



# Weak ties and the core discussion network: Why people regularly discuss important matters with unimportant alters<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers have paid increasing attention to the core discussion network, the set of friends and family people turn to when discussing important matters. For nearly thirty years, social network researchers have argued that the network is composed of ego's closest or most important alters. This assumption, however, has not been tested empirically. Using original data on an online representative quota survey of 2000 respondents, I find that 45% of the core discussion network is composed of people whom respondents do not consider important to them. In fact, the core discussion network includes doctors, co-workers, spiritual leaders, and other alters whom ego confides in without feeling emotionally attached to. I examine what respondents consider important matters and why they approach weak ties to discuss these. Placing emphasis on the process through which ego mobilizes alters, I develop two theoretical perspectives, which focus on how people identify those appropriate to a topic and how they respond to opportunities in interactional contexts. Findings suggest that ego discusses important matters with non-close alters at times because they are known to be knowledgeable (targeted mobilization) and at times because they are available when important issues arise (opportune mobilization). Results suggest that recent findings about changes in the core discussion network of Americans are consistent with several different possibilities about the nature of strong ties, including those in which there has been no change at all.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most important and widely-used concepts in the study of social support networks over the past thirty years has been the “core discussion network” (Marsden, 1987; McPherson et al., 2006; Fischer, 2008). The core discussion network (CDN), defined as the set of alters with whom ego discusses important matters, is believed to represent people's close, important, trustworthy, and socially supportive partners (Burt, 1984; Marsden, 1987; McPherson et al., 2006). The core discussion network has been used to understand questions as varied as how networks affect happiness (Burt, 1987), how people respond to hurricanes (Hurlbert et al., 2000), how connected they remain as they age (Cornwell et al., 2008), and how isolated Americans have become (McPherson et al., 2006).

A major reason behind the wide use of this concept is that the discussion network can be elicited relatively inexpensively in a questionnaire using the CDN name generator, which asks respondents to report the names of those with whom they discuss important matters (Burt, 1984; see McCallister and Fischer, 1978). Because of its practicality, generality, and reliability, the CDN name generator has been used in major national and international surveys, helping scientists understand the size and composition of people's core networks in numerous contexts (Marsden, 1987; Ruan, 1998; Völker and Flap, 2002; Suzman, 2009). Perhaps the most famous of these surveys have been the 1985 and 2004 General Social Surveys (GSS), which have been used to understand changes in the core discussion networks of Americans over the past 25 years. In fact, a recent study of these changes sparked major controversy by suggesting that Americans had fewer supportive ties than in the past (McPherson et al., 2006; Fischer, 2008, 2011, 2012; Brashears, 2011; Paik and Sanchagrin, 2013).

Nevertheless, few researchers have examined the primary assumption that the core discussion network represents, as McPherson et al. (2006:353) put it, “the people who are very close to us.” That is, while the CDN name generator has been shown to exhibit high reliability (Burt, 1984; Bailey and Marsden, 1999; Straits, 2000), substantially less is known about its construct

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validity, the extent to which the measure captures what it is theoretically expected to.<sup>1</sup> Is “the core discussion network,” in fact, the representation of an actor’s strong ties?

Early proponents such as Burt (1984) were clear in their belief that an actor (ego) would reserve disclosing those issues she finds most important to the people (alters) in her network who are closest or most important to her. And, in fact, as I show below, this understanding of the core discussion network itself has remained consistent since the mid-1980s (e.g., McPherson et al., 2006; but see Bearman and Parigi, 2004; Marin, 2004). However, this understanding is not based on documented evidence that people are emotionally attached to those with whom they discuss important matters. Nor is it based on a theoretical model about how people go about seeking support from others when they need to discuss those issues that matter to them most. In fact, the process through which actors approach others to discuss important matters has been under-theorized.

As I discuss below, other literatures suggest that people may regularly confide in others for a host of reasons unrelated to how close they are to the confider. In fact, people may confide regularly in people to whom they are not close, and close partners may be regularly avoided when important topics need to be discussed. That is, the set of alters with whom important matters are discussed and the set to whom ego is close may be different sets of alters—undermining the central assumption behind the core discussion network as a representation of strong ties. If so, then what to make of the findings from major national surveys about “the core discussion network” becomes unclear. Stated differently, while we know that the CDN name generator elicits a network reliably, we do not know that this network is, in fact, composed of respondents’ strong ties—and, if not, what the alternative might be. By implication, we do not yet know with certainty whether patterns or changes in the core discussion network imply patterns or changes in the nature of strong associations or attachments.

The following study, then, is driven by a straightforward question: do people in fact turn to those who are closest or most important to them when discussing important matters? (And, if not, why not?) I suggest that theorizing the process through which actors approach others to discuss important matters leads to alternative predictions about the composition of the core discussion network and about the relationship between personal attachment and social support. I propose that actors may be perfectly willing to discuss important matters with those to whom they are not close—provided the latter are knowledgeable on the topics they care about or available when such topics need to be discussed.

In what follows, I first discuss three theoretical perspectives on what the core discussion network represents: the traditional strong ties perspective, and two mobilization perspectives that I derive from the existing literature. After generating hypotheses from the perspectives, I discuss the data, an original survey of 2000 respondents that provides an opportunity to examine these questions in greater depth than existing surveys have allowed. To anticipate the results, I find that close to half of the alters elicited by the core discussion network are not people whom respondents consider important to them, and that a major part of the reason is that people are willing to confide in those who are not close when the latter are either knowledgeable on the topics they care about or regularly available when such topics need to be discussed. I conclude by presenting alternative plausible interpretations of recent findings related to the core discussion network, and by calling for

greater caution in how we theorize social support, attachment, and trust.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

The CDN name generator asks, “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?” Designers of the question, and many subsequent researchers, believe that this question will elicit a set of names constituting respondents’ strong ties. In what follows, I discuss the theoretical foundations behind that perspective and discuss two alternatives based, respectively, on research on social capital and on social support.

### 2.1. Strong ties perspective

Many researchers believe that the core discussion network is composed of respondents’ strong ties. The strength of a tie was defined by Granovetter in an oft-cited passage as “a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (1973:1361). The network is expected to be composed primarily of alters important to ego because strong ties tend to be strong in multiple respects. Trusting others with sensitive, private, or otherwise important issues requires a strong connection of the kind typically associated with strong emotional attachments (Granovetter, 1973). Thus, the network is expected to be composed of people who are close, intimate, and emotionally important.

This perspective can be seen in both the intention behind and the standard interpretation of the GSS name generator. In his paper proposing the addition of the name generator to the GSS, Burt (1984) explains the motivation behind the approach: “Intimacy stated in terms of discussing personal matters is the proposed criterion. The respondent is asked to focus on emotionally close ties in which specific matters of a personal nature have been discussed” (Burt, 1984:317; see also Bailey and Marsden, 1999; McCallister and Fischer, 1978; Straits, 2000).<sup>2</sup> The ties elicited by the generator are expected to be intimate and emotionally close. And as he argues later they are expected to be “the five most important discussion partners” (Burt, 1984:328).

Later authors adopt the same perspective. Marsden argues that the measure should capture overall strength: “the GSS criterion could be expected to elicit reasonably strong ties, with prominent representation of kin among those cited” (1987:123). He adds: “The theoretical case favoring ‘discussing important matters’ as a name generator was the view that influence processes and normative pressures operate through intimate, comparatively strong ties” (Marsden, 1987:123; see also Burt, 1985). Mollenhorst et al., using a slight variation of the GSS name generator, replace the terms “emotionally close tie” and “strong tie” with “confidant,” while making a similar point: “While people can have many network members and even many friends, they do not tend to discuss important personal matters with every one of them, but only with those they really trust. We therefore use the word ‘confidant’ to indicate these core discussion network members. . .” (2008:938).

In their controversial study, McPherson et al. (2006:353) explain the underlying logic of the core discussion network in similar terms:

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, researchers have examined how people understand “important matters” and whether question wording alters the composition of the reported network (see Bailey and Marsden, 1999; Straits, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The term “private matters” was later changed to “important matters,” to minimize strong divergences in the interpretation of the question (Marsden, 1987; Burt, 1985).

