The Importance of Work-Related Social Ties in Post-Soviet Russia: The Role of Co-workers in the Personal Support Networks in St. Petersburg and Helsinki

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This study considers the extent to which work-related social ties function as a source of social support in Russian workers' personal networks. The topic is important since, in the case of unemployment or retirement, personal networks are central for the well-being and coping of Russians. In order to illustrate the nature of the Russian case, an explicit comparison between Russian and Finnish workers' personal networks is carried out. The results are in line with previous findings concerning the workplace as a source of social support in China.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Cross-cultural Research on Personal Networks

There is an obvious lack of cross-cultural comparative studies utilizing a clearly defined notion of personal network and network data on alters' interconnections. This lack is partly due to the complexities of organizing a cross-cultural network research project which, even in the case of comparing two countries only, requires both time, money, and international collaboration contacts. More importantly, when designing the data collection and interpreting the results, a significant amount of cultural competence regarding all countries included in the study is needed.

Given these difficulties, international comparisons often rely on large pre-existing comparative surveys such as the World Values Survey, International Social Survey Programme and European Social Survey, using the survey questions on respondents' social relations to describe their personal networks. Though valuable in many respects, these surveys do not include data on alters' interconnections and therefore do not enable an analysis of the personal network structure. Fischer and Shavit (1995, 132) conclude, for example, that the International Social Survey Programme, one of the most comprehensive comparative studies, permits researchers to compare respondents' dyadic ties, but does not allow for comparisons of networks. Moreover, a focused study of the data questionnaires in original languages may reveal inconsistencies both in translations and cultural categories used in different countries.

A relatively small body of comparative research on personal networks utilizing network methods and collecting data on network structures has found both similarities and differences between countries. Fischer and Shavit (1995, 143) for example, found that the Israelis' networks were significantly denser than the Americans' and conclude that "societal structures and cultures can selectively affect particularities of personal life" (Fischer and Shavit 1995, 143). Grossetti (2007), on the contrary, noted marked convergences in network density between the personal networks of the Toulousains in 2001 and the Californians in Fischer's original study of 1977-78. He interprets this convergence by, among other things, the relatively stable relational structure in industrialized countries.

Research on support networks outside industrialized countries lends credence to the idea of cross-cultural variation in personal networks. Adams et al. (2006, 366) maintain, for example, that it is "clearly inapproriate to assume that the meaning, structure and function of support networks in Mali would be similar to those found in Western settings" and Lai (2001, 73) notes that the expectations from Chinese adult children to provide both material and emotional support to their elderly parents are more intense than in many other cultures.

This article contributes to the area of cross-cultural network studies through a detailed comparison of post-socialist Russia with neighboring Finland, a Nordic welfare society. It compares workers' personal support networks in the two countries on the basis of case studies conducted in Helsinki in 2003 and St. Petersburg in 2000 utilizing the network questionnaire adapted from Claude Fischer's original research (1982). Unlike many studies of social support focusing on family and kin ties, the study pays particular attention to the role of co-workers in the personal support networks.

The next section discusses the converging results of the studies of personal networks in Russia and China, both countries with experiences of the socialist system. The remaining text of the article focuses on the comparison between Russia and Finland, depicting data collection sites in St. Petersburg and Helsinki (section three), and the data and methods of the study (section four). The results are presented in the fifth section, with conclusions in the final section.

2. The Significance of Work-related Ties as Source of Social Support in (Post-) Socialism

Network research conducted in Russia and China has produced converging results on the importance of the work-related ties in both societies, relating this convergence to the legacy of the socialist era. Lonkila (1998), for instance, found in his comparison of 40 St. Petersburg and 38 Helsinki teachers in 1993 that whereas only 28% of all personal network ties of Helsinki teachers were mediated by their workplace, the corresponding figure for their St Petersburg counterparts was 48%. In a replication study with 20 teachers and five psychologists conducted in St. Petersburg in 1996, the same trend emerged even more clearly: work-mediated relations accounted for 53% of the ties in Russian respondents' personal networks (Lonkila, 1998).

