Network Assessments and Diagrams
A Flexible Friend for Social Work Practice and Education

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Abstract

• Summary: Personal social networks are often crucial in understanding the generation of social problems and form the context for social work interventions. Revived attention to networks has been prompted by recent interest in ecological approaches to social work and to social capital. This paper reviews the theoretical and research underpinnings of a social network approach to social work assessment. It describes an exercise that provides students with a systematic network-based framework and gives them opportunities to apply this in placement and reflect on their learning and experiences in class.

• Findings: Evaluations written by students and verbal reports made by the class were collected. These indicate that many students have not only applied to their practice the ideas and suggestions provided at the university, but have made imaginative choices, experimented and seen new ways of applying network ideas and assessment techniques.

• Applications: The translation of learning from the class to direct work in the community is an essential component of professional education. Evidence about what is effective in promoting such a translation of learning to action is vital for educators, practice teachers and policy makers, in order to be able to enhance learning and practice both in respect of the use of social networks and also in respect of other elements of the professional curriculum.

Keywords: network  social capital  social support  social work practice  student learning

The concepts of connections and social capital have recently become prominent in political and media discourses both in Scotland and more generally in the United Kingdom. At the local level, close relationships in families and...
neighbourhoods, as well as participation in voluntary civic activities, have been promoted as the answer to a range of social and political problems (Dasgupta and Serageldin, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Like many third-way ideas, these are Janus-faced, seeking to appeal to both traditional values and a commitment to social solidarity. They have the potential to promote social inclusion, but have also been used in a discriminatory fashion such as to criticize lone-parent or one-child households (Coleman, 1988). Arguably, many of the key themes are not new (Portes, 1998), but represent a repackaging of well-established terms such as community, social support and network connectedness. In whichever way these features of social life are framed, they are central components of the social work enterprise. This article presents an account of how network ideas and research can inform social work education at the individual and family level.

Networks are also relevant to other aspects of social work, including community development, organizational analysis, group work and policy (Payne, 2000; Trevillion, 2000). These are beyond the scope of the present article, but one of the virtues of network understanding is that it provides a linkage between these different arenas.

When most people need assistance with social care or experience social or psychological problems, they generally turn first, and often exclusively, to members of their personal social networks (i.e. relatives, friends and neighbours). Those with effective networks are less vulnerable to distress and usually more able to cope with crises and negative life events. When professional or official help is sought, this is commonly arranged, mediated or modified by the advice and opinions of family and friends. Hence, when social professionals are making assessments of individuals or families, it is vital for them to understand how network relationships have contributed to the need or problem under consideration and how they might facilitate or hamper a positive resolution.

Personal network assessments are relevant to the social care or case management tradition of social work, because of their impact on material, physical and social support. They also contribute to counselling roles within social work, since they can help to identify significant relationships and relationship issues, for which service users may wish to explore or seek help. Furthermore, understanding of the networks of individuals connects with understandings of communities (whether in a particular locality or of interest and identity) and indeed of professional networks. An assessment of networks is a generic aspect of social work, since it applies across the age span from infancy to old age and relates to a wide range of social needs (for example, care, isolation, bereavement, mental health difficulties) and of social problems (for example, addictions, offending, domestic violence) (Cochran et al., 1990; Phillipson et al., 1999).

Network ideas are not only of practical importance in social work assessment, but also of theoretical significance. Social work and its kindred professions are active at the interface between individuals and society (Lorenz, 1994). They mediate between citizens, usually those who are disadvantaged, and

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social policies and services. Personal social networks also exist in the middle ground which connects people to wider social influences, constraints and opportunities. It is often through social networks that social resources can be tapped, norms exercised and discriminations imparted or counteracted. In everyday life, social structures based on class, gender, ethnicity and so on are experienced mainly through personal relationships. People are born into existing networks, but are able to make choices about how their associations develop (Chamberlayne and King, 2000). Hence, any person’s social network is a key site where the interplay between structure and agency occurs. A network approach is consistent with social construction ideas, but does not disregard social divisions (Williams et al., 1999).

Recently, the idea of social capital has achieved prominence (Putnam, 2000; Baron et al., 2000; Hill, 2001). This concept is somewhat elusive, but all the varied usages contain and build on the notion of network. Social capital is seen as encompassing access to a supply or deficit of vital intangible resources that are affected by the degree of connectedness and trust within social networks. The concept has been applied to families, neighbourhoods, regions, states and societies.

