Mixed Methods Social Networks Research

*Design and Applications*

This edited volume demonstrates the potential of mixed methods designs for the research of social networks and the utilization of social networks for other research. Mixing methods applies to the combination and integration of qualitative and quantitative methods. In social network research, mixing methods also applies to the combination of structural and actor-oriented approaches.

The volume provides readers with methodological concepts to guide mixed method network studies with precise research designs and methods to investigate social networks of various sorts. Each chapter describes the research design used and discusses the strengths of the methods for that particular field and for specific outcomes.

Silvia Domínguez is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Human Services in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Northeastern University.

Betina Hollstein is Professor of Microsociology and Empirical Social Research at the University of Bremen.
Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences

Mark Granovetter, editor

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(continued after the index)
Mixed Methods Social Networks Research

Design and Applications

Edited by

SILVIA DOMÍNGUEZ
Northeastern University

BETINA HOLLSTEIN
University of Bremen
In memory of our colleague and friend
Janet W. Salaff
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Christine B. Avenarius, Dr. phil., Sociocultural Anthropologist, is an Associate Professor for Anthropology at East Carolina University. She attended the Universität zu Köln (Th. Schweitzer), Germany; Peking University, China; and the University of California, Irvine. Her research interests include social networks, legal anthropology, cognitive anthropology, ethnicity, integration, migration, conflict resolution, globalization, East Asia, and China. Her relevant publications include: Work and Social Network Composition among Immigrants from Taiwan to Southern California, Anthropology of Work Review 23 (3–4): 3–15 (2003); Conflict, Cooperation, and Integration among Subethnic Immigrant Groups from Taiwan, Population, Space and Place 13 (2): 95–112 (2007); The Role of Information Technology in Reducing Social Obligations Among Immigrants from Taiwan, Journal of International Communication 2008 14 (1) (2008); To Bribe or Not to Bribe: Comparing Perceptions About Justice, Morality, and Inequality Among Rural and Urban Chinese, Urban Anthropology 41 (2,3,4): 247–291 (2012).

Laura Bernardi, Prof. Dr., Demographer, is an Associate Professor for Life Course Research at the University of Lausanne and Deputy Director of the Swiss National Center for Competence in Research “Overcoming Vulnerability in the Life Course.” She attended the University of Rome La Sapienza (Italy), the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium), and Brown University (US). She has been the principal investigator of numerous projects about fertility and family in Europe funded by the Max Planck Gesellschaft, the U.S. National Institute for Health, and the European Community. Her main research interests include population fertility, family sociology, life course, social networks, anthropological demography, social research mixed methods. Her publications include: Channels of Social Influence on Reproduction, Population Research and Policy Review 22: 527–555.
Contributors


Contributors

Silvia Domínguez, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Human Services at Northeastern University, Boston. Her research interests include the social mobility of immigrants, transnational ties, the acculturation of host individuals, cultural identity, violence, mental health, and trauma as a neighborhood effect. She uses ethnographic and qualitative data on her studies and is the author of several articles on immigrants’ networks, including: (with Celeste Watkins) Creating Networks for Survival and Mobility: Social Capital among African-American and Latin-American Low-Income Mothers, Social Problems 50 (1): 111–135 (2003) and (with Amy Lubitow) Transnational Ties, Poverty, and Identity: Latin American Immigrant Women in Public Housing, Family Relations 57 (4): 419–430 (2008). She is also the author of Getting Ahead: Social Mobility, Public Housing and Immigrant Networks, New York: New York University Press (2011). Silvia is the Past Chair of the Latino(a) or Latino/a Sociology Section and present Chair-Elect of the Race and Ethnic Minorities Section of the American Sociological Association.

Julia C. Gluesing, Ph.D., is a business and organizational anthropologist and Research Professor in Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, who specializes in global teaming and global product development. She was the principal investigator of an NSF grant to study the diffusion of innovation across the global enterprise by tapping into an organization’s information technology infrastructure. She conducts research in global work practices, and in cross-cultural and organizational communication for companies such as Ford Motor Company, Nissan Motor Corporation, Aegon, EDS Corporation, and Sun Microsystems. She has published in: Virtual Teams That Work: Creating Conditions for Virtual Team Effectiveness, New York: Jossey-Bass (2003); Handbook of Managing Global Complexity, Oxford: Blackwell (2003); Crossing Cultures: Lessons from Master Teachers, New York: Routledge (2004).

