

A First Look at Justice-Involved Women's Egocentric Social Networks

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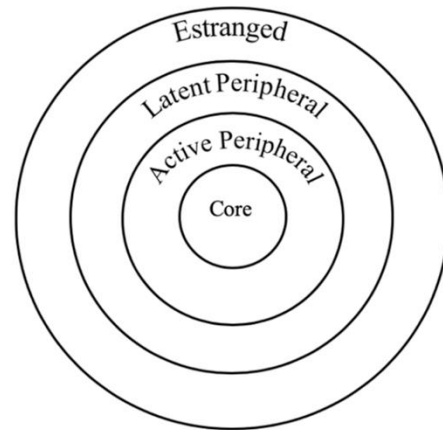
Reasons for Studying Justice-Involved Women's Egocentric Social Networks

Personal (egocentric) social networks shape justice-involved women's experiences navigating criminal legal contact. Social ties provide access to needed resources and are activated for emotional and tangible support. Notably, research has focused almost exclusively on core network members. This study extends existing research by assessing the structure and composition of women's personal social networks, with a focus on both intimate (e.g., friends and family members) and non-intimate ties (e.g., classmates and coworkers).

The Research

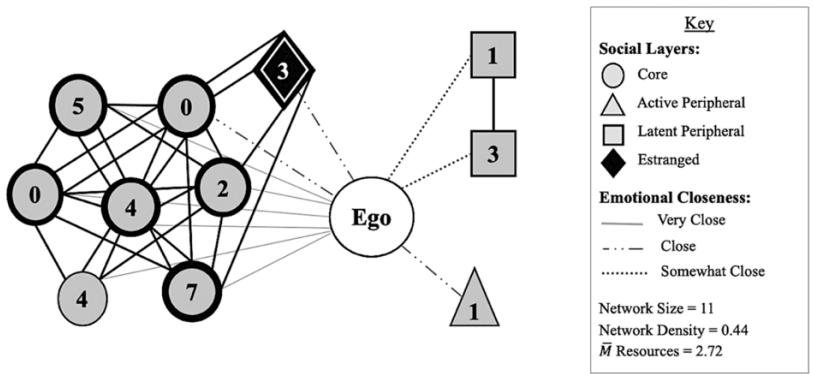
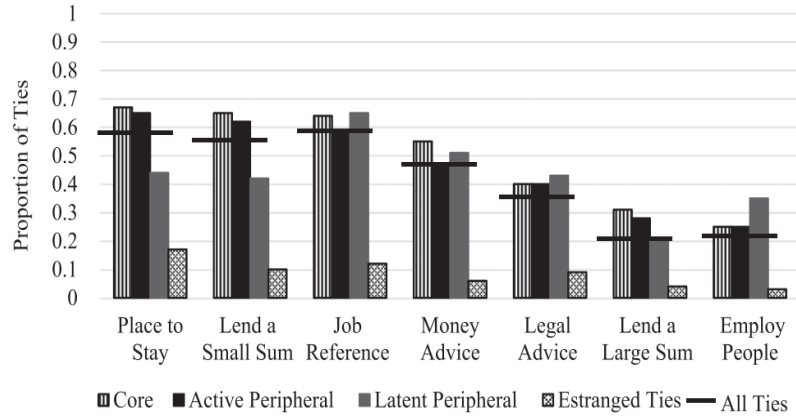
To provide a more comprehensive assessment of justice-involved individuals' personal networks, I use eleven questions to identify network members to establish network size. Then participants were asked questions about the nature of network members' relationships with one another to assess network structure. Based on in-person interviews with 159 justice-involved women about their 1,313 network members, four social layers are delineated, described, and compared. The four layers include: 1) core network 2) active peripheral, 3) latent peripheral, and 4) estranged.

- *Core Network.* Core network members were people with whom the participants discussed important matters. On average the core network included five or six network members, and network members were mostly relatives, with some friends and significant others. These relationships were characterized by frequent contact (daily to weekly) and "very close" emotional relationships.
- *Active Peripheral Layer.* Active peripheral ties were friends and family members who participants did not include in their core networks. This social layer typically included four members and approximately 70% were related to the participants. These relationships were characterized by weekly contact and "close" emotional relationships.
- *Latent Peripheral Layer.* Latent peripheral ties were network members from specific domains of participants' lives. The seven domains included religious, academic, employment, correctional, treatment, neighborhood, and "other" settings. Few network members (13%) shared kinship ties with the participants. These relationships were characterized by infrequent contact (2-3 times per month) and "close" to "somewhat close" emotional relationships.
- *Estranged Layer.* Estranged network members were ties with whom women had discontinued contact (in last six months) due to conflict or disagreements. This social layer typically included one member and approximately 40% were estranged kinship members. These relationships were characterized by infrequent contact (about monthly) and emotionally distant relationships.



Network Members' Access to Resources by Social Layer

As demonstrated by the figure to the right, findings highlight the important role of network members in the intermediate and outer layers of women’s social networks in providing access to needed resources. These ties are often overlooked in the literature but may be essential for employment-related resources (i.e., a job reference and/pr opportunity).



Furthermore, the study informs understanding of the structure of personal social network. As shown by the figure to the left, network structure is often shaped by relational dynamics. There relationships tend to become decentralized and unstable – in terms of frequency of contact, geographical distance, and emotional closeness – from the inner to outer layers

Implications

Intervening to improve women’s access to specific resources will require strategic effort to grow women’s network beyond the core and provide them with skills to seek support from weak ties. Some justice-involved women identified probation and parole agents, therapists, and other professionals as network members. Given their high rates of poverty, women could be coached to develop ties that link them to sources of income.

Source: Marva V. Goodson-Miller, A First look at Justice-Involved Women’s Egocentric Social Networks, *Social Networks*, vol. 70, 152-165, 2022.