There are some things that we discuss only with people who are very close to us. These important topics may vary with the situation or the person—we may ask for help, probe for information, or just use the person as a sounding board for important decisions—but these are the people who make up our core network of confidants.

And later: “The closer and stronger our tie with someone, the broader the scope of their support for us. . . and the greater the likelihood that they will provide major help in a crisis. These are important people in our lives” (McPherson et al., 2006:354).

In sum, many researchers believe that, since people only trust those things that matter to them most to those who matter to them most, the CDN name generator will produce a list of intimate alters. This perspective leads to a first hypothesis:

H1a (strong ties perspective): The core discussion network (the set of alters with whom important matters are typically discussed) will be composed primarily of alters who are important to ego.

While this expectation is widely assumed, it has not actually been tested. The 1985 GSS came close to asking whether ego was close to the alters reported (General Social Survey, 1985:53; see Burt and Guliarte, 1986). Nevertheless, rather than asking respondents whether they were close to each alter, the GSS asked them, after all names had been elicited, “Do you feel equally close to all these people?” If they replied in the negative, they were asked which of the reported alters they felt “especially close to.” As posed, the question allowed respondents to rank some alters as closer than others; it did not permit them to report that a recorded alter was not close (or important) at all. The researchers assumed that alters who were not close to ego simply would not be mentioned. The 2004 GSS dropped this question altogether and did not replace it with one more suited to our question (General Social Survey, 2004:82).

## 2.2. Mobilization perspectives

I introduce two alternative models under which the core discussion network will not necessarily be composed of ego’s closest alters. The alternatives conceive of the core discussion network less as an inherently meaningful structure of relations than as the realization of the regular, ongoing process of discussing important issues with others. From this perspective, “the core discussion network” is not necessarily composed of either strong ties or ties of any other kind; it is simply the set of alters ego regularly turns to others to discuss important matters. For this reason, the key to understand it is examine the process through which actors decide to engage others when they have important matters to discuss.

Research relevant to this process arises in the literature on individuals’ social capital, which defines social capital as the resources inherent in actors’ social relations (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001). Researchers have distinguished *access* to social capital, which refers to the characteristics of actors’ social network, from the *mobilization* of social capital, which refers to the process of seeking resources from others (Lin, 2001). Most of the work on mobilization focuses on the activation of ties for the purposes of obtaining jobs or moving up the occupational ladder, rather than for discussing personal, intimate, or otherwise important matters. In addition, much of it has focused on the consequences of mobilization, rather than the process of mobilization itself (but see Smith, 2007). Nonetheless, the literature offers a useful starting point.

## 2.3. Targeted mobilization

While Coleman (1986, 1988), Bourdieu (1986), and Lin (2001) differed in several respects in their conception of social capital, they

shared the idea that actors will seek resources from those in their networks to benefit their own circumstances. Actors will specifically seek those in their network who possess a relevant resource. For example, the unemployed will seek job information from not just anyone in their network but those they think will be useful in the job search (Lin, 2001; but see Granovetter, 1974). By implication, whether the alter is close or important to ego is secondary to whether the alter is useful by virtue of possessing the resource: the utility of the tie, rather than its affective character, is what primarily motivates ego. From this perspective, then, people seek support from those who are most useful, not necessarily those who are closest or most emotionally important.

From this focus on mobilization, an alternative to the strong ties perspective may be derived. In any given discussion of an important matter, ego would seek the alter most relevant to the topic at hand. By extension, the core discussion network would be the network that results from the regular process of seeking as discussion partners those who are most useful—that is, most knowledgeable or otherwise relevant, independent of emotional attachment—for the matters that people routinely find important. For example, an individual needing to confide in work-related matters will likely consistently discuss them with a coworker, even if she does not consider the coworker ‘important to her life’ (c.f. McPherson et al., 2006:354). In this way, the coworker would form part of the core discussion network. There is evidence consistent with the idea that people seek regular discussion partners in this fashion. Furman (1997) found that elderly women in a hair salon regularly discussed personal matters related to cancer-related hair loss with other elderly women in the salon, even though they did not have otherwise strong relationships. Similarly, Small (2009) found that mothers whose children were enrolled in childcare centers routinely discussed important matters related to their children with other mothers in the centers, even when they did not consider those mothers important to them. Thus, a hypothesis about mobilization may be derived:

H2 (targeted mobilization): Ego will tend to discuss important matters with those alters most relevant to the topic, even when those alters are not close.<sup>3</sup>

The hypothesis suggests a high degree of differentiation among alters by topic. If actors primarily discuss matters with those who are relevant, then as long as they find multiple topics important their network should be partitioned into alter-topic pairs. That is, to the extent that people find, say, religion, family, and work important to their lives, they would consistently talk separately to religious friends, family members, and colleagues, respectively, about each topic. There is evidence supportive of this idea (Fischer, 1982). In one of the few studies to explicitly examine what the core discussion network represents, Bearman and Parigi (2004) asked a representative sample of North Carolinians a version of the GSS name generator and encountered what they called “topic-alter dependency,” wherein different issues were regularly discussed with people occupying different roles. For example, respondents talked with spouses about money and household finances, while with relatives they tended to discuss relationships more than other topics (see also Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Small, 2009:Chapter 4).

<sup>3</sup> Note that this expectation is consistent with the notion that, in given contexts, actors may choose not to approach those who are relevant to a topic, as Smith (2007) found with respect to job-seekers actions in disadvantaged neighborhoods. For example, actors may end up not discussing work matters with colleagues at all—they are simply more likely to discuss such matters with colleagues than with others in their network.

This general pairing of topics with relevant alters would be expected for most matters that people seem to find important: work, faith, health, family, and so on. While for some topics the most relevant alter is also likely to be close—e.g., when the topic is family—for many others, such as work or faith, the most relevant alter will often be a non-close one, such as an office colleague or a fellow church member. And since most people have only a handful of close alters, many of the alters whom they regularly approach because of their usefulness for a particular issue would often be those to whom they are weakly tied. Thus, a hypothesis about the composition of the core discussion network may be derived:

H1b (mobilization perspectives): The core discussion network will not be primarily composed of alters who are important to ego.

This hypothesis stands in opposition to the strong ties perspective.

Taking the mobilization perspective to its logical conclusion leads to an additional prediction. The people who are most relevant and useful to discuss a given important topic are not necessarily family, friends, or even acquaintances; often, they are experts (see Merton et al., 1983; Perry and Pescosolido, 2010). Few will be more knowledgeable or supportive about an actor's depression than a therapist, whose livelihood depends on communicating knowledge and support. The same may be said of a spiritual leader when the topic is faith, a family doctor when the topic is health, or a physical trainer when the topic is fitness. In fact, the rise of service expertise has expanded the range of available professionals whose role is to listen and provide advice on a consistent basis, particularly on important matters that are of a personal nature. Further, the professionalization of support has created incentives for such experts to encourage regular interaction, often in the spirit (or guise) of the importance of prevention. Today, regular visits to physical therapists, trainers, and other experts for support are common (e.g., Olfson and Marcus, 2010). The presence of these experts is a *prima facie* reason to expect many core discussion partners to not be of the archetypal strong tie expected by the traditional model. Thus, we may hypothesize:

H3 (mobilization and experts): Ego will tend to discuss important matters that involve expertise with people professionally obligated to serve as discussion partners.

This hypothesis acknowledges that the people with whom we discuss important matters regularly today are often professionals.

#### 2.4. Opportune mobilization

Finally, I introduce a third, highly related perspective that, while also focused on mobilization, follows from an important critique of the social capital model. This critique derives from research on social support. The underlying purposive-actor model that is a foundation of social capital mobilization theory (see Kadushin, 2004) has been criticized for its overreliance on individual choice independent of context (Uehara, 1990; Pescosolido, 1992; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Small, 2009). For example, it seems to assume that, when faced with a problem, ego first mentally scans her network for the most relevant alter and then targets only that alter, sidestepping others less ideal for the topic along the way. Researchers have argued that seeking support from others—and, by extension, approaching them to discuss important matters—rarely follows such a prescribed procedure, since actors' behavior is often not purposive but habitual or practical or responsive to contextual opportunities (see Pescosolido, 1992; also Merton, 1936; Bourdieu, 1977; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Small, 2009).

