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"Trivial" Topics and Rich Ties: The Relationship Between Discussion Topic, Alter Role, and Resource Availability Using the "Important Matters" Name Generator

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Abstract: This paper uses a nationally representative dataset of discussion relationships to determine what Americans consider to be an important matter, whether some topics are predominantly discussed with certain types of associates, and if the topic of discussion or the role of the discussant predicts the availability of social support. Results indicate that some topics are pursued or avoided with particular types of alters, and that the role of the discussant, but not the topic of discussion, predicts the availability of support from our discussion partners. This implies that some differences in measured network structure may be due to variations in topics discussed, but that topic says little about the supportiveness of the tie once we are dealing with important matters discussants.

Keywords: ego networks; social support; discussion topics; important matters; roles; social networks

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> If all we talk about is money, nothing will be funny, honey.
>
> –Norah Jones *It's Gonna Be*

For over two decades social scientists have measured the core networks of Americans by asking them with whom they discuss important matters (e.g., Marsden 1987, 1988; Moore 1990; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006, 2008). This method relies on the bedrock assumption that we discuss important matters with persons who are significant to us, but despite the extensive research employing this method, we remain surprisingly ignorant of how this item is interpreted by the average American. When asked about their important discussions, what sorts of topics do Americans actually think of? Are particular topics only discussed with certain kinds of associates, or are discussion partners relatively interchangeable? And does the topic of discussion or the role of the discussant signal the likelihood that support may be available in a discussion relationship? Answering these questions is crucial because research has uncovered evidence that some topics are discussed preferentially with particular kinds of alters (Bearman and Parigi 2004; Small 2013), that the associations between role and topic vary by sex (ibid), and that many of the "important" matters may actually be "trivial" (Bailey and Marsden 1999; Bearman and Parigi 2004). Unfortunately, this research has relied on small samples (Bailey and Marsden 1999), non-representative samples (Bailey and Marsden 1999; Perry and Pescosolido 2010; Small 2013), included no measures of support availability (Bailey and Marsden 1999; Bearman and Parigi 2004; Small 2013), or all three. Thus, despite the importance of these questions, we have few definitive answers.

I address these concerns by using a unique, nationally representative dataset that allows inferences to be drawn about the total population of discussion relations and that includes measures of social support availability. I find that Americans discuss a wide variety of topics but focus on a handful of particularly important issues. I also find that some topics are pursued or avoided with particular types of alters and, using

a comparison between males and females as a convenient test case, determine that the association between role and topic does vary by category membership. Finally, I find that the topic of discussion is a poor predictor of the amount and type of support available through an important matters discussion relationship, but discussant role is a good predictor. These results partially validate existing research using the important matters methodology and suggest that conversations about "trivial" topics may occur frequently even in important relationships.

Background

Researchers have typically measured the size and structure of core networks with a name generator—a question that elicits a list of people with whom the respondent has a particular kind of contact. For example, Fischer (1982) asked about individuals who had provided advice about important decisions, who had socialized with the respondent, who had discussed decisions at work, who would look after the respondent's home if needed, and from whom the respondent could obtain a monetary loan. These name generators captured the tendency for ties to provide different resources or services (e.g., Wellman and Wortley 1990), but multiple name generators also increase the risk of fatigue-induced biases in the resulting data (e.g., Fischer 2009). Ronald Burt (1984) used the overlaps between name generators in Fischer's (1982) data to argue that the core individuals in the respondent's social network could be measured by asking about those persons with whom the respondent had discussed "important matters." This method has achieved wide acceptance and was adopted by one of the largest efforts to obtain representative personal network data: the General Social Survey networks module.

In 1985, 1987,[1] and 2004 the General Social Survey (GSS) included a module on social networks wherein each respondent, or "ego," was asked to name those persons, or "alters," with whom they had discussed important matters during the previous six months.[2] Respondents were free to decide for themselves what constituted an important matter and were allowed to name as many discussion partners as they wished, though if they named fewer than five persons they were prompted, "Anyone else?" Interviewers then asked a series of questions about the first five persons named, including their age, race, sex, religion, and level of education, as well as their role (e.g., spouse, parent, coworker).

In addition to providing a window into the social environments of the average American (Liao and Stevens 1994; Marsden 1987; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006, 2008), the GSS networks data have been used to examine health and wellbeing (Acock and Hurlbert 1993; Brashears 2010; Burt 1987), sex and gender (Moore 1990; Straits 1996), segregation and diversity (Deng and Bonacich 1991; Louch 2000; Marsden 1988; Reagans 1998), work and wealth (Carroll and Teo 1996; Huang and Tausig 1990; Liedka 1991; Marks 1994), and politics and opinions (Bienenstock, Bonacich, and Oliver 1990; Knoke 1990; Straits 1991). They have improved our ability to make cross-national comparisons (e.g., Blau, Ruan, and Ardelt 1991) and have contributed to the knowledge of measurement issues in social science (e.g., Burt 1991).

Data deriving from the important matters item are reliable. Variations in the phrasing of the name generator have few effects on the structure of the measured relationships (Straits 2000), elicited ties are associated with multiple types of social and material support (Ruan 1998), and respondent interpretation of the question does not influence the structure of the networks captured (Bailey and Marsden 1999). Marin (2004) determined that the important matters item captured strong, close contacts, and Burt (1997) found that it captured persons whom the respondent considered important, socialized with, and would rely on for advice.

Despite the important matters item's impressive record, questions remain about its meaning. The important matters item is often used to explore core network structure (e.g., Marsden 1987),

[1] These data include different constraints and are not generally considered to be comparable to the 1985 and 2004 data collections.

