How Actors Mobilize Their Networks in Practice

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An important reason personal networks matter is that individuals can turn to them when they have a need. But how do people decide whom in their network to turn to? Researchers across several literatures have studied this question under different rubrics, including "help-seeking behavior," "the mobilization of social capital," and the "activation of social ties." The question arises when people seek social support, information about jobs, help when they are ill, advice about college enrollment, and more. The process of turning to others is ultimately a decision, and the research addressing this question has explicitly proposed or implicitly suggested the common-sense notion that, when deciding, people first assess their needs and options and then choose the best available match between the former and the latter. This idea suggests that the decision-making process is largely consistent across situations, autonomous in nature, and at least minimally deliberative. In what follows, I argue instead that, in practice, the process is heterogeneous across situations; that the heterogeneity can be characterized by the degree to which it is internal vs external, deliberative vs intuitive, and personal vs organizational; and that it can be expressed in terms of an interaction space and an institutional space of possibilities. I outline the conditions likely to shape the decision-making process in each space, and propose that the more intuitive mobilization is, the more it will depend on interaction conditions, and the more organizational it is, the more it will depend on institutional ones. I discuss the substantive, theoretical, and methodological implications of understanding decision-making in context, and propose an agenda for future work.

THE ISSUE

Mobilization

Consider the following scenarios:
- A manager struggling at work seeks advice from a peer in a different firm.
- A middle-aged bachelor, diagnosed with cancer, emotionally vents his anxieties to his roommate.
- A suddenly-unemployed mother gets an acquaintance to inquire whether the supermarket where he works is hiring.

The three scenarios involve different actors facing different problems in different domains—management, health, and unemployment. But from the perspective of social network analysis, the scenarios are three versions of the same phenomenon, the importance of networks to people's ability to meet their needs. From that perspective, they have three things in common.

First, they all illustrate why well-connected people tend to do better than others. Networks provide valuable resources such as advice, emotional support, and information (Fischer 1982; Coleman 1988, 1990; Thoits 2011). As a result, people who are better connected are more likely to find jobs, and likely to find better paying ones (Granovetter 1974; Lin 2001; Mouw 2003; Pedulla and Pager 2019); they manage illnesses better, experience milder symptoms, and live longer (Berkman and Syme 1979; House, Landis, and Umberson 1988; Antonucci 1990; Pescosolido 1992; Thoits 2011; Antonucci, Ajrouch, and Birditt 2014); and they land higher in organizational hierarchies, have more original ideas, and earn better salaries (Burt 1995, 2004). The ability to resort to social networks helps distinguish those who manage their difficulties well from those who do not.

Second, the three scenarios show the importance of *mobilization*, the process by which actors actually turn to those in their network for help. While people can at times benefit from their network without doing anything—as when being well-connected provides a feeling or sense of safety—they can only receive many network resources to the extent they actually mobilize the network (Lin 2001; Thoits 2011). This process is known by different rubrics in different literatures, including "network mobilization," "help-seeking behavior," "the activation of social capital," and "advice-seeking" (Pescosolido 1992; Lin 1999, 2001; Smith 2005; Small 2017; Smith et al 2020; also Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). But the different terms all speak to the same core issue, the process through which people actually secure the resources in their networks.

Third, the scenarios also appear to bear evidence to a common assumption about how mobilization works, that that when people need something from their network, they will assess their needs and whom they could turn to and opt for the best available match. The manager would go to someone likely to understand his problem; the bachelor, to someone emotionally supportive; the mother, to someone with information about jobs. This assumption is so consistent with common sense that it does not appear to be an assumption or an argument so much as a statement of fact.

However, it is less a social fact than a deeply consequential, and underexplored, understanding of the decision-making process. To see why, we can state the assumption more systematically. It is that when mobilizing their networks, actors engage in a multi-stage process (see Bruch, Feinberg, and

Lee 2016; Bruch and Feinberg 2017): They (*a*) assess their need; (*b*) identify their potential helpers; (*c*) evaluate the appropriateness of each; and (*d*) select the best among those available.

This assumption is common in the literature (e.g., Borgatti and Cross 2003, Perry and Pescosolido 2010). Most studies focus on some, not all, of stages of the process, and different researchers focus on different stages. For example, in the context of health, Perry and Pescosolido (2010, 2015) focus on how people assess their needs and evaluate the appropriateness of potential helpers (*a* and *b*): "individuals engage in problem or task-specific activation of social network ties, evaluating who in their networks is most willing and able to fulfill a particular need…" (Perry and Pescosolido 2010:356). Stated differently, "people make decisions about who to talk to from among all possible discussants in the network, and our research indicates that this process is in part systematic, reflecting elements of bounded rationality" (Perry and Pescosolido 2015:126). Similarly, in the context of social support, Small (2013:472) focuses on how people select whom to turn to (*d*), and proposes that at times people "will specifically seek those in their network who possess a relevant resource." In the context of employment, Smith (2007:134) focuses on how people identify and evaluate the appropriateness of others who could help get a job (*b* and *c*), proposing that people often avoid others if "they might be maligned by [the] job-holding ties." In the context of management, Nebus (2006) focuses on how people assess their needs and evaluate the appropriateness of potential helpers (*a* and *c*), taking into account availability (*d*): "The theory posits that the advice seeker, when possessing rich information on potential alters, decides whom to contact by trading off expected knowledge value versus the cost of obtaining it" (2006:615). When the seeker has little information, they base the decision on "the potential contact's accessibility and perceived willingness to share advice" (2006:615).

Many other researchers adopt some version of the idea, but less explicitly. They do not examine any particular stage of the decision-making process; concerned less with the process than with its results, they propose in general terms that an actor will select whom to turn to based on how suitable the alter is to the particular need. Researchers usually express this suitability as a match between the need and the skills, knowledge, or ability of the actor's helpers (e.g., Wellman and Wortley 1989, 1990; Bearman and Parigi 2004; Thoits 2011; see also Small and Sukhu 2016 for a review). For example, Bearman and Parigi (2004), examining whom people turn to when they need to discuss important matters, propose that there is "topic-alter dependency," but do not delve into how people arrive at matching topics and alters.