In their comparison of migrant and native St. Petersburg factory workers, Lonkila and Salmi (2005) corroborated the importance of work-related social relations and social support, first to Russian workers in general and, second, to migrant workers in particular. The article at hand builds on the same Russian data corpus as Lonkila and Salmi, but adds to it both an explicit comparison with similar data collected in the neighbouring capital of Finland and an analysis of the structures of the personal networks in each city.

The findings of co-workers' role in Russia run counter to the stereotypical image both of the Russians giving preference to ties with family and kin and of the Finns as a work-centered people. They are, however, in line with Ruan et al.'s (1997) results in China, which stress – similarly in contrast to the traditional image of the weight of kin relations – the importance of work-related ties as a source of social support for Chinese respondents. A replication of a network survey conducted in Tianjin in 1986 and 1993 showed that despite the fact that workplace ties in respondents' discussion networks had been reduced in seven years, their reduction was relatively small in comparison with the reduction in kin-based ties. Ruan and her associates conclude that the ties with colleagues still played an important role in 1993. Though Lai's (2001) study in a more modern setting in Shanghai partly contested these results, a further comparison between socialist Beijing and capitalist Hong Kong found that the residents of the former were more likely to turn to their co-workers for support then their counterparts in Hong Kong (Lee et al. 2005).

In sum, despite the huge changes at the workplaces with the advance of market relations in China and the fall of the socialist system in Russia (e.g., Ashwin, 1999a,b; Clarke et al., 1996, 1999), the socialist past still seems to be visible in the role of co-worker in support networks both in China and Russia. The remaining text will focus on the comparative analysis of the Russian support networks.

3. Study Sites

This article investigates the social support networks of workers in two different but nationally equally important Russian and Finnish workplaces. The Kirov plant in St. Petersburg was a crown jewel of Soviet factories, employing around 40,000 workers in its heyday and producing tanks, turbines and other machinery. The fall of the Soviet Union forced the factory to reorganize its ownership during the process of privatization and to adjust to the demands of the emerging Russian market economy. By the time of our data collection in Russia in winter 2000, the number of employees had been cut to less than a quarter of the Soviet-era figures. (Lonkila and Salmi, 2005).

The Finnish data was collected in a Helsinki shipyard during the winter of 2003. The shipyard is an integral part of the history of the Finnish shipbuilding industry, boosted after the Second World War by war reparations to the Soviet Union. The Finnish-owned industry did not survive the tough competition, despite a merger in the late 1980s, and the shipyard was bought by a giant Norwegian enterprise in 1991. The early 2000s were marked by layoffs, the number

of Finnish employees being cut from roughly 4500 in 2001 to 3600 in 2004.

Both plants had both real and symbolic significance for their home cities. Not only was the Kirov plant named after the Leningrad party leader, but the factory premises cover an immense area in the Kirov city district (*Kirovskii raion*) in St. Petersburg and the Kirov workers, *kirovtsy,* earned a national reputation as exemplary workers of the Soviet empire (for studies of the Kirov factory, see Miroschnichenko and Maksimov, 1994; Grant, 1999). The Helsinki shipyard is similarly a visible part of the city center where immense cruise ships were built until early 2004. The Helsinki shipyard was also well-known nation-wide but, unlike Kirov, this was because of repeated industrial disputes and strikes, particularly during the 1970s.

Both factories were struggling to survive in the globalizing markets and the reorganizations and layoffs kept workers in both cities in a constant state of insecurity. At the time of the collection of the Finnish data, the respondents had already been apprised of forthcoming dismissals and many questioned the future of the whole Helsinki shipyard. In summer 2005, the Norwegian mother company announced it would move its head office from Helsinki to the city of Turku on the south-western coast of Finland. The big cruising ships would be built in Turku and the Helsinki shipyard would focus on smaller vessels, repairs and research. However, a South Korean shipbuilding giant bought the majority of the company shares in 2008 and the speculations about the future of the Helsinki shipyard continued in 2009.

METHODS

This section draws from the description by Lonkila and Salmi (2005) who analyze in detail the differences between native and migrant Kirov workers. For a more detailed description of the data collection and questionnaires used, see Lonkila and Piipponen (2002).