This article describes how a network assessment exercise has been applied in a social work qualifying course at Glasgow University over the past 10 years. The purpose of the exercise is to familiarize students with the critical role of informal support and care, while recognizing the problem-generating or indeed criminogenic nature of certain network relationships. To this end, students are introduced to some of the key theoretical concepts that have been developed in social network and exchange theories over the last 50 years and some of the key findings from empirical research. The exercise entails carrying out thorough network assessments, using diagrams as a tool for engagement and information gathering and as a method of recording, to gain insights and indications for intervention.

The pattern of this article mirrors the key elements of the exercise, which in turn are related to principles of reflective learning and stages of adult learning formulated in the well-known model of Kolb. He envisaged effective learning for practice as an active, continuous and cyclical process in four key stages: abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, concrete experience and reflective observation. A student may start at any point in the cycle, but needs to encompass all four elements if the new knowledge is to be truly owned and incorporated in long-term practice (Gould and Taylor, 1996; Goldstein, 2001).

The following section outlines key components of academic understandings of networks. These represent a combination of the empirical and analytic, in that they are mainly derived from systematic study of relationships, but they also include a normative thrust that human behaviour is best understood by means of a comprehensive approach to the ‘person-in-context’ (Erath and Hämäläinen, 2001). This material forms a necessary basis for students to improve their assessment and practice skills, but is in itself insufficient unless students are also enabled to see the relevance of the overall way of thinking and
individual concepts to practice. Hence the value of giving students concrete aids to assessment (described below), then promoting reflection by means of written assignments and discussion (Watson et al., 2002), which underlie the final part of the article. The whole process is in keeping with the current emphasis on interweaving theory with practice and integrating university teaching with work in the field (Adams et al., 2001; Doel et al., 2002).

### The Meaning and Significance of Social Networks

A social network consists of an unbounded set of relationships and, most important, the nature and quality of the connections among those relationships. Two main kinds of informal network may be distinguished: the personal social network of an individual or family and a social field found in a particular geographical area or within an organization or institution. The focus of the student exercise and hence this article is on personal social networks. However, the nature of a person’s social network is often affected by the social qualities of the neighbourhood in which they live in or into which they move (Warren, 1980; Holloway, 1998).

In theory, a personal social network can consist of everyone known to an individual, which in a complex modern society can stretch to hundreds of
people (Scott, 1991). For most practical purposes, it is sufficient to consider
the effective social network, which comprises those who have special
emotional or practical significance, though so-called weak and indirect ties can
be important (e.g. in opening up employment, educational or social oppor-
tunities) (Granovetter, 1973). Relationships can also be latent, as when a
casual acquaintance becomes a friend or a move of home activates contact
with a distant relative.

Network relationships are of central significance in social work, because
they make up the immediate environment in which service users lead their daily
lives. They play a vital role in the production, maintenance, prevention, allevi-
ation and resolution of problems. For instance, numerous studies have shown
that people with access to emotional and social support are less likely to develop
mental health difficulties and better able to cope with stressful events. Con-
versely, social isolation is a risk factor in a number of problems, including child
abuse (Stansfield, 1999; Cooper et al., 1999). An understanding of the structures
and processes in a person’s or family’s network helps assess the nature of the
problems, the kinds of changes that may be required to deal with these prob-
lems and the emotional, social and material resources available to facilitate or
obstruct change.

Key Features of Social Networks

A helpful framework for network analysis was developed by Mitchell (1969)
and its key points remain helpful and relevant (Wellman, 1998). Drawing on this
classification, four main aspects of social networks may be recognized — their
structure, processes, functions and composition.

Structures

The structure of a network derives from its shape and comprises the geometri-
cal properties of a network. The main morphological aspects are as follows
(Mitchell, 1969):

- range or size;
- geographical concentration or dispersion;
- accessibility – the number of connections needed to reach outer members;
- density or connectedness – the extent to which members know or are in
  contact with each other;
- degree of clustering; and
- homogeneity/heterogeneity.

The structural feature which has received most attention in research is con-
nectedness (Bott, 1971). This represents the number of links that occur
between network members compared with the number that could potentially
occur if everyone had contact with everyone else. Densely connected networks
involve contacts among most of their members, whereas in loose-knit networks
members are linked to only a few others in the network. In dense or close-knit networks information, ideas and attitudes are likely to be communicated widely throughout the network. In loose-knit networks there tends to be greater privacy but also less commonality (Scott, 1991). This has implications for the probability of network members having shared or differing assumptions, beliefs and attitudes. Dense or highly connected networks are more able to develop common norms and are in a position to exercise social control over individuals. Gossip is more likely, as is mutual support and sociability. Social capital theorists argue that the amount of cohesion and trust within a network crucially affects the extent to which an individual may benefit from the material, educational and social resources possessed by members of the network (Portes, 1998). Although loose-knit networks may be less able to mobilize collective support or action, they may be more open to new ideas and associations. Members of loose-knit networks can feel freer to change role, identity or values.

