The Community Question Revisited:
The Social Networks of American
Urbanites, Suburbanites, and Ruralites*

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Using the 1985 social network data collected in the General Social Survey conducted by the NORC, this paper reexamines the issue of 'the community question' formulated and first tested by Wellman (1979) with his East York network data and later by Tsai and Sigelman (1982) with sociability items from the General Social Survey data also by the NORC. The main reason for doing this is because this newly obtained network data on national representative sample is more appropriate and complete in testing the hypotheses derived from the issue of 'the community question' than those previous studies. the results of our analysis show some general similar results to those found in the previous studies using regional or non-network data though some differences were also found. In general, no conclusive or consistent support for the three different competing interpretations is found, although some rather interesting results that were not revealed in those previous studies were found. Some critiques and suggestions concerning the nature of the network data in the General Social Survey and the community question in general were made and raised for future efforts.

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1. Introduction

Prior to the 1985 General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), no social network data on a national representative sample was available (see Tsai and Sigelman, 1982 for some exceptions). This has handicapped researchers from adequately testing some of the hypotheses that have been around ever since the birth of sociology for more than a century ago. One of those hypotheses has to do with the major issue of the impact of urbanization on human interpersonal relations and the sense of community. This issue was very well summarized and tested by Wellman (1979) with network data from East York, Toronto, Canada. The issue was addressed as the `community question'.

The community question concerns the extent to which and the manner in which the organization and content of primary and interpersonal ties are affected by the large-scale division of labor associated with modern urban society. (Tsai and Sigelman, 1982 : 579) According to Wellman (1979), there are three basic points of view on this. The earliest, represented by the work of Tonnies, Sorokin and Zimmerman, Durkheim, Weber, Wirth, and Nisbet, considers urban society profoundly disruptive or communal solidarity. This `community lost' perspective considers urbanites to be `limited members of multiple social networks, sparsely knit and loosely bounded; their social ties are weak, narrowly defined and disorganized; and they are bound to the city only by "webs of secondary" affiliations.' (Tsai and Sigelman, 1982 : 579)

One the other hand the so-called `community saved' perspective argues that the community lost perspective is too pessimistic and contends that urbanites' `primary ties have not withered away... for the inherent gregariousness of human nature presents an effective counterpoise to any such ten-

dencies.' (Tsai and Sigelman, 1982 : 580) Close primary ties as a result continue to flourish in the city. The third perspective, the so-called 'community liberated' perspective argues that the community is liberated in the sense that city dwellers are no longer restricted to their immediate kinship groups or neighborhoods in developing intimate ties. Rather, their close relationships may come to encompass the entire urban area or even the whole nation. (Fischer, 1976; Tsai and Sigelman, 1982)

Wellman (1979) conducted an intensive analysis of intimate interpersonal network ties among the East Yorkers. His findings among other things supported the 'community liberated' perspective more so than the other two perspectives. There are many other studies of the similar kind in the past (see Tsai and Sigelman, 1982; and Wellman, 1979, for a brief review of these studies.) However, most of these studies were either limited to a subpopulation, such as Wellman's (1979) own study and Fischer's study of the communities of northern California (1977, 1982) or conducted prior to Wellman's formulation of the three community perspectives, e.g., Kasarda and Janowitz (1974), Fox et. al. (1980). Thus, they were either failed to address the issue formulated by Wellman or suffered from lack of national representative sample.

To remedy this problem, Tsai and Sigelman (1982) utilized NORC's national representative sample survey data on sociability items to test hypotheses derived from Wellman's formulation on the community question. Their conclusions were similar to that of Wellman's. However, this study was conducted prior to the collection of network data in 1985 by NORC. They could only infer interpersonal ties and networks through the sociability questions such as spending a social evening with relatives, neighbors and friends. Though the study came close to examining personal network ties was not complete by itself. It was still only a partial test of these hypotheses.

The present paper is an attempt to fill this void and to reexamine the

issue of the community question using the newly available social network data provided by the 1985 General Social Survey by the NORC. It is our belief that this data set representing American national sample and with a more specific set of questions concerning each respondent's personal social network can more adequately be used to address the hypotheses derived from the community question.