Roger Häussling, PD Dr. phil., is a sociologist and Professor of Sociology at RWTH Aachen University, Germany. He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Research Center, Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design, and he has been a Fellow at the International Academy Schloss Solitude and a Dissertation Fellow at the Landesgraduiertenförderung Baden-Württemberg (Germany). He received is academic education at the Universities of Mannheim, Siegen, and Karlsruhe. He holds an M.A. (Magister Artium) in sociology and a Diploma in economics and engineering. His relevant publications include: (with Christian Stegbauer, Eds.) Handbuch Netzwerkforschung [Handbook of Network Research], Wiesbaden: VS Verlag (2010); Allocation to Social Positions in Class. Interactions and Relationships in First Grade School Classes and Their Consequences, Current Sociology 58 (1) (2010).
Contributors

Betina Hollstein, Dr. phil., Sociology, at the Free University Berlin. She is Professor of Microsociology and Empirical Social Research at the University of Bremen, Germany. Previously, she held positions at the University of Munich, Mannheim University, Humboldt-University Berlin, and Hamburg University. She has been a Simon Visiting Professor at the University of Manchester, UK (2012) and a Visiting Fellow at Yale University (2010). Her research interests include social networks, sociology of the life course, social inequality, and methods. Her relevant publications include: *Grenzen sozialer Integration. Zur Konzeption informeller Beziehungen und Netzwerke* [Boundaries of Social Integration. A Simmelian Approach to Social Relationships and Networks], Opladen: Leske und Budrich (2001); *Soziale Netzwerke nach der Verwitwung* [Changes in Social Networks after the Death of the Spouse], Opladen: Leske und Budrich (2002); Qualitative Approaches, in John Scott and Peter J. Carrington (Eds.), *Sage Handbook of Social Network Analysis* (pp. 408–417), London/New Delhi: Sage (2011).

Jeffrey C. Johnson, Dr. phil., Social Science, University of California, Irvine. He is a Senior Scientist at the Institute for Coastal Science and Policy, University Distinguished Research Professor of Sociology, and Harriot College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor at East Carolina University, Greenville, NC. He has held adjunct positions in Anthropology, Biology, Biostatistics, and at The Institute for Software Research at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA. His research interests include social networks, network visualizations, modelling indigenous ecological knowledge, small group dynamics at Antarctic research stations, and complex models of social and biological systems. He has published in more than 80 peer reviewed publications, including *The Journal of Mathematical Sociology, American Anthropologist, American Ethnologist, Primates, Aviation, Space, and Environmental Medicine, Journal of Computational and Mathematical Organization Theory, Human Ecology, Social Networks, The Journal of Theoretical Biology and Social Science and Medicine*. He is the founder of the *Journal of Quantitative Anthropology*, an Associate Editor of *The Journal of Social Structure, Social Networks*, and a Co-Editor of *Human Organization*. He is an editorial board member of *Field Methods*, the *Open Sociology Journal*, and the *Developing Qualitative Inquiry* series for Left Coast Press. He is also a co-author of *Analyzing Social Networks*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (2013).

Sylvia Keim, Dr. rer. pol., is a sociologist and Assistant Professor at the Institute of Sociology and Demography, University of Rostock, Germany. Her research interests include sociology of the family and the life course, social networks, and qualitative research methods. Her relevant publications include: (with L. Bernardi and H. von der Lippe) *Social Influence on Fertility: A Comparative Mixed Methods Study in Eastern*
Contributors


**Andreas Klärner**, Dr. phil., is a sociologist and Guest Professor at the University of Hamburg, and Assistant Professor at the University of Rostock, Germany. He received his academic education at the Technical University Darmstadt, and then held research positions at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. His research interests include social networks, social capital, sociological theory, and qualitative research methods. His relevant publications include: (with S. Keim and L. Bernardi) Tie Strength and Family Formation: Which Personal Relationships Are Influential? *Personal Relationships* 20: 462–78 (2012).