The researcher who has done the most to articulate an alternative in the social support literature is Pescosolido (1992), who has proposed a “social organization of support” model. The model covers a wide array of elements of social support, and testing it is beyond the scope of the present article. However, the model, in addition to other critiques of purposive theories of behavior, may be used to generate an alternative to the targeted mobilization model. An alternative to the purposive actor is a pragmatist actor, who, rather than searching her network until she finds the most relevant alter, would mobilize the alter who happens to be present and available when the need for support arises, an actor who responds to contextual opportunities (Joas, 1996:Chapter 3; Dewey, 2004[1916]). Empirical research suggests that actors often satisfice (Simon, 1956), making decisions based on the opportunities available in the contexts in which they find themselves, rather than seeking the optimal solution. For example, Pescosolido (1992:1124) studied whom, among a range of available options such as friends, family, doctors, and neighbors, people turned to when needing medical advice. She found that availability mattered: people who were working were more likely to use co-workers; people who were married, family members. Small (2009) also found that people often get support from those in their social surroundings. In his study of mothers whose children were enrolled in childcare centers, he discovered that mothers often found themselves discussing important matters regarding children with other center mothers in part because they interacted regularly with those mothers during fieldtrips, parent meetings, fundraisers, and drop-off and pick-up times. In short, actors may ultimately be pragmatists when mobilizing their ties, responding to opportunities in their social environments.

Thus, ego may tend to discuss important matters with non-important alters because these alters are available in their everyday contexts, such as work, school, and so on:

H4 (opportune mobilization): Ego will tend to discuss important matters with those alters most available for discussion, even when those alters are not close.

This hypothesis acknowledges that people interact with and often seek support from those in their everyday surroundings.

To summarize: our overarching question is whether ego does in fact turn to her closest or most important alters when discussing important matters (and if not, why not). Three perspectives offer predictions, based on their understanding of how people seek support. The strong-ties perspective expects the network to be composed primarily of alters important to ego (H1a); both mobilization perspectives do not expect this to be the case (H1b). The targeted mobilization perspective expects ego to discuss a given important matter with alters relevant to the topic (H2) and, further, as a result, that many of the alters unimportant to ego will be people professionally expected to serve as discussion partners (H3). The opportune mobilization perspective expects ego to discuss a given important matter with those alters most available for discussion (H4).

### 3. Data

Addressing these questions requires a survey containing the GSS name generator, a separate measure of whether the alters are close or important, the actual topics ego has discussed, and a wide range of possible alter types. The study will employ the Core Networks and Important Alters (CNIA) survey, an original online survey of over 2000 respondents who formed part of a panel who agreed to participate in social scientific research. The survey was fielded by the professional survey firm Qualtrics. Respondents were selected to match the characteristics of the national U.S.

population. The sample characteristics, discussed in [Appendix](#) and shown in [Table A1](#), confirm that the sample matched the US national population closely. Respondents were asked about their social networks, demographic characteristics, wellbeing, and other issues. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two panels of questions aimed at answering different aspects of the questions guiding the present study.

One randomly-assigned half of the sample ( $n = 991$ ) was asked the GSS name generator question. Next, respondents were asked two questions intended to capture explicitly those alters who are important to them (as opposed to the alters with whom they discussed important matters). First, respondents were asked to name people who were not in their family but important to them: “Other than your family, who are the people you would consider important to you? These may be people you have already named or they may be people you have not mentioned yet. Either is fine. . . Please list one person who is important to you and who is not a member of your family.” After their response, they were asked if there were any other respondents; they could name up to 5 alters. After important non-kin had been elicited, respondents were then asked to name up to 5 family members they considered important to them: “Now, think about the family members that you consider important to you. While all family are significant to us, some may stand out as especially important. . . Please list one member of your family who is important to you.” An extensive name interpreter also asked respondents a battery of questions about the alters, including demographic characteristics, frequency of interaction, and length of time known.

Comparing the list of discussion alters (up to 5, from the GSS name generator) to the list of important alters (up to 10, from the important kin and non-kin name generators) should elucidate how many discussion alters respondents consider important. Since up to 10 important alters may be named but only 5 discussion alters need be named, the chances are low that a discussion partner who was important to ego was somehow missed by the important-alters generators. To the extent that the list of discussion alters is populated by important alters, respondents would be turning to their most important alters to discuss their most important matters, providing support for the strong ties perspective. To the extent it is not, the data are more consistent with the mobilization perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

The other randomly sampled half of respondents ( $n = 1019$ ) received an alternative to the GSS name generator that, rather than ask respondents to report on their discussion partners, first asked them to recall the last time they discussed a matter that was important to them. They were then asked to report on the topic they talked about and the person they talked to. (A name interpreter also asked respondents about alters’ demographic characteristics, frequency of interaction, and length of time known.) This experience-based question allows us to examine the topics they consider important and to probe the relationship between topics discussed and the alters involved. Respondents’ answers about the last discussion they had on a topic they considered important

may be read as a sample representative of last important discussions. For clarity, I will refer to this as the “last discussion sample” and to the former as the “name generator replication sample.”

The CNIA survey contains the unique questions required to address the present issues with some depth. It allows the examination of a battery of questions that would be prohibitively costly to incorporate into the General Social Survey. Furthermore, as an analytical survey designed to test among competing theories about the composition of the core discussion network, it is ideal. However, important limitations should be noted. First, while the survey followed a quota design to generate a sample comparable to the 2000 national population (as the GSS did), it should not be read as a conventional probability sample survey, since respondents were drawn from online volunteers. Among other things, those respondents are expected to be somewhat more educated than the national population, even if familiarity with the internet is becoming increasingly ubiquitous in the U.S. (see [Appendix](#)). Second, since the CNIA survey was an online rather than in-person survey, the answers culled from its GSS name generator are not comparable to those in the actual GSS. I specifically warn against comparisons about network size or other characteristics. Researchers have documented that online and in-person name generators produce different answers about the size of the discussion network ([Vehovar et al., 2008](#)). In-person surveys are known to generate slightly larger numbers of alters.

Still, the CNIA survey employed several features designed to improve accuracy in reporting and to yield numbers as reasonably approximate to those of the GSS as possible given the bounds of an online survey (see [Coromina and Coenders, 2006](#); [Vehovar et al., 2008](#)). [Vehovar et al. \(2008\)](#) found that the number of alters reported is influenced by the number of boxes presented on the screen to enter names: the higher the number of boxes, the larger the number of alters respondents feel compelled to report. For this reason, the survey asked respondents to name a single alter on a screen, subsequently asked if there was anyone else, and, if appropriate, proceeded to a new screen where a single new name could be entered. This procedure reduced over-reporting of alters. In addition, for both samples the name generator was the first question asked after eligibility was determined, to reduce not only question order bias but also respondent fatigue, both of which have been offered as possible explanations for the perceived lowering of reported alters in the 2004 GSS ([Fischer, 2008, 2012](#); but see [McPherson et al., 2009](#); [Brashears, 2011](#)).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For all respondents, the name generator was the first question asked after eligibility was determined. Eligibility was determined by asking respondents their gender, race/ethnicity, and employment status, which were the variables used to match the national population (see [Appendix](#)). Because the survey was also concerned with wellbeing, and because wellbeing questions are especially sensitive to question order effects, two subjective wellbeing questions were elicited at the very start of the survey, immediately before eligibility was determined. (These were the GSS subjective wellbeing question [“Taken all together, how would you say things are these days – would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?”] and the widely-used [Diener et al. \(1985\)](#) satisfaction with Life Scale.) Immediately after eligibility was determined, respondents were taken at random to either the name generator replication question or the last discussion question. By asking the network questions at the start of the survey, question-order effects that have affected other studies ([Fischer, 2012](#)) were avoided as much as practically possible. Since respondents were allocated at random to one of the two subsamples *after* the eligibility questions, the eligibility questions should have no impact on the differences between the two subsamples. However, it is possible that the wellbeing questions had an impact on the topics that respondents in the last discussions sample recalled discussing. For example, as I show below, happiness and life goals appear often as respondents’ topic of discussion, which might be due to the fact that respondents had previously been asked to think of whether they were satisfied with their lives on the whole.