2. Data, Methods, and Research Hypotheses

The data analyzed here are drawn from the file of the 1985 General Social Survey maintained by the NORC Center. In 1985, the NORC began asking respondents a set of questions considered to be his/her (personal) network items (Burt, 1984). It began with the question (Davis and Smith, 1986) "from time to time, most people discuss *important matter* with other people. Looking back over the last six months — who are the *people* with whom you discuss matters important to you? Just tell me their first names or initials. If less than five names mentioned, probe, Anyone else? Only record first 5 names." The answer to this question simply indicates the number of names given. However, those given more than 6 names were recorded as 6. This is unfortunate since as will become clear later that it truncates the true network range of those 84 respondents who gave more than 6 names. In addition to this initial question, respondents were asked whether they felt equally close to all these people? Whether they felt especially close to each of the names they mentioned? They were also asked whether among those names mentioned, i.e., a respondent's personal network, any pair of them were especially close, neither close nor strangers, or total strangers. Respodents were further asked about some of the social attributes of their personal networks including, such attributes as sex, race, religious affiliation, level of education, and age. They were also asked whether those names given were

spouse, parent, child, sibling, other family member, co-worker, neighbor, friend, supervisor, and others. They were asked how long they had known each one of them and how often they talked to each one of them: almost everyday, at least once a week, at least once a month, less than once a month. Finally, they were asked a general overall question, 'would you say that all of your friends know one another, most of your friends know one another, only a few of your friends know one another, or none of your friends know one another ? '

3. Social Network Variables: The Dependent Variables

The questions provide us with measurements of a respondent's personal social network characteristics. We have classified these network characteristics into five categories. The first category measures *the degree of network intimacy* of a respondent's social network. It includes the following:

(a)*Percentage of the network members identified by the respondent as being close to*.

This is computed in terms of the number of network members being identified by a respondent as being close divided by the total number of network members of that given respondent. Thus, it can range from 1, none was identified by a respondent as being close to, to 1, all network members were identified as being close to. We make no distinction among different network size in computing this variable. To do so would seem to complicate the analysis at this point. Perhaps it needs to be considered separately in different situations.

(b) *Percentage of respondents in a given group, e.g., the urbanites, feeling equally close to his/her friends*.

This is computed from the question on whether a respondent felt equally close to his/her friends. A yes answer is coded as 1, and a no answer

is coded as 0, in this paper. Thus, the range of this variable is from 0, none of the respondents in a group, for example, among the urbanites, felt equally close to his/her friends, to 1, all respondents in a group, for example, ruralites felt equally close to their friends.

(c)*Network density*.

Network density is computed in the conventional way. Respondents were asked to judge whether the relationship among their network members were (1) specially close, coded as 1; (2) neither close nor stranger coded as 1; and (3) total strangers, coded as 0. This was compared pairwise. We simply add up all the 1s and divided the sum by the total number of possible pairwise relationships. Thus, the range of this variable is from 0 to 1 as is obvious. We did not differentiate between the first two answers, i.e, different degree of closeness in computing the network density since this is how it is done in network literature. (Burt, 1984) Perhaps, they need to be differentiated in different research situations.

(d)*Extent friends know one another*.

This is computed by simply recording the answers as the scores from the question in the following manner: all of the friends know one another coded as 1; most of the friends know one another coded as 2; only a few of the friends know one another coded as 3; none of the friends know one another coded as 4; and no friend at all coded as 5. Thus, the value of this variable ranges from 1 to 5, the lower the score, the higher the *friendship network density*. Notice that this is different from the network density. in (c) above where network members include others, such as, kins, neighbors, co -workers, etc, beside friends.

(e)*Frequency of interaction with network members*.

This is computed by obtaining an average frequency a respondent talked to his/her network members, where 1 is almost everyday; 2, at least once a week; 3, at least once a month; 4, less than once a month. The range

of this variable is from 1 to 4. We thus treat this measure as an interval variable. Once again we did not differentiate among network of different size for the simple reason of parsimony. Perhaps, there is a merit to compare the first named persons in the network across all therespondents if we could be sure that the first named persons were respondents' closest network members, etc.

(f)*Frequency of talking to network members about politics.*

This is computed by simply recording the answers as scores. (1) all the time; (2) most of the time; (3) occasionally; and (4) almost never. Thus, the score ranges from 1 to 4.

The second category concerns *the length of time respondents known their network members*. We simply take the answers from the question as the score. (1) less than 3 years; (2) 3 to 6 years; and (3) 6 years or more. Thus, the score of this variable ranges from 1 to 3.

The third category of network characteristics concerns *the types of relationships respondents have with each of their network members*, such as kins, neighbors, co-workers, friends, etc. Three major subcategories of this category were formulated in order to test the hypotheses stated above. This includes the following:

(a)*Percentage of respondents' network members who were kins.*

Among the kins are spouse, parent, child, sibling, and other family members. We compute the combined and the separated scores for each by simply computing the percentage of a respondent's network members who were kins. As stated above and throughout this paper, we do not differentiate among respondents of different network sizes. Thus, a respondent's score with two network members is computed based on two while another respondent's score may be based on five network members if that was the size.

