

**The Unique Romantic Relationships:  
Roles of Spouses and Partners in Core Networks**

Ruijie Zhong and Claude Fischer

Berkeley Population Center  
University of California, Berkeley

Corresponding Author: Ruijie (Mia) Zhong, PhD Student, Demography Department, 2232  
Piedmont Avenue, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-2120,  
ruijie\_zhong@berkeley.edu

## **The Unique Romantic Relationships: Roles of Spouses and Partners in Core Networks**

### **Introduction**

Social network studies have shown the importance of having spouses and partners on people's psychological and physical well-being, protecting their survival (Rendal et al., 2011). In general, marriage helps people recover from shocks, gain better health and live a longer life. Literature has shown positive effects of marriage with both genders and across different age groups, and the effects are salient with men, especially the older cohorts (Cable et al., 2013). Among our core social networks, besides spouses and partners, friends, kin and other social connections also provides crucial support to individual's life and health.

While both marriage and other social connections are important to people's wellbeing, some research proposed that marriage is a greedy institution, pushing away friends, kin and other ties from individuals. The greedy marriage hypothesis extends to the social withdrawal hypothesis that a personal network shrinks when he or she starts dating, cohabitates and marries. Solid evidence has proven that as people enter wedlock or cohabitation, the significance of friendship reduces (Kalmijn, 2003, 2012) and married women give less attention to their own kin (Gerstel and Sarkisian, 2006).

However, this literature usually doesn't include the significant others in the discussions of people's social networks. These group of research explains the greedy marriage by seeing marriage and cohabitation as a life transition where familial and private life squeezes out people's social life. Relying on the familial, private and intimate nature of the romantic relationship overlooks the social part of these relationships. This study proposes an alternative approach to understand the relationship between marriage/cohabitation and people's social life.

We treat spouses and partners as people's social connections as friends, kin and neighbors are. As members in people's social networks, are spouses or partners special? Do they serve unique roles that other ties aren't able to? Answering these questions will help understand the nature of romantic relationship and the phenomena of greedy marriage.

### **Data and methods**

To investigate the social nature of romantic relationships, this study uses a unique dataset from the University of California Berkeley Social Network Study (UCNets; see Fischer and Lawton 2017), which consists of three waves detail data about social networks, health and life transitions of the bay area population. Between 2015 and 2018, people in 20-30 and 50-70 age groups from six counties in the San Francisco Bay Area take three rounds of the extended egocentric network surveys in face-to-face or web version. This current project utilizes the data from wave 1, which consists of 1159 valid cases.

In the UCNets study, as the respondents answer in-depth about the core network members they named during the survey, the dataset consists of two levels of information: the respondent-level data and the alter-level data. This study focuses on the alter-level data and asks: for different alters in people's core social networks, what roles do spouses, partners, friends, kin and other people play in respondents' social life? Do romantic relationships have higher multiplicities than non-romantic relationships?

First, we compare the mean number of roles different alters play in respondents' social life. The set of role variables consists of alters being social companions, confidants, advisors, emergency helper (emHelp, the ego will turn to this alter for help during emergency), help receiver (rcvHelp, the alter has received help from the ego), demanding ties (dmding, demanding tie) and physical disability helper (phyHelper, the alter helps with the ego's physical disabilities). There

are 7 roles in total, and the calculation takes the sum of these 7 binary variables for each alter and calculates the means of the numbers of roles for different groups-spouses, partners living together (partner\_lv), partners, friends, kin and other. These groups are mutually exclusive and we prioritize according to the order of spouses, partners living together, partner, kin, friends and others. For example, alters who are spouses and also considered as “friends” would only be labeled as spouses.

Second, we analyze what roles spouses and partners are more likely to play compared to other people in egos’ networks. In this part, we calculate the proportion of roles among all the ties (over 12,000) different groups have. For example, “p\_socialcom” in Figure 2 shows the proportion of social companion roles that different groups have among all the reported roles, and about 30% of the friendship ties are respondents’ companions for social activities.