It is important to consider connections that extend beyond an individual’s direct personal contacts. For instance, concern may centre on an older woman with severe angina whose main carer is her sister or neighbour. The balance of demands and support in the carer’s own network may be crucial in affecting their capacity to meet the needs of the woman with angina. Indeed support for a person in need is likely to be more durable and less burdensome if it is part of a reciprocal network of mutual help rather than located in an isolated relationship (Trevillion, 1999). In addition, links beyond the core network (weak ties) may have less emotional intensity, but can provide access to vital information about resources and opportunities (for example about job vacancies, specialist services) (Granovetter, 1973).

It has been found that most personal social networks are made up of a small number of largely separate sectors. Each sector tends to consist of a specialized kind of relationship (such as relatives, neighbours, friends, work colleagues). Often an individual’s relatives have little knowledge of or contact with their non-relatives. Some relationships are single-stranded. In other words, they involve just one role or context (e.g. a work colleague, one’s hairdresser). Multiplex relationships spread across fields of activity, as when work contacts extend to leisure or home activities.

**Processes**

Interaction with network members may be classified along several dimensions (Mitchell, 1969; Scott, 1991; Wellman, 1998):

- content - types of communication and exchange (for example, advice, gossip, practical aid, caring);
- degree of intimacy;
- frequency of contact;
- directedness - are relationships symmetrical or one-sided?
durability - are contacts routine, episodic, repeated or crisis-oriented?

intensity - the importance attached by the individuals concerned to the rights and obligations of the relationship.

Modern communications mean that close relationships may be maintained without frequent face-to-face contact and that support may be offered or accessible from considerable distances. Telephones and increasingly the Internet have reduced the importance of distance in sustaining kin and friendship ties, and fast forms of travel can mean that someone well outside the immediate neighbourhood may be able to come quickly to help in a crisis. However, access to modern technology and the financial resources to make use of them are uneven and socially distributed (Holloway and Valentine, 2000).

A vital consideration in understanding network relationships is the nature of social exchange and reciprocity. This refers to the balance in giving and receiving, whether of love, social care, physical care or material assistance. A symmetrical relationship has a rough balance of power or exchange, whereas an asymmetrical relationship includes a partner who is more dominant and privileged. People do not necessarily evaluate relationships in a simple way with regard to gains and losses, although as Crow and Allan (2000: 46) point out, ‘social support is rarely unconditional’. In some relationships a considerable degree of imbalance may be tolerated or even welcomed. Typically, ties with close kin are affected by a strong sense of obligation. Nevertheless, relationships that are very unequal in input or outcome are often unstable or produce stresses. People who give a lot with little return are likely to experience strain and resentment, while those who mostly receive can feel guilty, dependent or stigmatized. In most relationships some kind of rough balance is desirable, but this need not be along the same dimension or from the same person. Doing the shopping for an elderly neighbour may be paid back by friendship or taking in deliveries, for example. A person who carries out many caring activities for one or more dependent others may gain great satisfaction or a strong sense of positive identity. Exchange may be spread across the life cycle, as looking after an aunt or grandparent reflects a kind of repayment for what the senior generation did for oneself when younger. Generalized exchange occurs when a service is returned to a different member of the network, as in a babysitting circle (Hill, 1989).

Functions

Network members perform functions for each other as individual members, but it must be remembered that networks can also provide wider social functions ranging from the socialization of children to the generation of delinquency. There has been a tendency to view networks primarily in favourable terms. Common groupings can be seen in Table 2.

In many ways these correspond with core direct or indirect social work activities. It remains the case that the great majority of social care, performed
for dependent individuals, is carried out by informal networks, mainly kin (Parker, 2000). This shows not only that social work often focuses on those individuals whose networks have limited capacities for fulfilling these functions (Wenger, 1991; Bauld et al., 2000), but also that the long-term effectiveness of social work is usually greater if people are helped to develop an informal network that is more able to act in a supportive way. One of the key benefits of inclusive family centre approaches is to increase mothers’ networks and access to support and advice (Gibbons et al., 1990; Kirk, 1999).

Networks (or members or cliques within them) may also act negatively. For instance, they may promote antisocial attitudes and behaviour, or constitute major sources of conflict, stigmatizing or pressure (Jack, 2001; Nelson et al., 2001). Often individuals find it hard to loosen ties with a negative social network (like a delinquent gang, a set of friends involved in heavy drinking or drug abuse, a prostitute network) because that network meets many of their personal and social needs. In high-risk child abuse cases, involvement of family and other network members can reduce rather than enhance the likelihood of a good outcome (Thompson, 1995; Berry and Cash, 1998).

