

## **Theoretical Understanding of Social Networks and Social Capital for Volunteering for Refugees**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Volunteering is considered the outcome of social networks between volunteers. This article aims to contribute a theoretical understanding of social networks as a mechanism providing social capital (benefits) for volunteers donating their time to help refugees. For this purpose, the article conducts a combination of basic social network theory, structural hole theory, and social capital theory. Applying these three theories helps to explore who can benefit from the structure and how, and then both structural hole and social capital theories explain the way in which the network structure produces social capital benefits. Based on these theories, social networks, both direct and indirect ties can provide benefits to volunteers who help refugees. Volunteers can access and share different types of information. They can exchange ideas with other volunteers relating to volunteering. Then, they can do volunteer work that benefits volunteers and refugees.

**Keywords:** social networks, social capital, volunteering, refugees

### **Introduction**

Social networks include people and the ties between them. It is impossible or difficult for people to do what they want on their own (Field, 2003). Rather, they need to depend on others (network with others) (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010). People are connected together based on different types of ties. They meet each other as friends or colleagues regularly. They act and interact with one another or communicate with others to get benefits, including volunteering. Thus, the state of being connected allows people to discuss with, help, or gain from others because of the direct ties between them. Besides this, indirect ties can also provide benefits; a person can obtain benefits from other people who have indirect ties with them (Burt, 1992) because, as Burt explains, other people do not tie themselves together, and they do not act together. Instead, they act with the person who has ties with them. In other words, the state of being disconnected between two people where interactions and communication do not happen between them still provides benefits for other people. Benefits can be seen as a form of capital, in this case social capital (Burt, 1992), such as forming an opinion, communicating norms and information, sharing common values, performance, accessing different types of information, and doing volunteer work that benefits volunteers and other people (Abbasi et al., 2012; Baron et al., 2000; Burt, 1992; Esser, 2008; Field, 2003; Forbes & Zampelli, 2014; McFeeter & Thomson, 2015; Newman, 2018; Spera et al., 2015).

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There are several previous studies that examined the relationship between social networks (direct ties) and volunteering (Dávila, 2018; Dury et al., 2015; Wilson & Son, 2018); however, they have lacked in terms of their theoretical contribution. The previous studies have looked at the network structure of volunteers based on the theoretical arguments of the integrated theory of volunteer work, hybrid theory and structural hole theory (Burt, 1992; Einolf & Chambré, 2011; Wilson & Musick, 1997). They sought to understand how social networks – direct ties – play a role in supporting volunteer work by developing or applying volunteering theories such as the integrated theory of volunteering, the hybrid theory of volunteering, and the resource theory of volunteerism. Based on the theoretical arguments of those theories, most previous studies examined social networks as a social capital resource (Dávila, 2018; Dury et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2008; Wilson & Musick, 1997) related to the tripartite categories of human, cultural, and social capital theories. It has not yet been studied social network theory, indirect ties, to know how the structure of networks as linking people together can be a means of completing actions. Those studies also do not apply social capital theory and structural hole theory (Abbasi et al., 2012) to investigate other issues except volunteering. These mean that it has not yet been studied how direct and indirect ties can support volunteer actions theoretically.

In light of the limitation found in these studies, this study has managed to overcome the theoretical gap. As for the study's theoretical significance, this study used a combination of basic social network theory, structural hole theory and social capital theory to the subject at hand. Social network theory explains who can utilize benefits from the structure and how, then both structural hole and social capital theories explain in what way the network structure produces social capital. Combination these three theories helps to explain the aim of the study; providing a theoretical understanding of social networks as a mechanism, both direct and indirect social ties, provide social capital (benefits) for volunteers donating their time to help refugees. To address the purpose of the study, a general overview of social network theory is introduced, and then social capital theory and structural hole theory are introduced to illustrate how a network's structure can benefit its members in the following sections.

