

According to a common sense intuition, expressed in proverbs such as: “*birds of a feather flock together*” or “*who keeps company with the wolves will learn to howl*”, what we think, like or do depends on or affects with whom we keep in touch or where we belong to. Following this line of reasoning, we try to understand the mutual links between people’s consumption tastes, practices and knowledge (in such domains as cuisine, television, music, housing etc.) and the ways in which these people are connected to others (their personal networks). How do social contacts and their characteristics (e.g. size, homogeneity, strength) affect the cultural repertoire of individuals and how does the latter (interests, knowledge, preferences for different cultural genres) shape personal contacts and ties?

This research topic derives from the classical sociological problem pertaining to a relation between social structure and culture. Although this issue is not new in sociological inquiry, the insufficient attention has been paid to social connections so far. In traditional framework, dating back to Veblen’s critical study of “leisure class” (1899), scholars have been rather interested in tracing the link between social positions (classes or statuses) and consumption patterns, remaining the role of personal networks a relatively understudied topic. At the same time, literature on social capital (and social networks) has grown explosively, reporting numerous benefits of them for various domains of life (e.g. R. D. Putnam, J. S. Coleman, P. Bourdieu, N. Lin, R. S. Burt, A. Portes). The term “**social capital**” usually embodies the idea that social actors accrue benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures. Depending on concrete theoretical orientations, research focus is either on “morphology” of social ties (e.g. size, density, heterogeneity, closure, position in the structure of connection – e.g. being a “broker”) or on resources available to individuals by virtue of a given stock of them (e.g. information, support).

Network analysis may be very fruitful in the field of consumption. Focusing on parameters of social networks, such as size, density, heterogeneity, composition, strength of ties, intensity of contacts, it would be possible to explain different configurations of consumption preferences and activities, as well as advance our understanding of social boundaries/social cohesion formation, that is answer the questions how culture is distributed in the society and how its diverse forms function as “fences” or as “bridges” between people. As one of the axis of social differentiation, social capital may serve as a factor explaining diversity of lifestyles in contemporary societies. Not without significance are benefits of social capital and consumption for various domains of life (e.g. job searching). At a micro level analysis, it is possible to reconstruct relevant networks and social mechanisms through which social ties affect behaviours and preferences (e.g. normative pressure, information flow, encouragement, common practices), as well as address “strategies” and practices employed by people to form and maintain relations.

Network approach is a promising avenue for research as evidenced by some earlier studies conducted mostly in English-speaking countries. These works show, for example, that: 1) people with networks of larger size and diversity (i.e. affiliated to different groups) develop tastes for wider variety of cultural forms (are more “omnivorous”); or 2) individual tastes for different types of culture (popular vs high-brow) are selectively associated with different types of network relations (weak vs strong ties); the basic argument is that more restricted forms of taste (more “esoteric” and difficult, such as highbrow culture) are more useful for the formation of stronger, closed-in networks, while a preference for forms of taste that are weakly correlated with social position (e.g. “popular culture”) is more likely to be associated with weaker, loosely knit networks.

These findings, although in its early stages, show promising connections between networks and culture that heighten the desire for extending the analyses into Polish society. The aim of the project, in addition to classic question on association between social position and consumption patterns, is to verify a number of previous hypotheses in different circumstances (on different sample, population and measures) as well as raise new questions, expanding the current state of knowledge, for example: what role do family versus non-family contacts play in cultural consumption? What characteristics of our friends and acquaintances do facilitate active forms of cultural participation? What are friends for (source of information, inspiration, norms, or companions in consumption)? How do we sustain our contacts, and what resources are used in this process?

To answer these questions, we will use a wide spectrum of sociological research tools, ranging from representative, large-scale survey of the big city population aged 18-75, through in-depth household interviews, to semi-structured interviews aimed at list of “friends” elicitation. Employing different methods is to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of social phenomena. Quantitative research (e.g. survey) is especially efficient at getting to “structural” features of social life (e.g. distribution and/or frequency of activities, opinions, preferences etc. in the population), while qualitative studies are stronger in elucidations of participants’ meanings, processes and contexts, as they take the subject’s perspective as the point of departure.