Networks or sectors of them may have expectations and values members have to adhere to in order to gain acceptance and avoid condemnation, shaming or gossip. A study of a farming community found that families in the village were supportive and available to each other as regards crises and physical health problems, but could be experienced as negative and disabling for women with mental health problems (Christensen et al., 1998). For a social worker, it can be important to understand what are the prevailing attitudes in a network or social field about such things as privacy, independence, public services, altruism or law breaking. Values vary about the kinds of circumstances in which strangers may be given access to one’s home, confidences or personal care. Personal networks (like neighbourhood communities) may be exclusionary or discriminatory in not accepting or helping those who are seen as outsiders or different.
Composition

Relatives provide the most significant and enduring relationships for most people, though their significance varies at different points in the life course. Kin relationships are normally highly connected and multiplex. In Britain and most of the West, compared with other cultures, a much narrower range of kin keep in close touch and have significant obligations. Most people’s frequent contacts are with their parents, siblings, offspring and grandparents or grandchildren (McGlone et al., 1999; Phillipson et al., 2001).

In almost all societies, there are strong expectations that kin should help each other. Among older people, for instance, only a minority confide in friends, seek advice or involve them in important decisions, whereas most have a relative other than their spouse who fulfils this function (Phillipson et al., 2001). Earlier in the life cycle, relatives are the main sources of informal care of children (McGlone et al., 1999). By contrast with other relationships, there may be no expectation of doing something in return. Indeed relatives may resent any implication that they want a reward for services given. If substantial demands or strains are involved, the desire for compensation may be directed to society at large rather than the individual in need.

Some people’s significant network contacts are almost exclusively with kin. For others, non-kin are equally or much more important. The two main kinds of non-kin relationships are based on proximity (neighbours) and affection (friends). For some people and in some areas, friendships typically develop from contacts with neighbours. In other cases, friendship is not based on locality. Particularly in urban areas, only a low proportion of neighbours become acquaintances, let alone friends. Contacts and assistance among neighbours tend to be greater for those who are not working, such as older people or mothers with young children. A Iain (1991) noted that the main functions of friendship are sociability and enjoyment, so that it is not generally part of the expectation to give or receive major practical help or intense emotional support. However, Pahl and Spencer (1997) suggest that friendships have become emotionally more important than they used to be, especially when things go wrong with family relationships. In old age, friends are particularly important for people who are single or who do not have children (Phillipson et al., 2001).

In some areas norms of independence and non-interference are prevalent among neighbours. Expectations of frequent contact and help tend to be associated with a settled population and long-established contacts, though this is not invariably so (Crow and A Iain, 2000). Certain individuals (natural helping neighbours) are particularly prominent in aiding those about them (Collins and Pancoast, 1977). They have normally lived in the area a long time and are active people who like to be out of the home. Most are women. Some have a family history of caring for others or wish to make some repayment for help they themselves have received in the past (Bulmer, 1986).
Diversity in Social Networks

In the postmodern era both relationships and theorizing about them are less constrained than formerly by major structural factors such as class or life stage. Alongside globalization, one of the defining features of present-day societies is said to be individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernschein, 2001). Associational choices are less restricted than formerly by categorical features such as occupational background or locality. Although kin obligations are still generally strong, they do entail individual choice and are related to the narrative histories of particular relationships (Finch and Mason, 1993).

Nevertheless, network relationships are still patterned to a considerable degree. Indeed certain socially excluded groups such as the unemployed or children brought up in public care have few of the choices just outlined (Borland and Hill, 1997). Many of the classic studies of social networks identified strong social class differences, as well as considerable variations (Young and Willmott, 1957; Rosser and Harris, 1965). For example, manual workers tended to live close to kin and have sharply sex-segregated social lives, especially in areas with large employers like mines or shipyards. Most such communities are now much depleted as a result of employment changes, rehousing and urban regeneration (Abercrombie and Warde, 1998). Social class differences in frequency of kin contact persist, partly because manual workers are more likely to live within a one-hour journey of key relatives (McGlone et al., 1999). Middle-class networks have been characterized by greater geographical mobility and emphasis on friendships at several life stages, though kin usually remain important (Hill, 1987; Holloway, 1998; Phillipson et al., 2001).