[2] The text of the name generator was: "From time to time, most people discuss *important matters* with other people. Looking back over the last six months—who are the *people* with whom you discussed matters important to you? Just tell me their first names or initials."

but research (e.g., Perry and Pescosolido 2010; Wellman and Wortley 1990) suggests that the topics discussed are related to the role (e.g., friend, spouse, kin) of the discussant. If respondents differ in what they view as important, or in how they allocate topics to discussants, we could observe substantial variation in measured networks without the underling relationships actually differing (e.g., if males are more likely than females to discuss healthcare with coworkers, male networks will appear to be more employment centered). Likewise, if issues vary in prominence over time then longitudinal changes in measured network structure may reflect differences in topics rather than in the relationships. Role-topic association therefore presents a challenge to both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of networks.

Second, the ability of social networks generally, and discussion networks in particular, to provide social support has been a major reason for studying those structures (e.g., Baker and Faulkner 2004; Campbell, Marsden, and Hurlbert 1986; Franzen and Pointer 2011). The types of issues that we discuss with individuals may vary by the degree of closeness we feel to our associates, which in turn may influence the amount and type of support (e.g., monetary loans, companionate support) available. The topic of discussion may distinguish the really important associates from the less important.

To the best of my knowledge, only four studies (including this one) have collected data on the topics elicited by the important matters item. Bailey and Marsden (1999) investigated this issue using a small (n=50) quasi-experiment, finding that individuals did not always report on discussions that would typically be viewed as having to do with important matters. Instead, some respondents reported on relationships that were subjectively important, regardless of the topics of discussion, though Bailey and Marsden did not find any evidence that discussion topic directly impacted measured network structure. Regrettably, due both to its small size and its limited representativeness, it is difficult to generalize from this quasi-experiment to the national population.

Bearman and Parigi (2004) investigated respondent behavior using the 1997 North Carolina poll (n=771), which included both a variant of the important matters item and a question asking respondents about the topic of their most recent discussion of an important matter. They failed by a small margin ($p<0.055$) to identify a significant general association between role and topic, though their non-significant results were suggestive. However, they did find a limited association between role and topic among females, who discuss different topics with their spouses than they do with their friends.

Bearman and Parigi also found that their respondents discussed a variety of topics, some of which were not obviously important (e.g., the cloning of headless frogs). They concluded that the important matters item, "... did not eliminate a priori those without something *really important* to discuss [emphasis original]" (2004: 547). In their view, this finding has two implications. First, they suggest that, "... many of the matters people consider important enough to report having conversation about bear only the vaguest and most tenuous relationship to the achievement of instrumental ends" (2004: 552–553). In other words, there is a missing mechanism connecting discussants to social support and other instrumental benefits. If a discussion relation supports only one type of topic, information pertaining to other topics might not pass through it. Second, Bearman and Parigi argued that, "Since the topics of conversation are so often *trivial* news events, one should be cautious inferring that the conversation networks that arise from such discussions are of substantive importance [emphasis added]" (2004: 553). This concern challenges the foundation of the important matters method: that important matters are discussed with important people. Unfortunately, as Bearman and Parigi acknowledge (2004: End note 3), the researcher is rarely in a position to judge the importance of a topic to the respondent. Moreover, because this study contained no measures of social support or instrumental benefits, it is not possible to determine whether particular topics are genuinely associated with greater resource availability. This is a significant issue because research (e.g., Agneessens, Waege, and Lievens 2006; Plickert, Cote, and Wellman 2007; Ruan 1998; Wellman and Wellman 1992; Wellman and Wortley 1990) suggests that the role of an associate is the strongest predictor of social support. As a result, once an individual has been identified as an important

alter, the topic might not matter very much in predicting the supportive potential of the tie.

These issues have been partially addressed by Perry and Pescosolido (2010), who linked discussions of health issues to specific mental health outcomes. They administered a variant of the important matters item[3] as well as an item specifically about discussions of health matters to a sample (n=171) of persons presenting with new mental illness at a single hospital. The characteristics of the alters elicited only by the health matters name generator predicted health outcomes such as treatment satisfaction, expectations for independence, and trust in physicians, better than did the characteristics of those elicited only by the important matters item. The characteristics of alters who were named in response to both name generators improved health outcomes, though not to the same degree as those named exclusively as health discussants, and they provided a larger variety of social support resources than the other two groups (Perry and Pescosolido 2010:352–353). These results indicate that generic discussion relations may not be useful for all types of tasks and support the notion that the topic of discussion predicts the availability of support resources. Unfortunately, these results are based on an unusual sample and the health outcomes are largely attitudinal, possibly downplaying the importance of many support resources.

Finally, Small (2013) used a non-representative national survey (n=2,000) to investigate the subjective importance of alters elicited by the important matters item, as well as the topics that Americans discuss. His survey administered the conventional important matters item to roughly half of the sample (n=991), followed by two more name generators meant to capture those alters who are particularly important to the respondent. He found that roughly 45 percent of the alters elicited by the important matters item are not regarded as important by the egos. Instead, 20 percent of the alters were chosen due to their knowledge of the topic (a finding consistent with Perry and Pescosolido 2010), and 15 percent because they were readily available. The other half of the sample (n=1,019) did not receive any of the thrre name generators but was instead asked about their most recent discussion of an important matter, followed by items designed to elicit the topic of discussion as well as the characteristics of the alter. Small found that males and females exhibit some limited, but significant, differences in the types of topics they report. Moreover, some topics are discussed preferentially with particular types of alters. This paper is a significant advance, but the data are drawn from a nonrepresentative sample and lack measures of social support.

