

A plea for consistent terminology for personal and social networks

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Clear, consensual terminology needed for efficient communication in science

Standard terms most critical for a field's basic concepts, e.g.:

- **atom vs. molecule**
- **plant vs. animal**
- **igneous vs. sedimentary vs. metamorphic**
- **organic vs. inorganic**

Social science plagued by plethora of ill-defined and variously defined terms (many meanings for same term)

- e.g., “social capital” (Kadushin, 2004, Social Networks, “Too much investment in social capital?”)

Redundant terms also abound, causing confusion and hindering communication

Multiplicity of terms referring to “personal networks” and “social networks”

Goals:

- identify and critique some synonyms
- plead for standardization

Definitions (mostly taken from Marsden, 2005):

social network = set of social relationships among a set of nodes (social units or actors)

personal network = set of social relationships between a focal node (ego) and other nodes (alters) to which it is linked (and sometimes direct relationships between alters)

- **a personal network is a special case or subset of a social network**

Distinction a matter of study design (Marsden, 2005), not data collection, relational content, or social units (individuals, organizations, etc.) studied

Implications for analytic techniques and interpretation

Some desirable characteristics of terms

- **logical**
- **specific and faithfully descriptive**
- **complementary (part/whole semantic relationship of concepts)**
- **morphological equivalence**
- **unique application in field**
- **historical continuity**

Partial list and critique of synonyms

Not linked to originators' names (difficult to establish and irrelevant)

Personal

- egocentric - long history; accurate description
- local - vague (sometimes used to refer to “low” [1st/2nd/3rd, etc.] order zones around a node in a network); already applied to roles

Social

- sociocentric - “social-centered” = unclear-- personal networks aren’t “social-centered”?
- global - already applied to roles; social networks typically not measured completely or boundaries unknown/ill-defined
- whole/full - social networks typically not measured completely or boundaries unknown
- complete - social networks typically not measured completely or boundaries unknown; already applied to graphs
- sociometric - already applied to specific type of relations and design -- sociometry; no good morphological counterpart

**Most synonyms are recent additions to jargon
(used by established SNA researchers)**

Best terms in my opinion:

**social vs. personal - satisfy all criteria, but
“personal” awkward re corporate social units/
actors (e.g., organizations, countries)**

**social vs. egocentric - satisfy all criteria except
morphological equivalence**

Consensus is the paramount concern

**(Separate problem of “social” used as adjective
describing a relation, implying informal contact)**

Plea for standardization

Technical and scientific language is inherently conservative, allowing long-term understanding (across generations) and ease of learning (by novices)

How to standardize?

- **special (INSNA?) committee**
- **plebiscite/poll**
- **editors and reviewers insist on some sort of standardization; methods text writers adopt**
- **no intervention, hope problem self-corrects**

Potential futures

Nonscience

- more terms coined, no consensus developed
- sociobabble

Sloppy science

- continued use of multiple terms, but referencing to corresponding “core” terms and a central glossary/thesaurus (published somewhere and/or posted on INSNA web site)

Good science

- consensus, abandonment of unneeded terms

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Please share other synonyms with me:

www.interscientific.net/contact.html