### ***Social Network Theory***

Social network theory considers the mechanism and process by which social structures contribute to achieving outcomes (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Depending on the theoretical perspective, the relational ties between individuals form the structure of the social network, which in turn affects individual actions (Kirke, 2009). This theory presents a relational understanding of social phenomena emphasizing people's networks more than their individual attributes (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). From this perspective, the central notion is that of social networks (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010).

Social networks consist of two main elements: a set of actors and the connections between them (Crossley et al., 2015). A network is like a chain, where a person connects with some other people or links in the chain, and then those others connect with still others and so on, continuously forming new chains and new links in those chains. From the perspective of network theory, ties connect people together that allow enable them to receive more opportunities in life; people's social context is considered to be extremely important, as being with other people has been shown to provide multiple benefits (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010). Social networks can appear in the social context of individuals, groups, or whole societies (Weenig, 2004). According to Weenig (2004), social context can be defined as whole set of people who are or are not connected with one another, and then that pattern of the ties between people creates a

network of connection either directly or indirectly. Social context is considered as the most important theoretical issue in network theory, referring to interpersonal relationships. People connect with others, and their ties can be a means of influence on each other, affecting behaviors such as crime (Jackson et al., 2017). This means that people alter their behavior due to the influence of other people, and their actions cannot be taken in isolation and are sometimes even impossible or difficult to do alone (Field, 2003). Moreover, the concept of social network theory generally can be traced back to a number of theoretical traditions, such as ideas of social influence and social capital, that all agree on the idea that connections benefit the parties involved (Perry et al., 2018). This study follows the social capital tradition. The reason for choosing this direction relates to purpose of the study. This study seeks to understand how social networks become social capital for volunteers. Social capital theories look to study exactly this: how social networks can provide capital (benefits) (Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1994; Lin, 1999). Social networks can help people to access resources indirectly (see Bourdieu 1986; Lin 1985). Social networks can provide benefits that some people would not otherwise directly have access to, such as power and wealth (Lin et al., 2001). Based on Bourdieu's explanation, a person can obtain benefits from other people who have ties with that person; someone may enjoy spending time with others who share their interests, for example, because the presence of similarities between the people makes for easier interactions. Or a wealthy child goes to the opera because his/her family goes (the family has this interest or resource), thus, the child would enjoy that time with his/her family at the opera only because of the family connections (Crossley et al., 2015). This means that an educated and wealthy person would find it easier to make ties with other educated and wealthy people, and the ties can in themselves be a conduit to obtain benefits (Burt, 1992). People can capture other people's resources, such as their reputation or power through the social networks between them, and the resources can then provide a benefit (return) for the people. For example, people with higher socioeconomic status use their ties with others who are in the same position to get a better job compared to those with a lower status (Lin et al., 2001; Lin & Dumin, 1986).

In contrast to the above-mentioned approach, there is another way to obtain benefits from social networks by emphasizing cohesion; strong or close ties between people is a variation on this mechanism of providing benefits (Coleman, 1994; Crossley et al., 2015; Putnam, 1995). For example, Coleman (1994) explained how direct ties between two parents can provide benefits for them in that they share the duties of caring for their children. When two parents are tied together strongly, they can come together in order to discuss their children's activities at school and then reach a consensus on their children's behavior. To add, one parent can also take responsibility not only for his/her own child, but also for the children of other families. This is all because of strong ties between the parents. Therefore, the direct connections create benefits for parents and the children as well. As Coleman (1988) pointed out, the mutual helping between parents supports the parents in raising their children and setting standards for their behavior. However, while scholars such as Bourdieu or Putnam studied social networks and their benefits, they did not look at the mechanism of indirect ties providing benefits, as Burt did.

This study focuses on social capital in the form of cohesion and structural holes. The reason has to do with the purpose of this study; the main concern here is to understanding how social networks become social capital for the volunteers to help refugees. In using these theories, this study seeks to theoretical understanding both direct ties (cohesion perspective) and indirect ties (structural holes perspective) that provide benefits. Thus, the chosen theories

are structural hole theory by (Burt, 1992), as the most essential theory among social network theories in organizational contexts (Robins, 2015), and social capital theory by Coleman (Coleman, 1994).