The common assumption about how mobilization works is probably prevalent across so many fields because of three advantages. First, it is intuitive. In our scenarios, the manager, the middle-aged bachelor, and the unemployed mother all turned to people it made sense for them to turn to— another manager, a roommate, and an employed acquaintance. This common sense is also consistent with standard and well-documented network theories; the three cases reflect the value of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Thoits 2011; Small 2017), of strong ties (Granovetter 1973, 1983; Thoits 2011), and of weak ties (Granovetter 1973, 1983), respectively.

Second, it is theoretically elegant. The theorized multi-stage process—actor considers need, identifies options, evaluates each, and selects the best among those available—is analytically clear. It is simple, not in the negative sense of lacking sophistication but in the positive sense of avoiding unnecessary complication. As a result, it is highly portable, not only compatible with many theoretical perspectives but also applicable across many situations.

Third, it is consistent with methodological convention. Though network analysis is a diverse methodological field, the first step in any conventional network analysis is to *map the network*. This is precisely the same step that the common assumption presumes the actor makes when faced with a given need: map the network of alternatives. As a result, the analyst can essentially test different hypotheses about what the actor is likely to do based on the network the researcher elicits, as the analyst's map is assumed to be reproduce the start of the actor's process.

Given these advantages, the ubiquity of the common assumption is not surprising. But how accurately does it reflect reality? Consider the following scenarios.

Practice

- A manager is struggling at work. He heads to his field's national annual conference where, at a small open session on overcoming obstacles, he finds himself confessing his struggles to the group and seeking one-on-one advice, after the session, from the moderator, who is a similarly positioned manager at a different firm.
- A middle-aged bachelor is diagnosed with cancer. When he returns from the clinic, he runs into his new roommate. The roommate, whom he does not yet know well, asks how things are going; the bachelor, surprising himself, confides his anxieties and insecurities.
- An unemployed mother goes to her regular supermarket. Her cashier, it turns out, is an old acquaintance, who asks how things are going, and, who, upon hearing that the mother lost her job, tells her he will inquire whether the store is hiring.

In the second version of each case, the outcome is the same. Indeed, each second case is merely a fleshed-out version of the first. Yet the second version of the scenarios reveals several problems with the standard assumption. I present three problems:

First, *the decision-making process is not homogeneous across situations*. I noted above that one of the traits of the common assumption was its applicability across many situations. This trait is an advantage for the theory but a disadvantage to the analyst, since it can induce what Kahneman (2011:277) has called a "theory-induced blindness," forcing the analyst to seek consistency across phenomena that may not exist in practice. The three cases exhibit different decision-making processes, and, thus, different mobilization processes. For example, the manager may or may not have first reflected on whether the moderator's skills met his needs. But the bachelor certainly did not assess his roommate's skills as an emotional supporter before blurting out his anxieties and insecurities—in fact, it was the roommate, not the bachelor, who prompted the discussion. There are certainly times when people first consider their need, then identify whom they might approach, and next evaluate their relative strengths before doing so; but there are times when, as in the bachelor's case, the alter was just there when the person needed to talk (Small and Sukhu 2016; Small 2017).

Second, *the alter selected may not actually have been a part of ego's network*. I noted earlier that one of the traits of the common assumption was its consistency with methodological convention. The assumption is that actors first map the relevant alters in their network, just as the analyst would. For example, when needing advice, people would first consider who in their network is a good adviser and then select one from among these to consult. The analyst, analogously, would first ask survey respondents whom they turn to for advice and then test theories about whom among these the respondent is likely to turn to. One potential problem with this practice is already known, which is

that people may be inaccurate about whom they turn to due to survey wording or recall issues (Bernard et al. 1984; Schwarz and Sudman 1992; Sudman, Bradburn, and Schwarz, 1996). In fact, they at times expressly do not mention people such as spouses (Pescosolido and Wright 2004).

The deeper problem is that people do not always turn to someone in their effective network, just as the manager, rather than turning to someone he already knew, confided his troubles to the moderator he did not know before the opening session. In fact, the experience of turning to someone one just met for something deeply personal is common, and has been documented often in both sociological and psychological studies (John, Acquisti, and Loewenstein 2011; Small 2017). If asked to map his advice network, the manager—even if he were scrupulously honest and perfectly accurate—could not have reported the moderator, since he had not yet met him.[1]

Moreover, the problem is not just methodological but conceptual. In their own lives, people do not have perfect maps of their networks at the time they are making mobilizations decisions. They do not recall all potentially helpful alters especially well, and whatever factors affect whether an alter is cognitively accessible—i.e., whether the alter even comes to mind—will play a role in whom they turn to (Smith et al 2020; Omodei, Brashears, and Arenas 2017). If, when the manager first considered whom to turn to, he had in fact first mentally scanned his network to see who was appropriate, the moderator would not have appeared as a possible candidate, as the two had not met. In any such circumstances, trying to account for whom an ego sought by relying on a map of the ego's network would be fruitless.

Third, *the mobilization process may not be entirely the product of an autonomous ego*. I noted earlier that one of the traits of the standard assumption was its conceptual elegance, expressed most systematically as a multi-stage decision process driven entirely by the actor. Indeed, the fact that the actor needs to drive it would appear to be the crucial difference between network resources that need to be mobilized and those (like a feeling of safety) that do not (see Lin 2001; Thoits 2011). But the case of the mother suggests otherwise. She did mobilize her network for job information; however, *she* did not really turn to her helper; he, upon learning her needs, proceeded to make the inquiry. In everyday circumstances, alters offer to help, and offer help, repeatedly, providing information, loans, gifts, emotional support, advice, connections and many other network resources without being asked to do so (see also Pescosolido, Gardner, and Lubel. 1998). Alters can be the source of mobilization as much as an ego is—indeed, they can be the sole source of the mobilization process.