## **Results**

Spouses and partners carry more roles (about twice as many) in egos’ networks compared to people who are neither spouses nor partners (Figure 1). That is to say, the romantic relationships have higher multiplicities than other relationships in people’s core networks. There isn’t a clear pattern regarding role distributions among people’s different network members. Figure 2 shows that spouses and partners are more likely to be confidants, but the advantage isn’t huge compared to friends. Kin, spouses and partners are considered as more reliable during emergencies. Also, spouses and partners are major providers for egos with physical disabilities. Interestingly, being a spouse or partner doesn’t make the alter demanding according to the respondents’ answers. The fact that friends, spouses and partners are not demanding social connections that people have to maintain speaks to a previous UCNet study that these “chosen” ties are less burdensome than “given” ties such as kin and coworkers (Offer and Fischer, 2018).

## **Conclusions**

This study compares the role of romantic relationships to non-romantic relationships as individuals' core social networks. Regarding the social nature of these relationships, spouses and partners significantly serve more roles for the egos than kin, friends and other connections do. This explains that the romantic relationships are more intense and have more responsibilities to the egos. This study also shows that spouses and partners actually share the roles of better confidants, advisors and emergency reliance with friends and kin, and they are the major help provider for physical disabilities. Friends, spouses and partners are significantly less demanding than other connections. One limitation in this study is that we include parents, children and all relatives in the "kin" category. We do not have enough siblings reported by each respondent, otherwise, it would yield stronger comparison if we compare spouses and partners with siblings. These findings suggest that it's important to understand the value and social support nature of romantic relationships in understanding the institution of marriage and cohabitation and the dynamics in people's social relationships.

## References

Fischer, Claude F. and Lawton, Leora E. (2017). *Data Documentation – UCNets – Wave 1*.

Downloaded from [http://ucnets.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Data-Documentation\\_2Nov2017.pdf](http://ucnets.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Data-Documentation_2Nov2017.pdf).

Gerstel, N. and N. Sarkisian (2006). "Marriage: The Good, the Bad, and the Greedy." *Contexts* **5**(4): 16-21.

Kalmijn, M. (2003). Shared friendship networks and the life course: An analysis of survey data on married and cohabiting couples. *Social Networks*, *25*(3), 231-249.

Kalmijn, M. (2012). "Longitudinal analyses of the effects of age, marriage, and parenthood on social contacts and support." *Advances in Life Course Research* **17** 177-190.

Offer, S., & Fischer, C. S. (2018). Difficult People: Who Is Perceived to Be Demanding in Personal Networks and Why Are They There?. *American sociological review*, *83*(1), 111-142.

Rendall, M. S., et al. (2011). "The Protective Effect of Marriage for Survival: A Review and Update." *Demography* **48**(2): 481.

Wright, M. R. and S. L. Brown (2017). "Psychological Well-being Among Older Adults: The Role of Partnership Status." *Journal of Marriage and Family* **79**(3): 833-849.

## Figures

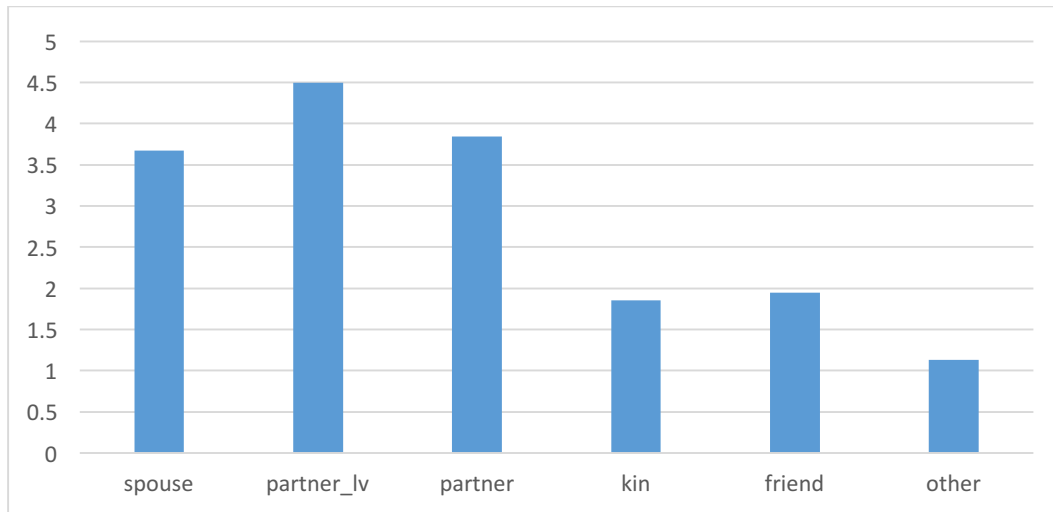


Figure 1. Multiplicities of different identities  
*Note: exclusive identities, mean number of roles*  
*Data: UCNets, Wave 1, 2015*

