

# **Tracking Social Interactions with Data from Sampling Surveys, Contact Diaries, and Social Media**

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As building blocks that link the individual to society, social interactions are intriguing yet difficult to observe and interpret. Due to the complexity of human nature and social circumstances, researchers have found it particularly challenging to transform social interactions into hard data for scientific analysis. This talk highlights and compares three approaches of collecting and analyzing quantitative data about how people contact or connect with one another: sampling surveys, contact diaries, and social media.

For nearly half a century, large-scale social surveys have generated patterns of interpersonal contacts and social networks based on probability sampling and questionnaire interviewing. Even though sampling procedures often yield representative samples that facilitate statistical inferences to populations of interests, social surveys may suffer from recall bias, social desirability, and limited depth of data. In contrast, contact diaries, a powerful though rarely used unconventional approach, dig deep into the complex circumstances around interpersonal contacts in everyday life. The resulting longitudinal diary logs help build actual and comprehensive databases of social interactions from a small group of participants.

While both sampling surveys and contact diaries rely on elaborate research designs that require participants' efforts to provide data, the digital era offers an unprecedented opportunity to study social interactions based on data automatically recorded on social media, as well as data collected via sensors and other electronic devices. By integrating existing approaches of collecting designed data into the emerging approach of studying recorded data on social media, sociologists can join data scientists to apply both theoretical reasoning and methodological rigor to better understand social interactions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.