In sum, individuals are neither as consistent, deliberative, or autonomous as the standard assumption implies. And though the scenarios depicted above may seem arbitrary, they, in fact, illustrate important social processes depicted in many ethnographic studies (Boswell 1969; Stack 1974; Menjívar 2000; Clawson 2005; Small 2009; Desmond 2012; Small 2017; Lubbers, Valenzuela, and Small 2020). They reflect a growing literature that has repeatedly uncovered processes inconsistent with the common-sense view about how people come to mobilize their network when needed.

In the pages that follow, I make sense of these processes. I argue that the decision-making process is heterogeneous across situations; that the heterogeneity can be characterized by the degree to which it is internal vs external, deliberative vs intuitive, and personal vs organizational; and that it can be expressed in terms of an interaction space and an institutional space of possibilities. This

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[1] In fact, it is worth noting that many people develop a relationship as a result of having turned to another for help: Network *mobilization* can at times precede network *formation*.

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understanding, as we shall see, contributes to theory, substance, and method. It broadens network analysis by delving deeper in to decision-making, and broadens decision-making theory in mobilization research by taking context far more seriously (Feld 1981; Coleman 1988; Pescosolido 1992; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Chua 2012; Doreian and Conti 2012; Bruch and Feinberg 2017; but see Abend 2018). It provides a clear view of what "context" is, and, in turn, provides a clearer perspective on the mechanisms through which larger social processes may shape mobilization, and, thus, a core aspect of network inequality. And it helps address the methodological limitations that can derive from too strict a devotion to conventional structural methods, suggesting that, for some aspects of network analysis, mapping the network need not be the place to start. I begin unpacking the heterogeneity of the decision-making process by examining deliberation and autonomy.

DELIBERATION AND AUTONOMY

Some heterogeneity in the decision-making process may be captured by examining two distinct axes: the degree to which the decision was deliberative and the degree to which it was driven by ego.

Deliberative vs Intuitive

One axis involves how much the actor reflected on the decision before making it. At one end of the continuum is the standard model, which assumes that actors are deliberative—that is, that ego weighs the options, the possible alters she might talk to and what those alters might bring, before deciding whom to turn to. This assumption was articulated explicitly in several of the studies described earlier.[2]

In contrast, several researchers have argued that decision-making is not consistently deliberative. People go about their lives making many decisions without giving them much thought. Schutz (1964:78) argued that it "is erroneous to assume that consciousness of such alternatives and therefore choice is necessarily given before every human action and that in consequence all acting involves deliberation and preference" (see also Dewey [1916] 2004). He offered an example: "When I walk through a garden discussing a problem with a friend and I turn left or right, I do not choose to do so. I have no alternative in mind" (Schutz 1964:78). He insisted people often act out of habit, instinct, or just chance. Many sociologists have explored related ideas. Esser concurred with Schutz and went further, suggesting that "there will almost never be such a calculation [of alternatives] in the context of everyday behavior" (Esser 1993:16). Most action, according to Esser, merely follows routines, an idea expanded on by Kroneberg (2014). In fact, models of action based on habit, routine, and predisposition have been important to sociological theories of action (Weber 1968; Bourdieu 1977; Vaisey 2009; Lizardo 2017).

In recent years, sociologists and psychologists have proposed different versions of "dual models," perspectives wherein, consistent with the notion that decision-making is heterogeneous across situations, actors are believed to deliberate in some circumstances but not others. In cognitive psychology, dual systems theory proposes that actors make decisions based on two systems of thought: "System 1 is characterized as automatic, largely unconscious, and relatively undemanding of computational capacity…. System 2 encompasses the processes of analytic intelligence that have

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[2] I note that some researchers adopt this assumption, for modeling purposes, on an "as if" basis, but make no claim as to whether this cognitive process is actually taking place.

traditionally been studied by information processing theorists trying to uncover the computational components underlying intelligence" (Stanovich and West 2000:658; see also Kahneman 2011). In sociology, Vaisey (2009) has proposed that culture can shape behavior through either cultural predispositions that are not reflected on (analogous to System 1) or cultural beliefs that are openly articulated (analogous to System 2). Several sociologists have expanded on these ideas (Kroneberg 2014; Lizardo 2017; Moore 2017; Small 2017).

However, for our purposes, deliberation is best seen not as dichotomous but as a matter of degree, a continuum that reflects different aspects of the mobilization process. To understand why, consider an earlier model in Small and Sukhu (2016), which proposed that the mobilization process may be divided in to three decisions: seeking (the decision to get help), selection (the decision to opt for one alter over another), and activation (the decision to request help). At one extreme, people first decide to seek help, then think about who is optimal, and finally decide to approach that person; at the other, they make all three decisions spontaneously, as the cancer-struck bachelor did after the roommate asked. But there are many options in between. A person, for example, may decide to seek help, but not have figured out whom to turn to when an opportunity materializes. Or they may decide to seek help, and not know *exactly* whom to turn to but know that, if they go to a conference with many experts or the topic, they are likely to find someone who is valuable. The mobilization process is complex enough that deliberation is best understood as a matter of degree.

Empirical research in mobilization has uncovered situations where mobilization was not deliberative in the standard way. For example, Granovetter's (1974) study of how people found work uncovered many such circumstances. In one passage, Granovetter describes how a man who lost his job and started driving cabs in the interim eventually landed another position. "Granovetter discussed the experiences of one respondent, Carl Y, who was unemployed and had been looking for help in finding a job. In the interim, he began driving a taxi until he could find a job in his regular field. Once, while on a fare, he ran into an old friend at a train station and asked for a job on the spot. Carl did not select this friend to then go out and find the person; Carl decided whom to ask (selection decision) at the moment he decided to ask (activation decision). Some version of this situation was common. Granovetter explained that many of his respondents were, in a sense, "always looking" for a job, but not explicitly aiming to ask a particular member of their network for help. They simply responded to opportunities as they saw fit" (Small 2017:118-19).