**Carlos Lozares**, is a Professor of Social Research Techniques and Methods at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain, and a co-founding member of the Centre d’Estudis Sociològics sobre la Vida Quotidiana i el Treball (QUIT). His research subjects and publications refer to data analysis, multivariate and stratified sampling and the methodology of large surveys, mathematical modelling and the methodology of social research; the analysis of social networks, social capital, and network analysis of discourse; social time and the interactions between productive and reproductive practices and time and, more extensively, to the sociology of everyday life. His current interests are also focused on ethnographic analyses, situated activity and socially distributed knowledge, and social complexity and simulation. His most recent publications include: (with Pedro López-Roldán) El Atributismo estructural y el Interaccionismo estructural en ciencias sociales: ¿concepciones alternativas, antagónicas o complementarias? *Metodología de Encuestas. Revista de la Sociedad Internacional de Profesionales de la Investigación en Encuestas* 14: 25–44 (2012); (with Joan Miquel Verd and Oriol Barranco) El potencial analítico de las redes socio-métricas y ego-centradas: una aplicación al estudio de la Cohesión-Integración de colectivos sociales, *Empiria* 26: 35–62 (2013); (with Mireia Bolíbar and Joel Martí) Aplicaciones de los métodos mixtos al análisis de las redes personales de la población inmigrada, *Empiria* 26: 89–116 (2013).

**Isidro Maya-Jariego**, Doctor in Psychology, is a Full Professor at the Department of Social Psychology at the University of Seville, Spain; Director of the Laboratory of Personal Networks and Communities; Assistant Dean of the Faculty of Psychology; and the Coordinator of the Master in Psychology of Social and Community Intervention and
Contributors

the Doctorate Program “Community and Social Intervention.” He is also Editor of the journal REDES, Revista Hispana para el Análisis de Redes Sociales. His main interests are social network analysis, social and community intervention, and migration and cultural diversity. He has researched social support and personal networks of international immigrants. His most recent research compares the psychological sense of community in local, transnational, and on-line communities. His relevant publications include: (with S. Domínguez) Acculturation of Host Individuals: Immigrants and Personal Networks, American Journal of Community Psychology (2008); (with N. Armitage) Multiple Senses of Community in Migration and Commuting: The Interplay between Time, Space and Relations, International Sociology 22 (6): 743–766.

Christopher McCarty is Director of the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida and currently a rotating program officer at in the Cultural Anthropology Program at the U.S. National Science Foundation. His areas of research include the development of new methods and tools for studying personal networks in a transcultural framework, collaborative networks, and survey research methods. He is the author of the software package Egonet, a program for the collection and analysis of personal networks. His relevant publications include: (with Peter D. Killworth, H. Russell Bernard, Eugene Johnsen, John Domini, and Gene A. Shelley) Two Interpretations of Reports of Knowledge of Subpopulation Sizes, Social Networks 25 (2): 141–160 (2003); (with José Luis Molina, Claudia Aguilar, and Laura Rota) A Comparison of Social Network Mapping and Personal Network Visualization, Field Methods 19 (2): 145–162 (2007).

Cecilia Menjívar is the Cowden Distinguished Professor of Sociology in the School of Social and Family Dynamics at Arizona State University. Her research interests include family, gender, and intergenerational relations among immigrant populations; religion and the church; and immigrants’ transnational ties, as well as similar substantive issues in non-immigrant contexts in Central America. She has used various methods in her work, including ethnographic and other qualitative methods. She is the author of several articles on immigrants’ networks which have appeared in such journals as International Migration Review, American Journal of Sociology, International Migration, Journal of Comparative Family Studies, Social Problems, and Sociology of Religion, as well as the book Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America, Berkeley: University of California Press (2000).