<sup>4</sup> Notice that the question asks about important alters, rather than close ones. Throughout the discussion, we have used the terms more or less interchangeably, as has much of the literature, with some justification. If an alter is truly close, then she or he is very likely also important to ego. However, an important alter need not be a close one; e.g., many who are not close to their mother still consider her important to their lives. The umbrella category “people we consider important” includes the sub-categories “people to whom we are close” and “people to whom we are not.” Ideally, the CNIA survey might have separately asked whether discussion partners were important and whether they were close. However, asking both questions risked generating attrition (and noise), given that respondents might feel themselves to be answering the same questions repeatedly about multiple alters. Asking about the umbrella category provides a conservative test of the mobilization prediction that the core discussion network will include many weak ties. If, say, 40% of alters are not important, we know that *at least* that many are not close.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Important alters

Respondents in the CNIA replication sample reported an average of 1.69 discussion partners, with a range of 0–5. Seventeen percent reported no alters. While online and in-person name generator results are not comparable, I note that in the 2004 GSS, the average size of the core discussion network was similar, though (as expected) larger, with 2.08 alters, with 24.6% of respondents reporting no alters (McPherson et al., 2006). In our survey, the number of *important* alters is 4.2, which is substantially higher than the number of discussion partners, increasing our confidence that important alters who could have been nominated as discussion partners are not missing.

Our first hypotheses (H1a vs. H1b) refer to the extent to which the network of partners for discussing important matters is comprised of important alters. For the sample as a whole, 45.3% of alters with whom important matters are discussed are non-important alters. For men, the proportion consisting of non-important alters is 48.1%; for women, 41.6%. Contrary to the predominant strong ties model, the name generator is capturing many alters whom respondents do not report as being important alters. People do not necessarily reserve those issues that matter to them most to those who (they feel) matter to them most.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, respondents seem to avoid some of their important alters when discussing important matters. Note that, since the mean number of important alters is 4.2 and the mean number of discussion partners is 1.7, the average respondent could have included 2.5 more important alters as part of their discussion network without reaching the question limit of 5 discussion partners. In fact, of the 78.1% of respondents who listed more important alters than discussion alters, 93.7% had not reached the limit, meaning that the large majority of respondents could have but opted not to report some of their important alters as people with whom they discussed important matters.

### 4.2. Why ego sought non-important alters

The next set of findings examine why so many alters in the core discussion network are not important by exploring why respondents approached whom they approached when discussing important matters. For most of the analyses that follow, I turn to the CNIA last discussions sample, which allows us to examine how respondents made decisions about whom to approach on the last time they discussed something they thought important. The targeted mobilization perspective expects ego to turn to alter because alter is knowledgeable about a topic ego wishes to discuss (H2); the opportune mobilization perspective, because alters are

<sup>6</sup> An examination of the distribution of discussion partners who are important shows evidence of bimodality. Among respondents who had any discussion partners, 35.0% considered none of them important and 43.6% considered all of them important. The latter number might be due to the possibility that respondents interpreted the name generator question as referring to alters who were close or important to them. In a small study, Bailey and Marsden (1999) examined how 50 respondents interpreted the name generator and found that 43% interpreted the question literally, 28% interpreted it as eliciting names of people with whom they had general discussions, 13% interpreted it as eliciting names of close or important alters, and the rest in other ways. The 13% figure suggests that the bimodality is not primarily driven by question interpretation. It is also only somewhat driven by the average small number of discussion partners. Of those who considered none of their discussion partners important, 27.5% had more than one partner; of those who considered all of them important, 50.7% had more than one partner. Interestingly, therefore, people seem to discuss important matters either exclusively with or rarely with alters who are close to them. In either case, however, they seem to avoid many of their close partners when discussing such matters (see above).

**Table 1**

Why did you discuss (the topic you discussed) with (the person you talked to)?

		Alter type by motivation		
		Important	Non-important	Total
S/he is good to talk to about any topic	0.45	0.58	0.42	1.00
S/he is an expert or insightful on the topic	0.20	0.41	0.59	1.00
S/he was available when I needed to discuss the topic	0.15	0.42	0.59	1.00
I am not sure	0.03	0.21	0.79	1.00
Other	0.18	0.52	0.48	1.00
Total	1.00			
If "Other":				
Because the topic involved alter	0.44	0.56	0.44	1.00
Because alter and ego are related	0.14	0.35	0.65	1.00
Because alter had a need	0.13	0.69	0.31	1.00
Uncategorized	0.30	0.47	0.53	1.00
"Other" total	1.00			

Source: Core Networks and Important Alters Survey, last discussions sample (n = 728 last discussions; an additional 258 respondents had not discussed an important matter during the previous 6 months). Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding. Under "Other," "Uncategorized" reflects a wide array of understandings of motivation. See text.

available (H4). The CNIA last discussions sample asks respondents to report why they discussed the topic they talked about with the person they talked to during their last discussion of an important matter. The question was designed to assess the extent to which knowledgeable or availability were motivating factors from the perspective of respondents. Table 1 exhibits the results.

The first column in Table 1 shows that 45% of the time respondents reported turning to whom they turned because the person was good to talk to about any topic. However, almost 20% of the time respondents reported that their motivation was the person's knowledgeable (expertise or insight) on the topic, consistent with H2. Furthermore, 15% of the time, respondents reported turning to others merely because the latter were available when the topic needed to be discussed, consistent with H4. Happenstance, context, and opportunity play a role.

The remaining responses in the first column help present a full picture of actors' motivations. Eighteen percent of the time, respondents reported another reason. Respondents who answered "Other" were subsequently asked to describe in a few words why they turned to whom they turned. The most common responses were as follows: because the topic involved alter, 44% (e.g., "because it involved him," "because its [sic] something we both need to agree on," "because we share the costs"); because alter and ego are related, 14% (e.g., "because he is my significant other and I try to share things with him," "she's my mother," "she is my wife"); and because alter had a need, 13% (e.g., "because she wanted to talk about them," "because he's having trouble," "he brought it up," "help her understand her finances," "he had a stroke," "she has a family member with cancer").<sup>7</sup> In a separate analysis, I also examined the extent to which men and women differed in their motivations. The differences were not substantial.<sup>8</sup> Taken together,

<sup>7</sup> The rest of the responses did not fall into a set of clear categories, reflecting a wide array of understandings of motivation (e.g., "to inform others," "I do not trust the government," "wanted to," "was upset," and "happy that it happened").

<sup>8</sup> The percentage reporting that the alter was good to talk to about any topic was 47.5% for men, 43.2% for women; those reporting that the alter was expert or insightful, 20.1% for men, 19.3% for women.

**Table 2**  
Effect of mobilization variables on odds that alter was non-important, last discussion of important matter.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	e <sup>b</sup>	b	e <sup>b</sup>	b	e <sup>b</sup>
<i>Reported motivation</i>						
Ego turned to alter because knowledgeable on topic	0.554*** (0.193)	1.74	0.638*** (0.214)	1.892	0.691*** (0.221)	1.995
Ego turned to alter because alter was available	0.515* (0.217)	1.673	0.652*** (0.237)	1.919	0.684*** (0.241)	1.981
<i>Ego characteristics</i>						
Age			0.0173*** (0.00632)	1.017	0.0151** (0.00752)	1.015
Female			-0.513*** (0.165)	0.598	-0.478*** (0.170)	0.620
Black			0.0620 (0.261)	1.064	0.303 (0.427)	1.354
Latino			0.0619 (0.248)	1.064	-0.0574 (0.289)	0.944
Asian			1.328*** (0.515)	3.773	1.124* (0.595)	3.076
Employed			0.234 (0.183)	1.264	0.192 (0.187)	1.212
<i>Alter characteristics</i>						
Age					0.0009 (0.007)	1.001
Female					-0.204 (0.167)	0.815
Black					-0.792 (0.590)	0.453
Latino					-0.166 (0.600)	0.847
Asian					-0.364 (0.509)	0.695
Controls for ego education and income?		N		Y		Y
Log likelihood		-498.7		-450.1		-432.8
Observations		728		694		670

For sources: see Table 1. Figures are unstandardized logit coefficients and odds ratios for regression of log odds that alter was not important on predictors. Standard errors in parentheses.