In summary, while the important matters item is at the heart of a wide variety of research on social networks, several key questions remain about its operation. Below, I use a unique, nationally representative dataset to: (1) report on the types of topics that characterize discussions of important matters for Americans, (2) test for the presence of an association between role and topic, and (3) examine whether the topic of discussion or the role of the discussant better predicts the availability of social support.

Data and Methods

The data for this study were gathered via the Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS) program, a collaboration between the National Science Foundation and Knowledge Networks (KN) to field experiments via the internet to a representative sample of the national population.[4] Recruitment employs a dualframe method combining random digit dialing (RDD) and address based sampling (ABS). The RDD sampling uses recognized standards developed and used by the federal government to ensure representativeness. The ABS sampling is based on a probability sample of the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File. This dual-frame method includes a wider variety of households (e.g. cell phoneonly households, lowincome households lacking a phone line) than is typical of RDD-only methods and samples from ninety-eight percent of U.S. households. Panel members are compensated based on the number of surveys completed, with

[3]The variant used (Perry and Pescosolido 2010: footnote 4) differs considerably from the standard important matters item, possibly biasing recall towards female alters (ibid: footnote 2), and thus may not be fully comparable to other studies.

[4]The data are available for download from both TESS (`http://www.tessexperiments.org/data/brashears772.html`) and the Mathematical Sociology section data depository (`http://mathematicalsociology.org`).

respondents completing no more than one survey per week.

The computer-assisted self-interview (CASI) method used here differs from many previous studies,[5] but research indicates that CASI methods yield data that is of comparable quality to that obtained by other methods. Heerwegh and Loosveldt (2008) found that web-based surveys have slightly higher item non-response rates and marginally less differentiation between response options than face-to-face surveys. Toepoel, Das, and Van Soes (2008) found only slight differences in the way that experienced panelists complete a web-based survey, suggesting that cumulative survey fatigue is not an issue. Kreuter, Presser, and Tourangeau (2008) found that web-based CASI surveys provide more accurate data about socially undesirable or embarrassing behaviors than telephone interviewing. Finally, Matzat and Snijders (2010) found that the number of names given in answer to a name generator depends on the respondent's degree of comfort with the survey mode. Given that my respondents have completed multiple CASI studies, all should be quite comfortable with the mode.

The experiment was fielded to a random sample of non-institutionalized individuals aged eighteen and older (i.e., the same sampling frame used in the GSS) in the spring of 2010. Informative response rates for online panels are difficult to calculate (see Callegaro and Disogra 2008), but of the 3,073 panelists randomly drawn from the KN panel, 2,061 responded to the invitation, yielding a final stage completion rate of 67 percent.[6] While response rate is often viewed as an indicator of data quality, it is not a particularly useful indicator (e.g., Curtin, Presser, and Singer 2000; Groves 2006; Groves and Peytcheva 2008; Keeter et al. 2000; Vonk, van Osenbruggen, and Willems 2006). Recent work by Yeager at al. (2009) indicates that probability-based internet panels like the one employed in this research achieve comparable levels of reliability and accuracy to large infrastructure surveys carried out using face-to-face interviews, even when the response rates are lower.[7] Previous work using these data finds network sizes and distributions consistent with the 2004 GSS as well as with other similar data collection efforts (Brashears 2011), confirming their validity for the current research. Survey weights, calibrated by Knowledge Networks using the Current Population Survey, are used to adjust for biases in panel construction and retention (see DiSogra 2009 for more). Descriptive statistics are available in Appendix A in the online supplement.

These data were gathered as part of an experiment (see Brashears 2011 for details), but as my respondents comprise a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, I can use the data non-experimentally by applying two kinds of corrections. First, survey weights, calculated by Knowledge Networks, must be used in order to correct for design effects and make the results representative. Second, because these data were gathered as part of an experiment, it is necessary to control for experimental condition. When both of these corrections—survey weights and controls for experimental condition—are imposed, my data are equivalent to a probability-based survey.

Study Design and Variables

The study employs a variant of the important matters item[8] and includes several questions about the named alter. Study respondents were first presented with the important matters item, accompanied by a single blank for them to enter a name or initials. Beneath the blank were two buttons labeled "Add another name" and "I have no more names to add." This approach was informed by previous research (Vehovar et al. 2008) finding that the number of blanks provided following a name generator influences the number of names given. I adopted Vehovar et al.'s recommendation to provide a single blank with a button to permit respondents to add additional names one at a time. As with the GSS, if respondents entered fewer than five names, they were prompted "Anyone else?" The prompt was accompanied by a single blank for a name or initials and the same two buttons. Responses to this item ranged

[5] Small (2013) also used computer-assisted self-interview but did not use representative sampling.

[6] The recruitment rate for KnowledgePanel was 18.8 percent and the profile rate (i.e., proportion who completed the initial entry survey) was 57.4 percent, for a cumulative study response rate (including final stage completion) of 7.2 percent.

[7] See also Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan 2014.

[8] My item varied from the GSS only in one word (i.e., "tell us..." rather than "tell me...").

from zero, meaning the respondents discussed no important matters with anyone during the preceding six months, to twenty-four.