Ego vs Alter Driven

A second axis involves the extent to which the decision to mobilize is primarily the ego's or primarily the alter's. At one end of the continuum is the conventional model, which naturally presumes that ego alone decides whether to mobilize others. Decision-making of this kind is fundamental to not only rational actor models but also to much of the work currently under the judgment and decision-making perspective (Bruch and Feinberg 2017). For some, that ego is the decision-maker is fundamental to the term "to mobilize."

At the other end of the continuum is the fully alter-driven process, where the mobilization is entirely the product of someone else's actions. Examples are the alter who, without prompting, offers ego information about a job, or the friend who, seeing that ego is despondent, offers an embrace. Alter-driven mobilization is not unusual. In the context of work, McDonald (2005, 2010), Lin and Ao (2008), and others have discussed situations where ego does not actually mobilize social capital. For example, Lin and Ao (2008) report that many people simply receive job information from others,

even when they were not "actively engaging in job search." They report that 43% of respondents in a nationally representative survey had "someone mention job possibilities, openings, or opportunities to [them], without [their] asking" (Lin and Ao 2008:118). In fact, not merely information but also jobs themselves are often found through networks without intrinsic mobilization. McDonald and Elder (2006) examined the 1998 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and found that 27% of respondents had found their job without searching. McDonald (2005) found similar rates. And in a qualitative study of the job process, McDonald (2010) found that 13 of 42 respondents had found their job without searching, and 10 of those 13 people who did not search got the job information through a contract. (Of the original sample, 58 found job formally, 52 through intermediary; of 52, 42 were interviewed.)[3]

It is important to note that the extent to which a particular act of mobilization was ego- or alter-driven is a matter of *degree*, because it requires social interaction, and interaction, a joint process, can be driven partly by both parties. For example, the situation with the cancer-struck bachelor might have evolved differently. The bachelor might have gingerly hinted at the topic of his hospital visit, not knowing whether his roommate would be willing to participate on an emotionally difficult conversation. The roommate, sensing a need, might have probed further, and ultimately asked how the visit went. In this context, the mobilization is partly ego- and partly alter-driven.[4]

The Interaction Space

Arrayed over the two axes, the heterogeneity of the process of mobilization can be visualized as in Figure 1.
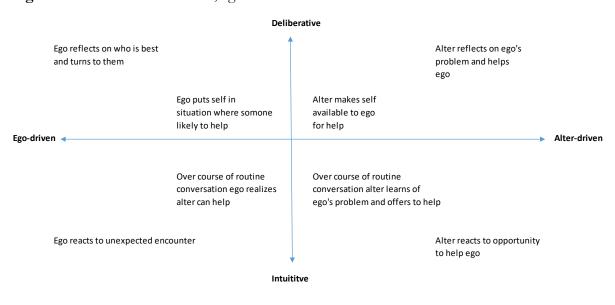
Figure 1: Forms of mobilization, ego and alter

[3] See also Campbell and Rosenfeld (1985). McDonald (2010:325) "White males receive significantly more job leads than women and racial minorities"; also McDonald, Lin, and Ao (2009).
[4] I note that the alter's role in the mobilization process can also be negative or preventive (Menjívar 2000. Smith (2007) has shown that, in contexts of high distrust, such as high poverty neighborhoods and networks, alter may refuse to offer to help ego with job information, fearful of negative consequences for alter's own reputation (see also Marin 2012). Alternatively, alter may help by offering information but requesting ego not to alert employers of who made a referral.

The top to bottom axis represents deliberative to intuitive decisions; the left to right axis, ego- to alter-driven decisions. Thus, the upper left extremes of the continua represent the standard assumption, wherein people think about their issues, evaluate options, and pursue, of their own volition, someone who could help. The lower left extremes represent the circumstances where people respond to an opportunity that was unexpected. In such contexts—again at the extreme of non-deliberation—ego had a problem but had not selected whom to seek help from, and in fact, had not even decided whether to seek help at all. Neither the selection nor the seeking decisions had been made—ego just had an issue. Over the course of an encounter, however, an opportunity to solve an issue they had not realized they could seek help on materialized, and ego spontaneously asked for help, advice, or information. For example, consider a parent who, when casually chatting with a new acquaintance who happens to be a schoolteacher, suddenly realizes that the teacher could help her figure out whether a given school has a good reputation. Social interactions represent opportunities for mobilization that ultimately are as important as the mobilizer herself.

The upper right extremes of the continua represent situations where the highly efficacious *alter* pursues ego for help. At this juncture, alter knows ego needs or could use some resource that alter possesses, and proceeds to offer it. While this kind of mobilization has not been theorized at length in network research, it is quite common. Research on care work has documented such circumstances repeatedly, even if the studies often focus on the burdens for caregivers (England 2005) The adult children of patients with debilitating conditions, such as Alzheimer's or cancer, must often pro-actively make decisions about bringing care, support, and information to their parents. Similarly, friends and family often organize "interventions" when a loved one needs to but has neglected or refused to seek professional help (see Pescosolido, Gardner, and Lubell 1998). Faculty advisers often, on their own, think of ways of helping their graduate students (Small 2017). Partners at law firms find ways of shepherding junior associates toward effective career decisions. Network mobilization can be driven either largely or entirely by alters with a personal or professional motivation to provide advice, information, support, or another resource.

