformation from four to three, individual interests and orientations have to be taken into consideration – a level laid out but not systematically developed in Simmel's work.⁹

V. Prospects for future research

In this contribution I have argued that Georg Simmel's work was more influential for social network research and more systematic than has been widely recognized. Simmel stimulated generations of scholars, especially in sociology, but also in psychology and anthropology, to think in structural terms. At the same time his "investigations into the forms of sociation" (1908; 2009) provided a rich mine of ideas that were taken up and became the basis for key concepts in the development of social networks research.

Unfortunately, Simmel's major treatise, *Soziologie*, the most significant for social network research, was published in its entirety only recently. This might have been part of the reason why Simmel's work - with few exceptions (e.g. Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976a, Dahme 1981) - was received so selectively. His distinction between form and content, especially, proved to be responsible for his (often negative) appraisal as a "pure formalist". In the previous section, I have emphasized that in his investigations into the forms of sociation and reciprocal influence, Simmel also referred to the interests and orientations of actors (i.e. "content"), and especially the effects forms have upon actors. In this regard decomposing forms into so-called "basic structural properties" is key to understanding how forms matter and how they change.

Basic structural properties - such as group size, spatial, and time-related aspects of relationships, similarity/equality, the degree of institutionalization, or the knowledge one has about the other - mark the outcomes of past action. At the same time, once established they are an important factor in understanding the persistence of social interaction and the momentum of

⁹ Simmel did not systematically pursue this aspect, but his work offers connecting points for an integration of theoretical aspects of structure and action. Confer Dahme (1981) and Hollstein (2001; 2002).

social relationships. In this respect, basic structural properties provide a theoretical explanation for the *effects* and *dynamics*¹⁰ of forms. Thus, understanding social relationships and networks as combinations of such structural properties opens up new research perspectives.

For example, with respect to the realm of personal networks, life course events may be investigated with regard to the changes in the structural composition of social relationships and networks, changes that actors may have neither intended nor anticipated: Like widowhood, partnership, and divorce, family formation and empty nest can entail changes in the number of people involved in forms of sociation. Social mobility can alter the relations of similarity (homogeneity) in a personal network. Spatial mobility, such as moving to other places of residence, can bring fundamental change in the spatial and temporal order of relationships; that is, it alters the structure of relationships, potentially of a person's entire network, thus affecting the range of social resources, social capital, and support that actors have access to. As in the case of widowhood, these structural changes can hold specific risks and challenges for actors, raising further questions regarding how individuals deal with these challenges, how the challenges are perceived, and how they are coped with over time.

Focusing on structural properties and on forms of sociation as “solidified patterns of interaction” *beyond* the classical role relationships (such as get-togethers with two couples) allows us to study relationship and network changes and the underlying mechanisms in a more fine-grained manner. Exemplified in relationships to couples, it became clear how structural changes and individual orientations may interact and under which conditions structural properties act as a force capable of turning against actor interests while evading actor control. For instance, for widow/ers an interest in sociability turned out not to be a sufficient condition to guard against losing the social loci that had provided opportunities for socializing in the past (relationships to other couples). Such limits to the malleability of relationships, which the actors are partly unaware of, i.e. unanticipated consequences of purposive action (Merton), can only be grasped by taking both individual and structural (especially relationship-related structural) aspects into account and exploring their interaction.

Empirical research directed at both basic structural properties and subjective orientations allows us to study the diversity and heterogeneity of forms and their effects, as well as how

¹⁰ This not only pertains to changes in already existing relationships, but also to tie formation. On the role of space, for instance, confer Small and Adler (2019) who also pay homage to Simmel's work.

they interact. In order to translate such a dual-focus concept into a useful approach for empirical research, mixed methods designs appear to be a promising road to take, since they enable the systematic collection of data on formal network structures, as well as qualitative data on network practices, perceptions, and network orientations of actors.

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Appendix A: Table of content of Simmel's *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (1908) (Sociology: Inquiries into the forms of sociation)

The *Soziologie* has about 580 pages with ten chapters and twelve excurses. These are:

1. *Das Problem der Soziologie* (The problem of sociology) with the
Exkurs über das Problem: wie ist Gesellschaft möglich? (Excursus on the problem: How is society possible?);
2. *Die quantitative Bestimmtheit der Gruppe* (The quantitative determination of the group);
3. *Über- und Unterordnung* (Superordination and subordination), with the
Exkurs über die Überstimmung (Excursus on outvoting);
4. *Der Streit* (Conflict);
5. *Das Geheimnis und die geheime Gesellschaft* (The secret and the secret society), with the
Exkurs über den Schmuck (Excursus on jewelry and adornment) and
Exkurs über den schriftlichen Verkehr (Excursus on written communication);
6. *Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise* (The intersection of social circles, translated by Bendix as „the web of group affiliations“);
7. *Der Arme* (The poor), with the
Exkurs über die Negativität kollektiver Verhaltensweisen (Excursus on the negativity of collective behavior);
8. *Die Selbsterhaltung der sozialen Gruppe* (Self-preservation of the group), with the
Exkurs über das Erbamt (Excursus on inheritance), the
Exkurs über Sozialpsychologie (Excursus on social psychology) and the
Exkurs über Treue und Dankbarkeit (Excursus on faithfulness and gratitude);
9. *Der Raum und die räumlichen Ordnungen der Gesellschaft* (Space and spatial organisation of society), with the
Exkurs über die räumliche Begrenzung (Excursus on the spatial limitation),
Exkurs über die Soziologie der Sinne (Excursus on the sociology of the senses) and the
Exkurs über den Fremden (Excursus on the stranger);
10. *Die Erweiterung der Gruppe und die Ausbildung der Individualität* (The expansion of the group and the development of individuality), with the
Exkurs über den Adel (Excursus on the nobility) and the
Exkurs über die Analogie der individualpsychologischen und der soziologischen Verhältnisse (Excursus on the analogy of the individual psychological and the sociological relationships).