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The contextual name generator: a good tool for the study of sociability and socialization

Abstract:

The debate upon the relative validity, power, limits and relevance of the different name generators comes along the development of the social network studies. The core questions are: what do they respectively refer to? What are they supposed to construct, for what research question? Some procedures tend to choose a precise target with a unique name generator that may synthesize a crucial point. Others prefer to use series of different name generators, in order to gather names referred to diverse spheres of social life. In this case the various name generators are often built with heterogeneous logics, and often remain incompatible.

Is it possible to standardize a procedure enough to overcome these limits and keep the comparisons possible? We discuss here some specificities and advantages of a new kind of integrated name generator, the “contextual” name generator, which was developed in a longitudinal qualitative panel study that started in France in 1995 and was also conducted in 2005 in three different projects in Quebec. This tool is not the juxtaposition of independent name generators, as we are used to; it combines their respective advantages in a real integrated and systematic procedure and allows going through a wide range of areas, scales, social conditions, qualities of ties, etc. This name generator gives access to a great diversity of information that allows to combine sociability and socialization questions. It thus seems to be a relevant tool, especially for sociologists.

The debate on the relative validity, power, limits and relevance of various name generators forms part of the development of social network studies. The core questions are: what do these generators refer to? What are they supposed to construct and for which research questions?

This presentation will discuss the specific characteristics and advantages of a new kind of integrated name generator, the “contextual” name generator, which was developed in a longitudinal, mixed qualitative and quantitative panel study that began in France in 1995 and was also carried out in three different projects in Quebec in 2005. Here we'll only talk about the tool, the name generator, and not about the more qualitative part of our studies.

This tool is not a juxtaposition of the independent name generators to which we have become accustomed; it combines their respective advantages in an integrated procedure and uses a wide range of areas, scales, social conditions and qualities of ties, etc. As a result, this name generator gives researchers access to a great diversity of information, especially useful for

sociability and socialization studies. It thus seems to be a relevant tool, especially for sociologists.

Which research questions, which name generators?

Researchers studying societies in transformation often want to know if individuals are isolated or receive support, if people in a variety of circumstances have access to the resources that can be provided by their contacts and connections, and if they are influenced by others in their behaviour and decision-making. They may also wish to identify the social standing of individuals in our societies. They may be interested in socialization and social integration processes and monitor changes in the roles of family, friends, neighbours and work colleagues. We thus ask ourselves what is their place in everyday life and in each person's orientation.

For each of these questions, which may be analyzed thanks to the social networks approach, it is possible to construct one or several very precise name generators.

Why generate names? Because it opens a path toward detailed analysis of milieus or circles. Indeed, only a name (or at least a given name) allows us to establish a link between sociological categories and the real individuals that respondents are able to discuss with us.

Of course, a generated name is only an introduction to the topic. Carrying out network analysis also requires gathering data on the individuals cited and on the relations linking them to the individual interviewed.

The choice of a generator is always linked to the initial objective: what do we wish to construct by generating relational networks? To study the problem of social isolation, we can use a name generator that targets contacts while noting their frequency: "Name the individuals with whom you are most often in contact?" or even the generator suggested by Wellman that allows us to identify strong links, that is, individuals of closest contact. These generators already open the way to two interpretations of social ties. In the first, frequent contact with others wards off isolation, while in the second, isolation is avoided through emotional proximity within a core network.

To explore other types of support or resource circulation in greater depth, we can use generators of the type suggested by Fischer for his San Francisco survey. These allowed him to form a portrait of a potential support network ("if you left the city, whom could you ask to water the plants, pick up your mail; with whom could you discuss important matters, etc.). There is also the retrospective approach, based on events that arose in the recent past (sickness, birth), to determine who really provided assistance.

If, instead, our interest lies in issues of information dissemination or power structures within work contexts or school classes, generators will try to identify the individuals with whom we discuss important matters, from whom we seek advice or for whom we have the greatest respect or most trust, etc. (Burt). By asking these questions to several persons in a closed framework, we obtain overlapping responses allowing us to describe this structure.

Which name generators, which networks?

According to Degenne and Forsé (1994), there is a convergence in the findings of the majority of studies. These studies come up with an average figure of 5000 persons we know or have known. Of these, a few hundred are in our immediate circle; in the course of a week, we are in regular contact with about twenty. Less than ten (three on average) individuals can be located with the help of generators designed to deal with close individuals, confidants and those with whom we can discuss important questions.