Following the initial name generator, if the respondent had one or more discussion partners the software asked a series of follow-up questions about one randomly selected alter. Random selection was used, rather than Bearman and Parigi's (2004) and Small's (2013) most recent conversation method or the GSS's first five names given method, in order to obtain a representative sample of discussion partners as a whole, rather than those spoken to most recently or named first. Research (McCarty, Killworth, and Rennell 2007) suggests that this method should produce accurate estimates of network composition even when the sampling percentage is relatively small. I am therefore able to produce results that are representative of the population of important matters dyads among adults in the United States, and to my knowledge this study is the first to do so. The within-respondent probability that data will be captured on a respondent-partner dyad is equal to 1/k where k is the number of discussion partners named. To obtain results that are representative of the population of dyads as a whole it is necessary to weight observations by the product of the respondent-level weights and the inverse probability of dyad selection. These dyad-representative weights are used in all analyses, while the respondent-level weights are used for the descriptive statistics in Appendix A in the online supplement.

Respondents were then asked to describe the topic of their most recent important discussion with the randomly chosen discussant. The author inductively derived a series of categories, and the strings were then sorted into categories by two independent coders. The coders assigned 86 percent of the topics to the same categories and then resolved the discrepancies to arrive at the final coding. Both Bearman and Parigi (2004) and Small (2013) used the same approach (i.e., inductively derived categories into which coders sorted topics), employing nine categories and twelve categories, respectively. After eliminating respondents who refused to answer, or provided an unintelligible response, we are left with valid topic data from 1,797 respondents. Small categories were then collapsed together based on frequency and content similarity to simplify analysis, yielding fourteen final categories.[9] For robustness, two coders also sorted the topics into the categories used by Bearman and Parigi (2004), assigning 88 percent of the topics to the same categories before resolving disagreements.

Next, respondents were asked whether the discussion partner is someone who, if they were able, would loan the subject a sum of money equal to one month of the respondent's income; is someone with whom the subject had recently engaged in social activities (e.g., having them over to dinner); and whether the discussion partner is someone who, if they were able, would watch the respondent's home during an absence or provide the respondent with a place to stay for a few weeks. Obviously, there are many types of social support that may be available via discussion networks, but these three items capture several major domains of support. Previous research (van der Poel 1993) suggests that expectations of support are likely to be accurate, and respondent beliefs will guide their actions and therefore are important to assess.

Finally, subjects were asked to classify the role of their discussion partner. Possible roles were parent, sibling, spouse/romantic partner, child, other family member, coworker, friend, neighbor, and other non-kin. Descriptive statistics for both roles and discussion topics are given in Table 1.

Additional control variables were gathered during data collection and are included in the analyses, such as female sex, married or cohabitating, race (black, Hispanic, other, and multiracial), and respondent employment status. I also include variables indicating years of education completed and household income (measured in thousands of dollars). Finally, I include variables for the number of children who lived in the respondent's household, number of names given in response to the name generator, age, and the square of age. These variables control for factors that may influence the availability of others for association or the respondent's access to resources that influence sociability (e.g., McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Watts 2004). It is particularly important to control for the number of names given in response to the name generator as this directly impacts the probability that any partic-

[9] No form of factor analysis could be used because respondents provided only a single topic each.

ular name will be selected for name interpreter items.

I capture the most recent discussion of an important matter within a given relation, which is sufficient both to show that the detected topic *has* been discussed with that alter at least once and to reveal role-topic association in the aggregate. If some topics indicate particularly close relationships, then they should be discussed with particularly close alters and predict greater support availability in the aggregate. However, this method does not show that a particular topic has never been discussed during a relationship solely because it was not discussed during the particular event captured by my data.[10] Nevertheless, by starting with a representative sample of discussion relations, the topic data I collect contain less bias than previous efforts.

Results

Topics of Discussion

The topics of discussion provided by my respondents are given in Table 1. The first four of these categories—Finances, Family, Health and Medical Care, and Work—I dub the "Big Four," which collectively account for 52.08 percent of all topics. Specific topics respondents listed that were part of the Big Four categories include, "My terminal brain cancer," "Losing my job," "Not having enough money to pay our bills," and "Our son's wife leaving him and his boys," and fit our naïve expectations of issues that should be regarded as important and discussed with those to whom we are linked by close relationships. Examples of topics provided by respondents that were part of the remaining ten categories include, "The dopes in Washington are screwing us," "I punched somebody while playing basketball," and "KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken] changing the color of their bucket."

Table 1 also includes the topics sorted into Bearman and Parigi's (2004) nine categories. The single largest category is Life and Health (27.70 percent), followed by Relationships (20.59 percent), Money and House (14.70 percent), Work (12.99 percent), and Kids and Education (10.93 percent). The two coding systems exhibit broadly similar results, with health, work, wealth, and interpersonal relationships occupying top spots. Differences in the results obtained by the two methods largely derive from three sources. First, Bearman and Parigi's system excludes a category comparable to my "Other/Undefined," and thus contains fewer coded topics overall. Second, Bearman and Parigi's system includes fewer categories, so on average each category must account for a larger fraction of the total. Third, topics that are allocated to the same category in one scheme are divided into several in the other, and vice versa.

The topics identified in these data are generally consistent with those obtained by prior efforts. Bearman and Parigi's (2004) top two categories (Money and House; Life and Health) appear in the top three categories in my data. Likewise, my results overlap considerably with Small's (2013) twelve-category system. While I identify Finances, Family, Health and Medical Care, and Work as the Big Four discussion topics, his top five categories are Family, Career, Personal Finances, Happiness and Life Goals, and Health. Given the different sampling methodologies and populations, these studies produce remarkably consistent findings.