The St. Petersburg interviews took place in one department of the Kirov factory. A total of 50 workers, of whom 12 were women, were interviewed, and their personal networks contained altogether 711 members. The Helsinki data consisted of interviews with 19 male workers, whose networks contained 190 network members. In order to preserve comparability, only male Russian workers were selected and two elderly male workers (69 and 71 years) were excluded. This resulted in the complete data corpus consisting of 36 Russian and 19 Finnish respondents, and of their 490 and 190 personal network members.

The personal networks were constructed with the help of name generators adapted from Claude Fischer's network study *To Dwell Among Friends. Personal networks in Town and City* (1982, cf. Grossetti, 2007, Fischer and Shavit, 1995). These name generators covered several daily-life situations such as with whom the egos talk about work matters (ng1), whose opinion they would listen to when making an important decision (ng2), with whom they shared a common hobby (ng3) or spent free time (ng4), to whom they would turn for such help as repairing domestic appliances or fixing a car (ng5), for baby-sitting or borrowing kitchen utensils (ng6), from whom they could ask to borrow a large sum of money (ng7), to or from whom they had given or received favours during the last three years (ng8), and with whom they had participated in meetings, demonstrations, gatherings or strikes during the last three years (ng9). Finally, the respondents were asked whether there were any important people who had not been mentioned (ng10).

For each name generator, the respondent could name (by first name and initials or by an invented code name) as many people as he wanted. The list of all names given – complemented by the respondent's household members – constitutes the personal network of the respondent. The respondent was then asked to record information about each network member such as age, occupation, place of birth and residence, type and duration of relationship

between respondent and network member and how they got acquainted, in a structured questionnaire.

In addition to the questions concerning the personal network, the questionnaire requested basic socio-economic information about the respondent, as well as information about his participation in social and political activities. Moreover, a thematic interview was conducted with each respondent to construct an account of his life course and important life events. Finally, an N x N matrix of each respondent's network members was constructed by asking the respondent to indicate which of the network members had been in mutual contact.

Four methodological points of the study are worth emphasizing. First, the study employs a strictly defined notion of personal network which allows investigation of the totality of the respondents' daily social relations (including friends and relatives, for example). In contrast to confining the study to the work sphere only, this approach enables analysis of the differences in the mixing of professional and personal spheres of life (cf. Gribaudi, 1998; Eve, 2002; Lonkila, 1999). Second, instead of examining values or attitudes toward work, the focus is on the actual micro-level interaction practices. Third, the study joins those students of post-Soviet Russia who stress the importance of investigating social processes at the grass-roots level (e.g., Burawoy and Verdery, 1999, Ashwin, 1999a). Finally, the study is explicitly comparative.

Because of the non-representative sample, the study does not aim at generalizable results. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate the potential of the micro perspective and network methods in comparative studies and to generate fruitful hypotheses for further research.

RESULTS

The average size of the Russian networks in the data corpus was significantly larger than that of the Finnish ones, with 13.6 (SD=3.0) network members in St. Petersburg as opposed to 10.0 (SD=4.8) in Helsinki ($p=0.001$ in t-test). Not unexpectedly, a majority of the network members in both cities were men, but neither the proportion of male network members in St. Petersburg (67%) nor the mean age of network members (43.7 years) was significantly different than in Helsinki (61% and 43.2 years respectively).

In the following text, the importance of co-workers in each city will be studied using four indicators concerning the personal networks (cf. Piipponen, 2004, Lonkila and Salmi, 2005). These indicators include:

- proportion of co-workers in the networks relative to the number of all personal network members
- overlap (multiplexity) of the various types of informal support and forms of social interaction
- proportion of co-workers who were simultaneously considered as friends
- number of links connecting co-workers with other network members

The first indicator of the co-workers' role is their number in the networks. Because of the difference in the size of the networks in the two cities, this number was calculated relative to the total size of the network. The results showed that the average proportion of colleagues in the St. Petersburg data was more than twice as high (M=33.5%, SD=16.4) than in Helsinki (M=15.4%, SD=12.3, $p<0.00$). Since the networks were constructed in this study by adding the respondents' household members to the list of people recorded through the ten name generators, the proportion of co-workers in the networks shown above is in itself also an estimate of their importance in terms of mutual support in the workers' lives. Moreover, of the 36 Russian networks studied, 35 (97%) contained at least one co-worker, while the corresponding figure for the 19 Finnish networks was 15 (79%).

