# 1 Social networks and the resilience of marginalized communities

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One of the greatest challenges in contemporary societies is achieving more equity and inclusivity of marginalized, disadvantaged social groups. Neoliberal reform, economic austerity, the progressive automatization of work, the pandemic, the climate crisis, and growing social divisions reinforce inequality. Social networks can generate, mitigate, or exacerbate marginalization, and it is therefore essential to analyze their functioning.

This chapter discusses how social network research can be adopted to study and ultimately strengthen the social resilience of marginalized communities. I start by defining marginalized social groups and resilience, relating them to inclusion. Then, I discuss how networks aid but also hinder the capacities necessary for resilience. Based on this discussion, I set an agenda for future network research in this area.

## The Resilience of Marginalized Communities

Marginalized social groups are groups of individuals experiencing economic, political, and social exclusion due to unequal power relationships. Examples are low-income families, undocumented migrants, and homeless people. Wacquant (1996: 123) used the term "advanced marginality" to stress that "those forms of marginality are not *behind* us and being progressively resorbed […] but rather they stand *ahead of us*." Indeed, marginalization continues to be a major problem in contemporary societies.

The term "resilience" stems from ecology, where it is used to study the persistence and adaptation of ecological systems in the face of environmental change. Likening communities to ecological systems, researchers have adopted



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the term *social resilience*, defined as "the capacity of groups of people bound together in an organization, class, racial group, community or nation to sustain and advance their wellbeing in the face of challenges to it" (Hall and Lamont 2013: 2). Challenges include rapid-onset events such as natural hazards but also slow, long-term stresses (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013), such as economic recessions, the retrenchment of welfare states, and systemic racism.

Importantly, social resilience involves not only *reactive* (*absorptive*) *capacity* – that is, the capacity to cope with adversities after they occur, absorb their impacts, and bounce back to a previous equilibrium – but also proactive capacity – that is, the ability to "develop increased competence […] in dealing with a threat" (Obrist, Pfeiffer, and Henley 2010: 289). Researchers (e.g., Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013) further distinguish two types of proactive capacities, namely *adaptive capacity*, the incremental adjustment of strategies in anticipation of challenges, among others through social learning, and *transformative capacity*, the capacity to change the deeper causes of the challenges such as the social arrangements in place. Reactive, adaptive, and transformative capacities thus differ in their timing relative to the adversities (ex post or ex ante) and their scope.

Social resilience research often takes an agentic approach, emphasizing how individuals, households, or communities draw on financial, cultural, human, and social capital, institutions, and social protection arrangements to guarantee their well-being in the face of shocks and stresses. The concept of social resilience has been criticized for disguising the power relations that cause threats and impact actors' capacity to deal with them (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013). In the area of social exclusion, it is imperative to acknowledge the role played by systemic forces, such as social arrangements, power structures, and institutions, in the production of inequity and marginalization. For instance, Gans (1972) argued that poverty performs multiple societal functions, explaining its persistence over time. While alternatives to these functions exist, these incur costs for wealthy, politically more powerful actors, who therefore dismiss them as viable alternatives. Disadvantaged people tend to be excluded from prioritizing policy areas such as affordable housing, access to health care, and food security, vis-à-vis others, such as space exploration, as well as from deciding on measures to contain marginalization (e.g., punitive or protective). Marginality is thus an outcome of unequal power relationships, and should be studied as a societal challenge rather than solely a problem of the excluded.

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## Bringing Networks In

Adopting social network analysis is crucial because inclusion and exclusion are profoundly relational processes. Unequal power relationships have emerged through long histories of face-to-face intergroup relationships, opportunity hoarding, and institutionalization (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Even if systemic forces now appear somewhat distanced from everyday interactions, social networks still reproduce, mitigate, or exacerbate systemic inequity. Therefore, a fuller awareness of these processes helps us design inclusive policies. This section discusses how networks intersect with the three capacities that determine the resilience of (economically) marginalized individuals: (1) reactive (coping), (2) adaptive, and (3) transformative capacities.

### Reactive Capacities: Social Networks as a Safety Net

The vast literature on social support, social capital, informal economy, and sustainable livelihoods shows that social networks form a crucial resource for individuals to cope with life's challenges. Individuals typically bounce back from poverty episodes by receiving cash transfers, material resources, and services such as unpaid childcare from relatives, friends, and acquaintances (Biosca et al. 2020; Stack 1974). Networks also pass on knowledge and information about, for instance, job openings or resources (e.g., charity organizations). Furthermore, they provide emotional support, which helps individuals cope with stressors and sustain their mental well-being. Both strong and weaker ties increase individuals' reactive capacities.