The Association between Role and Topic

Weighted tabular analysis indicates that discussion topic is significantly associated with alter role in general ($\chi^2 = 244.42$, $p < 0.001$), and separately among both males ($\chi^2 = 212.09$, $p < 0.001$) and females ($\chi^2 = 156.82$, $p < s0.01$).[11] I estimate a series of three-way log-linear models (e.g., Agresti 2002: Ch. 8; Marsden 1988; Powers and Xie 2004: Ch. 4) to determine if the association between relationship type and discussion topic differs between males and females (Table 2). The fit of the three-way independence model is poor, as expected given our earlier results. Fitting the two-way interactions between sex and relationship type and between sex and topic improves

[10] Similar issues arise with the collection of network data in other contexts (e.g., Freeman and Romney 1987).

[11] Performing these analyses with my data sorted into Bearman and Parigi's nine categories yields similar, albeit weaker, results (Overall sample: $\chi^2 = 154.14$, $p < 0.001$; Males only: $\chi^2 = 112.69$, $p < 0.07$; Females only: $\chi^2 = 92.24$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 1: Discussion Topics and Relationship Types

Discussion Topics	%	Relationship Types	%
Primary Coding			
Finances	11.43	Spouse/romantic partner	15.67
Family	14.22	Non-spouse kin	34.50
Health/medical care	14.27	Friend	36.95
Work	12.16	Coworker	5.08
Politics	5.16	Neighbor	1.06
Spouse/romantic partner	5.90	Other, non-kin	6.75
Other relationships	5.99		
Economy & News	4.12		
Legal/crime/accidents	1.20		
Plans for the future	2.78		
Emotions	2.73		
Home and living	3.09		
Religion/recreation/school	9.11		
Other/undefined	7.86		
Alternate coding[a]			
Community issue	0.31		
News and economy	4.29		
Kids and education	10.93		
Politics and election	5.10		
Life and health	27.70		
Relationships	20.59		
Money and house	14.70		
Ideology and religion	3.39		
Work	12.99		

[a] Based on Bearman and Parigi (2004).
$N = 1817$

the fit somewhat, but not markedly. While males and females have different propensities to talk to alters with certain roles, and about certain topics, including these associations does little to improve the fit of the model. In contrast, adding the final two-way interaction between role and topic substantially improves the model. Finally, the saturated model significantly improves the fit of the model to the data relative to the prior model. These results indicate that the association between role and topic is stronger (i.e., improves the fit of the model more) than either the association between sex and topic or sex and role. Indeed, the role-topic association reduces the L^2 of the model by more than 50 percent relative to the independence model. In contrast, the three-way association between sex, role, and topic accounts for roughly 28 percent of the improvement in model fit from the independence model to the saturated model.

I calculated the standardized chi-squared residuals (see also Bearman and Parigi 2004) from a log-linear model that includes all two-way interactions but omits the three-way interaction between sex, role, and topic.[12] As a result, the standardized residuals capture the deviations in the observed data specifically attributable to variation in role-topic association by sex. I then subtracted the female standardized residuals from the male standardized residuals and summarize these results in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows results for alters who are spouses or romantic partners, non-spouse

[12] Calculating the residuals with a saturated model would be uninformative as the model would perfectly fit the observed data.

Table 2: Three-Way Log-Linear Models of Respondent Sex, Discussion Topic, and Alter Role

Model Type	Model L^2	Model *d.f.*	Δ Likelihood-Ratio χ^2	Likelihood-Ratio *d.f.*	P-value
Independence Model	454.41	121			
Sex-topic and sex-role association model	378.01	104	76.39	17	< 0.01
All two-way associations model	125.95	52	252.07	52	< 0.01
Saturated model	0	0	125.95	52	< 0.01

kin,[13] friends, coworkers, or other non-kin. A positive value for a particular topic indicates that males are more likely to discuss that topic with the relevant alter than females, while a negative value indicates that females are more likely to discuss that topic with that alter than males.

Inspection of Figure 1 reveals modest differences between males and females. Males are more likely to discuss health and medical care, and less likely to discuss the economy and news, with their spouse than are females. Males are more likely to discuss their spouse or romantic partner, and less likely to discuss other relationships, with non-spouse kin than are females. Males are less likely to discuss health and medical care, their spouse or romantic partner, and home and living with their friends than are females. Males are less likely to discuss finances or home and living, and more likely to discuss health and medical care, with coworkers than females. Finally, males are less likely to discuss work, and more likely to discuss home and living, with other non-kin than are females.[14]

These results confirm that role-topic association exists. This is not to say that the role of one's alter somehow compels a particular discussion to occur, or that discussion topics transform one type of alter into another, but only that individuals tend to reserve some kinds of conversations for particular classes of alter (i.e., the association is not causal). This implies that questions that prime respondents to think of particular topics as "important matters" might produce systematic changes in the measured network composition.

The pattern of role-topic association differs between males and females, raising the concern that differences in network structure detected between two or more groups may derive from variation in how topics are allocated to alters. The differences in role-topic association between males and females are relatively modest, and so it is more accurate to say that males and females are generally similar to each other than that they are different, but other demographic categories might exhibit larger differences in how role and topic are connected.

Important Matters and the Provision of Social Support:

If the topics elicited by the important matters item are not particularly "important," then are the relationships in which these discussions occur weaker than usually thought? Answering this question requires that one be able to distinguish the really important topics from those that are more trivial. Rather than attempt to impose my own judgment, I rely on the consensus in my data to make the distinction.