When we consult surveys, we note that the choice of a generator or generators results in the creation of networks of different sizes. When a limit is imposed right away -- for example major surveys that do not allow the questioning to last too long -- or those in which the examination of networks is secondary, we obtain networks of "strong links", each containing three to five members.

In the Wellman survey, which was carried out in a Toronto neighbourhood, each network of close individuals had 4.7 persons, on average. Ten years later, when Wellman conducted interviews with a sub-group of 33 persons (obtained from his survey), he added an average of seven other ties per person (connections characterized as 'weaker' though still significant) so that his average reached 11.7 persons. Fischer's survey, which involved a series of nine generators, referred to close ties -- including neighbours and work ties -- resulted in the generation of an average of 18.5 members, among whom he selected a sub-sample of nearly four strong ties for the purposes of more in-depth analysis. The "contact-amongst-persons" survey in France asked individuals to keep a notebook in which they noted with whom they had conversed during the week. It obtained an average of 17 interlocutors. When, twenty-five years later, Grossetti and his team replicated the Fischer survey in Toulouse, they obtained an average of 27.4 members per person.

All researchers face a dilemma. They must choose between (a) maximum effectiveness (fewer questions or even a single question, limiting the number of generated names and secondary questions) and (b) reflecting as accurately as possible the real-life experiences of the social actors (as complete a network as possible, with the maximum information on the members and relationships). Those who seek as complete a portrait as possible often choose to combine several generators. But this combining exercise is generally carried out by drawing on different types of generators (important persons + frequent contacts + support) -- so that these "bits" are fragmented and disjointed. The overall logic here is not always obvious.

Which networks, which dynamics?

So far, there are more studies using longitudinal approaches to follow the development of social networks throughout their existence than before. Questions of social isolation, support and influence should always be analyzed as part of a dynamic process.

Still, the networks do not "arise out of nowhere". An understanding of the logics underlying the construction, transformation and end of ties is crucial for the analyst, who must understand in specific terms "how" a given network is formed and the particular context that has favoured the emergence of these connections.

We sometimes forget that a network is made up of relationships. Not all relationships are identical. Nor do they have the same influence or durability. Studying a relationship -- how it was created and transformed, and how it evolves -- cannot be separated from the analysis of social networks.

We also know that the variables of age and position in the life cycle are the factors that most affect social networks. The significant “thresholds” of life and of unforeseen events can also have repercussions on an entourage. Researchers must therefore ask themselves what constitutes the connection between, on the one hand, the biographical path and the development of relationships, and, on the other hand, the development of the network as a whole.

The "contextual name generator" and the French and Québec longitudinal networks surveys

Mis en forme

With these considerations on the dynamic of ties and networks in mind, Claire Bidart, Alain Degenne, Lise Mounier and Daniel Lavenu set up a longitudinal survey in 1995¹.

This qualitative follow-up survey was conducted among a panel of young people originally living in the Caen area in Normandy. The team first interviewed them on the eve of an important stage in their lives, namely, graduation from high school or the end of a training program.

The survey population was selected on the basis of the educational type of training and gender. In 1995, a first wave of interviews was conducted with 87 young people. They were between 17 and 23 years old. Three years later, in 1998, 73 of them were interviewed a second time; in 2001, 66 were interviewed, and in 2004, 60 were interviewed again.

The tool was adapted by Johanne Charbonneau and Sylvain Bourdon to the context of three other surveys conducted in Québec². What were the objectives of these surveys? The French survey was based on several major hypotheses:

- 1) There is a very strong relationship between sociability and socialization. Indeed the relational network constitutes an “intermediate level” (Degenne) between the individual and society; the creation and development of the network provides us with vast information on patterns of circulation and the way the individual is rooted in society. Since we are French, we were obviously looking for social differentiation (!) and the contrasts found in the survey population were based on this principle. From this standpoint, it is very important to form a network that is as broad as possible. It is therefore necessary to create a tool that aids memory as best as possible and envisages a range of relational contexts.
- 2) We must understand the dynamics of the relationships to understand the dynamics of the network and the forms of sociability. From this standpoint, we need to obtain information on the characteristics of the alter and the relationships that link them to the ego.

¹ This French research project has been funded by the Délégation Interministérielle à l'Insertion des Jeunes - Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité, the DRASS of Basse-Normandie, the DDASS of Calvados, the DRTEFP of Basse-Normandie, the Town of Caen, the MRSH of Caen, the Délégation Interministérielle à la Ville, the Ministère de la Jeunesse et des Sports, the Ministère de la Culture, the Fonds d'Action Sociale, the Plan Urbain, France Télécom R&D, the Caisse Nationale d'Allocations Familiales.

