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The Session Will Begin Shortly

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LLMs for Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Social Network Analysis

Session 2: Qualitative and Mixed-Methods SNA

Moses Boudourides

Faculty, Graduate Program on Data Science
Northwestern University

Moses.Boudourides@gmail.com

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Outline

Qualitative SNA Is Not New

Qualitative social network analysis has deep roots:

- ▶ Ethnography and anthropology
- ▶ Relational sociology
- ▶ Process-oriented social theory

It predates most formal social network analysis (SNA) and network science both bsed on the methodologies of matrices, metrics, graph theory, and statistics.

Qualitative SNA emphasizes:

- ▶ Relations as enacted
- ▶ Networks as dynamic
- ▶ Meaning as emergent

Networks are outcomes of interaction, not fixed objects.

Classic Traditions

Key influences include:

- **Manchester School**: Focused on observing social relations in real-world contexts–such as in conflict, power, situation (e.g., Gluckman, Mitchell etc.).
- **Relational sociology**: Emphasizes that social reality is constituted by relationships, not pre-existing individuals (e.g., Harrison White, Emirbayer, Fuhse etc.).
- **Interpretive sociology** and **Ethnograph**: Provide the "thick description" necessary to understand the meaning of network ties (e.g., Geertz, Goffman etc.).

Taken together, these traditions resist the reification of structure: they caution against treating networks, roles, or institutions as objective objects that exist apart from practice. Instead, they insist that structure is continually produced, interpreted, and renegotiated through action, discourse, and ongoing social negotiations.

The Manchester School (conflict, power, situation):

- ▶ emerging from intensive case-based fieldwork
- ▶ treats social life as dynamic and contested
- ▶ emphasizing how actors navigate shifting situations and how power is exercised through everyday interaction and institutional constraint
- ▶ especially attentive to
  - ▶ process,
  - ▶ contradiction, and
  - ▶ the way "structure" is enacted in concrete episodes rather than assumed as a static backdrop.

Relational sociology:

- rather than starting from isolated individuals or fixed categories, it begins with
  - relations,
  - transactions, and
  - ties
- as the primary units of analysis.
- It asks how
  - identities,
  - meanings, and
  - opportunities

  are produced through interaction and

- it highlights how patterns of connection (and disconnection) generate durable outcomes without positing an independent "thing" called structure.

Interpretive sociology:

- foregrounds
  - meaning-making,
  - symbols, and
  - situated interpretation,
- focusing on how actors understand their worlds and coordinate action through shared (and contested) understandings,
- encourages close attention to
  - narratives,
  - categories, and
  - local reasoning,
- especially when mapping how people explain, justify, and revise their relationships and evaluations over time.

Strong Criticisms to Quantitative SNA

- **Reification of structure and thin accounts of meaning/agency:** ties are not just "pipes" for influence; they are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in practice (e.g., Emirbayer & Goodwin).

- **Networks as narratives, identities, and control/projects:** relational patterns are sustained through stories, identities, and communicative projects, not merely captured by edge patterns (e.g., White; Mische).

- **Meaning- and communication-centered networks:** networks can be treated as structures of discourse and signification, where ties organize communication and shared meanings (e.g., Fuhse).

- **Construct validity and contextual definition of ties:** what counts as a "tie" is context-dependent; qualitative elicitation and interpretation help avoid flattening, misclassification, and loss of relational content (e.g., Hollstein; Bellotti).

- **Measurement and design limitations within quantitative SNA:** boundary specification, missingness, name generators, and measurement error can dominate conclusions if not handled explicitly (e.g., Marsden; Carrington).

Lived Experience

Ethnography is the bedrock of qualitative SNA. It reveals the lived experience and cultural meanings that animate social networks.

- ▶ Participant observation.
- ▶ In-depth interviews.
- ▶ Analysis of cultural artifacts.

Thick description involves interpreting a culture by understanding its web of symbols, meanings, and social practices (Geertz).

Application to SNA

It's not just about mapping connections, but understanding their meaning from the actors' perspectives.

Multiplexity

Relationships are rarely one-dimensional. A tie can involve friendship, professional collaboration, and kinship all at once.

- Qualitative methods are essential to unpack these multiple dimensions.
- Quantitative analysis often struggles to capture this complexity.

Stories as Data

Narratives are how people make sense of their social world and their position within it. These stories are a rich source of network data.

▶ They reveal how actors perceive their relationships.

▶ They highlight the cultural norms that shape interactions.

▶ They show how network positions are negotiated and contested.

- ▶ **Roles:** Social roles (e.g., mentor, broker) are defined by patterns of relationships.
- ▶ **Positions:** An actor's position in a network shapes their opportunities and constraints.
- ▶ **Identities:** Our sense of self is shaped by our connections to others.

The Emic-Etic Distinction

Emic Perspective

The insider's view.
Understanding the social world
from the perspective of the
people being studied.

Etic Perspective

The outsider's view. The
researcher's analytical categories
and theoretical framework.

The Goal

To bridge the emic and etic perspectives, creating an analysis that
is both theoretically informed and grounded in lived experience.

Focus on the Individual

Ego-centered analysis focuses on an individual actor (ego) and their immediate relational environment (alters).

▶ Allows for in-depth understanding of an individual's social world.

▶ Can be used to compare the relational environments of different actors.

▶ Often used in interview-based research.

- We have explored the foundations of qualitative and mixed-methods SNA.
- We have discussed key concepts like thick description, multiplexity, and the emic-etic distinction.
- We have introduced and examined the Ego-Centered Network Analysis.

Next Session
We will turn to the capabilities of LLMs and how they can be integrated into these designs.

Thank you!

Questions?

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