The Big Four categories of Finances, Family, Health and Medical Care, and Work, collectively account for a majority of the discussions captured in my data. These are therefore the topics that most Americans agree are important. Moreover, they meet our expectations for the sorts of issues that should be elicited by the important matters item. I thus class the Big Four discussion topics as important and tentatively regard the remaining ten categories as being relatively unimportant in comparison. While the color of the

[13]Spouses/romantic partners are not included with kin both because unmarried romantic partners are not fictive or legal kin and because previous research has found that spouses and non-spouse kin are associated with different discussion topics (Bearman and Parigi 2004:548–552).

[14]Regression models predicting role-topic association with a vector of controls yield similar results.

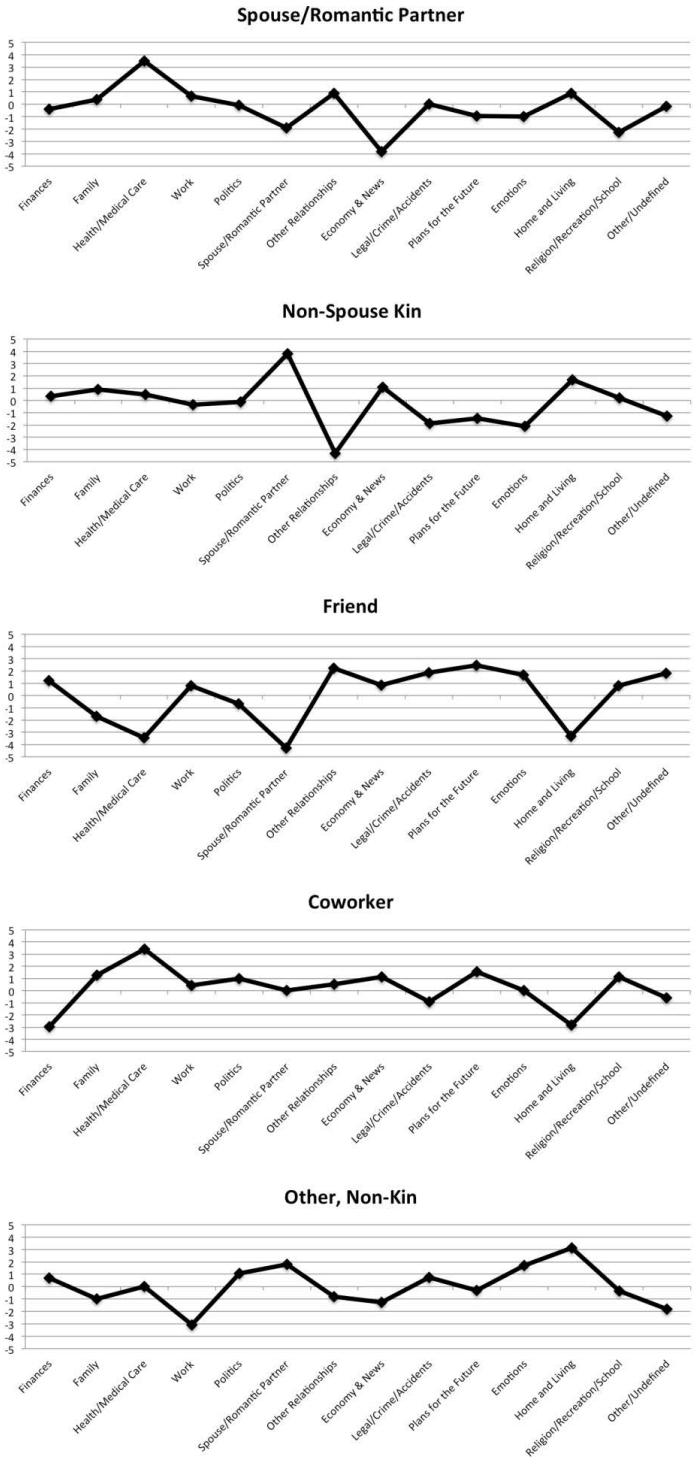

Figure 1: Differences in Standardized Residuals Between Males and Females

Table 3: Social Support Resources

Support types	
Lend money	64.15%
Material assistance	83.34%
Social activities	72.69%
Number of resources	
Mean	2.17
Mode	3.00

KFC bucket may be very important to some of my respondents, it nevertheless does not appear to be important to most Americans. I focus on the Big Four in subsequent analyses of social support and collapse the remaining ten categories into the reference group. This allows me to determine if those topics identified as important by the consensus choices of my respondents predict greater social support than more "trivial" topics, and whether one important topic predicts greater amounts of social support than another.

An inspection of Table 3 reveals that the relationships captured by the important matters item are quite rich in social support. Approximately 83 percent of the dyads can potentially supply the respondent with non-monetary material support, 73 percent include individuals the respondent has recently seen socially, and 64 percent could provide the respondent with a substantial loan of money. The mean number of resources available in a given dyad is estimated at just over two, with a mode of three.

I estimated twelve regression models to evaluate the connection between role, topic, and social support. The first nine models use logistic regression to estimate the likelihood that the respondent has recently seen the discussant socially discussant, that the alter would, if they were able, loan the respondent a significant amount of money, and that the alter would, if they were able, provide non-monetary material assistance. The tenth, eleventh, and twelfth models use Poisson regression[15] to estimate how many of these resources are available from a discussion partner, ranging from zero to three. In addition to the control variables, these models include as independent variables three roles (i.e., spouse, non-spouse kin, and friend),[16] as well as the Big Four topics, to determine whether the topic of discussion predicts the availability of support, net of the role and other covariates. Odds ratios for the logit models and incidence rate ratios for the Poisson models are given in the text and table. For each outcome variable, I first estimated a model that omitted the variables for alter role but included the variables for discussion topic as well as all controls. The second model omitted the variables for discussion topic but added the variables for alter role and retained the controls. Finally, the third model included the variables for discussion topics and for alter roles along with all controls. To save space, I discuss only the final model in each set as it is in all cases consistent with the earlier models. All models are estimated with controls, but only the variables of interest are presented in Table 4. The full models, including all control coefficients, are located in Appendix B in the online supplement.