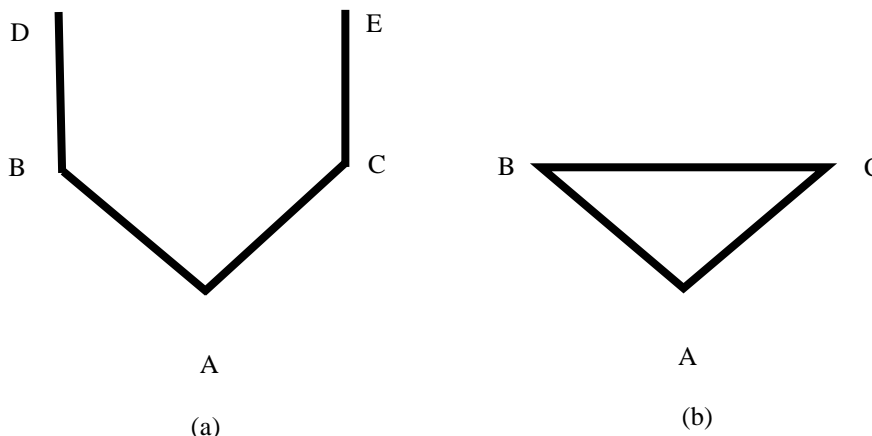
### ***Social Capital Theory***

The main idea of social capital theory is that network structures provide benefits (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). With regard to previous discussions, the chosen theory in this study is social capital theory as put forward by Coleman (1994). Coleman's theoretical notion coheres with the aim of the study; he focuses on network structure, direct ties in particular, and on obtaining benefits. Coleman's theoretical perspective will be explained in more depth below.

The sociologist James Coleman is considered as one of the first theorists who introduced the concept of social capital following the structural-functional approach (Son, 2013). Coleman, in his book *Foundations of Social Theory* (1994), discussed his perspective on the role of family and organizational relationships in providing benefits to their members (Coleman, 1994). Coleman (1994) defines social capital such as that generated by networks as featuring two main characteristics: It includes some aspects of social structure, and provides benefits to people who are part of the structure by helping them to carry out certain actions. From Coleman's definition (1994), social capital can be analyzed for its different structural aspects that help people perform certain behaviors (Robison et al., 2002). Coleman recognized social capital as one of three types of capital, namely physical, human, and social capital; physical capital is created when materials are used in forming tools, and then the tools are used to produce things that have value. Human capital is produced when a person is educated and trained to have skills, and then the skills help him/her to act in a different way by providing value. Social capital is created through the structure of social networks, and then the network structure creates benefits that have value (Stone, 2018). Coleman believes that social capital can be understood as a productive activity because it generates profits that help people to carry out desired actions (Coleman, 1988). For Coleman (1994), the profits are generated in the network structure, and the direct ties allow people to perform desired behaviors, which is also a benefit. This argument is explained in detail below.

### ***Social network structures facilitate social capital***

In 1988 and 1994, Coleman identified 'closure' as one of the properties of a social network structure, and argued that this closure is a source of benefits for network members, which he thus called 'social capital.' For Coleman, closure means strong or direct connections between or among people, and when networks have closure it means that everyone is connected with all the others in the network (Burt, 2001; Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000). Furthermore, Coleman (1988) explains how different types of social capital, in particular trust and norms, can be obtained when people are connected strongly. He explains the role of direct connections in the existence of social norms, because a person can encourage other people to change their behavior if there are direct connections between them, or a person can protect other people from negative external impacts if they are directly connected. Conversely, when direct connections are lacking, norms cannot exist (Coleman, 1994). In other words, benefits cannot be obtained. For more clarification, Coleman explains his argument in an illustration as shown in Figure 1.1