The lower right continuum extremes depict circumstances where situational opportunities are key, but the primary driver is alter, not ego. Many faculty advisers spend little time thinking about their students, but react pro-actively if, over the course of a conversation, they realize a student has a problem they can solve. Small (2009) has documented that directors of childcare centers, over the course of interactions with low-income parents, often offered resources, referrals, or access to services when a need became apparent. All such circumstances are clearly cases where network mobilization has benefitted ego.

Though mobilization can happen at all four corners of Figure 1, many everyday circumstances fall outside of the extremes, given the fluid nature of how people think about their needs, of how much alters think about those in their lives, and of how social interaction shapes decision-making (e.g., Blau [1955]1963:132). In fact, somewhat deliberative, somewhat ego-driven situations are quite common, wherein people are aware of a need and would appreciate help, but have not quite decided that they want to seek it, the way someone dealing with a fear of failure may have trepidation about exposing themselves as vulnerable (Small 2017). In such circumstances, people might place themselves in a situation where others, hearing the right hint, might offer to help. For example, they might go to church more often, or participate in a workshop on managing failure. They may not know who will be there, but they have reason to expect the people there might be safe for this particular topic.

Pushing further, somewhat intuitive, somewhat ego-driven situations are common as well, wherein the actor is aware of a need but has not really concluded they want help, either because it has not occurred to them that help would be useful or because, in the long list of issues everyone faces at any given time—broken toilet, dying relative, coworker conflict, car trouble, sick child, recurring migraines, threat of eviction, weight problems, etc.—this particular issue simply has not risen to the top. People regularly engage in what Simmel (1950) referred to as sociable talk, discussions with no purpose whatsoever. Over the course of a conversation, ego can slowly come to realize that a particular alter is probably good to talk to about that nagging issue.

Similarly, alter can more or less drive mobilization without entirely doing so. Somewhat deliberative, somewhat alter-driven situations are common. In the standard exchange relations most people are part of, the expectation of giving and receiving help is fundamental to the maintenance of the network (Homans 1950; Blau [1964]1986; Stack 1974; Emerson 1976; Uehara 1990). When social interaction is regular and ongoing, it is not difficult for alters to recognize a need in ego, and to make themselves available should ego choose to activate the tie. When people are going through divorce, friends and family often make themselves available, at times not so much giving support—though this happens, too—as offering to provide it when needed.

Finally, somewhat intuitive, somewhat alter-driven situations are part of how networks are mobilized as well. Alter may learn about ego's issue over the course of an interaction and spontaneously offer to make themselves available—without outright giving advice, support, information, cash, or another good or resource. Examples are learning, over the course of regular conversation, that someone may face eviction or may lose a custody battle (see Desmond 2017). Ego may or may not have expressed the problem for a reason. Alter may spontaneously offer to help in the future if the need arises.

The various circumstances described above are important forms mobilization as it happens *in practice*, and do not conform to the fully-deliberative, fully-autonomous model that, albeit for understandable reasons, has come to dominate much of our thinking.

Implications

A basic implication of the preceding discussion is that *social interaction* is indispensable to the mobilization process—that is, understanding mobilization requires an interaction-based extension of network analysis.

To be sure, research on mobilization has always extended network analysis by prioritizing *decision-making*. Pescosolido's (1992) model of support, Perry and Pescosolido's (2010) functional-specificity hypothesis, Bearman and Parigi's (2004) concept of topic-alter dependency, Smith's (2007) theory of distrust in networked job seeking, and Small's theory of cognitive empathy in support mobilization (2017)—to name a few—all represent analyses of network processes in which decision-making matters. In addition, the research has not been blind to the fact that alter, not just ego, plays a role in the process, as in Smith's (2007) and Marin's (2012) work on when job holders offer to help job seeker.

But our discussion so far has suggested extending that perspective further. In much of the prior work, the decision-making process has been contextually abstracted from the interaction process

itself, such that ego or alter are assumed to weigh options but not much else. Each actor in the pair has been conceived as deliberating on their own, taking the other's past and future actions into account but not responding much to interactional conditions at the particular time and space they are deciding whether to ask or offer help (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In practice, actors are as deliberative as they are reactive, as concerned with their own wellbeing as they are sensitive to social cues. The decision-making process is inevitably contextual. To the degree that a decision has been less deliberative and more intuitive, the conditions of social interaction will likely matter more. Thus, understanding mobilization requires extending network analysis by developing a deeper view of not only decision-making but also social interaction contexts. The study of how social interaction shapes mobilization involves many questions for research that lie well beyond the scope of the current paper. However, any such work will require making decisions about three core issues.

Scope. Research into social interaction may focus on either *indexical* or *routine* contexts. The first, whose term I borrow from Garfinkel (1967) involves the analysis of a particular mobilization decision, at a particular place and time, and the conditions of the social interaction in that specific context. The large body of work on social interaction has examined how context-specific issues such as power, the potential for embarrassment, and interactional cues shape behavior (Goffman 1956; Garfinkel 1967; Atkinson 1988; Maynard and Clayman 1991). While much of this work has been ethnographic, audio- and video-recording and other methods are relevant as well (Goodwin and Heritage 1990). For example, Gibson (2012) studied how conversational dynamics among National Security Council members in closed-door meetings during the Cuban Missile Crisis affected whose advice President Kennedy took more seriously. The second kind of context involves studying not a single interaction situation but how the environments people participate in routinely affect the decisions they tend to make. Here the focus is not a single act of mobilization, but the kinds of mobilization people make over the long run. An example is research on how the characteristics of childcare centers that parents enroll their children in affect the people they encounter routinely and, in turn, the extent to which they turn to others for parenting advice (Small 2009). Much of this work involves studying people's routine organizations or the individuals, networks, or groups people interact with routinely, a research project that may be qualitative or quantitative in nature. While indexical research can capture well how large scale processes manifest themselves in micro interaction, research on routine interaction can address how actors manage needs that are not discrete but ongoing, such as health conditions, poverty, residential instability, and the like (Pescosolido 1991; Pescosolido, Gardner, and Lubell 1998; Pescosolido and Boyer 1999; Perry and Pescosolido 2012)