- \*  $p < 0.1$ .  
 \*\*  $p < 0.05$ .  
 \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

the findings in the first column of Table 1 suggest that about half the time people report being motivated by the nature of the relation to the alter (related or good talker), closely followed by being motivated by need-related factors (alter is knowledgeable, otherwise relevant, or in need).

The last three columns relate to whether actors' reported motivations help account for their discussion of important matters with non-important alters. When the reported motivation was to seek an alter who could talk about any topic, respondents spoke to important alters more often (58% of the time) than non-important alters (42%). However, when the motivation was to seek someone either knowledgeable or who was available, respondents spoke to non-important alters more often than important ones, 59% of the time in both cases. These descriptive statistics are consistent with the expectations in H2 and H4 about why people turn to non-important alters.

I test these predictions systematically. Since the hypotheses relate to the relationship between ego and alter, our analytical options are, in theory, either dyadic or ego-centric regressions. Dyadic models, however, conceive of the pair as a unit and of all variables as contained in the pair. Our core variables of interest, ego's reported motivations for turning to a non-important alter, are measured only for the ego. For this reason, I run regressions with ego as the unit of analysis and include both alter- and ego-level variables. Since the outcome of interest—whether the alter with whom an important matter was discussed was non-important—is dichotomous, OLS regression would produce inconsistent estimates. I thus run a logit regression, wherein the log of the odds that the alter was non-important is a linear function of the reported motivation

to seek someone knowledgeable or someone who is available, after controls (Long, 1997; Agresti, 2002). I control for both ego-level and alter-level variables. At the ego level, I control for education, income, full-time employment, gender, and race. Education and income are entered in categories—six education categories, for less than high school through graduate or professional degree, and 24 income categories, for less than \$1000 through \$150,000 or more. Education, income, and employment are entered to account for the fact that in at least some contexts individuals of high SES have been shown to mobilize weak ties frequently (Granovetter, 1974). Age, gender, and race are entered to account for reported demographic differences in core discussion network size and potential differences in willingness to turn to non-important alters (Marsden, 1987; Cornwell et al., 2008). At the alter level, I control for alter's age, gender, and race, which allows us to account for potential alter effects (e.g., the possibility that people are more willing to discuss sensitive topics with non-close alters if the latter are women) and also, since ego demographics are included, for potential homophily effects (i.e., the possibility that people are more willing to discuss a sensitive matter with a non-close alter who is the same background, and thus perceived as more capable of empathy) (see McPherson et al., 2001).

Table 2 exhibits the results. It lists the effects of both mobilization variables on the odds that the alter approached for an important matter was a non-important alter, before and after adjusting for ego and alter characteristics. For clarity of exposition, the table does not present the included controls for education (five indicator variables) and income (23 indicator variables). Each pair of columns presents logit coefficients and odds ratios. The

first row shows that, consistent with H2, when ego turned to alter because alter was knowledgeable about the topic, the odds that the alter was not important were greater, and this result held after controlling for both ego and alter characteristics. After controls, the odds of discussing matters with a non-important alter were 99.5% greater when the motivation was someone knowledgeable. When the motivation was availability, the odds were 98% greater, consistent with H4. Interestingly, the impact of motivation was more robust than that of most demographic variables. The most notable exceptions were gender, wherein women are only 62% as likely as men to approach non-important alters; and age, wherein each year increased the odds of approaching a non-important alter by 1.5%. The education and income variables, consistent with the employment variables, did not have statistically significant effects (available upon request).

In all, the results suggest not only that close to half of alters in the core discussion network are non-important alters, but also that an important part of the reason is that actors seek those who are knowledgeable and those who are available when seeking to discuss what they care about. In the rest of the analysis, I probe deeper on the two mobilization perspectives.

#### 4.3. Probing further on targeted mobilization

What respondents report as their motivations may not be reflected in their actions. If the mobilization perspective holds, then people should *in practice* be discussing particular topics with those most relevant to the topic (H2). For example, they should actually be discussing religion with those people in their network most knowledgeable about religion. Do they?

Any assessment of this question using survey data will face serious limitations, for two reasons: (a) we do not know in advance what topics a given actor will find important, and (b) we can only know in a limited sense whether a given alter is relevant to a topic. The first problem is that, since people may find an infinite array of topics important, a survey must allow them to report the topic in open-ended format (see Bearman and Parigi, 2004). The open-ended format complicates the job of specifying in advance the right types of alters in the name interpreter section of a survey: if we did not know that someone is likely to find “fitness and exercise” an important topic, we would not think of entering “physical trainer” as an alter category, to assess whether the actor is turning to a trainer to discuss fitness. The second problem is that, even if we knew the topics in advance, identifying the appropriate alter would not be straightforward. The best person with whom to discuss one’s cancer diagnosis might be either a doctor or a friend with cancer, and without knowing which friends have cancer a full assessment of the actor’s choice set is not possible.

In spite of these concerns, the CNIA allows us to assess this question theoretically to a greater extent than any prior survey. The survey contained questions on whether the alter was of a wide array of types identified from the GSS, from a pilot study, and from prior research (Bearman and Parigi, 2004). In addition, the second problem is not insurmountable, provided a reasonable array of likely types of alters is available: even though we cannot predict an ego’s optimal alter for a given problem, we can reasonably expect that, for a given problem, a kind of alter is more appropriate than normal. For example, if the targeted mobilization perspective holds, an actor discussing cancer should still be more likely to talk to a doctor in her network than she typically talks to doctors. This rationale will inform our analysis.

We begin by examining in some detail what topics respondents considered important; we then turn to whether topics and alters match as expected by the targeted mobilization perspective. The CNIA asked respondents to report, in a few words but in open-ended format, what they talked about during the last time they discussed

a matter they considered important to them. The topics are listed in Table 3.

The categories were derived inductively from the raw responses based on naturally emerging patterns and substantive cleavages between the responses. To confirm the reliability of the resulting coding scheme, an additional researcher blind to the inductive process separately and independently coded the raw topics based on the previously-developed scheme. A pair-wise assessment using two different reliability measures found that 84.2% and 87.8% of topics, respectively, were coded identically by the researchers, indicating high reliability.<sup>9</sup> In the table, three of the topics have been listed under shorter names for presentation purposes. The topic “Career” refers to “education, work, and retirement.” For example, “finding a new job,” “going back to school,” and “plans for retirement” were all classified under that category. Similarly, the topic “Family” refers to “family, spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend.” Examples of raw responses are “about grandma,” “having a child,” “I talked about my boyfriend,” and “my husband’s affair with my sister.” Finally, the topic “Happiness and life goals” refers to “happiness, life goals, and aspirations.” Examples of raw responses are “my life,” “my broken dreams,” and “the meaning of life.”

Of 723 raw responses, 209 (29%) could be classified under two topic categories, for different reasons. Sometimes, respondents reported talking about two different issues. In these cases, the raw response was classified under two categories, the first of them corresponding to the first topic reported by respondents. For example, “school and boyfriend” was classified as *career* and as *family*. Other two-category responses were compound topics. In those cases, the response received two classifications, the first of them being the primary topic. For example, the response “buying a house” was classified as *housing* and *personal finances*. In addition, when an individual was involved, the classification referring to individuals was listed first (e.g., “my husband’s heart condition” was classified as *family* and *health*).<sup>10</sup>

The first column lists the proportion of all last discussions that were mainly about each listed topic—that is, wherein the topic was the only topic, the first of two topics, or the primary of a compound topic. The most commonly discussed topic was the family, with about a quarter of respondents discussing family issues during their last important conversation. The general topic of career was the second most commonly discussed. Personal finances, happiness and life goals, and health followed, with about 12%, 10%, and 7% of respondents, respectively. The top five topics captured 71% of all main conversation topics. The second column lists the proportion of all last discussions involving each topic, whether as first or second topic. The findings are largely similar with respect to family and career. Notice, however, that personal finance, happiness and life goals, and health are much more prominent, meaning that the topics often arise in conjunction with other primary topics. In the case of health, part of the reason is that many conversations about health involve the family (e.g., “my brother’s health,” “my dad dying,” “my husband’s depression”). Personal finance and happiness and life goals, by contrast, are discussed in conjunction with a wide array of topics. The second column confirms the primacy of the top five topics.