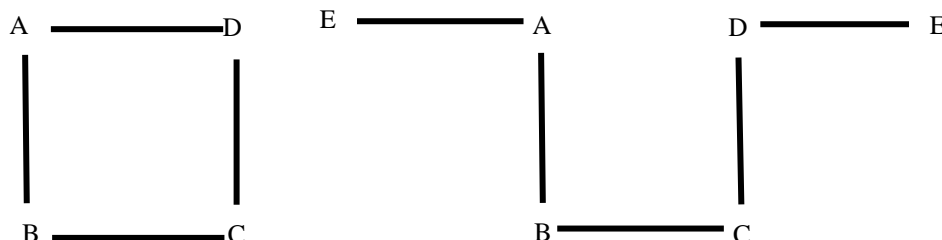
**Figure 1.1** (a) *Community without direct ties* and (b) *Community with direct ties*  
**Source:** Adapted from Figure 12.5, p S106, Coleman (1988)

On the left of Figure 1.1(a), all the actors are not connected together. Actor A is connected directly with actor B and actor C, but actor A cannot obtain more benefits because actors B and C are not connected together directly and have only external connections (with actors D and E). In other words, actors B and C cannot combine their efforts to provide benefits for actor A. In contrast, on the right of Figure 1.1(b) is what Coleman calls a closed network structure, where actor A has strong connections with actor B and with actor C. At the same time, actors B and C are likewise connected strongly. Coleman explains that in this type of structure, actor A can receive benefits from both actors B and C. Actors B and C can combine their efforts to provide benefits for actor A. The only reason for this is due to the direct connections between the actors. For a more practical understanding, Coleman (1988) simplifies his argument with the example of relations in and outside the family.

In Figure 1.2, actor A and actor D are parents. Actor B is the child of actor A. Actor C is the child of actor D. There are direct connections between the parents (A and D), between the parents and their children, and between the children who attend the same school. The left of the figure (a) shows a closed network structure; parent A and parent D can discuss their children's school activities and may come to a consensus regarding their children's behavior. In addition, parent A can provide guidance not only for his/her own child, but also for the other parent's child (D's child). This is because parent A has a direct connection with D who is the parent of C. In this way, the direct connections create benefits for the parents toward their children and for the children toward each other. As Coleman (1988) pointed out, the mutual assistance between parents helps them to raise their children and agree upon norms of behavior for their children. Conversely, on the right in (b), parent A and parent D are not connected directly and thus cannot help each other.

Overall, according to Coleman, closure in a network structure can provide benefits for parents, who may alternate caregiving, and for children, who can help each other at school. Coleman (1994) explains that the benefits obtained through direct networks are classified into three main types, namely norms and sanctions, information flow, and obligation and expectation. In his explanation, Coleman (1988,1994) points out that one of the significant benefits that can be provided through direct connections is informational benefits, which can facilitate behaviors or actions. Following his explanation, Coleman believes that when a person has no interest in an event, for example, but only really wants to know what

happened there, he/she can ask a friend to share the information. The person can ask others for information (e.g. to save time reading) if the parties are directly connected.



**Figure 1.2:** *Networks including parents (A, D) and children (C, B) with direct ties (a) and without some direct ties (b)*