Characteristics. Regardless of scope, research into social interaction will need to consider which characteristics of the context of interaction shape mobilization decisions (Hsung, Lin, and Breiger 2009; Small 2009; Chua 2012; Doreian and Conti 2012; Mollenhorst, Völker, and Flap 2008, 2011). These include *demographic*, *relational*, *spatial*, and *institutional* characteristics. The first refers to the number and composition of the individuals present in the context, whether indexically (at the moment of interaction) or routinely (over repeated encounters with alters). Contexts with many actors shape mobilization differently from those with few, and the demographic characteristics of those actors will shape the process as well. For example, people may be more reluctant to ask for help in a crowded room than in a private office. The second refers both to the dynamics inherent in the ego-alter relation (obligations, expectations, trust, etc.) and to the relation between each of them and all other actors in the context—that is, the network context. For example, people may be more likely to receive unsolicited help if they are part of a network of generalized reciprocal obligations (Stack 1974; but see Dhand et al. 2019). The third refers to the characteristic of the physical space in

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which the mobilization (indexically or routinely) happens, the office hallways, cafes, parks, plazas, barbershops, nail salons, restaurants, bars, and other contexts in which people come into contact with one another (Oldenburg 1989; Small 2009). Accumulated research in sociology, psychology, urban planning, and design has shown convincingly that the configuration of physical spaces can affect social interaction, as when the proximity between co-workers offices affects who becomes friends with whom (e.g., Doreian and Conti 2012; Sailer and McCulloh 2012; see Small and Adler 2019 for a review). The fourth characteristic involves the institutional conditions of the organizations in which the mobilization takes place, the local norms and rules that govern social relations in firms, colleges, schools, churches, and other contexts of interactions that affect actors' willingness to seek or offer help (Small 2009, 2017; see also Small and Gose 2020).

Effects. Given a scope and a set of characteristics, researchers must examine what effects the interaction context has. A given context may affect mobilization through its impact on *ego*, *alter*, their *relationship*, or their *interaction*. The effect on ego involves examining how the interaction context shapes whether to mobilize but also the general disposition toward doing so. For example, to consider the institutional conditions, some companies have more cooperative norms than others, affecting ego's disposition to ask for help from peers or superiors. The same is true for alters. For example, some universities explicitly reward faculty for offering advice to junior peers, while others do not. The effect on the relationship is distinct from the other two. For example, an institutional context may determine the relationship expected among individuals—a student who encounters a faculty member on campus can expect to request time to vent a problem at a different level than had the student and faculty member encountered each other at a supermarket. The context can impose expectations on the relation that will shape the mobilization process. Finally, the context can shape the interaction itself. For example, to consider spatial conditions, the proximity between teachers' offices or classrooms in a school may affect who runs into whom, and thus, who teachers end up seeking advice from on curricular matters (Spillane, Shirrell, and Sweet 2017).

ORGANIZATIONS AND AUTONOMY

While our discussion has sought to substantially expand the scope of mobilization research, an important issue has been missing. Consider the following scenarios:
- A manager is struggling at work. A colleague notices the struggle and recommends that he sign up for the company's upcoming session on managing time.
- A middle-aged bachelor is diagnosed with cancer. After diagnosis, the oncologist follows hospital protocol and automatically enrolls the patient in a brief counseling session before the patient heads home.
- An unemployed mother is looking for work. Rather than ask friends for information, she decides to participate in her college's annual recruitment sessions, during which employers regularly visit campus and conduct in-person interviews.

The third version of each of the three scenarios represents an entirely different kind of process. While in all of them a networked resource was mobilized to ego's benefit, in each of them organizations played an important role, reflecting the *organizational embeddedness* (Small 2009) of the mobilization process. Though people are embedded in social networks (Granovetter 1985; Uzzi 1996), networks are embedded in organizations, and those organizations play a role in how networks are formed, maintained, conceived, and mobilized (Small 2009, 2017). The degree to which organizations play a role in mobilization varies, and this heterogeneity itself is a function of two axes.

Individual vs Organizational

One axis refers to whether the mobilization was primarily driven by an individual or by an organization. At issue here is how to conceive of the primary actor. When either ego or alter take the initiative, the drive is, naturally, primarily individual. But organizations as collectivities can act, with respect to mobilization, independent of any individuals. I define an organization, following Small (2009:15), as "a loosely coupled set of people and institutional practices, organized around a global purpose, and connected, both formally and informally, to other organizations" (see Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott 1995; also Scott and Meyer 1991). At the other extreme, the mobilization of a good or service can be perpetrated primarily by an organization, as when an organization directly emails employees information about managing stress, their time, or their finances. (However, as I discuss below, the most important role for our discussion is that of organizations not as service providers but as network mobilizers.)

Organizations can play active roles in the mobilization of resources not merely out of the goodness of their hearts but in response to competitive needs. Large employers with high turnover often use their current employees as sources for new hires, providing incentives for successful referrals and using their own workers as a source of labor (Fernandez and Weinberg 1997; Neckerman and Fernandez 2003; Fernandez and Rubineau 2019). When the cashier offered to connect the unemployed mother, he may not have been doing her a favor; he may have been responding to an incentive system created by the supermarket. Indeed, the process that from the perspective of ego may appear to be luck or opportunity ("how lucky that the cashier offered to help!") may in fact be the result of institutional processes made common by the many large organizations that perpetuate them.[5]