I begin by predicting the likelihood that an alter will be willing to provide the ego with a substantial loan of money. When both the Big Four and alter roles are included in the same model (Table 4, model 3), discussions of health predict monetary loans, as do spouses/romantic partners, kin, and friends. Post hoc tests confirm that even the weakest of the role coefficients (i.e., friends) is significantly stronger than the health discussions coefficient ($F = 7.08$, $p < 0.009$). Spouses/romantic partners and kin are indistinguishable in their potential to supply a loan ($F = 0.06$, $p<0.81$), while friends are substan-

[15] Estimating the same model using negative binomial regression does not alter the conclusions. No evidence of zero-inflation was observed.

[16] Preliminary analyses showed that coworkers, neighbors, and other non-kin were not unusually likely to predict any resources and thus are collapsed into a reference category.

Table 4: Regression Models Predicting Social Support Using Relationship Strength and Role.

	Lend Money			Material Assistance			Social Activity			Total Support		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Finance	1.15		1.23	0.84		0.93	0.82		0.83	1.00		1.00
	(0.30)		(0.33)	(0.28)		(0.32)	(0.21)		(0.22)	(0.04)		(0.03)
Family	1.22		1.14	1.05		1.07	0.66		0.70	1.00		1.00
	(0.30)		(0.31)	(0.35)		(0.37)	(0.16)		(0.18)	(0.04)		(0.04)
Health	1.83*		2.08*	2.29*		2.53*	1.14		1.19	1.09*		1.09†
	(0.51)		(0.62)	(0.92)		(1.09)	(0.31)		(0.33)	(0.04)		(0.04)
Work	1.19		1.61	0.62		0.75	0.56*		0.67	0.96		1.00
	(0.33)		(0.47)	(0.22)		(0.25)	(0.15)		(0.19)	(0.05)		(0.04)
Spouse		15.5†	16.6†		7.23†	7.29†		37.2†	36.0†		2.06†	2.05†
		−4.96	(5.40)		(2.63)	(2.65)		(13.50)	(13.2)		(0.18)	(0.18)
Friend		5.73†	6.08†		6.13†	5.94†		5.85†	5.49†		1.79†	1.78†
		−1.64	(1.74)		(1.99)	(1.91)		(1.68)	(1.59)		(0.16)	(0.16)
Non-Spouse Kin		16.4†	17.7†		8.73†	8.61†		4.37†	4.25†		1.91†	1.91†
		−4.97	(5.33)		(2.97)	(2.88)		(1.27)	(1.23)		(0.17)	(0.17)
# Names Given	0.93†	0.97	0.96	0.99	1.02	1.03	0.94*	0.97	0.97	0.99	1.00	1.00
	(0.02)	−0.03	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	1.42	0.11†	0.099†	35.00†	4.09	4.38	24.1†	4.53	4.76	2.69†	1.41†	1.40†
	(1.06)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(36.40)	(4.32)	(4.68)	(20.2)	(4.07)	(4.25)	(0.31)	(0.18)	(0.17)
N	1,785	1,785	1,785	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,784	1,784	1,784
Model Type	-Logit-			-Logit-			-Logit-			-Poisson-		

* $p < .05$; † $p < .01$.

Note: Additional controls not listed to save space.

tially less likely than either spouses/romantic partners ($F = 16.50$, $p < 0.001$) or kin ($F = 24.93$, $p < 0.001$) to loan the respondent a substantial amount of money. No evidence of mediation was identified.

When both topics and roles are included in the same model (Table 4, model 6), discussions of health predict greater availability of non-monetary material support, as do spouses/romantic partners, kin, and friends. While the weakest role coefficient (i.e., friends) is more than double the size of the coefficient for health discussions, this difference is not quite significant, while the coefficients for spouses/romantic partners ($F = 3.80$, $p < 0.05$) and for kin ($F = 4.68$, $p < 0.05$) are significantly different from that of health discussions. None of the role coefficients appear to differ significantly from each other, and no evidence of mediation was identified.

When both discussion topics and roles are included in a common model (Table 4, model 9), none of the topics predict recent social activity, but spouses/romantic partners, kin, and friends do. The Sobel-Goodman test indicates that there is a very small indirect association between discussions of work and recent social activity (Sobel-Goodman coefficient $= -0.016$, $p < 0.05$), with spouses/romantic partners as the mediating variable, but confirms that there is no significant direct association. Additional tests confirm that the coefficient for spouses/romantic partners is significantly greater than that of kin ($F = 51.61$, $p < 0.001$) and friends ($F = 36.98$, $p < 0.001$), while the kin and friend coefficients do not differ significantly from each other ($F = 1.66$, $p < 0.20$).

Finally, when we include both the Big Four and the alter roles in a common model (Table 4, model 12), discussions of health are significant predictors of greater amounts of social support, as are spouses/romantic partners, kin, and friends. The health discussions coefficient is significantly less than that of spouses/romantic partners ($F44.96$, $p < 0.001$), kin ($F = 34.06$, $p < 0.001$), and friends ($F = 24.39$, $p < 0.001$), and the coefficients for spouses/romantic partners, kin, and friends, are all significantly different from each other. There is no evidence of mediation between the topic and role variables.