Second, the relations between the Russian respondents and their co-worker-alters were

more multiplex than those in Finland: The average number of name generators, in which the co-worker-alters were recorded, was significantly greater in St. Petersburg (M=1.56, SD=0.77) than in Helsinki (M=1.13, SD=0.35, p=0.045).

Third, while 97% of Russian respondents and 79% of the Finns reported at least one friend in their networks, only 16% of the Finns reported at least one friend who was simultaneously a co-worker, whereas 64% of the Russians did (respondent could record one network member simultaneously as a friend, co-worker and neighbor, for example).

In sum, these observations speak of the co-workers' significant role as sources of support, and of the blurring of professional and personal spheres of life in Russia. The first three indicators show that the co-workers were relatively more numerous in the networks of Russian workers compared to the Finns; that the Russian workers' relations with co-workers were more varied or multiplex; and that more Russian respondents had co-worker friends in their networks than the Finns. These results reinforce the impression of the significance of co-workers in post-Soviet Russian society vis-à-vis Finnish society.

In the remaining part of this section *the fourth aspect*, namely the structural significance of co-workers in St. Petersburg and Helsinki, will be investigated. The data will be limited to the 35 Russian and 15 Finnish networks containing at least one co-worker. The section is based on the examination of the N x N matrixes of the interconnections between alters filled in by Russian and Finnish respondents. For each alter in the network, the respondent was asked if he had been in mutual contact with other alters. The resulting binary matrixes were analyzed with the UCINET network analysis software (Borgatti et al., 2002). A comparison of the basic indicators on the networks in the limited data showed a significant difference in size (M=13.7, SD=3.0 in St. Petersburg, M=10.5, SD=4.9 in Helsinki, p=0.008) and average distance (M=1.50, SD=0.26 in St. Petersburg, M=1.32, SD=0.28 in Helsinki), but no significant difference in density (57% vs 61%) or compactness (0.74 vs 0.71).

The structural significance of co-workers stresses the fact that their role in the networks cannot simply be measured by their number, because any number of co-workers may be weakly connected to the rest of the network. This is exemplified by the following network graph from the Finnish data (Figure 1 – note that the ego is not shown in the figure):

Figure 1. Weakly Connected Clique

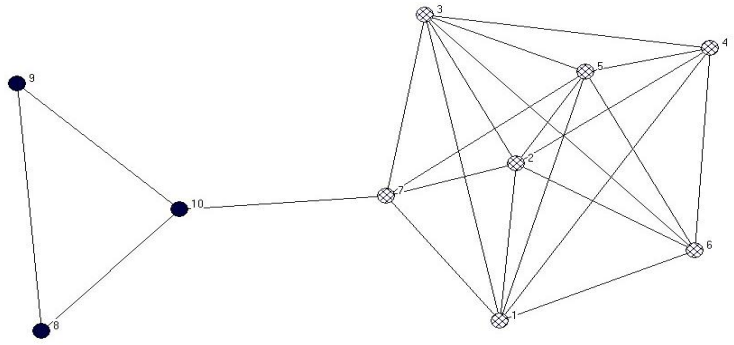

Figure 1. Example of a weakly connected clique of three co-workers (black nodes) in the network of a Helsinki worker (hki06).

In Figure 1, the connection between co-workers and other network members may vanish – except for the ties with ego – by cutting the "bridge" between the clique of three co-workers on the left-hand side and the rest of the network consisting of family and kin and a plumber friend (no. 7). Hence, in this type of network the co-workers may disappear from the total network without doing much damage to the structure of interaction among the remaining network members. Figure 2 gives a contrary example of a Russian network where the co-workers are much more strongly connected to the whole network structure.