Network functions have traditionally been gendered. Most major caring functions outside the household as well as within have been undertaken primarily by females (Offer, 1999), with consequences for women’s paid employment careers and risk of poverty (Abbott, 2000). Also women have been found to spend more time in intimate conversations; to place more importance on the expression of emotions; to keep up closer contacts with kin and to form more intimate relationship with friends (Cooper et al., 1999; McGlone et al., 1999).

Network contacts tend to alter as people come to different stages in life, as well as in response to specific events. The concept of a support convoy has been coined to convey the idea of a person being accompanied through life by vessels of changing composition, which provide support and protection (Pahl and Spencer, 1997).

From the pre-school period through to old age, there is a general tendency for people to associate most with those who are of similar age, with the important exceptions of kin contacts which are much more multi-generational. In adolescence, peers are important influences on life-style choices and important confidants with regard to sensitive personal and social issues (Barrera and Li, 1996; Gordon and Grant, 1997). Sometimes befriending is based more on life-span stage (for example early parenthood) rather than age itself.
In middle and old age, the shape of the significant kin sector of the network changes as older members die and the next generation multiplies. Siblings and grown-up children become increasingly important. It becomes less common to form new attachments. One view is that old people slowly disengage from social life and many become isolated. Although this is undoubtedly true for some, repeated studies have shown that the great majority of old people have very frequent contact with one or more close relatives and some have very active friendship networks (Tinker, 1981; Phillipson et al., 2001). For frail persons, it may be useful to distinguish a care network (providing primarily instrumental help) from a support network (giving emotional or social support). Most research shows that, unless there are major health problems, older people give as much help to others as they receive. Some elderly people with severe physical difficulties may have largely asymmetrical relationships, but practical services can be reciprocated by provision of friendship, interesting memories or availability for callers.

Ethnicity influences network patterns in complex ways and it is important to avoid simplified assumptions (Atkin and Rollings, 1992). Among the factors are:

- religious and cultural traditions, e.g. kinship patterns; expectations about marriage; attitudes to non-kin interaction between members of the opposite sex;
- the attitudes of other people and in particular the implications of racism;
- the effects of migration on network contacts and the relative importance of links with people back home (see, for example, Phillipson et al., 2001: Chap. 9); and
- proximity to others of the same background, religion and/or locality of origin.

Until recently, it has been common among white social workers to suppose that close-knit extended families reduce the need for support and services among minority communities. Families of minority ethnic background do indeed have higher levels of contact on average with relatives (Modood and Berthoud, 1997, cited in McGlone et al., 1999), though this may be accompanied by few weak ties beyond the close kin sector of the network. People of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds often live in large, complex kin households that reduce the need for external assistance. Even so, some women may feel overwhelmed and unsupported in caring roles (Phillipson et al., 2001). Although close kin support is common, there are also significant proportions of Asian and Afro-Caribbean people who live alone and have few or no close relatives in this country (Atkin and Rollings, 1992). Many black carers face the same practical and emotional difficulties as white carers, including ill health and depression.
Network Diagrams

Network diagrams have been developed in social work both to provide an organized approach to assessment and to make a concise, clear record. They help social workers to understand systematically ‘an overwhelming amount of data’ (Hartman, 1995) and to reflect on how all the different elements interact.

Diagrams can be simply a record, i.e. produced separately and perhaps unknown to the service user as an economical means of expressing a complex array of information. They can also be used more productively in interaction with service users, so that the process is open and insights can be shared both ways. The service user may identify aspects which the worker overlooks, and an outside perspective can help the client see things which he or she perhaps takes for granted or does not realize the significance of.

Use of diagrams is a common communication device with children and young people, for several reasons. They capitalize on children's interest in drawing, allow for limited verbal and written communication and reduce power differentials (Hill et al., 1996). Diagrams have also been used with adults who have learning disabilities (Seed, 1990) and recently they have been incorporated in person-centred planning. However, as students on the Glasgow course have demonstrated, diagrams can be used participatively with people of any age over five years.

Broadly, six main types of diagram are in common use for assessing personal social networks:

- **The ecomap, ecogram or star-diagram.** A symbol for the key person is in the centre of a blank page or of a ready formatted set of connected shapes, such as circles, squares or triangles (Hartman, 1978, 1995; Protengen and van der Neut, 1999). Significant people are entered into the shapes and lines are drawn to connect them with the central person and with each other. Sometimes activities are included (for example, work, school, leisure pursuits). A variant is a circle divided into segments representing the different network sectors.

- **Concentric circles** place people at different distances from the central person. The degree of proximity in the diagram can represent emotional or geographical closeness, or significance for the issue under consideration. Evaluations of this technique indicate that it makes participation easy and is best suited to long-term relationships (Wenger, 1991; Phillipson et al., 2001).