² The first Québec research project has been funded by the Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC), Program "Perseverance and school improvement", the second one by the Association des centres jeunesse du Québec and the third one by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

- 3) The best way to analyze the dynamic is to study it in a real diachrony, to consider "time" seriously; this implies the choice of a longitudinal survey that is carried out by way of repeated interrogation of the same persons.

The Quebec team completely supported these hypotheses, and this facilitated an adaptation of the tool. We adapted it, in part, because of the more specific objectives of the three Quebec surveys:

Two focussed on a transition period in early adulthood and allowed for a meeting with the participants on two or three occasions: the first one aimed to study the influence of the family and the social network on the educational path taken in the first two years following entry into post-secondary education. This required a description of the network and keeping track of the way it evolved during the given period (2 years). The second one aimed to directly study the development of the personal network of young people being monitored by social services. It is part of an intensive intervention program to prepare them for independent living, to find out if they were isolated and if they had people on whom they could count to help them integrate socially. The third survey does not have a longitudinal component; its aim is to describe the social networks of persons in different age groups who have the particular characteristic of living alone in central neighbourhoods of large cities. The survey wants to find out if living alone meant being socially isolated. It turned out that the answer was "no". But we will not present results here.

Let's just see for now the different surveys populations.

Survey	Year/Month	Number of egos
Panel of Caen		
1 st wave	1995	87
2 nd wave	1998	73
3 rd wave	2001	66
4 th wave	2004	60
Québec surveys		
'Solos'	2005	55
'Post-secondary'/'Youth protection center' 1 st wave	September 2004	96/60
'Post-secondary'/'Youth protection center' 2 nd wave	May 2005	86/32
'Post-secondary' 3 rd wave	December 2005	83

The name generators

We will now describe more precisely the tools of the surveys. The personal networks are constructed on the basis of a series of questions related to the various life contexts addressed. For example, respondents would be asked about their work context: "In your work, are there people whom you know a little better, with whom you talk a little more?" A list of first names is established and the sociographic characteristics of these different partners are collected later. The number of possible contexts is very large:

- education,
- leisure activities in education, old school friends and acquaintances,

- Work, former jobs, part-time and summer jobs, links with former colleagues,
- training courses,
- leisure, sporting and cultural activities,
- membership of organisations (clubs, trade unions, political parties, various groups),
- old involvements now abandoned,
- activities associated with practice of a religion,
- holidays, travels
- groups of friends, former groups of friends,
- places of residence, former places of residence,
- parents' friends,
- other old acquaintances,
- military service,
- other places of meeting,
- romantic attachments and relationships arising as a result,
- previous romantic attachments
- family.

We had not only their current contexts (or environments), but also past contexts they no longer frequented but where they knew people with whom they were still in contact. In certain cases, we began by invoking the contexts themselves by way of a preliminary question, before associating them with names: for example, not all persons partake in the same leisure activities. In this way, we have attempted to reconstruct the broadest possible network, taking into account all of the ties maintained in all spheres of life. The tool is very flexible because it allows for adding new contexts (telephone and internet for 2 waves of the French survey) or specific contexts that are being emphasized: placement communities, school, for example, in the Quebec surveys.

Thus, this is a systemic tool. It seems to encompass the vast majority of contexts in which it is possible to be with individuals with whom one has a relationship. To the greatest extent possible, we tried to make that the boundaries of the social networks did not originate with the tool.

Most existing tools are very restrictive, since they are coloured from the outset by a particular aspect of the relationship (frequency of contact or intimacy or support). With our tool, however, we consider the entire set of names generated to be a "relational universe". In a second phase, these will be subjected to a series of supplementary questions allowing us to describe both the ties and the members.

On this level too, the tool is very evolutive since it allows us to emphasize a particular aspect (support, joint activities, relationship quality, integration into specific social circles, the characteristics of the members, etc) depending on research objectives.

The interviews are divided into two parts:

- the first part involves the systematic collection of names and attributes of alters, and is more factual since it deals with statistical measurement and analysis;
- this procedure was followed by in-depth, qualitative interviews, in which personal and relational changes were discussed at length.

