Vb AS A Social Network: Exploring Underlying Difference BETWEEN Vb AND Western Social Networking

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Abstract

This paper is an effort to establish Vartan Bhanji (VB) as a social network and distinguishes it from the Western notion of social networking. In order to attain the goal of this paper, an in-depth analysis of literature has been conducted and a model devised by Michailova and Worm (2003) (and verified by Butler and Purchase (2004)) is used to evaluate VB as a social network. In addition to this, a novel intellectual framework containing fifteen (15) categories is developed and applied to compare VB with Western social networks. It has been found that VB, being a unique cultural feature of Pakistani society, fulfills the requirement to be declared a social network, though it is not similar to Western social networks. This paper offers a rare in-depth insight into the issue at hand and extends directions for future research.

Key words: Vartan Bhanji (VB), social network, unique characteristics, western social network, Pakistan

Introduction

A social network is described as a collection of people, organizations or other social entities, associated by a set of socially significant relationships like friendship, co-working or information sharing, and contacts to effectively attain targets, by mutual sharing of expertise, resources, and information (Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1997; Kempe, Kleinberg, & Tardos, 2003; O'Murchu, Breslin & Decker, 2004). Members of a social network share information regarding opportunities of finding social support, establishing new social or business contacts (Hogg & Academic, 2004) for collaboration (O'Murchu et al., 2004),

exchanging social capital including financial resources, goods or services (Garton et al., 1997), exploring and application of knowledge transfer (Hustad, 2004), and supporting to develop & run successful business firms (Fafchamps & Minten, 1999). The concept of social networking is presently used to reflect locally and technologically interconnected people. This categorization is mainly based on the size and nature of social networks (Garton et al., 1997). Homogeneous, smaller in size and personally connected group of people like village communities and colleagues are considered traditional social networks whereas a large group of people with more heterogeneity in social characteristics and complexity in the structure is

called modern/international/global social network (Lea, Yu, Maguluru, & Nichols, 2006). Kimball and Rheingold (2000) have argued that social networks have evolved from personal networks into online social networks; and are mediated by computer networks (Kimball & Rheingold, 2000). Anyhow scholarship studying developing countries has revealed that personal social networks are deep rooted in society and are influence socio-political and economic spheres (Butler & Purchase, 2004; Liu, 2001; Michailova & Worm, 2003; Fafchamps, 1999; Lomnitz & Sheinbaum, 2004).

While the concept and practice of networks has gained popularity in the West in the 1990s (Axelsson and Easton, 1992) there is nothing new in Asia about it, especially in Pakistan. 'Who is who and who knows whom' is more important than anything else. If you know the right person as per the situation, all the doors will open and solutions will be created; otherwise, doors will be closed and problems will be created. 'Who you know' refers to social connections with the appropriate authorities or individuals, commonly referred to as 'Vartan Bhanji' (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014). The tradition of Vartan Bhanji (an institutionalized custom of gift/service exchange), that is maintained among relatives (familial network, 'Bradri') is prevalent in Pakistan as well as in India (Cialdini, 2001). Interestingly, few researches are conducted on this topic and recently qualitative research delineating the role of Vartan Bhanji in contemporary Pakistan, modern organizations and human resource management practices has brought VB into the limelight (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014). VB networks which have remained a significant feature of contemporary Pakistani society have a strong influence on personal interaction, political formation, business relations, and organizations (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014; Abbasi, 2010 a; Abbasi, 2010 b; Khalid, 2010; Khilji, 2003) and will remain relevant to

Pakistani society, perhaps in an adapted shape and form (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014). In mainstream scholarship, ideas regarding socio-economic development and organizational growth, role of culture specific institutions like Guanxi, Wasta, Blat etc. have gotten a lot of attention and their relevance is established as a unique type of social network. But no such research is available on VB. Considering this gap, we intend to explore the functions of VB which establish its role as a social network and develop a theoretical framework to differentiate it from the notion of Western social networks.