Internal vs External Drive

The second axis is a more general version of an earlier continuum. While mobilization can be primarily driven by either ego or alter, a more general statement is that it may be internally or externally driven—that, is resulting primarily from the efforts of ego or primarily from the efforts of other individuals, groups, or entities. External drives can be sourced from individuals or organizations. If the cashier who inquired about jobs on behalf of the unemployed mother did so of his own accord, the mobilization was external but individually driven; if the cashier did so in response to a financial incentive or requirement by the organization, it was more organizationally driven. Organizations are quite often the drivers of network mobilization on behalf of individuals. Indeed, this is one of the conclusions of the organizational embeddedness perspective on network mobilization, wherein organizations are not merely *sites* where networks happen to be situated but also *actors* shaping the information, trust, support, and other resources those networks carry (Small 2009). For example, management consulting firms routinely send recruiters to top campuses to interview and offer jobs to graduating students, as might have happened to the unemployed mother. In such cases, even though the mobilization is being perpetrated by the individual (the recruiter), the organization (the company) is the ultimate driver. Similarly, childcare centers in low-income neighborhoods regularly bring health workers and other kinds of resource providers with goods and services to parents and families. Across such contexts, organizations are mobilizing networks

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[5] I thank Roberto Fernandez for this insight.

institutionally, bringing people with valuable resources to individuals, extrinsically mobilizing networks.

The Institutional Space

Generalizing externality in this fashion helps array the space of mobilization differently. Consider Figure 2, which represents mobilization around two new axes. The figure can help understand the role of *organizations* in mobilization.
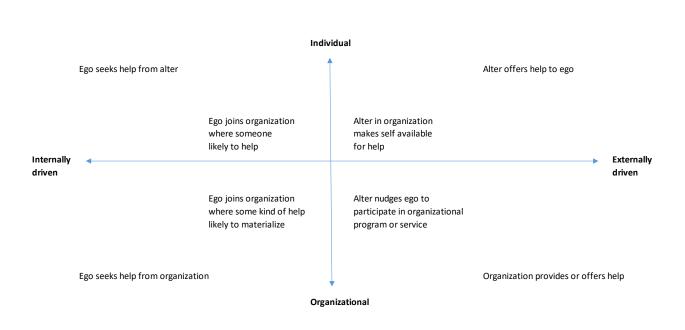
Figure 2: Forms of mobilization, individual and organizational

The top to bottom axis represents individual to organizational mobilization; the left to right axis, internally- to externally-driven decisions.[6] The upper left extremes of the continua contain, again, the standard account. The lower left extremes depict the situation where ego, while needing information, support, a referral, or another networked resource, turns to an organization instead of an individual. Examples are signing up for an organization's time management workshop or going to an organization's website for information about a job. While situations at this extreme may seem outside the purview of research on network mobilization, that supposition is inaccurate for at least three reasons. First, in a formal network context, since the duality of individuals and organizations has been noted multiple times (Breiger 1974), standard network models can represent both individuals and organizations as nodes in complex network across which resources of multiple kinds can travel (see, e.g., Carley and Prietula 2014). Network models can easily accommodate individuals and organizations as actors. Second, the extent to which people mobilize a good from an alter is affected by the full space of alternatives, and organizations form part of that space. People may or may not turn to an acquaintance for support, information, or a loan to the extent that an alternative

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[6] It is possible to combine figures1 and 2 into a single three-dimensional array. Doing so, however, would complicate, rather than clarify, the points of this paper.

person—or organization—is available. Third, some forms of mobilization from organizations are nothing more than mobilization from people who, as members of the organization, have access to an organization's valued good.

The upper right extremes of the continua depict the situation, as discussed earlier, where alter, of their own volition, helps ego. Our discussion of Figure 1 explained the many ways this intervention might vary. The lower right extremes of Figure 2, though, depict situations where organizations grant the good or resource to the actor as part of institutionalized operation. An example is the annual health care enrollment process through which many employees of large companies obtain information on their care options. Once a year, employees received a categorized information sheet containing health care options that are part of their plan. This information is institutionally created and organizationally distributed, a process that is highly valuable in its own right. Consider, as a contrast, a self-employed contract worker making a decent annual income but purchasing insurance through the health insurance exchanges. That worker faces the much greater costs of searching, acquiring, and navigating the information required to identify, compare options, and select a provider (see Small 2009:177ff).

As before, though the extremes are useful to note, many everyday mobilization practices occur outside of those extremes. Somewhat internal, somewhat individual mobilization is characteristic of people who join an organization knowing someone there is likely to provide a valued resource but not knowing exactly who, as when people hoping to manage their finances better join investment clubs in the hopes that one or more members will provide valuable advice. Ego is largely the driver and the mobilization is largely driven by individuals, but the existence of the organization, in this case the club or association, is indispensable in practice. Somewhat internal, somewhat organizational mobilization is characteristic of people who join an organization knowing it is likely to provide a valued resource but not being clear on how, as when people looking for meaning join a church in the hopes of resolving their anxiety, uncertainty, or ennui. There, the actual valued good may be provided by an individual (e.g., by another parishioner) or by the organization itself (e.g., because of the sense of peace provided by the collective, or the rituals enacted by the institution) (see McRoberts 2003; Chaves 2004; Ammerman 2005).

Somewhat external, somewhat individual mobilization is characteristic of alters in an organization who, as part of their organizational role, make themselves available to ego for help. The faculty and partners who make themselves available to students and associates, respectively, fall in this category. In many large professional organizations, workers, as part of their roles must make themselves available to others, providing information, advice, support, or other network goods as needed. Somewhat external, somewhat organizational mobilization is a more institutional version of this practice, wherein the role requires alters to nudge ego into a service. An example is the experience of the cancer-diagnosed bachelor, who was enrolled in counseling without asking for it—by an oncologist who did so not out of the goodness of his heart, but as an institutional requirement behind his role.[7]

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[7] I note that, when mobilization is largely external, its place along the continuum between individual and organizational can require distinguishing the driver from the perpetrator. People in organizations can perpetrate actions because the organization requires (drives) them to do so, but organizations can themselves (institutionally) perpetrate actions because of the initiative (drive) of a manager, leader, or some other individual member. In such cases, one could technically state that since the individual-organization continuum is about the primary driver, that condition should determine where on Figure 2 the case falls. However, the more important issue is identifying clearly the driver, the perpetrator, and the full set of dynamics shaping both.