**Source:** *Adapted from Figure 12.5, pS107, Coleman (1988)*

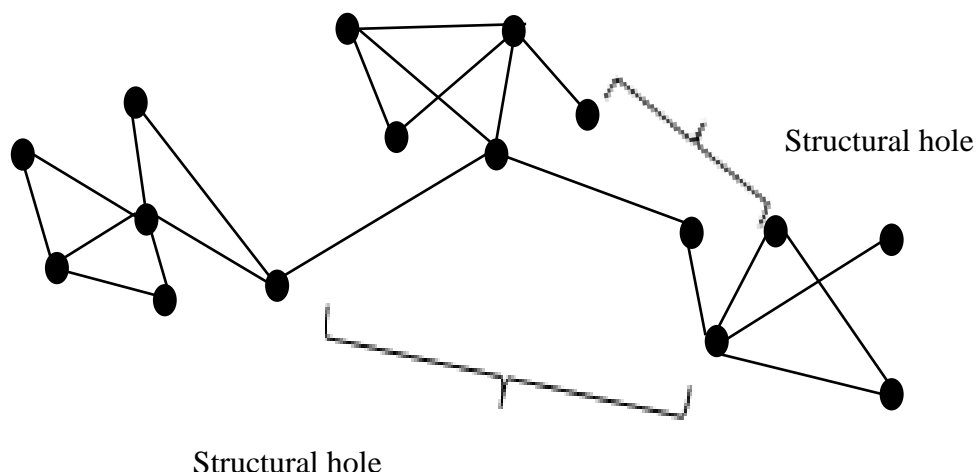
### **Structural Whole Theory**

The concept of individual social capital views social networks as a mechanism for action and explains how a social network produces certain outcomes for individuals through the function of its social ties (Mwila, 2014). This concept, as characterized by Burt (1992), has two ways of explaining social capital. The first way is to view an individual's role in the network as a conduit to obtain profits. Nan Lin's work is an example of this view, where he defines social capital as an "investment in social relations with expected returns" (Lin, 1999). The second way, as presented by Burt (1992), states that social networks can be described as capital in their own right. Although there are some theorists who have presented theoretical notions to explain the two ways differently, this study takes the second perspective, which describes how people can reach benefits but not who they reach, by applying the structural hole theory of Ronald S. Burt (Burt, 1992).

American sociologist Ronald Stuart Burt is considered to be the leading and most prominent scholar to create a bridge between social networks and social capital through his work on 'structural hole theory' (Baron et al., 2000; Koput, 2010). The main idea behind structural hole theory is that a social network's structure determines the benefits its members receive (Burt, 1992). Practically, it looks like this: If you connect with only close friends, your resources for getting information are limited, but if you connect with other possible networks, then you have more chances to access different types of information (Esser, 2008). This is the main idea behind Burt's theory, which is based on several sociological theories, specifically network theories emphasizing the strength of weak ties by Granovetter, the power of exclusive exchange partners by Cook and Emerson, betweenness centrality by Freeman, and structural autonomy through network complexity by Burt (Burt 1997). Structural hole theory was developed to describe how certain network structures provide benefits and differs significantly from Coleman's argument (Burt, 1992). For Burt, certain network structures feature indirect ties, which he terms "structural holes," meaning absent or missing ties between two persons who are connected to others in the network but not each other (Perry et al., 2018). Burt used the term "structural hole" to represent indirect ties. This hole is not actually a physical or literal hole, however. Instead, holes refer to indirect ties or

disconnections between or among people (Burt, 1987, 1992). In his theory, Burt (1992) uses the term ‘structural hole’ as shown in Figure 1.3, as a gap between two disconnected contacts. This means that within these individuals’ networks, there are no close interactions between them (Labun & Wittek, 2018). Burt (1992) believes that disconnections – indirect ties – can be determined in two ways: either there are no strong ties or cohesion between individuals, or there are no direct ties between some individuals who are connected to others in the network but not each other, generating a lack of structural equivalence. In other words, without cohesion and structural equivalence in interpersonal connections, indirect ties or ‘structural holes’ may appear.

Burt (1992) explains that indirect ties appear when there is an absence of cohesion, where cohesion refers to the situation where two people are directly connected, such as a brother and sister, or husband and wife. In a situation where people are connected directly or strongly, their channel of connection involves the same people, or ‘redundant ties,’ and everyone with ties can reach the same person easily, thus the obtained benefits are likely the same ‘redundant information’ (Burt, 2000). In other words, if there is a strong connection between two people, they are likely to obtain similar benefits; for example, they may share the same information, and their network structure will not include indirect ties (Burt, 2001).