Perhaps paradoxically, while networks can mitigate disadvantage at the micro level, they reproduce inequality at the macro level (DiMaggio and Garip 2011; Lubbers, Small, and Valenzuela-García 2020). Pedulla and Pager (2019) identified two network sources of cumulative disadvantage. First, marginalized people have lower *network access* as they typically have smaller, less resourceful networks than the more privileged. For instance, as network formation displays homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), marginalized individuals tend to know disproportionally many people with equally disadvantaged placements in the social structure. Homophily thus limits the support networks can give.

Second, even with equal access, marginalized people have lower *network returns* than privileged individuals; that is, they obtain fewer benefits from their networks. Analyzing racial disparities in job access, Smith (2005) and Pedulla and Pager (2019) showed that employed people holding information

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about job vacancies disclose it selectively to those friends and acquaintances they see as deserving of assistance to preserve their own reputation in the company. As preserving one's reputation is more important in insecure jobs, marginalized people reaped fewer benefits than privileged individuals from mobilizing networks. However, Arvidsson, Collet, and Hedström (2021) found that network-based recruitment sometimes *reduces* exclusion. When mostly male firms hired male employees from more diverse firms, these employees acted as bridges causing their new firms to hire more women in the future. This "Trojan horse mechanism" increased inclusiveness, and more research is needed to gauge the generalizability of this result to other exclusion-related dimensions.

On top of the reputation mechanism, networks are governed by social norms that limit their mobilization, such as the norm of reciprocity (Lubbers, Valenzuela-García et al. 2020). Receiving help obliges the recipient to return the favor in the future. This norm produces exclusion because marginalized individuals may have fewer means to return favors. Repeated non-reciprocation and long-term asymmetrical support eventually cause endogenous network erosion, further marginalizing individuals (Lubbers, Valenzuela-García et al. 2020). The norm of reciprocity also traps low-income people in poverty because they need to redistribute any excess they may receive (Stack 1974).

In sum, while the literature emphasizes marginalized people's universal and essential reliance on networks, networks also perpetuate and accumulate disadvantages. Consequently, reactive capacities are typically insufficient to improve marginalized people's living conditions.

### Adaptive Capacities: Improved Networking Practices

Adaptive networking capacities refer to the ability to build on networks and adjust networking practices incrementally to improve future resilience. Studies about livelihood strategies in the global south have highlighted that people with limited assets collaborate and coordinate to share resources, pool risks, and achieve collective efficacy (Fafchamps and Gubert 2007). Examples are informal lending networks (Caudell, Rotolo, and Grima 2015), rotating savings and credit associations (Biosca et al. 2020), and labor exchange arrangements (Fafchamps and Gubert 2007). Economic migration is also often an adaptive risk-pooling strategy, where one or two family members migrate to provide for those who stay behind to care for children, the elderly, and belongings (e.g., Vanore, Mazzucato, and Siegel 2015).

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Interestingly, network functionality is adjusted to the constraints of the context in which networks are embedded, as people try to make the system "work." These adjustments manifest precisely the adaptive capacities of communities. First, networks are used to exchange *those* resources to which individuals have limited access. For instance, in the planned economy of the former USSR, Russians exchanged public resources in short supply (Ledeneva 2009), which they accessed via their institutional positions. These so-called "blat" networks evolved with the system:

> Blat developed together with the regime and reflected its changes: at first there were the basic necessities such as food, jobs, and living space, helping kulaks to escape exile or making it possible for Bolsheviks to christen their babies despite the party ban on religious rituals. Then came the more sophisticated needs of late socialism associated with education, mobility and consumerism. (Ledeneva 2009: 260)

Likewise, American people experiencing poverty often lack access to health care and, therefore, rely on medically insured network members to obtain prescription medicine and medical equipment (Raudenbush 2020). Networks are not only adapted to the context in terms of *what* is exchanged but also *with whom* and *how*. For instance, Torres (2019) described how older people in a New York City neighborhood flexibly interpreted tie strength to fit unmet needs.