(b)*Percentage of respondents' network members being non-kin nor neighbors, friends.*

This includes co-workers, members of an association, advisors or consultants, and others.

(c)*Percentage of respondents' network members being neighbors.*

(d)*Percentage of respondents' network members being friends.*

It must be pointed out that these subcategories were taken from the survey questions directly. It is entirely possible that a respondent's neighbor can also be a friend or even a sibling. However, we have no way of knowing whether respondents make this distinction.

The fourth category concerns the *network range*. Since as mentioned earlier that the NORC only recorded 5 names and treated those identified more than 6 names as 6. This has an unfortunate effect of truncating the network range even though only 84 out of the total sample size of 1534 fell into this category. For this reason we have decided to use two different measures for this variable.

(a)*Netowrk range as number of names given.*

(b)*Network range in terms of proportion of respondents in a given group who identified none.*

For example, proportion of urbanites who identified none or were isolated.

The last category concerns *network heterogeneity*. This category is further divided into five subcategories. Respondents were compared to their network members in terms of whether or not they have the *same* (a) *sex or gender;* (b) *race;* (c) *religious affiliation; and the difference in* (d) *age; and* (e) *level of education.* The first three subcategories were computed in terms the percentage of a respondent's network members who had the same sex, race, or religious affiliation. The last two categories were computed in terms of the square root of the sum of square of the difference in actual age and years of schooling between a respondent and his/her network members.

Place of Residence:The Independent Variable

The NORC also categorizes its respondents in terms of the size of the communities in which they live. In testing the three competing perspectives on the community question, we have classified respoondents into three categories: those who live in the central cities of any of the 112 largest SMSAs (*the urban sample*); those who live in counties having no towns of 10,000 or more (*the rural subsample*); and those who live in suburbs or towns (labelled `other`). These three categories represent the continuum or urbanism from high to low. If urbanism does affect primary ties, its impact should show up most clearly in differences in network characteristics between the urban and the rural subsamples with the `other` subsample falling into somewhere between the two extremes of the urban-rural continum.

Although our primary interest lies in the differences between the city and rural dwellers, the intermediate category, the suburban residents is also of strong interest to us. This is partially due to the unique ecological characteristics of the suburban community as Fischer and Jackson (1976) point out; and partially due the increasing number and proportion of people residing in these areas in the U.S. The ecological features of the suburbs, especially the distance from poulation concentration, influence individual attitudes and shape social networks in the direction of greater localism. (Fischer and Jackson, 1976)

For the 1985 General Social Survey, the NORC sample provides a pool of city dwellers, residents of rural areas, and residents of intermediate areas (suburbs and towns) with whom we can test for the effects of residence upon social networks. Having defined the residence categories and the social network variables, we can now state the specific research hypotheses implied by the `lost`, `saved` and `liberated` interpretations.

(A)According to the `lost` perspective: residents of cities are less likely to
(a) have a high degree of intimacy with their network members; (b) have

known their network members longer; and (c) socialize with their kins, neighbors, friends, and others than are residents of rural areas with those who live elsewhere falling in between but displaying greater similarity to the rural dwellers. However, residents of cities are more likely to have a greater (d) network range and a higher degree of (e) network heterogeneity than their rural and suburban and small-town counterparts.

(B)According to the `saved´ perspective: residents of cities are no different from their suburban, small-town, and rural counterparts in terms of (a) the degree of intimacy with their network members; (b) the length of time they have known their network members; and (c) socializing with their kins, neighbors, friends, and others. Furthermore, residents of cities are no different from their suburban and small-town and rural counterparts in terms of (d) network range; and (e) network heterogeneity.

(C)According to the `liberated´ perspective: residents of cities are less likely to (a) have a high network intimacy; (b) have known their neighbors longer; and are more likely to (c) include friends, and other non-kins, such as, co-workers, advisors, and voluntary association members in their networks; (d) have a higher degree of network range; and (e) have a higher network heterogeneity than their suburban and small -town and rural counterparts.

4. Findings

Table 1 provides information based on analysis of variance procedure concerning the manner in which the network characteristics are related to place of residence. Section A compares the degree of intimacy of various kinds of the residents of the three different areas. As can be seen that only one of the six measures of the degree of network intimacy shows a statisti-

cally significant difference among residents of the three different areas. However the difference is so small to have any substantive meaning that we can, for all practical purposes, conclude that residents of all three different areas show same degree of network intimacy. This leads us to conclude that the community 'saved' perspective is better supported than the other two perspectives.