Figure 2. Tightly Connected Co-Workers

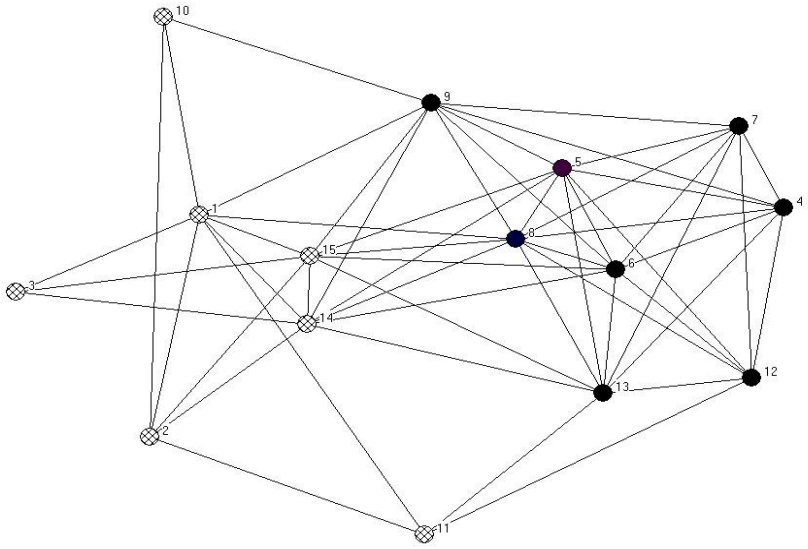

Figure 2. Example of tightly connected co-workers (black nodes) in the network of a St. Petersburg worker (spb 401).

In addition to the mere number of co-workers in the networks, their integration was therefore measured as the number of links connecting egos' co-workers to the remainder of the network. In Figure 1, for example, the total number of links connecting the sphere of work and the rest of the network is one whereas in Figure 2 the corresponding number is fifteen. Based on this reasoning, an indicator of 'co-workers' integration' in the networks was constructed. Table 1 shows the distribution of this indicator in St. Petersburg and Helsinki.

Table 1 gives additional credence to the general image of relatively low co-workers' integration in Finnish networks as opposed to Russian networks. Eighty percent of the 15 networks in Helsinki but 54% of the 35 networks in St. Petersburg contained less than a quarter of all possible links between the co-workers and other (not work-related) network members.

Table 1. Indicator of Co-Workers' Integration in the St. Petersburg and Helsinki Networks

*Integration Indicator**	St. Petersburg (N=35) *no. of networks*	*%*	Helsinki (N=15) *no. of networks*	*%*
0-25%	19	54	12	80
25-50%	8	23	0	0
50-75%	7	20	2	13
75-100%	1	3	1	7
Total	35	100	15	100

*The indicator was calculated by dividing the number of the actually effectuated links between co-workers and other network members by the theoretically possible maximum number of these links. The percentages were calculated only for networks containing at least one co-worker.

Though the difference observed in the comparison of the means of this indicator in Russia and Finland was not statistically significant, this was due to one Finnish case only: a network of eight alters, in which the only co-worker in the network knew everyone else of the remaining alters. This raised the integration indicator of this particular case to 100%, not observed elsewhere in the data. After exclusion of this case, the difference between Russian data (M=32.7%, SD=22.7) and Finnish data (M=16.2%, SD=22.3) was significant (p=0.025).

Lastly, the networks were analyzed with the KeyPlayer 1.1 software programme (*http://www.analytictech.com/*) in order to find three 'key player' nodes for each network, that is, nodes that when removed would result in the largest number of disconnected components. This experiment revealed that in 69% of the Russian networks the three key players contained at least one co-worker whereas the corresponding proportion in the Finnish data was 27%.

There are, however, at least two variables which could easily explain the observed differences (cf. Lonkila and Salmi, 2005). First, the number of co-workers mentioned in the networks is very likely related to the duration of the ego's employment at the factory. The newcomers are generally expected to mention fewer co-workers than those with a long history at the same workplace. Second, the migrants from elsewhere are less likely to introduce their fellow workers to their family and kin living in another part of the country.