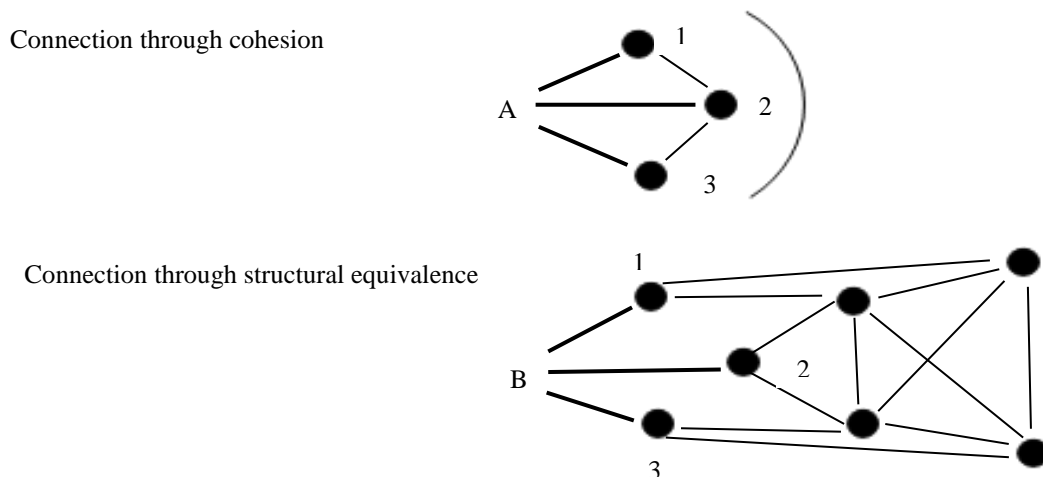


**Figure 1.3** *Structural holes*  
**Source:** Adapted from Figure 1.6, p27, Burt (1992)

In addition, Burt (1992) explains the second form of indirect ties through the concept of structural equivalence; structural equivalence means two people are not connected with one another directly, but they do connect with other people who are connected together directly. According to Burt (Burt, 2000), however, although the two people are not connected together, their source of benefits (other people) are the same and thus the obtained benefits are the same. Therefore, indirect ties cannot appear (Burt, 2000). Simply put, indirect ties appear in a network structure where there is a lack of cohesion and structural equivalence.

To better understanding what Burt means with the two forms of indirect ties mentioned above, his theoretical idea is illustrated in Figure 1.4. First, at the top of the figure, actor A has three contacts: contact 1, contact 2, and contact 3. The contacts are strongly connected together, therefore the same benefits are provided for actor A through those equivalent direct ties. This means that indirect ties are absent and the same benefits are obtained by all. Second, at the bottom of Figure 1.4, actor B is connected to actor 1, actor 2, and actor 3. However, B’s networks (contact 1, contact 2, and contact 3) are not tied together

– there is no cohesion – but they are still tied to others who are tied together (structural equivalence). Therefore, actor B has same source of benefits. After explaining how indirect ties may appear in a network structure, Burt (2000) continues in his powerful explanation of how these social ties can provide benefits for people.