Section B reports the length of time respondents know their network members. A statistically significant difference between urban and rural residents is shown. Rural residents on the average tended to know their network members longer than their urban and suburban counterparts. Statistically, we should conclude that the community is somewhat 'lost' as a result of the large scale of urbanization. However, it is more difficult to concude substantively that this is indeed the case.

Section C of Table 1 provides information on types of relations respondents have with their network members. Several interesting results stand out. First, rural residents are somewhat more likely to identify their kins as their network members than their urban counterparts, 12.5% vs. 10.0% respectively. Second, rural residents are much more likely to identify their spouses as their network members than their urban counterparts, 20.9% vs. 13.5%; however, both groups are more likely to name their spouses than other kin members as their network members. Third, rural residents are significantly more likely to include their neighbors in their networks than their urban counterparts whom in terms are more likely to do so than their suburban and small-town counterparts. Fourth, and perhaps most interesting of all, regardless place of residence, respondents are much more likely to include friends in their networks, from 67.8% among urbanites to 70.4% among the ruralites. Finally, somewhat surprisingly, all respondents report a low percentage of co-workers as their network members. These results indicate a 'very weak' support for the 'liberated' perspective in the sense that they are

somewhat less likely to include their kins and neighbors in their networks. However, urbanites have not shown any greater likelihood to include friends and non-kins in their networks and thus liberated in this sense.

Section D shows two measures of network range. While no statistically significant differences are found among residents of different places in terms of average number of newtork members identified, a significant difference is found in terms of percentage of isolated. However, since the percentages are all small, from 6% to 11%, and since the direction of the difference is contrary to the `lost´ perspective's prediction, the logical conclusion based on the results of Section D is that the `saved´ perspective is better supported.

The last section in Table 1, Section E, shows five different comparisons of network heterogeneity. The results indicate that indeed urbanites are more likely to include people of different racial and religious backgrounds from their own in their networks than suburbanites and small-towners whom in terms are more likely to do the same than their rural counterparts. This is as the `lost´ and the `liberated´ perspectives would both predict. it is also interesting to note that regardless of place of residence respondents are more likely to cross gender and religious lines than racial line in choosing their network members.

5. Conclusions and Discussions

Has community been `lost´, `saved´ or `liberated´? Given the newly available national representative sample with network items can we be more definitive in answering this question? Is our conclusion similar to that of Wellman's (1979) more restricted Canadian data or to that of Tsai and Sigelman's (1982) study based on sociability items of the General Social Survey by the NORC?

Despite the improvement of the data, i.e., based on the network items

instead of sociability items, we find ourselves once again in a muddy water. We found some `weak' support for all three perspectives. While we see no real difference in terms of network intimacy, thus, a support for the community `saved' perspective, ruralites tend to have known their network members longer than the urbanites, hence, a support for the `lost' perspective. Ruralites are found to be more likely to have included kins and neighbors in their networks than the urbanites, hence, an indirect support for the `liberated' perspective. However, urbanites were not more likely than their rural counterparts to include friends and other nonkins such as co-workers in their networks. Thus, the result is not a strong nor clear support for the `liberated' perspective.

The average network range or size makes no difference among residents of the three different places, signifying the fact that urbanization has not detered people from having personal networks as the `lost' perspective would have preidcted. This we consider as a support for the `saved' perspective. Finally, we found a weak support for the `lost' and the `liberated' perspectives in terms of network heterogeneity. Urbanites are indeed more likely to have included in their networks people of different racial and religious backgrounds from their own than their rural counterparts.

Thus, no clear nor consistent results have been found for us to more clearly determine which of the three competing interpretations is closer to the reality. On the balance, we must say that the community `saved' and the community `liberated' have slight edge over the community `lost' interpretation. However, this is far from clear nor definitive at all. Thus, we are back to where previous works have shown, namely, despite the vast improvement in data collection, no consistent results are found to conclude one way or the other. Our findings have not illuminated the issue. On the contrary, it seems to have further confuse the issue and confirm the inconsistent findings by previous researchers' efforts.

Do we have any explanations for what we found? We think there are three possible reasons for the results reported here. First, the use of place of residence as an indicator of the effect of urbanization may be at fault. As a nation of mobile peole, place of residence at time of interview may not reflect true effect or lack of effect of urbanization on a person. Secondly, with the improvement of technology in communications, especially telephone, and transportations, including cheap air fare, people are no longer isolated or immuned from the effect of urbanization. We are reminded by the telephone company's slogan, 'the next best thing to be there is to call long distance' or something to that effect. We are also reminded that in many instances one can fly cheaper than one can drive. All of these factors if anything are going to blur the possible differences among residence of the three identified areas.