Organizations can also contribute to individuals' adaptive capacities. Organizations in which individuals participate routinely, such as churches, childcare centers, and charity organizations, can actively broker in community networks, helping marginalized individuals build social capital (Small and Gose 2020). They do so best when they create opportunities for repeated interaction during prolonged periods of time, with participants collaborating on outwardly focused tasks (Small and Gose 2020). Encouraging generalized reciprocity and intervening in conflicts are other mechanisms through which organizations can strengthen networks (Mazelis 2020). Unfortunately, the most segregated communities lack such basic institutions (Wilson 2012 [1987]), but grassroots organizations created by marginalized communities (see next section) also foster trust and relationships (Mazelis 2020). Charity organizations also launch poverty alleviation interventions that successfully strengthen social networks by requiring regular participation (Matous, Wang, and Lau 2021). By evaluating them, social network analysis can improve such interventions.

Nonetheless, when resources are severely limited, harmful reactive and adaptive networking capacities may emerge. For instance, Lavee (2016) showed

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that some low-income mothers in Israel were exploited by wealthier men, who gave them money or material support in exchange for sex. Some of these relationships were disguised as romantic relationships, while others were "a kind of prostitution" (90), in which women participated reluctantly to access resources. Furthermore, marginalized people are vulnerable to exploitation by gangs (Venkatesh 2006) and clientelism (Auyero 2016). In areas neglected by formal institutions, people can hardly avoid participating in clandestine activities (Venkatesh 2006). Moreover, Desmond (2012) suggested that people in chronic poverty form "disposable ties" when their networks have eroded. They rapidly thicken weak ties to ask them for help, although these ties also burn out quickly. All three practices are better described as "survival strategies" than "resilience," and scholars must avoid uncritical uses of the term. As reducing marginality requires far more than reactive and adaptive capacities, I now turn to transformative capacities.

### Transformative Capacities: Changing Unequal Power Relationships

Transformative capacities focus on changing the deeper causes of marginalization – the underlying power structures that expose individuals to threats and reduce their capacity to deal with them. The systemic causes of marginalization can be conceptualized in terms of *structural violence* (Galtung 1969; Farmer 2004). Structural violence refers to the avoidable harm (e.g., poverty, family separation, illness, death) that individuals suffer because of policies and other systemic factors. In contrast to physical violence, it is often impersonal because no one directly injures others. Nonetheless, it harms people as much as direct violence, if not more. An example is politicians' exploitation of the so-called "European migration crisis" for political gains, leading to migration-containing measures that expose already highly vulnerable individuals to even more dangers during migration trajectories (De León 2015; Mandić 2017).

Structural violence threatens not only the well-being of disadvantaged individuals but also their communities' social fabric. For instance, Hagan, Leal, and Rodriguez (2015) showed that mass deportation fragments the social capital of migrant communities, as deportees had relatively high human and social capital. Undocumented people also avoided participating in community activities for fear of deportation.

Structural violence is complemented by two closely related processes (Bourgois 2009), namely *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu 2001), "the mechanism whereby the socially dominated naturalize the status quo and blame themselves for their domination" (Bourgois 2009: 19), and *normalized violence* (Scheper-Hughes 1992), referring to the historically ingrained social tolerance to structural

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violence in the general population, which reproduces the status quo, creates indifference, and invisibilizes inequities. Mechanisms normalizing structural violence include the public discourse regarding marginalized individuals' (un-)deservingness of assistance and routinized bureaucratic procedures. Through these mechanisms, humans perceive inequality as legitimate, natural, and inevitable (Galtung 1969: 173).

These mechanisms are firmly embedded in social networks. As people are socialized in structurally unequal systems, everyday interactions reproduce power imbalances, among others through identification, such as classifying self and others into social groups (e.g., racialization and stigmatization), and rationalization, such as legitimizing the status quo (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). For instance, in our research, a single low-income mother of four recalled how economically well-off relatives and friends lectured her about her life:

> Then they start about the past. "Why did you need to have that many children, why?" They clearly don't realize that they're already there, that I can't do anything, I can't drown them. Then, when they light that little fire, yes, they go on and on about it. (Lubbers, Valenzuela-García et al. 2020: 80)

Such everyday interactions or micro-aggressions (Sue 2010) reproduce political notions of deservingness of welfare assistance, attributing poverty to individual causes (e.g., promiscuity, lack of economic productivity, lack of financial literacy). Network members use these discourses to justify not helping someone ("it is her own fault"). Individuals experiencing poverty internalize this stigma by feeling shame (e.g., Garthwaite 2015; Walker 2014), which causes "defensive individualism" (Smith 2005), isolation, and reduced network access to support (Lubbers, Valenzuela-García et al. 2020).