- **The genogram or family tree** represents the kin sector of a network and usually only immediate kin. It depicts the biological and marital/partner relationships of the most relevant three or four generations of the family. Conventions indicate divorce, separation and death (Hartman, 1995).

- **Life-space representations** portray key locations in an individual’s life space, with indications of the people and activities relevant to each. This approach has been used effectively with adults with learning difficulties, for
instance to show the limitations and lack of connections in their lives centred on the family home and day centres (Seed, 1990). Mobility on a daily basis can be shown by including vehicles.

- **Life-course changes.** A sequence of houses shows changes in locality and household composition. These home sequences were first developed to help chart and discuss changes experienced by children in public care (DHSS, 1985). They can be extended to show changes in wider relationships in the community, at school and so on.

- **Matrices** consist of tables listing people, their interaction, importance, functions and so on (Dunst et al., 1988; Tracy and Whittaker, 1990). They have the advantage of allowing for detailed and comprehensive analysis, but their very thoroughness results in some loss in ease of use and holistic clarity. The textual content is high, but the visual impact is low.

Different shapes and colours can be used to show gender and the types of relationship (for example, kin, friends, formal contacts). The thickness and continuity of lines connecting people can reflect their frequency of contact or degree of intimacy, and a wiggly line shows stress.

It is possible to use stickers, pictures and photos, both to add vividness and to allow for flexibility in representing changes or allowing people to modify what they have put. It is not essential to use paper. For instance, talking mats have been used with adults with communication difficulties. They choose relevant symbols and pictures and place them on a mat to which they adhere (Murphy, 1998).

Diagrams can be used not only to review the current network. Retrospectively they may facilitate the examination of the influence of past relationships on current difficulties (Hartman, 1995), reviewing patterns of relating (e.g. with respect to violent or unreliable partners) or dealing with losses. Prospectively they may help in planning for major changes, such as discharge from hospital. Two or more diagrams may be used to show changes in a person’s network at different times (e.g. before and after discharge from hospital, admission to residential care, a key relationship breakdown). A second diagram can also represent expectations or aspirations for a future or ideal situation, compared with the present.

**The Exercise**

**Groundwork**

The basis for the network exercise is laid in an initial teaching double session, which takes place a little while before the students start on placement. The purpose is to familiarize students with key network ideas and the use of diagrams to assist in the assessment process. The students are introduced to network theory and research by means of a detailed handout, reference list and summary presentation. In class, students then discuss in pairs their own
networks to identify key changes they have experienced in the composition, structure and functions of their networks since early childhood. In this way, alterations in personal networks are seen to reflect social and geographical movements between different contexts, so that links are explored between community and personal relationships, as mediated by such factors as gender, social class and employment status.

Students are provided with illustrations of different forms of network diagram. It is stressed that the ideal is to use diagrams openly and participatively, in keeping with notions of the consent and empowerment of the service users. This includes adapting the nature and contents of the diagram to their needs and wishes. Finally, in a short simulation exercise students make diagrammatic records of a network (real or imagined) described by a partner.

Thus, the class represents in miniature the overall process of moving from theoretical discussion to recognition of personal application to usage in a professional context. Discussions help to tease out and debate typifications. For instance, close-knit networks in their home communities have been perceived as warm and supportive by certain students, but as constraining or oppressive by others. Some have characterized changes in networks since childhood as liberating and expansive, whereas others are more conscious of losses. An important conclusion is the importance of examining preconceptions about network segments or particular roles and being aware not to substitute one’s own judgements and expectations for those of service users.

Application

Once in placement, students identify an individual they are working with and negotiate an appropriate opportunity and focus for discussing that person’s network. Often this forms part of a formal assessment (for example, for community care services). It may contribute to discussions underpinning the preparation of a court or children’s hearing report. Some students find it helpful to explain that this is a routine way of getting to know the person’s context and working together to identify needs and resources. Over the years students have been able to apply the network exercise to a wide age range from early childhood to old age and in relation to many different issues. For instance, a recent class included exercises with a 60-year-old with cerebral palsy, a 15-year-old on supervision for offending, a lone mother admitted to hospital, an isolated man with a speech impairment and a middle-aged woman with severe mental health difficulties.

The diagram can be used in two main ways to assist the network assessment: as communication tool and as a record. The first approach uses the diagram itself as a prompt for systematic discussion of relationships and activities. Here the diagram is an integral part of the communication and is produced collaboratively. It may be that a tidier version is made later. In the second approach, the diagram is drawn by the student following the assessment. Here it functions like a post-hoc written record, but with the benefits of vividness and economy. In
the latter case, students choose the type of diagram, but in the participative approach, the service users may also be given a choice about the format they prefer.