Describing the ties

It is a generator that focuses on contexts. But we kept an advantage from the other researchers' generators that are to generate the names of persons forming the central core of the network. Thus, the first question asked in the interview enables us to create an initial set of this core network, which we can then place in the more complete network patiently constructed later.

The French first question is: "Who are the persons currently important to you, who matter to you?"

The Québec question is a mixture of questions proposed by Wellman and by McCallister and Fischer: "Who are the people you currently feel closest to or with whom you discuss important matters?"

In the French survey, the first question constitutes a lead-in and facilitates the chronicling of the spontaneous evaluation of the most "important" circle. However, these names can later be repeated when different contexts are enumerated. An "important" person can also be a work colleague, a partner in leisure activities and a brother-in-law. This person's name will be repeated in each context as long as the context is relevant.

Since the achievable duration of the interviews in Québec is shorter, we decided to suppress certain parts of the original tool. In the Québec surveys, this questionnaire takes twenty minutes, on average, to administer. By contrast, the French survey takes more time – up to two days – , and there are greater variations, depending on the size of the network.

In the Québec surveys, the names already mentioned in the preceding questions are not repeated. We therefore had to use the questions about their common activities and encounter circumstances to analyze multiplexity, but with less precision. That said, for the central core of the network, we maintained the advantage of being able to process the information more rapidly.

In the French survey, we add a screening question to each question in the generator, by context. By proceeding according to context, this question allows us to differentiate "strong ties" from casual contacts.

- In your present job, are there people whom you know a little better, with whom you talk a little more?
 - *Screening question :*
 - Do you see any of them outside of work?
 - Are any of them important to you, whether you see them elsewhere or not?
 - *If "yes" to one OR the other question, this is considered as a strong tie*

The strong ties are identified as a function of their multiplexity or of the importance attributed to them by the respondent. Here, we were attempting to test the hypothesis of a link between multiplexity and the strength of the tie. This sub-question was not retained in the Québec surveys.

Once the list of names has been determined, we can describe these networks. Tables, multiple choice cards and drawings are used.

Name list

Generator no	Surname	Relationship	Age	Gender	Circumstance Encounter	Date encounter	Occupation	Schooling	Distance esid.	Frequen. Contact	Context I (important) only					
											Together (Yes/No)			Activities together (list)	What bring you closer...	
											Lived	School	Work			1 st choice
1	Lisa															
1	Robert															
1	Mark															
2	Michael															
2	Anna															
2, 3	Lucy															
3	Paul															
4	Peter															
5	Susan															

The first table is for gathering information on the characteristics of the members. It already has the names, which are linked to each context. Information can be added to it.

Relationship	What is your relationship with [first name]?
Age	How old is this person? <i>[To specify: as of September 1st 2005]</i>
Gender	<i>[Deduct using first name or ask if not sure]</i>
Encounter circumstance	How did you meet?
Encounter date	How long have you known each other? <i>[Note year or month if < 1 year]</i>
Occupation	How does this person currently spend most of his/her time?
Education	What <u>schooling level</u> has this person reached?
Distance from place of residence	How far does this person live from you? <i>[To specify: your living quarters during school]</i>
Frequency of contact	How frequently are you in <u>contact</u> ? <i>[To specify: in person, phone, e-mail...]</i>

Once general questions involving the overall content of the network have been asked, the interviewer may also decide to ask questions that develop in greater depth certain points of interest to our research. For example, we ask additional questions on the relationships between *ego* and the members of his or her network who form part of the central core (the most important persons). For example, we ask them if they have already lived, studied or worked together. We use multiple choice cards allowing us to select the main activities they did together. We also collect the principal contents of their relationship, based on a question of the type: “what brings you closer”, with the possibility of selecting from among eight possible answers.

“What brings you closer?”

1 – One or more common activities	6 – I like his/her qualities
2 – Common friends or people you see	7 – I can confide in this person
3 – Just the fun of being together	8 – We share a common past
4 – Mainly an emotional bond	9 – Mainly a family bond
5 – Helping each other	10 – Other

By asking respondents to imagine themselves in various scenarios, a supplementary section enabled us to add information on the quality of the relationships and to select these typical relationships from the global list.

<p>Scenarios (<i>Using the name list as it is now, note the corresponding Alter numbers for each question</i>)</p> <p>With whom of these persons would you consider sharing living quarters?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>To whom would you ask for advice for personal problems ? (to specify : emotional problems, choices to make...)</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

Unlike other surveys on networks that use this type of question, ours does not generate names out of context, but refers to an existing list we just made before. This two-steps procedure creates a much more systemic process, with less risk of forgetting someone and more possibilities to focus afterwards on specific issues.

