

Is the power of weak ties universal? A cross-cultural comparison of social interaction in Argentina and Canada

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Although we interact with a wide range of people on a daily basis, the social psychological literature has primarily focused on interactions with close friends and family (i.e. strong ties). Recent research carried out on Canadian students suggests emotional benefits to interacting with acquaintances (i.e. weak social ties). The present study investigates whether this 'weak tie effect' holds in non-Western cultures, using a Latin American sample to broaden our understanding of collectivism. Participants reported daily how many strong and weak ties they greeted in person, as well as a daily subjective wellbeing questionnaire. Preliminary analyses suggest weak tie interaction is related to a sense of community, and indicate distinct patterns of social interaction among Latinos.

1. Introduction

Recent research suggests that mere acquaintances (i.e. weak ties) can boost our subjective wellbeing and sense of belonging (Sandstrom & Dunn 2014). This challenges the social psychological literature suggesting that only close bonds can satisfy our fundamental 'need to belong' (Baumeister & Leary 1995). However, evidence for the 'power of weak ties' has so far only been found among a student population in one cultural setting (Canadian). Are these findings relevant to off-campus populations and different cultural groups? This study replicates Sandstrom and Dunn's (2014) research but uses instead non-student samples living in Canada and Argentina. Previous naturalistic observational research suggests that Latin Americans have more face-to-face social interactions per day than their North American counterparts (Ramirez-Esparza et al. 2009). However, no hispanic research has thus far differentiated strong and weak ties, nor measured subjective wellbeing in relation to social interactions. We hypothesise that the Argentines will on average experience more daily weak tie interactions than Canadians do, as well as more social interactions per day overall (i.e. both strong and weak ties combined). We also hypothesise that weak tie interaction enhances wellbeing in both samples.

A key aspect of this research is that it broadens the concept of collectivism. Cross-cultural psychologists often use Hofstede's (2001, 2010) distinction between individualism and collectivism to conceptualise differences between countries. According to this framework, those in individualist countries perceive relationships to be voluntary, valuing independence and self-reliance, while in

collectivist countries relationships tend to be perceived as lasting, as mutual dependence is the norm. In social psychological research, Far Eastern samples (for example, Chinese and Japanese participants) have often been taken as representative of collectivism generally, leading to the creation of an implicit East-West paradigm. However, Asian cultures are not the only ones where the importance of the group prevails – in fact the five most extremely collectivistic countries on Hofstede's original scale are all Latin American (Hofstede 2001). The current research will therefore attempt to redress this imbalance by investigating one of collectivism's lesser understood cultural manifestations.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The Latino sample was composed of 40 participants (18 female) with an average age of 28.93 ($SD = 5.75$). The Canadian sample was composed of 41 participants (30 female), aged 25+ (selected from an age range). Both groups of participants were community members, i.e. non-students and lived in urban areas (Toronto and Buenos Aires).

2.2 Procedure

The participants received a pair of mechanical tally counters ("clickers") that they were asked to carry with them at all times during 3 consecutive weekdays on one week, and 3 consecutive weekdays on another week to count their daily face-to-face interactions. They were told to use a plastic coloured clicker to count weak ties, and metal clickers to count strong ties, one click per interaction. The participants received detailed instructions on how to distinguish between weak ties and strong ties. The criteria were as follows (but translated into Spanish): Strong tie = "someone you are close to", "someone who you know really well (and knows you really well)" or "someone who you confide in or talk to about yourself or your problems." Weak tie = "someone you are not very close to", "someone who you don't know really well (and who doesn't know you really well)" or "someone who you consider a friend, but would be unlikely to confide in." (Sandstrom & Dunn 2014). The participants counted every time they greeted someone in person regardless of the length of the interaction. At the end of each day they reported their tallies and completed a pen-and-paper questionnaire, before resetting their clickers for the next day's interactions.

2.3 Measures

All measures were kept consistent with Sandstrom and Dunn's (2014) original study, but translated into Spanish for the Latino sample. They included : number of interactions, subjective wellbeing (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) and belonging

(Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$). Subjective wellbeing was measured by assessing affect using the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (Diener et al. 2010), and by assessing subjective happiness using the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubormirsky & Lepper 1999). Examples include completing the phrase "In general I consider myself..." with numbers on a scale from 1 (An unhappy person) to 7 (A very happy person).

Belonging was assessed using several different measures: the Social Connectedness Scale (Lee, Draper & Lee 2001), the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck & Hoberman 1985), the UCLA Loneliness Scale, version 3 (Russell, 1996) and the Sense-of-Community Scale (Davidson & Cotter 1986). Examples include rating agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 4: "I feel I belong here", "If I became ill I could easily find someone to help me with my daily chores" and "How frequently do you feel alone?". All of these measures were adapted by Sandstrom and Dunn (2014), to which the reader is referred for additional details.