José Luis Molina is head of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology (UAB) and Director of the Personal Networks Lab at Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Spain. His areas of interest are
Contributors

Kenneth R. Riopelle, Ph.D., is an educator, entrepreneur, management consultant, and retired research professor at the Department of Industrial & Systems Engineering, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. His professional career spans more than 40 years in both the auto industry and academia. His primary research interests include “Accelerating the Diffusion of Innovations in Globally Networked Organizations,” which was funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant from 2005 to 2010; the study of Collaborative Innovation Networks or COINs; and the Science of Team Science using co-author and co-citation analysis as a method to visualize, measure, and understand scientific collaboration. His relevant publications include: Being There: The Power of Technology-Based Methods, in Brigitte Jordan (Ed.), Advancing Ethnography in Corporate Environments: Challenges and Emerging Opportunities, Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press (2012); (with James Danowski and Julia Gluesing) The Revolution in Diffusion Caused by New Media, in Arun Vishwanath and George Barnett (Eds.), The Diffusion of Innovations: A Communication Science Perspective (pp. 123–144), New York: Peter Lang (2011); (with Willie L. McKether and Julia C. Gluesing) From Interviews to Social Network Analysis: An Approach for Revealing Social Networks Embedded in Narrative Data, Field Methods 21: 154–180 (2009).

Bruce Rogers was awarded his Ph.D. in Mathematics from Arizona State University in 2009 and considers himself a social scientist trapped in a mathematician’s body. As such, much of his research is devoted to computational social science in the broadest sense using both computer simulation and data analysis. From 2009 to 2011, he was a post-doctoral Fellow at the Statistical and Applied Mathematical Sciences Institute in North Carolina. He is currently a statistical consultant in St. Louis, Missouri, and he loves dogs. His relevant publications include: (with David Murillo) Control of Opinions in an Ideologically Homogeneous Population, Proceedings of Social Computation, Behavioral Modeling, and Prediction Conference, 2009; (with Gregory K. Fricke and Devendra P. Garg) On the Stability of Swarm Consensus under Noisy Control, Proceedings of the ASME Dynamic System and Control Conference, pp. 291–298, 2011; (with Gregory K. Fricke and Devendra P. Garg) Aggregation and Rendezvous in an Unbounded social world.
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Joan Miquel Verd, Graduate in Political Science and Sociology, Graduate in Economics and Business Studies, PhD in Sociology, is a member of the Centre d’Estudis Sociològics sobre la Vida Quotidiana i el Treball (QUIT) in the Department of Sociology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain, and a Professor of Social Research Methods at the same university. His research activity focuses on the relationship between training and employment, labor market trajectories, and the links between social protection and employment. Methodologically, he is interested in discourse analysis, narrative analysis, social network analysis, and CAQDAS use. His recent publications include: (with Martí López-Andreu) Employer Strategies, Capabilities and Career Development: Two Case Studies of Spanish Service Firms, International Journal of Manpower, 34 (4): 292–304 (2013); (with Irene Cruz) La fuerza de los lazos: una exploración teórica y empírica de sus múltiples significados, Empiria 16: 149–174 (2013); (with Emanuela Abbatecola, Florence Lefresne, and Josiane Vero) Individual Working Lives through the Lens of the Capability Approach: Evaluation of Policies and Items for Debate, Transfer 18 (1): 83–89 (2012).

Claudius Wagemann, Ph.D., political scientist, works as a full professor for qualitative social science methods at the Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany. Previously, he had held positions at the Istituto italiano di scienze umane (SUM) in Florence and at the Florence program of New York University. He received his education at the University of Konstanz (Diplom degree), the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne, and at the European University Institute in Florence (Ph.D.). His research interests include comparative methodology (above all qualitative comparative analysis and fuzzy sets), political participation (political parties, interest groups, social movements), quality of democracy, and governance. His selected publications include: (with C. Q. Schneider) Set-Theoretic Methods for the Social Sciences: A Guide to Qualitative Comparative Analysis, New York: Cambridge University Press (2012); Breakdown and Change of Private Interest Governments, New York: Routledge (2011); (with M. Caiani and D. della Porta) Mobilizing on the Extreme Right: Germany, Italy, and the United States, New York: Oxford University Press (2011).

Andreas Wald is Dean of Research and Professor of Management and Strategy at the European Business School Paris and a Visiting Professor at the EBS Business School in Germany. He holds a Master’s degree in Political Science and Business Administration and a PhD from the
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Foreword

H. Russell Bernard

This book illustrates an important moment in social network analysis: the continued maturation of the field into a truly interdisciplinary science. The chapters represent the disciplines of anthropology, applied mathematics and statistics, communications research, demography, industrial engineering, management, political science, social psychology, and sociology.