Lastly, as we proceed from one survey wave to another, all of this data is, of course, compared -- including its qualitative dimensions.

Comparing them, whether this is over time or with reference to the populations of each survey wave, reveals that there is great diversity, if only in terms of network populations. Undoubtedly, this reflects the great diversity in social conditions, which have an impact on relational structures.

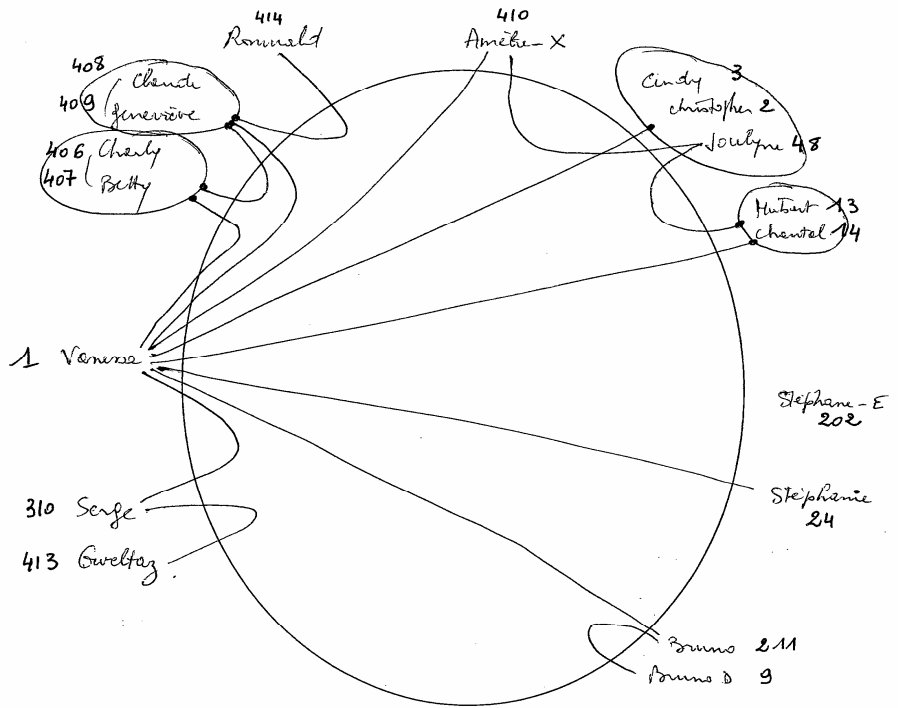
Network structures and social circles

Another stage in the survey then focuses on groups and circles, which allows us to return to the collective dimension of the sociability. It begins by putting all the names on a circle and asking who are the network members who know each other. This allows us to measure the network density (only for strong ties).

D 8

DENSITE DU RESEAU

FR
Parmi les personnes citées là, quelles sont celles qui se fréquentent, celles qui se rencontrent volontairement, même sans toi ? (ne pas dire : "qui se connaissent !")
 Noter toutes les FR autour du cercle, entourer les cliques et tracer des traits entre ces prénoms et / ou groupes etc. Si trop de noms pour rester lisible, faire des listes à part.



By adding a series of questions, we are able to identify the groups and to improve our knowledge of the life of the group: How did he get to know this group, how often does the group meet, how many people are there in the group, what do they do together, what is it that brings this group together (with multiple-choice cards).