The third possible explanation for the inconsistent results may have something to do with the way network data were collected. Despite the convincing arguments made by Burt (1984) and the painstaking efforts made by the overseers of the NORC, discussing 'important matters' may not be the best way to identify a respondent's personal network. It is not clear what respondents thought when they were asked the term 'friend'? If a person is a relative and a co-worker and also a good friend, is this person likely to be called 'friend' or 'co-worker' or 'relative'? Judging from the dominance of 'friends' in the respondents' networks, some combinations of the above kind are very likely to have occurred.

Finally, as Tsai and Sigelman (1982) have pointed out that the distinctions among the three different competing perspectives may not be as clear cut nor do they contradict one another. We have seen overlapping in predicting network heterogeneity for example. Perhaps, it is time to further refine the conceptualization of these different interpretations and predictions. Perhaps, urban theorists and network researchers both need to further improve their conceptualizations jointly.

In closing this paper, we must point out two very interesting results. First and despite our critique on this, majority of Americans discuss 'important matters' with their 'friends' not 'kins', a 68% average for the friends vs. a mere 11% average for the kins. Does this signify the declining importance of kinship ties? We think it is a very interesting question. Second, the network density for all residents was very high at about 0.66. Does this mean Americans operate in a very cohesive and small group circle? Friends of egos are usually friends as well. Perhaps, this is due to the small number of people identified in the network, averaging slightly more than 3 people. We are not sure if this is a result of the limitation of large scale survey. This question deserves a better answer.

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Table 1.Social Network Characteristics of Urbanites, Suburbanites,
and Ruralites.

Social Network Characteristics	Urban	Suburban Small Town	Rural
(A)Network Intimacy			
(1)Proportion feeling real close to network members	13.8%	17.6%	14.1%
(2)Feeling equally close to network members (yes=1; no=0)	.600	.529	.579
(3)Network density	.628	.678	.660
(4)Extent friends know one another (1=all know one another; 4=none knows one another)	2.34*	2.37*	2.09*
(5)Frequency of talking to network members (1=all the time; 4=almost never)	3.34	3.35	3.28
(6)Talk to network members about politics (1=all the time; 4=almost never)	2.44	2.58	2.59
(B)Length of time known network members (1=less than 3 years; 2=3 to 6 years; 3=more than 6 years)	2.58*	2.62	2.72*

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(C)Types of relations to
network members

(1)Kins	58.2%	54.6%	62.3%
spouse	13.5%*	17.5%	20.9%*
parent	10.5%	11.1%	11.1%
child	8.3%	9.8%	9.7%
sibling	9.9%	8.5%	10.2%
other family members	7.9%	7.7%	10.4%
(2)Non-kins nor neighbors	45.2%	48.8%	51.1%
co-workers	14.5%	17.4%	14.0%
association members	14.5%	17.3%	18.3%
advisors/consultants	16.2%	14.1%	18.8%
(3)Neighbors	9.2%	8.4%*	12.2%*
(4)Friends	67.8%	67.7%	70.4%
(D)Network range			
(1)size of network members	3.11	3.28	3.07
(2)proprotion with no network member	9%	6%	11%
(E)Network heterogeneity			
(1)proportion same gender	57.0%	60.2%	56.9%
(2)proportion same race	86.4%	92.2%	94.9%*
(3)Proportion same religious affiliation	67.4%	71.7%	77.5%
(4)age differences in years	3.24	3.08*	3.32
(5)educational differences (in years)	2.94	3.00	2.95

* Statistically significant at .05 level with one other group.

Source : 1985 General Social Survey file, the National Opinion Research Center.

社區問題再探：美國都市居民、近郊居民及鄉村居民之社會網絡

蔡勇美　賴澤涵

摘　要

本文是以國家意見研究中心(NORC)所做之「社會普查」1985年社會網路資料為據，對Wellman所提出之「社區問題」做進一步的檢驗與探討。「社區問題」曾由Wellman本人率先以East York的網絡資料檢測之。其後，蔡勇美與Sigelman二人也以NORC所做「社會普查」中的「社交性項目」作檢驗。筆者認爲新獲之有關National Representation Sample網絡資料，當能更完備的檢測由「社區問題」所演出的假設，故撰寫此文。分析結果顯示：本研究與前述兩項研究有一般的共同結論，當然也發現了一些差異點。但是，儘管此一研究有前者所未得之發現，然三者間之優劣問題，則未有決定性之定論。爲往後之努力計，本文對「社會普查」中網絡資料之性質與一般性的社區問題，也提出了一些批評與建議。