Social networks particularly reproduce systemic inequities in social relationships marked by power differentials. Del Real (2019) showed that, intentionally or not, documented citizens often misuse their power to exploit or control undocumented network members who cannot seek legal help. Similarly, Levine (2013) showed that low-income single mothers learned to distrust bosses, boyfriends, caseworkers, and relatives, as the power differentials in their relationships combined with unaligned interests exposed them to exploitation and maltreatment. Headworth (2019) articulated how welfare agencies appropriate social ties to investigate welfare fraud, sowing distrust in communities. While distrust hampers upward mobility by keeping people from hiring childcare or seeking employment, it is a learned, adaptive response to past experiences.

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The structural violence framework thus suggests that making societies more equitable requires dismantling the power structures that expose large sections of the population to poverty and hardship. However, hardship also limits marginalized individuals' and communities' transformative capacity. Many scholars argue that marginalized people lack the agency, access, resources, and sense of entitlement to participate in politics (Visser, de Koster, and van der Waal 2021). According to Deveaux (2018), however, scholars have overlooked important, enduring social movements led by marginalized people worldwide. Examples are Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement (Deveaux 2018), India's National Slum Dwellers Federation (Appadurai 2001), Spain's Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (Casellas and Sala 2017), and the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in the US (Mazelis 2020). Deveaux argued that successful social movements led by poor people start by raising marginalized individuals' awareness about their rights and the causes of poverty and fostering community building, which are essential ingredients for organizing protests. Many also intend to secure resources for their members through production cooperatives, credit schemes, collective consumption movements, or providing legal assistance. While NGOs also aim to assist and empower marginalized populations, Deveaux stressed that "only poor-led social movements and grassroots organizations develop the skills they need to mobilize *politically*" (2018: 712). Political mobilization is essential because the ruling elites often perceive such movements as a "threat to their hegemony" (708).

Creating fairer societies is, of course, not solely the responsibility of those who bear the brunt of the existing system. More knowledge about the interaction of different types of actors in collective action against marginalization is needed.

## An Agenda for Network Research into Social Cohesion

Based on this brief theoretical framework, I propose four areas for future network research regarding the resilience of marginalized groups.

### Unequal Relationships in Networks

Both quantitative and qualitative network research can help us better understand the consequences of power differentials in social relationships and the extent to which unequal relationships reproduce and reinforce structural inequalities. Commonly based on social contact theory, network research is often limited to understanding *whether* mixing between different social groups occurs in friendship or support networks (e.g., cross-racial, -religious, or

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-gender relationships) and under which conditions. However, mixing alone, while helpful (Rohrer, Keller, and Elwert 2021), is insufficient for inclusiveness. As indicated before, individuals are socialized in structurally unequal systems and often perceive them as natural and justified, especially when they occupy privileged positions. Consequently, interactions in unequal relationships – even friendships – can reproduce these systems, intentionally or unintentionally. Like network research on school bullying, researchers can collect nominations of friendship, trust, or support, on the one hand, and of (micro-) aggressions (Williams 2020), on the other, to understand which ties reinforce inequity, how they are embedded in cliques and larger contexts, and how they affect individuals. To this aim, they could adapt racial micro-aggression scales (cf. Williams 2020): instead of asking, for instance, *whether* or *how often* individuals have had their experiences of racism denied or been subject to assumptions of criminality or low performance (individual measures), researchers could ask *who* treats them that way (relational measures).

Other valuable study areas are networked processes of stigmatization (Lamont et al. 2014) and legitimization (Lamont and Pierson 2019), and the spread of inclusivity norms, via network interventions, in schools, workplaces, and other organizations (e.g., Paluck, Shepherd, and Aronow 2016). Such research should not ignore the network positionality of privileged people to detect who become allies in the quest for inclusion. Furthermore, it is vital to identify network constellations of *informally* emerging intergroup relationships that make our societies more cohesive and resilient against exclusion.