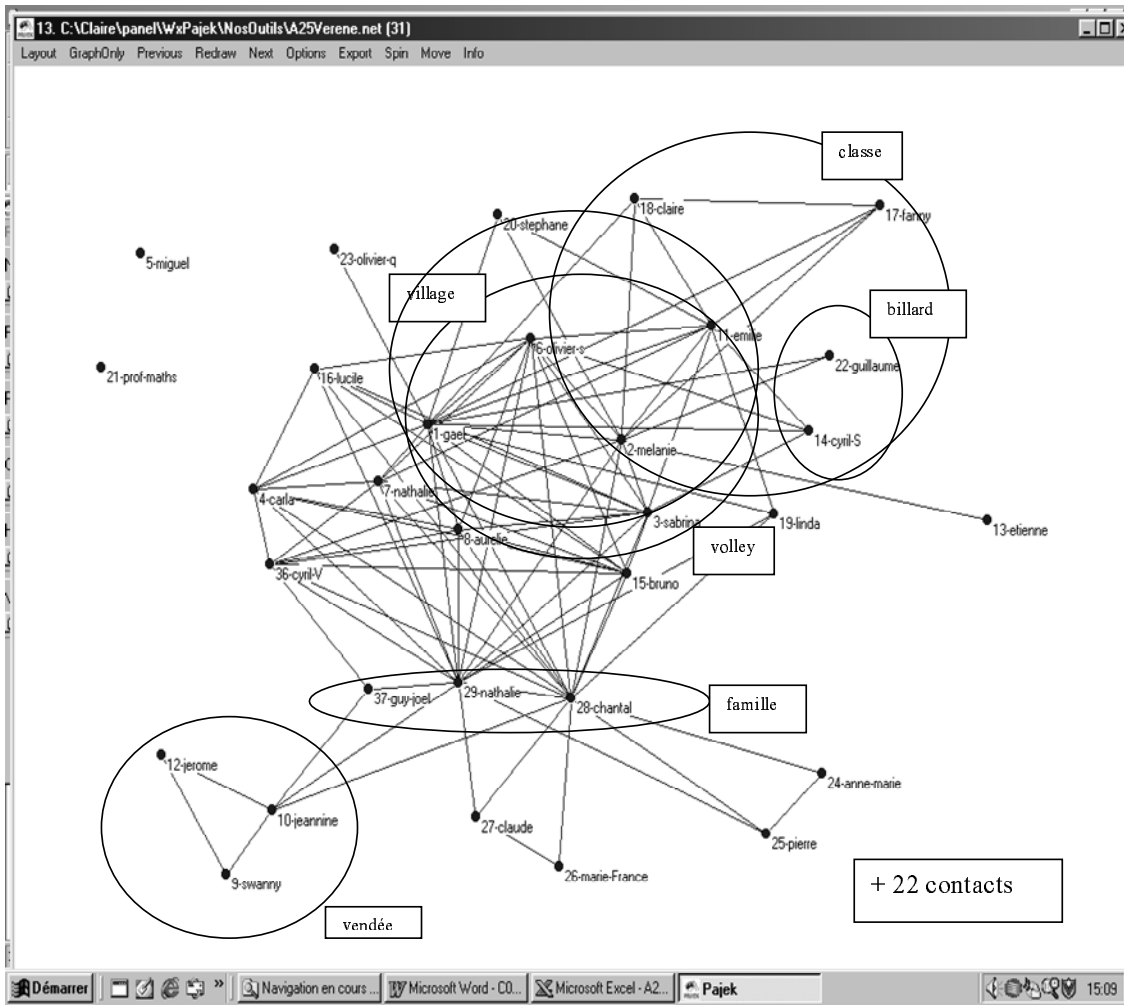
Analysis and comparisons of surveys

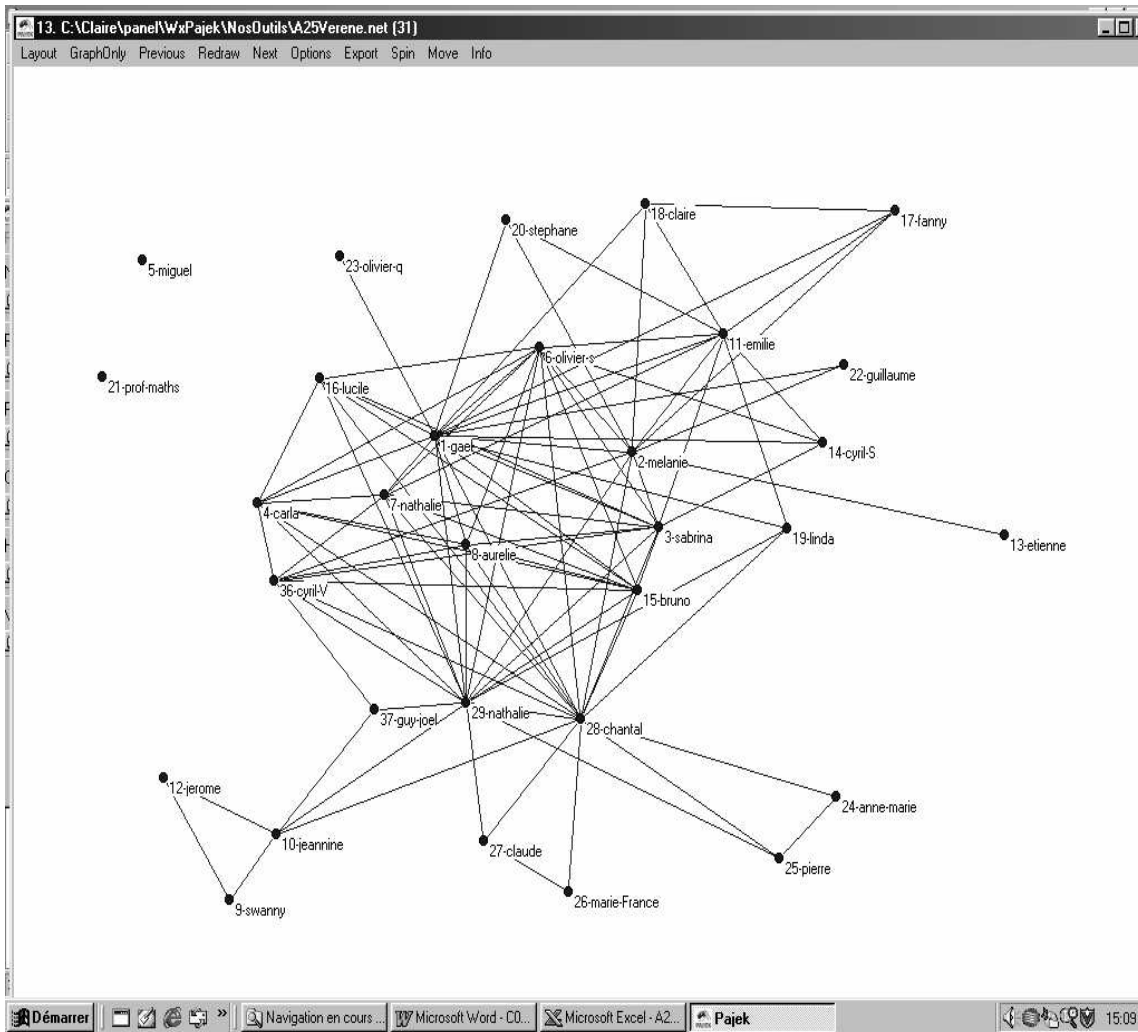
To understand the dynamic of the system, we must compare the successive waves of the network as it evolves. The waves of the French survey are repeated every three years, those of the Quebec surveys every 6-8 months. Thus, the questionnaires in the subsequent waves are slightly different. For, while it is in fact possible to draw up a completely new list of names after three years it is preferable, after six months to begin by (a) using the former list and going back over each of the names (asking if the person is still part of the network or not), and (b) taking up the generators again, one by one, this time asking if they made the acquaintance of new persons since the last meeting.