The majority of students have created their diagrams jointly and openly with clients, usually allowing them to make choices about the form and meaning of the diagram. A 15-year-old girl selected a range of coloured symbols to represent her network members, with ticks and crosses to show her positive or negative attitudes towards them. One student discussed with her client what criteria the latter used to judge her relationships. The response was in terms of emotional intensity and feelings of belonging. Another student was not able to develop her diagram collaboratively since the client did not communicate verbally. However, the student showed her the completed diagram and checked with her about the accuracy of the representation and analysis.

Students have responded to the network exercise with imagination. Some have used computers to generate the graphics or have developed a diagram jointly. One student used six diagrams to represent the different segments of a young man’s network, as his learning difficulties made it difficult for him to discuss the total network holistically. Students have added their own innovations to diagrams, such as individualized icons to illustrate the quality of relationships and small ‘struts’ to show which people were regarded as supportive.

The diagrams have often helped to reveal or highlight aspects of clients’ lives that might otherwise have been unknown or neglected. For example, several have shown the emotional significance of people from whom the client was separated through absence or death, providing an opportunity to explore these lost relationships. Diagrams have helped assess the advantages and disadvantages for a person’s social contacts resulting from significant moves (for example in or out of hospital; from one area to another; into residential care, foster care or a homeless person unit).

Follow-up and Reflection
Students bring an anonymous copy of the diagram to the university, along with a written summary two or three sides of paper long. This commentary explains the brief reasons for social work involvement in the case, then offers a brief analysis of:

- the structure and content of network relationships;
- strengths and weaknesses in the network as perceived by the service user and/or student; and
- potential ways to modify, extend or strengthen the network.

Each student is given individual written feedback on their work, usually of about four to five paragraphs. The purpose is both to give recognition to their efforts and to identify learning points. In class students share their experiences of both the processes and the outcomes of the exercise. This leads on to analyses of goals and means of network change.
It is recognized that some service users have satisfactory networks, so network change is not relevant to their problem or referral issue. Usually, though, network change is clearly needed. The types of change aimed for can be linked to the four key network elements, as follows:

- **Structure**: increasing size, altering geographical range, increasing or decreasing connectedness.
- **Processes**: improving communication, modifying reciprocity.
- **Functions**: accessing support, shifting burdens of care, seeking alternative information sources, developing multiplex relationships.
- **Composition**: adding or subtracting members; diminishing or stopping contact with negative or abusive influences; altering the balance of contact (e.g. between kin and friends or between officials and others).

Students are briefly alerted to the various strategies for tackling network change, including:

- working with individuals to gain insight, motivate, identify resources and hazards, improve skills and communicate wishes about change;
- working with individual network members to facilitate change (e.g. the parents of a young adult with learning difficulties);
- linking clients to networks, groups or agencies;
- network therapy (Speck and A tney, 1971; R ueveni, 1979); and

Consideration is also given to the relationships between official/professional and informal contacts and input. These may approach the positive ideal of partnership, but there are many dangers such as offloading, colonization, undermining and manipulating (B ulmer, 1986; A llan, 1991).

Among the various ways in which students have sought to produce change using the network assessment are:

- **giving insight**, e.g. pointing out that a young woman’s perception of a key relationship may not be reciprocated;
- **valuing strengths**, e.g. acknowledging a woman’s network-building and social care skills and responsibilities before her own hospitalization;
- **identifying back-up or substitution for main carers** of people with disabilities or health difficulties;
- **improving communication or links between different segments of a person’s life**, e.g. facilitating communication between different relatives of an old man in a hospice;
- **identifying skills that require rehearsal and development**, e.g. building confidence and skills to establish new relationships; managing relationships in a way that helps disengagement from crime or drug-taking;
addressing stress or conflicting relationships, e.g. as one student wrote, 'We worked together on adapting G.’s network contacts to redirect some of her anger which led to inappropriate behaviour. Helping her see that she had a bit of control in all of her relationships reduced stress';

providing motivation, e.g. one woman was fortified in her wish to co-operate in a residential establishment in order to free herself from social work involvement;

identifying network members who can assist, e.g. a teacher and uncle who could help a shy boy with special needs develop peer friendships; and

connecting people to supportive individuals or groups, e.g. referring a person whose contacts were nearly all with officials to a disability support group and befriending service.

Processes, Benefits and Issues
Student feedback on the processes and implications of the exercise have been obtained each year in two main ways. Firstly, the written papers produced by students have included a short evaluative section. This prompts what Kolb termed reflective observation on an individual basis. Secondly, the class discussions following the network assessment in placement have reviewed the benefits and drawbacks, opportunities and challenges.