2. Literature Review and Discussion

VB is a system of establishing and maintaining relationships through gift/service exchange (Eglar, 1960:106). In the agrarian societies of Punjab, it performed the role of a network of mutual help and cooperation (Gill 2003: 98). This relationship mainly developed among people belonging to a system of reference called bradri (people related through blood and marriage). However, depending on the situation, friends and neighbors are also incorporated into this familial network (Alavi, 1978:12; Eglar, 1960; Wakeel, 1970). On the basis of strength of relationship and mutual obligation, this familial network can be categorized into two groups: Pakki Vartan (PV-core relationship) and Katchi Vartan (KV-courtesy relationship) (Alavi, 1978:12; Eglar, 1960; Wakeel, 1970). The first group is composed of close relatives and friends. People belonging to PV (inner core) maintain strategic relationships and fulfillment of mutual expectations (of help and support) are mandatory despite conflict (Alavi, 1978:12). However, in case of critical situations, sanctions are imposed (on VB members) and relationships are terminated (Alavi, 1978:12). The system of VB works on two basic principles: gender specific obligations (a daughter's right in her parent's home) and reciprocation of gifts or services (Eglar, 1960:108-110). Furthermore, the

exchange of material and immaterial possessions is processed through offerings (the material offerings on the occasion of marriage are locally named as 'Neotta' or 'Neondra') and demands (of help\belongings named as 'Mang'). The tradition of VB, its characteristics and functions depicted by Eglar (1960), Wakeel (1970) and Alavi (1978) have not remained the same due to the strong influences of industrialization, migration and urbanization (Choudhary, 1999). Now, for example, the record of gifts is not openly maintained and gifts are not openly exchanged at the workplace. However, as a contained cultural value, VB influences individual and collective interaction in personal and professional settings (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014).

As a mechanism of connecting human resources, Vartan Bhanji (VB) is composed of connections/ties among actors; this connection has both content (nature of relation) and form (strength of relation) (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994). This institution also has clear cut rules regarding the nature and strength of relations. Consistently, VB can be considered a mechanism of social networks (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014). Here, the framework of social networks devised by Michailova and Worm (2003) and used by Butler and Purchase (2004), will be used to evaluate VB as a social network. A social network has the following three characteristics: social resourcing, continuity of relationships, coexistence of trust and cooperation as well as power and domination.

Social resourcing is the ability to access various types of resources through one's social connections. Social capital is embodied in the relations among persons and it is defined by its functions (Coleman, 1988). There are three major types of social capital: obligations and expectation, information flow structure and norms accompanied by sanctions. As discussed in the previous section, VB relations are based on obligations and expectations that are actualized

through offerings and demands; information is shared among VB members and there are norms which define the rights and duties of VB members as well as establish the idea of sanctions (Alavi, 1978; Eglar, 1960). The nature of the social bond between VB members varies according to the level of obligation and vice versa, and the flow of information moves accordingly. Multi-dimensional relationships prevail among VB members. The group members can ask for favors directly as well as indirectly (at the behalf of someone else). However, generally an indirect style is used as it is considered more appropriate, a phenomenon that has been found in other countries such as Russia (Butler & Purchase, 2004). Lyon (2002) puts forth that "virtually in all activities one must not act on one's own behalf but rather on the behalf of another. Assuming responsibilities for one's own problem in Pakistan means arranging with someone from within one's human resource network to actually carry out the solution" (p. 226-227). As Lyon highlights in the above-mentioned passage, it is much more acceptable and respectable to arrange a solution on someone's behalf rather than solving one's problem oneself. Butler and Purchase (2004) refer to this attribute as a social character of networks. In line with this discussion, VB represents the main features of social resourcing/capital that "can be seen as an essential capacity of social networking" (Liu, 1998).

Second, continuity of relationships means developing sustainable and close social relationships through strategic reciprocation of goods and services. Close social relations help "to establish and disseminate a system of shared and tacitly understood norms and rules …which allow dynamically changing contingencies" (Michailova & Worm, 2003:512). According to Michailova and Worm (2003) the specific mechanism for developing long term personal

relationships is a significant characteristic of a social network. Lyon (2002) highlights that family roles & reciprocal obligations are transposed on non-kin to develop personal relationships. As mentioned earlier, non-family interaction is also maintained on the ingrained principles of kin relations: intervention, indebtedness, loyalty and reciprocation (Lyon, 2002:1-2). This trend of converting non-kin interaction into kin interaction (through strategic gift and service exchange) is an effort to develop long term relationships. This mechanism pervades the country as "it offers some degree of cultural coherence in the absence of national, linguistic, market and political coherence" (Lyon, 2002: 226-227). Not only does reciprocation of gifts and services take place in VB, it takes place with additional added value (Alavi, 1978:11), that helps to initiate the two ways support system and creates long term relationships. In a nutshell, VB has mechanisms to create long term relationships among its members, which has been deemed an essential characteristic of a social network by Michailova and Worm (2003:512). In line with this argument, VB can be declared a social network.