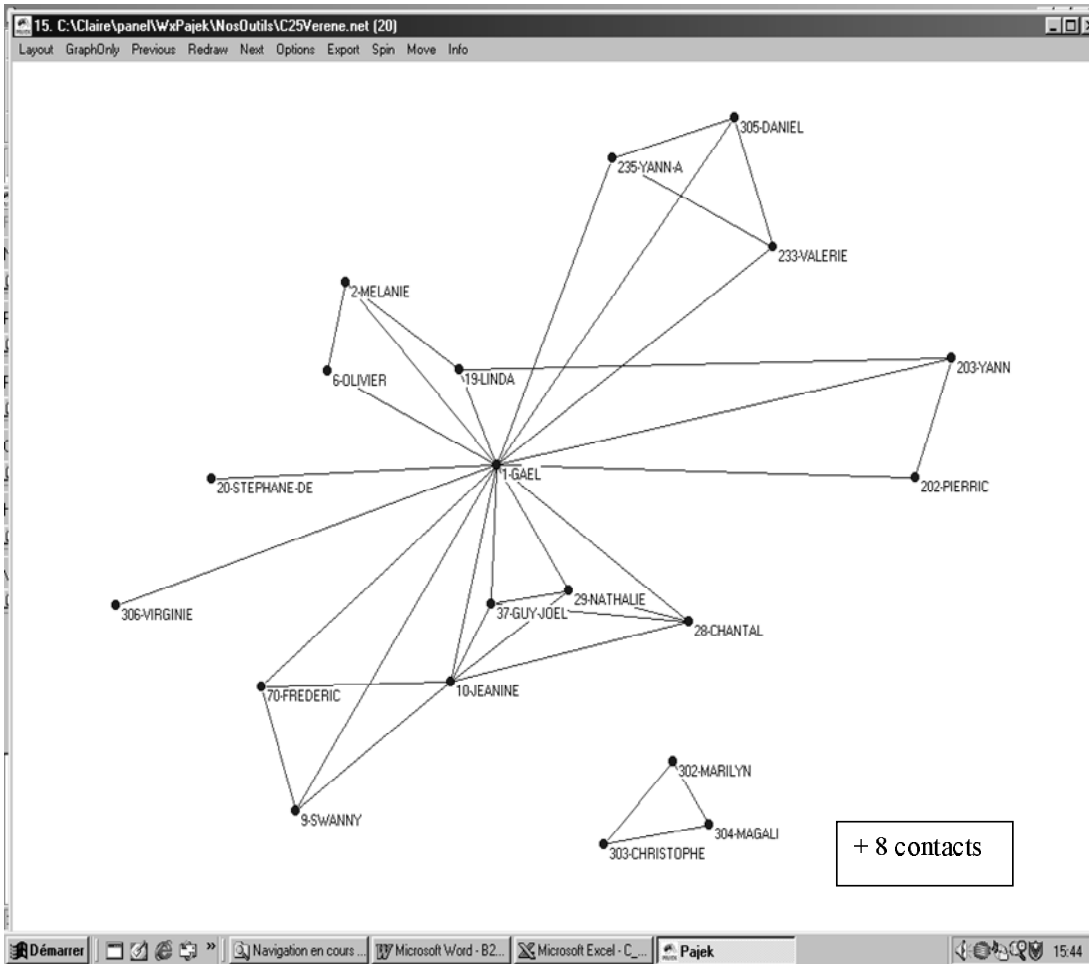
Studying a network using a panel has several advantages, one of which is major: that of monitoring the disappearance of certain members, a type of information that is quite new in surveys on networks; the interview accompanying the process also allows us to determine why these individuals leave the network. We are also able to observe changes in the quality of the relationships: some become looser, others grow stronger. Over the course of events that arise in the life of individuals, we get a closer view of the individuals on whom people can rely and of the differences as time goes by.

We then enter all the data on the networks, *alters* and ties into Excel tables. The strength of the networks allows us to statistically process this data. Using Pajek software, we are able to draw the graphs of the networks. For example, let us see the evolution of the networks of Verena.

As we see, her social circles and groups are very embedded in wave 1, they are still connected but less embedded in wave 2, we can see that her boyfriend Gaël connects most of the people including the families. In wave 3 network members are very less numerous and less connected as Verena started to work and to live with her boyfriend Gaël.







The data gathered with this tool are extremely wide ranging, and their analysis has barely begun, particularly for the Quebec surveys, which only got underway in 2004. Beside the differences in the mechanics of these two surveys, we now have to build the comparisons and to find in them the effects of sociological and societal differences between the dynamics of social networks of young people in France and in Quebec.

If we return to the question of the size of the networks associated with the various generators mentioned at the start of this presentation and compare it to our surveys, we obtain the following results:

Survey	Global Network	Core (important persons)
Wellman (2 nd survey of 33 persons)		11.7
Fischer	18.5	4
Grossetti	27.4	
Caen Panel		
W1	40	
W2	35	
W3	37	
W4	39	
Québec Surveys		
Solos	29	7
Solos (youth, 20-35 years of age) (16)	41	8
Youth – post-secondary	30.4	5.9
Youth – youth protection centers	16.5	3.9

Conclusion

This type of survey allows us to raise new questions regarding network analysis. We are interested in the "why" and the "how" of the structuring and development of networks. We observe the relationships that constitute them, the contexts in which they emerge, the social circles in their environments, and the dynamics in which they are created and evolve, in step with the changes they experience and with biographical transitions and events.

In addition, by remaining within the framework of life contexts, this name generator ensures that the networks have a societal dimension -- by way of the various circles and social groups. A network cannot be reduced to a "niche" of persons with whom one is close, to a circle cut off from the world. This name generator recovers a link with global society and is part of society's divisions, structures and contexts. In this way, social networks are not detached from the external world, other actors or the logic of society.

Mis en forme

To know more about these surveys:

French survey (Bidart):

http://www.lest.cnrs.fr/article.php3?id_article=375 (français)

http://www.lest.cnrs.fr/article.php3?id_article=376 (english)

Québec surveys (Charbonneau et Bourdon) :

<http://erta.educ.usherbrooke.ca/publication.htm>

<http://www.ucs.inrs.ca>