Overall, these results indicate that once we are dealing with important matters discussants, the role of a discussant matters considerably more than the topic of discussion for the provision of social support.[17] This suggests that allegedly "trivial" conversations are not indicative of substantively unimportant relations.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper set out to determine what sorts of topics Americans regard as important, whether topics are consistently linked to roles, and whether the topic of discussion or the role of the discussant has an impact on the availability of social support from one's discussion partners. It found that Americans talk about a wide variety of topics, including some that might seem unimportant to observers, but that there is a high degree of consensus that finances, family, health and medical care, and work are important matters. The results also show that topics and roles are associated, and that the nature of this association varies with respondent sex. This presents obvious challenges to comparisons of networks between categories or groups (e.g., males versus females), or over time. Likewise, researchers should be aware of the potential for questions that precede the important matters name generator to prime respondents to think of particular topics as important and thereby alter the composition of the reported networks. Efforts to use the important matters item in the future should seriously consider collecting topic data as a diagnostic measure.

It is apparent that many of our core confidantes are able to provide a considerable diversity of support resources. While discussant role is a robust predictor of support, the topic of discussion is not. Across all models only discussions of health and medical issues exhibited a robust direct association with loans of money and provision of non-monetary material assistance, while discussions of work exhibited only a very weak and indirect association with recent social activity. This is consistent with Perry and Pescosolido's (2010) observation that members of the general important matters discussion networks who also discussed health matters tended

[17] Additional interaction models indicate that these results are largely uniform by sex. In no model were the non-significant coefficients for discussion topic significantly different from each other.

to be richer sources of social support. Nevertheless, on the whole these results indicate that discussion topic has little predictive value once we are dealing with core discussion partners.

My data suggest that discussing topics that appear important to naïve observers is no better a predictor of resource availability than discussions of apparently trivial matters, once we are dealing with important matters discussants. Indeed, the respondent who reported that the topic of his discussion was "KFC changing the color of their bucket"—a topic that most of us would likely consider unimportant—nevertheless indicated that he could obtain both a loan of money and non-monetary material assistance from his discussant. This serves as a useful reminder that researchers should be reluctant to impose their own judgments of topic importance. More fundamentally, while some topics are likely intrinsically important, many others are important simply *because they are issues that concern those who are important to us.*

While the bulk of all discussions likely address matters of relatively low importance—such as the weather or recent television programs—we also discuss matters of high importance. These issues of genuine importance are probably focused on a relatively small set of trusted discussants. Observing a discussion about a matter of obvious importance, like one's brain cancer, therefore suggests (but certainly does not prove: see Perry and Pescosolido 2010) that the parties to the discussion are close. At the same time, observing a discussion about a matter of seemingly low importance, like a recent sporting match, suggests relatively little since we engage in such trivial discussions with both those who are important to us and those who are not.

It may seem odd that we discuss trivial matters with our core discussants, but we likely do so precisely because those persons are important. Serious issues arise infrequently, and waiting for a major concern to develop before contacting our important discussion partners would force those ties to remain latent for long periods. However, maintaining social ties requires regular, if not frequent, contact (Cummings, Lee, and Kraut 2006).[18] Seemingly trivial conversations represent an important engine for relationship activation and may be a form of wasteful signaling (e.g., Zahavi 1975), indicating the value of the relationship to the discussant. Research in the sociology of culture also suggests that apparently trivial topics like recent sporting events can provide a general basis for connections with others (Lizardo 2006) and may be deployed strategically to develop and maintain important relationships (Schulz and Breiger 2010). Much as Granovetter (1973) sensitized us to the strength of weak ties, this research should sensitize us to the potential importance of seemingly trivial discussions.

Humans recall alters using a variety of schemas, such as geography/context (Brewer and Garrett 2001; Killworth and Bernard 1982) and kinship (Brewer and Yang 1994), and recall is better for typical interactions than for specific encounters (Freeman and Romney 1987; Freeman, Romney, and Freeman 1987). This suggests that when responding to the important matters item, some individuals search their memory for important discussions, while others search for important alters. The former type is sensitive to changes in topic judgments or priming, while the latter is comparatively insensitive. My study cannot discriminate between these strategies and so my results could stem from a uniform tendency of my respondents to search by alter. However, Bailey and Marsden's (1999) research suggests that both strategies occur with similar frequency, and this is consistent with the roughly equal split of my topics between important and trivial matters. Therefore, my results imply that regardless of recall strategy, discussion topic has virtually no predictive relationship with social support once we are dealing with important matters discussants. By extension, while role-topic association might alter measured network composition, it appears unlikely to seriously impact measures of available social support.

Concerns have been raised (e.g., Bearman and Parigi 2004; Perry and Pescosolido 2010) about how information could flow over a tie if the relevant topic is never discussed, and research (Smith 2005) indicates that job information is sometimes deliberately withheld even from strong ties. However, my data indicate that we discuss many topics with a variety of alters; role-topic association constrains the likelihood that ties will transfer particular types of information but does not completely prevent it. Similarly, job informa-

[18] For a discussion of the decay of social network ties see Burt (2000, 2002).

tion is more likely to flow over strong ties because the involved individuals are better able to select relevant knowledge for, and more motivated to provide knowledge to, the recipient (Marin 2012). Researchers should not assume that all information flows equally over all discussion ties, but it seems likely that the strong ties measured by the important matters item provide many kinds of knowledge.

This work casts new light on what Americans regard as important, with whom they prefer to discuss those matters, and the types of social support they are willing to offer to their core confidantes. When it comes to social support, it isn't what you talk about that matters, but whom you talk to.

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