<sup>9</sup> As I discuss below, 29% of topics could be classified under two categories. The first reliability measure, 84.2%, indicates the proportion of all topics whose only or first classification by both researchers was identical. The second reliability measure, 87.8% refers to the extent to which either the single classification or the pair of classifications for a topic was the same in both researchers’ coding or no classification in one researcher’s two-category coding differed from any classification in the other. Raw topics and coding classifications are available upon request.

<sup>10</sup> A handful of responses could be categorized under three topics (e.g., “the economy, gas prices, health”). However the number of responses in that group was too small to prove informative in any analysis.

**Table 3**  
Topic of last discussion of important matter.

	Main topic		Main or secondary topic			
	All	All	Males	Females	Difference	
Family	0.25	0.27	0.22	0.31	0.09	
Career	0.16	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.00	
Personal finances	0.12	0.18	0.19	0.17	-0.02	
Happiness and life goals	0.10	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.01	
Health	0.07	0.14	0.11	0.16	0.05	
Housing	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.01	
Politics	0.04	0.05	0.08	0.03	-0.05	
Economy	0.04	0.08	0.10	0.07	-0.03	
Current national events	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.03	-0.04	
Other relationship	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.02	
Current local events	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	
Other topics	0.08	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	
Total	1.00	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	

Source: see Table 1. "Other topics" includes a battery of uncategorized subjects such as "fixing license suspension," "legal matters," "zombie movies," and "a big trip."

Columns three to five present gender differences in topics discussed. Men and women tend to find the same topics of conversation important. Nevertheless, women are about 9% more likely to talk about family, 5% more likely to talk about health, and 5% less likely to talk about politics than men. Notably, while women are more likely to discuss family, they are not less likely to discuss career, consistent with the work that finds that as women have entered their labor market, their preoccupation with family has not decreased, leading to the worries associated with juggling the second shift (Hochschild, 1989; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Bianchi et al., 2006).

Overall, the findings in Table 3 differ in several respects from those of Bearman and Parigi (2004). They found that the most common topics were "money and house" (15.8%), "life and health" (12.4%), "ideology and religion" (12.1%), "community issue" (11.9%), and "politics and election" (11.3%). Whereas in our survey the family was the most common topic, in Bearman and Parigi (2004) it was only discussed by 9.9% of respondents, and only as part of a broader category of "family and education." Similarly, the topic of work, our second most common, was discussed by only 10.3% of their respondents.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.4. Topics and alters

The targeted mobilization perspective expects people to discuss particular topics with those alters especially relevant to the topics (H2). It further expects that people will turn to professionals when professionals are the most relevant discussion partners (H3). Consider the five most common topics. On the topic of family, respondents would be expected to address kin members; on career, co-workers; on personal finances, accountants or brokers; on happiness and life goals, therapists, spiritual guides, or other personal advisors; on health, medical professionals. The last

discussions survey included an extensive name interpreter module which asked a number of questions about the roles or positions of the alters with whom the last important conversation was held, including whether they were kin members, co-workers, personal advisors, and health professionals. Unfortunately, it did not include questions on whether the alters were accountants or brokers.

Table 4 examines whether respondents were more likely than normal to turn to specific categories of alters when discussing one of the top five topics. I first discuss the top panel. The first column examines whether people reserve certain topics for those whom they consider important. The next four columns examine four categories of alters that, from the targeted mobilization perspective, should be prioritized for certain topics: kin (family); coworkers (work); health professionals, which refers to doctors, physical trainers, or therapists (health); and personal advisors (happiness and life goals).

The first row of the table presents the overall proportion of respondents in each alter category. Among all discussions, 49.7% (or 50% rounded) of all discussions involved important alters. (Thus, when asked about their last discussions of an important matter, a majority of respondents report that the alter was someone they did not later identify as important.<sup>12</sup>) The rest of the row indicates that among all last discussions, 64.0% involved kin members; 7.7%, coworkers; only 2.9%, health professionals; and 8.0%, advisors. (Note that the categories are not mutually exclusive.) People discuss relatively few important matters with coworkers, health professionals, and advisors.

The figures in the first row also constitute the expected proportion of discussions with alters in each topic in a world in which the topic does not matter. Rows 2 through 6 exhibit the

<sup>11</sup> The findings would be expected to differ for several reasons. One, the two studies sampled different populations. Bearman and Parigi's (2004) survey was conducted in North Carolina in 1997; the present study spanned the entire U.S. in 2011. Two, our survey was undertaken during the midst of the Great Recession, where jobs and personal finances have figured prominently in people's minds. Three, our categories are not exactly comparable to Bearman and Parigi's (2004). A preliminary analysis attempted to code the CNIA responses with their categories. The data could only be classified according to their categories after rather liberal readings of their meaning, and, even then, a substantial minority of subjects remained uncategorized. For example, the topics of family and education were clearly distinct in our responses, with the latter often reported in the context of career decisions. In the authors' survey, the responses on family and education were related enough to constitute a single category. (The authors do not discuss their coding scheme in detail.) Finally, 29% of our responses required two-category classifications, which were not part of the scheme of the Bearman and Parigi (2004) survey.

<sup>12</sup> This figure is based on the proportion of respondents who had experienced last discussions and who reported usable data on the topic of discussion ( $n = 723$ ). When all who reported last discussions are included ( $n = 734$ ), the figure is 48.6%. Note that the proportion of important alters in GSS replication sample was 54.7%. One must be cautious in interpreting this 6 percentage point difference, because the statistics in the two samples differ not only in question wording but also in unit of analysis. One figure (54.7%) refers to the proportion of alters in the average core discussion network who respondents considered important or close; the other (48.6%) refers to the proportion of respondents whose last important conversation involved someone they considered important or close. Still, if respondents are accurate in their reports of whom they discuss important matters with (c.f. Bernard et al., 1984), then the proportion of last discussions involving important alters should be consistent with the proportion of important alters in the core discussion network (as long as people approach the important alters within their CDN with the same frequency that they approach the non-important alters). In this context, it is notable that the two figures are similar, which increases our confidence that the results based on the last discussions sample are informative about the finding regarding non-important alters in the replication sample.

**Table 4**

Relationship between topic and alter type, five most common topics, last discussion of important matter.

	Alter is important		Alter is kin		Alter is coworker		Alter is advisor		Alter is health pro.		
Percentage of all last discussions	0.50		0.64		0.08		0.08		0.03		
<i>Percent increase in the raw probability that alter is of the listed type when the topic is</i>											
Family	0.03		<b>0.07</b>		0.18		−0.06		−0.64		
Career	0.03		−0.03		<b>0.85</b>		0.16		−0.76		
Personal finances	0.02		0.07		−0.50		−0.03		0.08		
Happiness and life goals	0.18		−0.02		−0.59		<b>0.72</b>		1.51		
Health	−0.11		0.08		−0.31		0.34		<b>0.77</b>		
<i>Conditional increase in predicted odds that alter is of the listed type when the topic is</i>											
	Alter is kin		Alter is coworker		Alter is advisor		Alter is health pro.				
	b	e <sup>b</sup>	b	e <sup>b</sup>	b	e <sup>b</sup>	b	e <sup>b</sup>			
Family	0.204 (0.209)	1.226									
Career			1.028 <sup>***</sup> (0.365)	2.796							
Happiness and life goals					0.780 <sup>*</sup> (0.403)	2.181					
Health									1.750 <sup>**</sup> (0.866)	5.752	

Source: see Table 1. Top panel presents raw figures, with bold typeset identifying theorized alter–topic matches. Bottom panel presents results of logistic regressions with outcome as the alter type and predictor as the relevant topic after controlling for ego's age, gender, race, employment, education, and income and alter's age, gender, and race.

<sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.1$ .

<sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ .

percent increase (or decrease) in the unadjusted probability that the alter is of a given type, for each topic. The closer the number is to zero, the less it is the case that respondents match alter and topic. For example, when the topic was family, respondents talked to kin members 68.3% of the time (not shown). Since the typical proportion of discussions with kin members is 64.0%, the percent increase associated with the topic of family is  $(0.683 - 0.640) / 0.640$  or 6.7%, as indicated in the second column, second row. That is, when the topic was family, people spoke to kin members 6.7% more often than they typically do. Since figures close to zero represent minimal deviations from expected or typical patterns, 6.7% does not represent much of an increase over typical behavior.

The first column on the top panel of Table 4 suggests that, when the topics are family, career, or personal finances, people do not distinguish important from non-important alters. However, people are somewhat more likely to discuss their happiness and life goals with important than with non-important alters; and a bit less likely to discuss health. The second column suggests that people turn a bit more to family when the topic is family, though not especially so. In fact, they do not especially turn to family for any particular topic. People might turn to family because they are close to family (strong ties perspective), or for some other reason, but not because family are relevant to particular topics (targeted mobilization perspective).

However, columns three, four, and five paint a different picture. Since the proportions of all discussions involving each category of alter are low—coworker, 7.7%, advisor 8.0%, and health professional, 2.9%—we can expect some volatility in the figures. However, if the targeted mobilization perspective (H2, H3) is correct, the figures should still trend in the right direction—and they do. When the topic is career, respondents are 85% more likely to talk to coworkers than they typically talk to coworkers. Interestingly, they are substantially less likely to talk to coworkers than they typically do when the topic is personal finances, happiness, or health. Similarly, when the topic is happiness and life goals, they are about 72% more likely to talk to someone they consider an advisor than they usually do; when the topic is health, 34% more likely. Finally, when the

topic is health, respondents are 77% more likely to talk to health professionals than they typically do; when the topic is happiness, 151% more likely (H3). By the same token, they are substantially less likely to talk to health professionals about the domain-irrelevant topics of family and career. In all, for 22.0% of all last discussions, the alter matched the topic as expected by the targeted mobilization perspective (not shown). If we consider only all discussions in which the topic could be matched to an alter type given our data—that is, those in which the topic was family, career, happiness and life goals, and health—the percentage that matched was 35.5%.<sup>13</sup>

The bottom panel of Table 4 tests these relationships in a series of statistical models. The panel presents the results of four logistic regressions predicting the log odds that the alter was a kin member, co-worker, advisor, and health professional as a linear function of whether the topic was family, work, happiness and life goals, and health, respectively, after controlling for both ego characteristics (age, gender, race, employment, education, and income) and alter characteristics (age, gender, and race). It examines whether, in practice, respondents did, in fact, turn to relevant alters for given topics, after other ego and alter differences are accounted for. The results are consistent with the raw numbers. When the topic was family, the odds that respondents turned to kin members were 22.6% greater than for other topics, after other factors were accounted for, but this result was not statistically significant. However, when the topic was work, the odds that they turned to co-workers were 179.6% greater than it was for other topics; when the topic was happiness and life goals, the odds that they turned to an advisor were 118.1% greater than for other

<sup>13</sup> Gender differences were minor. Because the numbers in some of the cells for Table 4 are small, the proportion matched for each pair cannot be assessed reliably for each topic by gender. However, we can assess the overall proportion of discussions in which alter and topic matched as theoretically predicted. For men, 21.8% of all last discussions involved a topic in which the alter matched the topic; for women, 22.7%. If we consider discussions in the four “matchable” topics, the percentages are 38.3% for men, 33.6% for women. By and large, men and women appear to discuss important matters with topic-appropriate alters at about the same rate.

topics; when the topic was health, the odds that they turned to a health professional were 475.2% greater than when the topic was anything else. These three sets of results were statistically significant.

In all, with the exception of the topic of family (which respondents are more likely but not significantly so to approach the relevant alters), respondents approach topic-relevant alters at very high rates, consistent with the targeted mobilization perspective.

#### 4.5. Probing further on opportune mobilization

I now probe the role of availability in greater detail. Tables 1 and 2 showed that (a) respondents seeking to discuss important matters were often motivated to speak to an alter primarily because of her or his availability, and (b) being motivated by availability statistically increased the probability that they discussed such matters with a non-important alter, consistent with H4. If respondents' self-reports are, indeed, accurate, then they should be reflected in behavior: people with more opportunities to interact with non-important alters should have more non-important alters in their core discussion network.

Testing that proposition quantitatively is difficult. We cannot easily obtain a sample of respondents' interactions, particularly not of interactions where we can ascertain whether non-important alters are present. Even if we could—i.e., even if we could address the methodological problems behind operationalizing “interaction” and “availability” and obtaining reliable data on an interaction's participants, their characteristics, and whether important matters were discussed—the proportion of all interactions in which ego discusses important matters is probably minuscule. (This is part of the reason designers of the CDN name generators give respondents a six-month, rather than, say, one-week window to think of those with whom they have discussed important matters.) However, we can still test the implications of H4 by assessing whether people whose routine activities provide more opportunities to interact with non-important alters have a higher proportion of such alters in their core discussion network.

After time at home and at work or school, the next place where most Americans spend regular time interacting with others is the set of social, voluntary, and political organizations in which they participate, such as churches, professional societies, sports groups, labor unions, and the like (Fischer, 1982). The extent of participation in these organizations provides as close a proxy as any to the set of opportunities people have to interact with acquaintances or weak ties on a regular basis. The GSS asked respondents a set of questions about their involvement in such activities, and these questions were added to the CNIA replication sample.

Table 5 exhibits the proportion of respondents who belong to one of fifteen social, voluntary, and political organizations in the CNIA replication sample. Most respondents, 54%, were members of at least one organization (not shown). Religious organizations constituted the most popular organizational memberships, by far, with 35% of respondents reporting memberships. Next were professional groups, sports groups, and hobby clubs, each with about 13% of respondents reporting being members. No other category of membership was common to more than 10% of respondents. The average number of memberships was 1.36, with a standard deviation of 1.34 (not shown).

I test whether membership in more kinds of organizations increases the proportion of non-important alters in the core discussion network. Since the outcome is the composition of the core discussion network (rather than the characteristic of alters

**Table 5**  
Membership in social, voluntary, and political organizations.

	Proportion of respondents with at least one membership
Church or religious affiliated group	0.35
Professional or academic society	0.13
Sports group	0.13
Hobby or garden club	0.13
Labor union	0.09
Service club	0.08
Veterans' group	0.08
Literary or art discussion group	0.07
Fraternal group	0.06
Youth group	0.05
School service group	0.05
Political club	0.05
Fraternity or sorority	0.04
Nationality group	0.04
Farm organization	0.02

Source: CNIA Name generator replication sample.

in last discussions), I use the CNIA replication sample. I regress the proportion of non-important alters in the network on the respondent's organizational membership after controls. The distribution of organizational memberships seen in Table 5 requires taking account of non-linearity, since most respondents participate in one or two kinds of organizations and few in more than that. The number of organizational memberships naturally sorts into three categories: respondents with no memberships (20.2%); those with one kind of membership (50.2%); and those multiple kinds of memberships (29.7%). For this reason, I estimate the effect of organizational membership as a categorical variable, with no membership as the baseline and both one and more than one membership as the predictors. I control for the total size of the core discussion network, since it is possible that, as the network gets larger, respondents may be naturally more comfortable with allowing non-important alters. Finally, I control for respondents' age, gender, race, employment, education, and income.