Third, the coexistence of trust and cooperation as well as power and domination are one of the fundamental features of a social network. Trust or confidence is a fundamental constituent of social solidarity and pivotal in the configuration of social networks (Lomnitz & Sheinbaum, 2004: Simmel, 1964: 318). Rose-Akerman (2001) identifies trust as a relational response (based on reason, not just loyalty) which facilitates in managing risk while dealing with each other. Consistently, a trustworthy person is the one who shows the higher potential to perform the desired role/task (Gambetta, 1988). Michailova and Worm (2003:512) propose that in collectivist societies trust is based more on emotional links. The in-group/out-group contemplations are made on the basis of the level of emotional trust and

support is extended accordingly. Cooperation among network members as well as exchanges within the network are not random but systematic (Lomnitz & Sheinbaum, 2004:7). Jones and associates (1997) contend that this phenomenon of exchange reveals a division of labor. Michailova and Worm (2003:513) identify the existence of a power structure within every network, "where different actors have different powers to act and influence the action of others. This power structure due to paradoxical tendencies of cooperation and competition thwarts its growth; and gives rise to the phenomenon of co-opetition" (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996). It means that members of a social network not only cooperate but they also compete with each other to attain a central or more privileged position in the network. Consistent with the discussion, it can be inferred that cooperation according to trust-level and power structure are two key features of social networks. As discussed in the previous section, VB has two main hierarchical layers: Pakki Vartan (PV) and Katchi Vartan (KV). These categories of VB are based on the level of closeness and confidence. PV is maintained with close relatives and trustworthy close friends (Alavi, 1978: 12), whereas KV (courtesy relationship) can be established with anyone (Alavi, 1978:12; Eglar, 1960; Wakeel, 1970). The people belonging to these two different types of VB have different expectations and enjoy different kinds of support from group members (Alavi, 1978:12; Eglar, 1960; Wakeel, 1970). PV (inner core) members are given more support and in-turn more loyalty is expected from members (Lyon, 2002). In this way, patron–client relation is witnessed between VB members; a phenomenon that has also been encountered in other countries such as China (Michailova & Worm, 2003:513). As VB members experience different levels of cooperation according to the closeness of relationship and mutual confidence, the relationships in VB are maintained according

to asymmetrical logic, which is identified as one of the important features of networks (Michailova & Worm, 2003:513). As VB possesses all the three characteristics of social networks highlighted by Michailova and Worm (2003:513), VB is considered as a social network in Pakistan. In the next section, we will discuss how VB is different from western networking.

Comparison of Vartan Bhanji and Western Networking

s.n	Dimension	Vartan Bhanji	Western Networking
1	Origin	Rural gift economy	Industrial work place
2	Base of membership	Familial	Non familial
3	Principle of exchanged	Written/ more organized	Not written
4	Nature of rules	Explicit	Implicit
5	Consequences of losing	strong negative implication	Fair negative implication
6	Focus	Long term	Comparatively short term
7	Influence level	More influencing	Less influencing
8	Gender orientation	Very strong	Fair strong
9	Appreciated attribute	Loyalty	Social capital
10	Requesting help	Indirect -mediation	Direct
11	Declining a request	Can't be declined (Mang)	Can be declined
12	Role of internal and external networks	Internal and external networks combined to promote career	Role of external networks is psychosocial whereas role of internal network is instrumental in nature
13	Source of help	Inside as well as outside the organization	source in the organization
14	Nature of sponsorship	Emotional and psychological	Professional
15	Role in globalized market	Highly important	Fairly important

The table above describes that VB, despite maintaining the basic framework of a social network, is a distinctive phenomenon in certain ways. In the following discussion we will discuss each differing characteristic.

Origin of the concept: VB originates from rural gift economies and are related to family affairs (Eglar 1960) whereas Western networking originates in the industrial workplace.