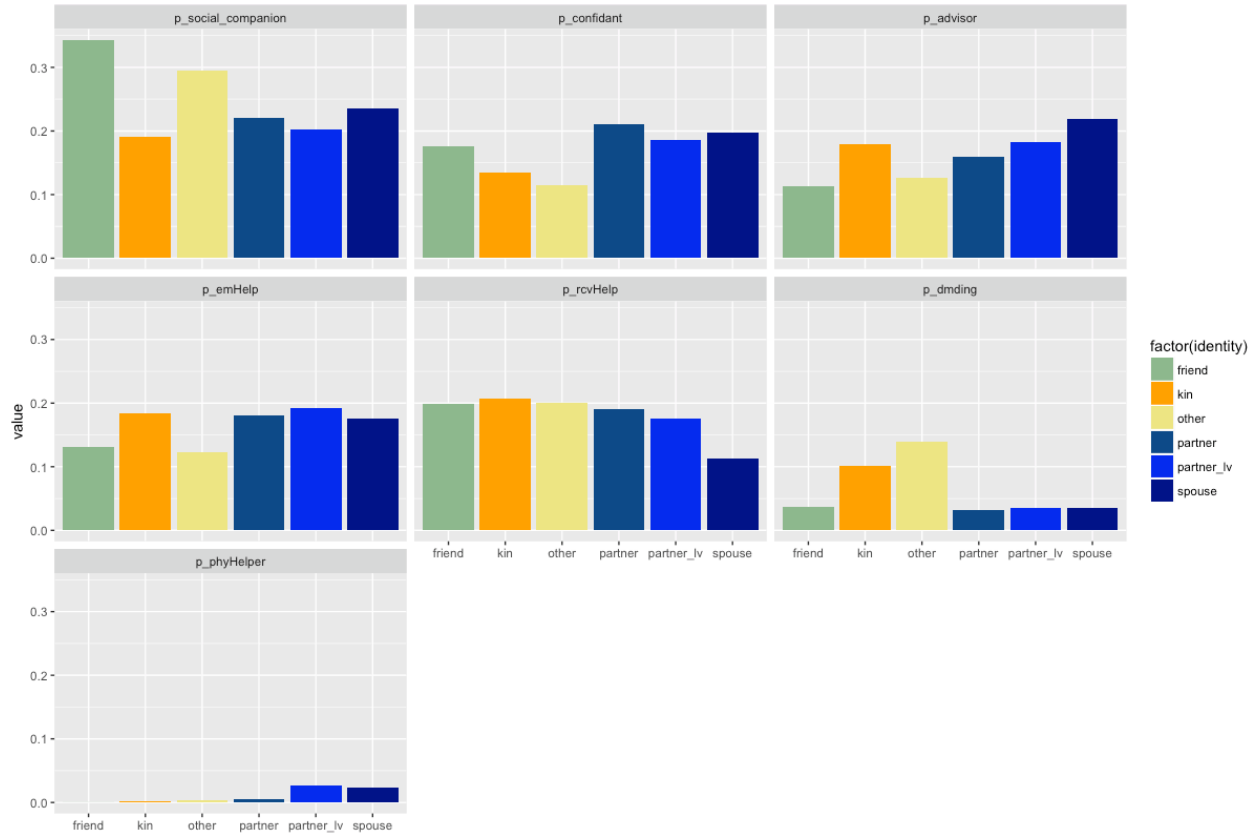


Figure 2. Proportion of roles: comparison between identities, wave 1  
*Note: partner\_lv means partners who live in the same household with the egos*  
*Data: UCNets, Wave 1, 2015*