Whatever the particular the mechanism at play, it is clear that organizations can play an important role in actually-occurring mobilization. Indeed, a job-seeker may ask for information about a job from an acquaintance, yes, but it may be an acquaintance whose firm has provided an incentive to make a referral, and whose organizational position, therefore, is essential to the mobilization process. As Perrow (1991) has remarked, we are a "society of organizations," and this fact informs the mobilization process as it does any other.

Implications

One core implication of these dynamics is that *institutional* conditions are indispensable to the mobilization process (Scott 1995). The organizational embeddedness of networks affects mobilizations because organizations can be (a) spaces of interaction, (b) perpetrators of mobilization, and (c) drivers of mobilization. This first (a) organizational role was discussed above, and my discussion here will avoid repeating the many ways organizations structure social interaction (e.g., by setting expectations of behavior or shaping the nature of the physical space). To the extent that organizations, rather than individuals, (b) perpetrate mobilization, they do so through institutionalized practices. Practices are institutionalized when they are stably embedded into organizational operations, as when a machine routinely sends emails to employees or clients with particular information or services (see Nee and Ingram 1998; Powell and DiMaggio 1991;). To the extent organizations (c) drive mobilization, they do so through institutional rules and norms, formal or informal expectations of behavior that shape how individuals in the organization interact with others, as when the oncologist was required to enroll the bachelor in post-diagnosis counseling. When expectations imposed by organizations shape the behavior of individuals, the ensuing relations become *institutionally mediated* (Small 2017) in ways that fundamentally structure the mobilization process. While the full study of how institutional conditions shape mobilization lies beyond scope, I suggest that any such work will require making decisions about three core issues.

Scope. Research into how organizations shape mobilization may happen at the level of the *individual*, the *relation*, the *social network*, the *organization*, or the *organizational field*. Our discussion of Figure 2 has assessed how organizations may shape ego, alter, and their relation, remaining at the micro level of interaction for the sake of space and argumentative coherence. However, organizational impacts may happen at the level of the social network itself—for example, as when a firm encourages or discourages the existence of structural holes across units, which, in turn shapes who mobilizes whom and how (Burt 1995). In such work, it will be important to examine the organization not merely as the site where the network happens to be situated but also as an upstream driver of mobilization. Independent of an organization's impact on the individual, the relation, or the network, the organization itself as a perpetrator of mobilization deserves serious scrutiny, given the many complex ways that, particularly in our era of rapidly increasing automation and routinization of organizational activities (as in "the internet of things"), organizations are structuring our lives on behalf of corporations and the state (see Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt forthcoming; Allard and Small 2013; Siliunas, Small, and Wallerstein 2019). Finally, the organizational field as a whole deserves serious attention, given that many of the practices affecting mobilization at the lower levels of analysis do not ultimately arise there; they arise in a large field of organizations competing over resources, coordinating activities, or both (Bourdieu 1977; Martin 2003). The field as a whole may but need not be understood as an organizational network.

Characteristics. Because research into how organizations shape mobilization is both organizational *and* institutional, researchers may focus on the characteristics of either. The organizational characteristics will depend, naturally, on the scope—e.g., a network study must capture that characteristics of the social network within the organization; a field study, those of the field. The institutional characteristics, however, cut across all categories, and vary in two dimensions. One is whether the primary institutional focus is *normative* vs. *cognitive.* That is, institutional expectations may be rules or norms of behavior that shape how individuals in organizations should act; or they may be cognitive understandings that do not dictate behavior but instead shape how individuals perceive their circumstances. The other is whether the primary institutional focus is *formal* or *informal.* That is, institutional expectations may be codified into explicit rules or laws, often associated with clear sanctions for non-compliance; or they may be an implicit, generally understood but not codified, part of the cultural context. Understanding the normative, cognitive, formal, or informal characteristics of the institutional conditions will become important to understand how organizational context shapes mobilization. For example, studying whether or how referral rules and practices in a large firm may require studying both formal and informal institutional practices (see Small and Pager 2020).

Effects. Given a particular organizational level of analysis and a particular institutional focus, research on mobilization may focus—as before—on effects on *ego*, *alter*, their *relationship*, or their *interaction*. However, since organizational study of mobilization may happen at multiple levels of analysis, the potential effects to be studies range far more widely, and include, perhaps most importantly, the *institutionalized practice.* Some forms of mobilization, such as employment based on personal referrals or recommendations, are common in an organizational field. Understanding how that outcome has come to be turns out to be important. Indeed, it may help pave the way to understand, sociologically, how actions that appear serendipitous may in fact not be.

CONCLUSION

Mobilization deserves far greater scrutiny. I have argued that mobilization is ultimately a decision-making process, that, in practice, it is heterogeneous across situations, and that this heterogeneity can be understood in light of two sets of axes that array a space of interaction and a space of institutional conditions. The paper has aimed to make theoretical, methodological, and substantive decisions. Theoretically, it has proposed a clear yet comprehensive model for capturing actually-occurring mobilization, demonstrating the limits of the common-sense, typically understood view of the decision-making process. Methodologically, it has shown that mapping the network of available alters is unlikely to uncover the true scope of mobilization in practice, in the many circumstances where alternative questions, and units of analysis, would be called for. Substantively, it has shown that the causes of mobilization, and, in turn, its role in differences in wellbeing and social inequality more broadly, can be far better understood than we currently have, given a perspective in which social interaction and institutional conditions shape behavior. This form of micro behavior has micro, meso, and macro level ultimate causes. In the end, although mobilization is a decision-making process it is nonetheless a deeply socially contextual one, and sociology has only scratched the surface for how context shapes this process.

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