3. Results

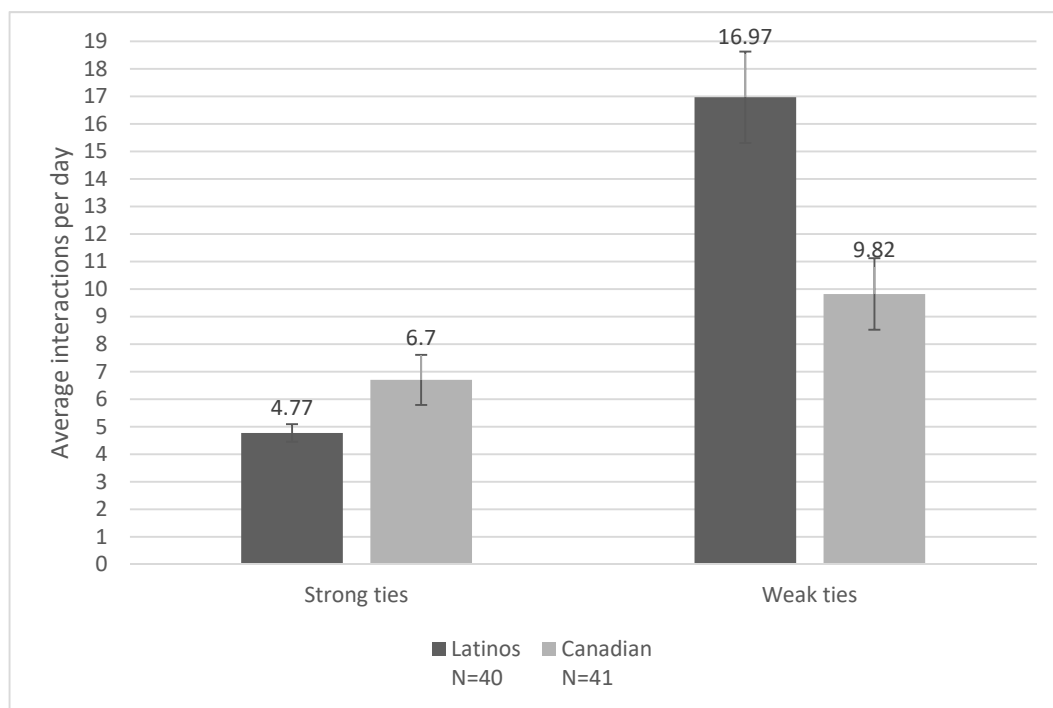


Figure 1: Average strong and weak tie interaction per day for Latino and Canadian participants

3.1 Daily interactions

As hypothesised, Latinos interacted with significantly more weak ties per day, $t(78) = 3.39$, $p = .001$, (see Fig.1). Unexpectedly, the Latino sample interacted with fewer strong ties per day than the Canadians did, $t(50) = 1.98$, $p = 0.05$. When considering the mean number of social interactions per day (i.e. both strong and weak ties combined), the Latinos did not report significantly more

interactions ($M = 21.79$, $SD = 11.20$) than the Canadians ($M = 18.10$, $SD = 14.98$), $t(79) = 1.26$, $p = 0.21$). This does not support our hypothesis that Latinos would have more social interactions.

3.2 *Happiness and Belonging*

The Latinos did not differ significantly from Canadians on any of these measures apart from sense of community, ($M_{Latino} = 3.0$, $SD = 0.39$, $M_{Canadian} = 2.3$, $SD = 0.4$), $t(79) = 7.94$, $p < .001$.

When correlational analyses were run to investigate any possible relationships between average weak/strong tie interactions per day and the happiness and belonging measures, no relationships were found for either sample, with one exception: For the Latino sample, average strong tie interactions per day and negative affect were positively correlated, $r(39) = .32$, $p = .05$. In other words, Latinos reported feeling more negative on days when they had had more strong tie interactions.

4. Discussion

The results of the current study suggest a different pattern of daily social interaction in Latin American countries. These findings help us broaden the concept of collectivist social networks as observed by Markus and Kitayama (1991) in East Asian samples. For example, despite being exposed to a greater number of acquaintances on a daily basis than Canadians, this is not reflected in an increased amount of close tie interaction. This suggests Latinos maintain prescriptive and impermeable social boundaries, much like other collectivists (Gheorghiu et al. 2009).

Interacting with those close to you appears to have a higher emotional cost in Argentina than it does in Canada. In contexts where you are less able to move between relationships, one must continue relationships with negative feelings, even if there are costs to maintain them. This is known as low relational mobility (Schug et al. 2010), and it may explain why Latinos reported more negative affect on days with more strong tie interactions.

This study cannot yet provide evidence that the power of weak ties is generalizable outside of a Canadian student population but this may be due to the type of analysis performed. Observations are nested within participants as a result of the repeated measures design, so multilevel analyses may be necessary to reveal any effect. The Latinos did however report a stronger sense of community alongside higher levels of weak tie interaction, supporting Granovetter's (1973) assertion that weak ties build communities and hinting that the weak tie effect may exist.

Perhaps the positive impact of weak tie interaction is more evident in the student context of the original study, when individuals can generally choose who they

want to be friends with. This is described as high relational mobility (Schug et al. 2010). Both samples used for this study were not students and consequently may have had their weekday social interactions pre-determined by their working life. They may have experienced 'emotional labour' - a sociological term referring to the negative effects of having many social interactions during working hours, due to managing the expectations and feelings of others (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993). This may have obscured the positive effects of weak ties.

This research is limited by its correlational nature and the sensitivity of its measures (e.g. a passing greeting and a deep discussion are both recorded as one greeting). As with all cultural studies, it is a quasi-experiment as one's cultural background is an important independent variable that can never be experimentally manipulated. It is of course possible that factors other than cultural difference may have affected the number of daily interactions. However the study investigates an area that could have important implications. Sense of community, of which Latinos reported significantly higher levels in this study, is increasingly recognised as providing health benefits, especially to the elderly (Eschbach et al. 2004). A deeper understanding of the relationship between social interaction and health would help combat social isolation.

The lack of a significant difference between the overall number of daily interactions for each sample is striking given the cultural distance between the two samples. Perhaps there is a universal psychologically optimal number of daily interactions similar to Dunbar's number of 150 – the cognitive limit to the number of friends an individual can have (Dunbar 1992). Much more cross-cultural research is needed to substantiate this claim, but this study is an important first step towards understanding how peripheral members of our social networks affect our wellbeing in different contexts.

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