A few students have found the exercise hard to apply either in general or in the particular circumstances. One wrote: ‘It has not been appropriate to focus our discussion on this social network exercise, due to greater issues of priority’. Most have reported that it is a valuable tool, as illustrated by the following comments.

‘The exercise proved extremely successful in identifying problems and needs, resources for coping with problems and confirming skills and personal resources.’

‘The exercise proved extremely useful in ( . . ) involving him in the assessment process.’

‘D and I both worked on this exercise and it proved a useful tool in getting to know the client.’

‘I used a family tree for my own benefit, to clarify Mrs B. ’s complex family in my own mind.’

Although some service users appeared neutral about the enterprise, others were described as having co-operated wholeheartedly: ‘She then embarked on the diagrammatic representation of her network with much ease and enthusiasm.’

Students have pointed to a variety of ways in which their clients have gained through the shared network assessment, by insights into their situation, reassessing past or current relationships and/or anticipating future challenges. Examples included the following:

A young man acknowledged that he needed to discuss his mother’s death more openly to help come to terms with it.
• An aunt found it helpful to review how she had come to be the main carer of her niece.
• A young woman recognized that all of her relationships with authority figures were stressful.
• An old woman decided she should re-establish contacts at chapel she had allowed to cease.
• During an assessment, a pregnant woman became ‘astonished at how many sources of support she had’.
• A woman with mental health difficulties discussed with the student her past losses and considered how to strengthen the number of supportive relationships that she had.

In other cases, the network assessment led students themselves to identify desirable alterations and ways of trying to achieve them. For instance, students have identified a lack of connectedness between network sectors; conflictual relationships that need addressing; a network dominated by professional contacts; a person who was busy with recreational and carers’ group activities yet lacked close friendships. The diagrams and associated discussions may reveal attitudes to key people that are the opposite of those expected. One boy whose main loyalty appeared to be to his foster family put his birth family as central in his diagram to stress its continuing significance for him. Several people relegated to the margins of their diagrams professionals who saw themselves as having much impact. Realization of what needs doing may be sufficient for the person to take action, but it may be necessary to tackle issues of social skills and confidence in order to initiate, renew, extend or terminate relationships. Direct action by the student worker may be required (for example, to link the person to a support group or voluntary association).

Students have recognized strengths as well as weaknesses in individuals and their networks. Thus, one student was surprised to learn over time that an older man in a wheelchair who had had two strokes was very active socially, did not have a ‘particularly strong dependence on professionals’ and could offer much to others ‘after all he has battled through’.

Commonly the network exercise provokes discussion of legitimate ethical concerns. How intrusive is a social worker entitled to be when discussing close personal relationships? Does an emphasis on informal care and support imply that public services are a last resort? Is it right for untrained social workers to move from network discussion into a counselling role?

Network assessments can be emotionally straightforward, but they can also evoke distress or difficult reactions. The reason for social work involvement may make it evident that the network discussion is likely to be sensitive, but in certain circumstances the student may encounter tension or distress unexpectedly. This may be inherent to the assessment, though the network diagram may heighten the effect. For instance, seemingly routine community care assessments led to one person becoming upset reliving a past bereavement and
another angry at perceived neglect. In one case, a young person revealed that he was being bullied. Students need to be prepared to adjust the nature and timing of the network discussion so that it fits with and does not override the person’s needs. It may be necessary to move from assessment to counselling or to arrange follow-up support to deal with an identified problem.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed concepts and research findings on social networks and described an exercise to help social work students learn and apply a network approach to assessment and intervention. Theoretically, this enables students to maintain a broad understanding of the genesis of social problems and resources for social care, even when dealing with individual clients. Practically, it offers a systematic framework for open communication with service users to assess the part played by other people in their needs and problems and to move towards mobilizing informal support or handling social conflict. Although the exercise was developed to focus on personal social networks in individual and family work, the elements and processes could be readily adapted for students dealing with groups and communities or for organizational and inter-agency analysis.

The format developed for the network exercise is flexible so as to enable students to apply academic knowledge and communication aids to enhance their practice and analytic skills in a wide range of circumstances. The four-stage process of input in class, application in a practice setting, individual reflection and collective discussion actualizes the key elements for learning identified by Kolb. Feedback from students in writing and in class has indicated that many have not only applied to their practice the ideas and suggestions provided at the university, but made imaginative choices, experimented and seen new ways of using network ideas and assessment techniques. Crucial for this have been the experience that students bring to the course, sensitive communication with service users and reflective observations, both internal and shared.

References


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