Table 6 exhibits the results. Participating in just one voluntary, social, or political organization has no impact on the proportion of non-important alters in the core discussion network, probably because of the limited exposure to weak ties that it provides. However, participating in two or more (as opposed to none) increases the proportion of non-important alters by 0.15 percentage points, a result that is statistically significant. Furthermore, as the core discussion network increases in size, the proportion composed of non-important alters decreases, though only slightly. The rest of the

**Table 6**  
Effect of organizational membership on proportion of non-important alters in core discussion network.

Organizational memberships	
One type of membership	0.050 (0.054)
Two or more types of memberships	0.147** (0.059)
Respondent characteristics	
Size of core discussion network	−0.066*** (0.016)
Controls?	Y
Observations	553
R-squared	0.118

Source: CNIA Name generator replication sample. Model includes controls for age, gender, race, employment, education, and income. Standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.1$

\*\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

controls (not shown, available upon request) had no impact, which indicates that demographic and socio-economic variables do not account for differences in the proportion of non-important alters in the core discussion network.<sup>14</sup> In all, respondents seem to have non-important alters in the CDN when they are exposed to many opportunities to interact with non-important alters.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis has shown that close to half of the core discussion network consists of alters whom respondents do not consider personally important. In addition, it has suggested that the prevalence of weak ties in the network is due to at least two forms of mobilization, purposive and opportune, which research on the core discussion network has not accounted for. To conclude, I outline the implications of these results.

First, the idea that people reserve intimate matters for their intimates is not supported by the evidence. The results call into question scholars' proposition that "there are some things we discuss only with people who are very close to us" (McPherson et al., 2006:353), and that "these are important people in our lives" (2006:354). The core discussion network is not a representation of our strong ties; it is a combination of the people we are close to, people we are not close to but who are knowledgeable about the matters we regularly find important, and people we are not close to but who are available because of our routine activities. Actors are motivated to confide in others by multiple, rather than a single, set of factors, such that the strength of a tie is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the pursuit of confidants. While the CDN name generator remains a convenient way to produce a network, the sociological understanding of what that network is needs revision.

Second, people have a strong tendency to discuss important matters with those who are knowledgeable, regardless of whether the latter are close. The results have shown to a greater degree than prior work that people specialize and differentiate, matching the topics they are concerned with to the people who can talk about them. The topics they tend to discuss range widely, but 70% of all last discussions concern one of only five topics: family, career, finances, happiness, and health. It is especially notable that, since several of these topics lend themselves to expertise, many of the alters in the core discussion network whom ego does not consider personally important are professionals, therapists, doctors, and others with whom people have become accustomed to discussing personal matters. As I discuss below, this finding has important implications for how we interpret patterns or changes in the core discussion network. The CNIA survey has allowed a closer examination of the topic-alter matching question than prior studies. However, fully addressing the extent and range of this process requires new and possibly new kinds of datasets.

Third, people exhibit tendencies that may be described as pragmatist or opportunistic (in the non-negative sense): they turn to others who are available when matters they wish to discuss arise. The decision to seek another as a confidant is not necessarily made independent of social context or primarily with an eye to the extent to which the potential confidant is close; it is often made in interactional settings, where the balance of available alters and the

need to discuss something important tilts decision-making toward acquaintances and weak ties. These findings introduce a set of questions that conventional survey data are unable to address, questions about the role of social interaction and opportunities present in the context of tie activation. As such, they are consistent with recent work emphasizing the importance of context in the operation of social networks (Small, 2009; Doreian and Conti, 2012; Chua, 2012; Sailer and McCulloh, 2012).

Finally, the results suggest that the findings of studies using the CDN name generator in large-scale surveys should be interpreted with caution. If the core discussion network is composed of at least three kinds of alters—those who are close, those who are knowledgeable, and those who are available—rather than one kind, then patterns in the core discussion network could refer to patterns in one, two, or three different kinds of mobilization of close alters. Without deeper analyses, recorded changes in the core discussion network are not necessarily informative about changes in close association.

To highlight the implication of these findings, consider the recent debate over the decline in the core discussion networks of Americans (McPherson et al., 2006; Fischer, 2008, 2011, 2012; Brashears, 2011; Paik and Sanchagrin, 2013). McPherson et al. (2006) report, based on GSS data, that the core discussion network decreased in size from 2.98 in 1985 to 2.08 in 2004. A number of researchers have cast doubt on these findings, suggesting that the findings are inconsistent with other data in the GSS (Fischer, 2008, 2011) or that question order effects (Fischer, 2012) or interviewer effects (Paik and Sanchagrin, 2013) may account for the results. Brashears (2011), one of the authors of the original study, suggests using subsequent experimental data that the results may hold for network size but not for social isolation.

Naturally, the results of the present study cannot speak to whether the CDN did, in fact, change over time. The findings do suggest, however, that there are several possible outcomes even if the network *did* decrease in size. One would be that people have fewer strong ties than they did in the 1980s. Another, however, would be that the number of strong ties has remained the same but that the number of weak ties they turn to because of the latter's knowledgeablebleness has decreased. A person seeking a knowledgeable source has more options in the 2000s than she did in the 1980s, in large part due to the spread of internet access. Whereas someone in the 1980s seeking to discuss a health matter might first seek an acquaintance in the field or even a doctor for information, one today may just as well first seek WebMD.com. The same could be said about many topics involving career, happiness and wellbeing, and finances. If so, then what would have changed over the past 30 years is not the nature of our close associations but the nature of our pursuit of information from weak ones. The results of the present study suggests that both possibilities would be consistent with an average reduction of one alter in the size of the core discussion network of Americans.

Researchers hoping to understand the network of strong ties would do well to heed Fischer's (1982) insistence that we employ multiple measures to capture different aspects of what a strong tie may constitute (see Marin, 2004). To be sure, multiple measures are costly, and the advantages of having representative data for a national sample surely outweighed the disadvantage of having a single measure in the GSS. However, such convenience probably calls for extra vigilance in the interpretation of results. In all, our results call for greater attention to the process of seeking others for support as, in fact, a process, one in which varying, context-dependent motivations are realized in a stable network of confidants whose characteristics deserve greater attention.

<sup>14</sup> Because of a high number of missing observations in the organizational membership variable, I ran a separate set of analyses following a multiple imputation approach, wherein multiple values for a missing case are drawn from a distribution of possible values and results from those multiple possibilities are estimated and averaged out (Little and Rubin, 1989). The results were similar. The effect of one membership was 0.315 (0.526); the effect of two or more memberships, 106\* (0.057). Results are available upon request.

**Table A1**  
Sample characteristics.

	U.S. population	Core Networks and Important Alters Survey	
		Replication sample	Last discussion sample
Gender			
Female	0.52	0.53	0.51
Race			
White	0.68	0.69	0.67
Latino	0.14	0.15	0.16
Black	0.11	0.11	0.11
Other	0.07	0.05	0.06
Employment			
Employed	0.61	0.60	0.62
Unemployed	0.07	0.06	0.07
Not in labor force	0.32	0.34	0.31
Age	46.00	44.30	45.10
Education			
Less than high school	0.15	0.04	0.03
High school graduate	0.29	0.21	0.21
Some college	0.24	0.30	0.30
Associate's degree	0.07	0.12	0.14
Bachelor's degree	0.17	0.23	0.22
Graduate or professional degree	0.09	0.10	0.10
<i>n</i>		1,019	991

Sources: American Community Survey (2009) and Core Networks and Important Alters Survey. U.S. figures refer to non-institutionalized adults 18 and over, derived from the 2009 ACS PUMS. The total number of discussion partners for the U.S. population is derived from the 2004 GSS (McPherson et al., 2006). The GSS replication sample figures present the random half of the total sample that was asked the GSS name generator question; the Last discussion sample figures represent the other half, which was asked to report on the last important discussion respondents had.

## Appendix.

Table A1 displays the basic characteristics of respondents in the Core Networks and Important Alters Study. Each respondent was randomly assigned to receive either a replication of the GSS name generator or a question aimed at capturing the last time the respondent discussed an important matter. Since the study was selected to match the adult non-institutionalized U.S. population by race, gender, and employment status, the columns can be seen to match well along those variables. Table A1 also presents figures for age and education, which were not explicitly matched. As the figure shows, the sample performed quite well. The samples are one or two years younger than the U.S. population it seeks to represent. As expected, given that the sample requires comfort with the internet, the samples are also somewhat more educated, with more respondents with some college or a college degree, and fewer whose education did not extend past the twelfth grade.

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