Basis of membership: Family relations are a core element in VB (Eglar, 1960). In Pakistan, endogamy and consanguineous marriages are widely practiced (Afzal, Ali and Siyal 1994). VB has a familial basis of membership whereas Western networking has a non-familial base.

Principle of exchange: VB bases gift exchanges on reciprocity and gender preference (a daughter's right in her father's home; Eglar 1960, pp. 108 – 110; Mandelbaum 1970, p. 552) whereas Western networking is based on the general principle of reciprocity.

Nature of rules: In VB, with its origin in the rural gift economy, a written record of exchange is kept by all parties involved (Alavi 1978) which is consciously managed through special registers, the so-called behi (Alavi 1978). Hence, the rules of VB are very clear and explicit. Therefore, to initiate and actualize VB, there are explicit rules. However, such rules are implicit in the function of Western social networks.

Consequences of losing: The loss of VB is considered humiliating (loss of face) in Pakistani society (Eglar 1960; Alavi 1978). It is important to note, however, that due to contemporary market changes, the influence of this institution has dwindled to some extent. There are still, however, strong negative socio-political and economic implications in a situation of losing VB. However, feeble consequences are faced in Western social networks.

Focus: The focus of VB relations is long term whereas it is short term in Western social networks.

Level of Influence: As VB relations are familial in nature (even new, non-familial members are incorporated in VB through transposing familial roles & relations) therefore the level of influence of VB is far stronger than the influence of Western social networks.

Gender orientation: Out of the two basic principles of VB (reciprocity and daughters' role in her fathers' home), one is based on gender roles. Consistently, gender orientation is stronger in VB than in Western social networks.

Appreciated Attribute: The most appreciated attribute of VB is loyalty, whereas it is social capital in the case of Western social networks.

Requesting help: The mode of request is indirect (through mediation) in VB, whereas it is direct in Western social networks.

Declining a request: In VB a request, which is known as 'Mang'(rightful demand), cannot be denied as denial can cause damage to VB. But in Western social networks, the request can be denied, though it has its implications (albeit weaker) on network relations as well.

Role of internal and external networks: In VB, internal and external networks combine to promote the growth of the individual, the group and the organization whereas in the case of Western social networks, the role of external networks is psychosocial and the role of internal network is instrumental in nature.

Source of help: In VB, social connectedness, loyalty and indebtedness is very high as compared to Western social networks, therefore VB supports its members both inside as well as outside the organization whereas it is a source of help within an organization in the case of Western social networks.

Nature of sponsorship: The nature of relations and sponsorship is emotional and psychological in VB whereas it is professional in Western social networks.

Role in the globalized market: Recent research has shown that VB has remained very important in the business activities of Pakistani society (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014) and it will remain part of the modern local economy as an embedded institution. The western social networks are also important but they are more professional in nature than personalized ones like VB.

The above-mentioned discussion has clearly highlighted differences between VB and Western social networks.

Conclusion

This paper has established that Vartan Bhanji is a social network, though it is a unique cultural institution. We have borrowed the framework of Michailova and Worm (2003) comprising of three dimensions (i.e. social resourcing, continuity of relationship, and coexistence of trust and cooperation as well as power and domination) and applied it to VB in an effort to see how VB aligns with these attributes. The intellectual discussion based on an in-depth literature review and analysis has confirmed that VB stands by all three dimensions mentioned above. Hence it is proved that VB is a social network. Another target of the paper was to compare VB with the concept of Western social networks. In addition to this, a novel intellectual framework containing fifteen categories (origin of the concept, basis of membership, principle of exchange, nature of rules, consequences of losing, focus, level of influence, gender orientation, appreciated attribute, requesting help, declining a request, role of internal and external networks, source of help, nature of sponsorship, and role in the globalized market) has been developed and applied to compare VB

with Western social networks. It has been found that VB differs from Western social networks across all fifteen (15) dimensions. This paper has offered a rare in-depth insight into the issue at hand and highlights the need of qualitative research both in the context of Pakistan and in foreign cross-cultural environments where Pakistanis are working/living. The most important idea is that VB will stay relevant in all areas of contemporary Pakistan (like Guanxi in China). Consistently, there is a dire need for future research in this area.

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