## Intersectionality

Future research should also analyze how intersectionality plays out in social networks. Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (1989), refers to the specific disadvantage and oppression an individual experiences due to overlapping forms of discrimination. With this concept, scholars called attention to how exclusionary practices centered on social traits, such as race, class, citizenship, gender, sexuality, age, or disabilities, do not work independently, but in concert, to produce unique levels and experiences of exclusion and inequality (Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2019). For instance, a Black woman's disadvantage is not simply the sum of disadvantages experienced by women and Black people; the two factors interact. Ignoring these intersections thus obscures the unique experiences of entire social groups (cf. Moore 2011).

Intersectionality has become a mainstream concept in the social sciences, but not in social network analysis. Perhaps the reason is methodological. Studies that take an individual approach can oversample marginalized minority

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groups, collect data on individuals' social traits, and analyze their interaction effects. While network researchers may adopt similar strategies, they analyze relationships rather than individuals, complicating the statistical modeling of intersectionality. Each social trait associated with disadvantage can shape networks in multiple ways; for instance, race or gender can affect actors' network popularity or activity, homophily (i.e., preference for relationships with similar others), closure, or other more intricate network effects. Studying interactions between two such traits thus greatly amplifies the modeling options, and without a proper theoretical framework, modeling becomes a fishing expedition.

Personal network analysis may seem better suited to study intersectionality, centering on respondents' traits. However, large-scale surveys representing the intersections of interest often only measure core networks of two to three relationships,[1] drastically limiting our understanding of networks. In contrast, studies eliciting larger networks typically draw on small, purposive samples (e.g., migrants, older adults), inhibiting intersectional analysis.

Therefore, incorporating intersectionality in network research should start with exploratory analysis. Qualitative network analysis can uncover how people experiencing social exclusion based on multiple social traits (e.g., Black women) differ in networks and networking practices from those having one such trait (e.g., White women or Black men). Such analyses can inform quantitative models.

## Networks in Context

As social network analysis focuses on individuals and relationships, it often obscures the crucial role systemic factors play in the functioning of networks. However, individuals and relationships depend heavily on systemic factors, and people adapt their networking practices to the context. Even if all people in a network are exposed to the same context, not everyone will have the same rights and recognition. Therefore, a better description of how context at different scales (e.g., organizational culture, national legislation) affects networks is relevant for any network research. By not acknowledging systemic factors, social network analysis may inadvertently reinforce the depoliticization of social issues, focusing on what individuals and relationships, rather than institutions, can do to ameliorate inclusion.

Research can also test whether network effects on inequality are compounded by contextual characteristics. For instance, Tóth et al. (2021) showed that

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physical barriers in urban contexts (such as railroads or rivers separating neighborhoods) exacerbate the effects of network segregation on inequality.

### Networks and Proactive Capacities

The literature has provided abundant evidence of the role of networks in coping with exclusion, reactively and adaptively (for a review, see Lubbers, Small, and Valenzuela-García, 2020). In contrast, research regarding transformative networking capacities is rather slim and disconnected from this literature. Although network researchers study broader social movements that advocate for marginalized groups (cf. Chapter 10 of this volume; Della Porta and Diani, 2020), systematic attention to grassroots organizations led by marginalized people and their linking capital to NGOs and other advocacy groups is lacking. Identifying success factors, the brokerage positions of different actors in collaborative networks, and the use of social media will help us understand how social inclusion can be strengthened bottom-up.

As the resilience framework suggests, transformative capacities require the ability to “create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social (including political) conditions make the existing system untenable” (Walker et al. 2004: 4). Increasing inequality, ever-evolving forms of exploitation (cf. Chapter 4 of this volume), and the current economic model’s ecological effects suggest that incremental changes are indeed insufficient to address advanced marginality. Network researchers should therefore also pay more attention to social movements proposing more profound changes to the system, such as the basic income movement or the degrowth movement.

Likewise, network researchers can help evaluate cases of participatory decision-making in organizations and NGOs directly working in affected communities, cities, and national politics. For example, UN-Habitat (2018) has developed the City Resilience Profiling Tool to enhance urban resilience to marginalization and other challenges globally. Social network analysis could contribute to such efforts by evaluating the urban networks involved in implementing this and other tools and the extent to which marginalized communities are involved and heard.

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## Note

1. For instance, the General Social Survey's core discussion network generator collects a maximum of five network members per respondent, with observed averages of two to three (Small 2013; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006).

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