The chapters also represent the continued maturation of social network analysis into a truly “normal science,” in Thomas Kuhn’s (1996:10) memorable phrase. In 1977, Samuel Leinhardt edited a volume titled Social Networks: A Developing Paradigm. The book had papers from social psychology, sociology, statistics and mathematics, and anthropology – the range of disciplines that, in 1977, was coalescing into what Leinhardt called a developing paradigm – that is, a normal science. Leinhardt was right. In 1993, Norman Hummon and Kathleen Carley analyzed the contents of the first 12 years of the journal Social Networks (1978–1989). The pattern of citations, they said, indicated the development of a normal science: The field was incremental (people “attend to each other’s work”) and there were “young scientists willing to base their careers on work in this field,” suggesting that “social networks as a specialty is in a ‘normal science’ phase rather than an early developmental phase” (pp. 103–04).

One characteristic of a normal science is the easy, unpretentious use of qualitative and quantitative data and analysis. This is the salutary result of the mixed methods movement. I use the word “movement” deliberately. As of April 2012, there were 2,100 citations to the term “mixed methods” in the Social Science Citation Index. As shown in the figure, the first occurrence of the term dates from 1993, with more than 80 percent since 2008. There is a Journal of Mixed Methods Research (mmr.sagepub.com), several textbooks on mixed methods research
First, here is what it is not: It is not a discovery of the value of combining qualitative and quantitative data and analysis in the same study. In fact, the most normal thing about normal science is the uncomplicated, taken-for-granted mixing of qualitative and quantitative data and qualitative and quantitative analysis. That was the recipe for the conduct of science followed by Galileo in his observations about the surface of the moon (Galileo 1610). It was the recipe adopted by Adolphe Quetelet, John Stuart Mill, and the other founders of social science in the nineteenth century. It was the recipe followed in the twentieth century by Donald Campbell in psychology, Franz Boas in anthropology, Paul Lazarsfeld in sociology, and so on. And what exercise in all of science is more of a mixing of the quantitative and the qualitative than poring over the results of a factor analysis and talking with one’s colleagues – free-associating, really – about what to call a particular factor?

There is a well-known countercurrent, of course, an on-again, off-again “war between the quals and the quants,” as Peter Rossi (1994) called it, marked by periods of rapprochement and vitriol. One of Franz Boas’s students, Paul Radin, accused his mentor of being naturwissenschaftlich eingestellt or science minded – what a disgrace! – and warned that this would lead ethnologists to the quantification of culture...
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(Radin 1933:10). In contrast, one of my teachers, Oscar Lewis, a gifted and prodigious ethnographer, observed with approval in 1953 that an increase in the use of quantification had been “one of the most significant developments in anthropological field work in recent years” (Lewis 1953:454). And in 1973, Sam Sieber argued – in the American Journal of Sociology, no less – for the integration of “qualitative fieldwork and survey research.” This “marriage of survey and fieldwork methodologies,” said Sieber, would produce “a new style of research” (p. 1337). The new style that Sieber described in 1973 would be indistinguishable from what is called mixed methods today.

The bottom line: Mixed methods is the natural order of science. It has never gone away, but it comes in and out of style in the social sciences. Which brings us to the current phenomenon, shown in the figure, a phenomenon that begs to be explained.

In grappling with this same question, Johnson et al. (2007:117), in the first issue of the Journal of Mixed Methods Research, offered that the movement is a “reaction to the polarization between quantitative and qualitative research.” I would take it a step further. It’s a reaction against the all-too-successful effort by some colleagues in the humanistic, interpretive tradition in social science to define the word “qualitative” as meaning not-quantitative and to force students of social science to choose epistemological sides – humanism or science, understanding or explanation, qualitative or quantitative. The current mixed methods, a-plague-on-both-your-houses, movement makes no such pernicious claims on the lives of young scholars. It is the development of an intellectual safe space where the “qual–quant” war is ignored and the result is an explosion of creativity and collaborative research across disciplines – like that in this book.

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Acknowledgments

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Silvia Domínguez and Betina Hollstein