The size and nature of our case study data allows only limited control of these variables. A repeated comparison was carried out between "old" migrant workers in the two cities – that is, between the Russian and Finnish workers who had been working at the factory more than 3.5 years and were thus supposed to have had a chance to get to know their co-workers (cf. Lonkila and Salmi, 2005). The percentage of co-workers, the number of co-workers from whom respondents had received (at least two different kinds of) multiplex support, and the percentage of structural integration of co-workers into the network, were calculated for the 25 Russian and 7 Finnish workers who met these criteria. The results showed that the observed differences either remained the same (percentage of co-workers) or increased (multiplexity and structural integration).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are in line with the results of the studies by Ruan and her associates (1997, see also Lee et al. 2005) of Chinese society, suggesting that a socialist system may have effects on networks which outlive its fall and may be resistant to the advance of a market economy. Our findings revealed that Russian co-workers were important as a source of social support in many respects. The St. Petersburg workers' networks not only contained more co-workers than in Helsinki but the ties between the Russian workers and their co-workers were more multiplex. In addition, the Russians had more co-worker friends than their Finnish counterparts, and the co-workers seemed to be more densely tied to their personal networks, though the proof of the structural connection remains mixed. Finally, the supportive role of co-workers seems to extend outside the factory walls, thereby blurring the borders of professional and personal spheres of life.

How could these observed differences be explained? Ruan and her associates (1997) related their findings to the continuing legacy of the role of workplace, which controlled most aspects of daily life in communist China:

> "Besides salary, a Chinese workplace typically provided its workers with goods, services, and other material and social advantages such as medical care, housing, loans, child care, and pensions. Many of these benefits, including housing, schools, and services, extended also to the workers' families. It was true also that the distribution of goods and services by the workplace was usually under the control of workshop leaders and other officials. In short, not only did Chinese workers depend on their workplace to satisfy their needs, they depended specifically on influential people at work to obtain needed goods and services." (Ruan et al. 1997, 84)

A thorough understanding of the present-day structure of the respondents' personal networks would require a detailed analysis of their life courses in the specific historical and national contexts. Such a detailed life course study is not attempted here (cf. Lonkila and Salmi 2005). Suffice it to say that, similarly to the description of Ruan et al. (1997) above, the impact of the factory and workplace on the workers' lives was generally much more marked in the Soviet Union than in Finland. The Soviet factory allocated workers jobs and housing, medical care, cars and other goods in short supply, offered them cultural recreation, places to meet other people and so on. Even though many of these benefits were also provided by Finnish employers, the Finns could also search for solutions to their daily problems on the market (e.g., for housing, cars and other goods), and their social lives were generally much less dependent on the factory than those of their Soviet counterparts.

Explaining the role of co-workers in the present-day Russian networks only as 'Soviet legacy' would be, however, a premature conclusion. The anthropological students of Russian transition have remarked that the features which at first glance look as the remains from the Soviet era, such as the role of barter in Russian economy in the 1990s, may in fact have resulted from the factors and causes unleashed by the transition process itself (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999).

In line with this thinking, the role of co-workers would rather appear as a combined result of the Soviet traditions and post-Soviet experiences: Much of the benefit allocation through the Russian factory has diminished since the fall of the Soviet Union. Having lost the stability and predictability of Soviet era employment, and lacking the unemployment benefits of Finnish workers, post-Soviet Russian workers were more prone to turn to their personal social safety nets, of which co-workers traditionally formed an important part.

Nevertheless, the economic aspects alone can hardly explain the observed differences. Rather, they are more likely to be caused by the complex

interaction of social, economic, historical, structural and cultural factors, all of which cannot be addressed in this article.

Our comparison suggests that unemployment or retirement may have different consequences for Russians and Finns. It seems possible that after a working career Finns are more likely to lose the relatively few contacts with their fellow workers than Russians. However, if the Russians also lost these ties, the impact on their social life would be much more grave. In Russia (and probably other post-socialist countries) the maintenance or dissolution of the largely work-related support networks may prove vital in the absence of a well functioning social security system.

This study also proposes that the multiplex social ties revolving around the workplace might play a different role in the formation of Russian civil society as compared to western models. In a society penetrated by mistrust in most social institutions and lacking clear interest articulation based on social groups with distinct identities, the workplace-based social networks may function as one possible platform for joint action (Alapuro, 2008; Alapuro and Lonkila, 2000; Gordon, 1997).

Finally, the mixing of professional and personal spheres of life implies that post-Soviet Russian society might combine modern features, such as industrialization and urbanization, with "premodern" aspects, such as weakly differentiated spheres of life and a particularly strong role of networks in economy and society (Srubar 1991, Lonkila, forthcoming). This combination may be indicative of the specific nature of the emerging new socio-political system in Russia and certainly merits further studies.

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