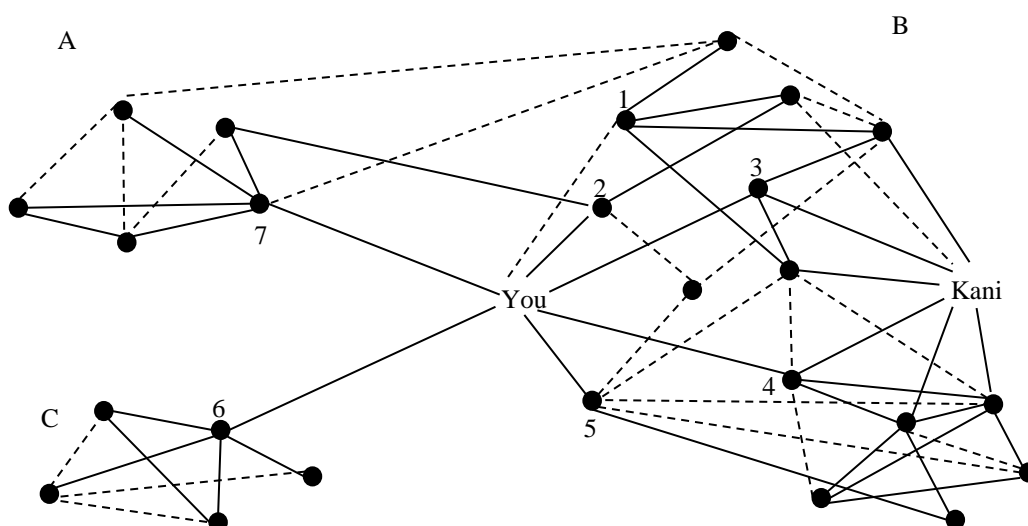
**Figure 1.4** *Structural indicators of being connected*  
**Source:** *Adapted from Figure 1.2, p18, Burt (1992)*

Burt (2000) believes that there are two kinds of network benefits derived from having indirect ties in a network structure; the benefits are information and control benefits, which then lead people to attain their goals or rewards (Perry et al., 2018). According to Burt (1992), an information benefit determines who knows about new projects or new jobs, for example, when they can know and who then gets to work on them. The argument is that a person can obtain information benefits from others who are not connected together directly, and then the person is able to get what he/she wants in order to make such as decision (Perry et al., 2018). The access feature of a network means that when a person is connected to others who are not directly connected to each other, then the first person is likely to have a greater opportunity to get more information (with little redundant information) compared to other people by being able to reach more people (more sources of information benefits). This means that through channels formed by connections, information can be sent and received, and greater access is provided to the connected network members (Koput, 2010). In addition, timing, as Burt (2001) explains, means giving a person information earlier than other people; having indirect ties in a person’s network structure allows the person to obtain information earlier. Regarding referrals, being connected with others will allow you to mention “your name at the right time in the right place, so opportunities are presented to you” (Burt, 1992). He believes that when a person is informed by others at an earlier time than other people, that person could also be informed about other benefits in the future by the people who are aware of him/her. Overall, having indirect ties in network structures can help people to obtain benefits in the form of greater access, earlier time, and more future opportunities related to information (Burt, 2000).

The second type of benefit – control benefit – means that a person’s position (connected with others who have no connection together) allows that person to act as a broker to manage indirect ties in the form of passing information or ideas to disconnected parties (Crossley et al., 2015). Control benefits have to do with the power and influence of a person (or an actor or ego) who plays a role as a coordinator, consultant, or gatekeeper for others who are not connected with them (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). For a better understanding,



Burt's theory is illustrated in more detail in Figure 1.5. In Figure 1.5, Kani has fewer benefits than you; however, your number of direct ties is the same as for Kani: six direct ties. On the one hand, Kani is tied to actors (1, 2, 3 and so on) within group B. Through the direct ties of actors with other actors, all actors connect with each other directly within the group. Therefore, Kani is well informed about the activities taking place within the group. On the other hand, like Kani, you are tied to all actors in group B through direct connections. However, in addition, your direct ties with actor 7 and actor 6 can give you additional



**Figure 1.5** *Networks around You and Kani*  
**Source:** adapted from Figure 1., p. 33 Burt (2001)

Benefits. Because you can reach people from group B, as well as groups A and C, you are likely to have more opportunities to receive benefits. Your expanded access to information limits the amount of redundant information you receive, because the information benefits come from different actors that are not all connected to each other. Moreover, your position can allow you to perhaps obtain information earlier before the other actors can get the same information, such as between actors 6 and 7. Furthermore, your ties are more likely to create new opportunities for you in the future and make you a candidate for talks or discussions in the groups before other actors.

## Conclusion

Volunteering is a social behavior that is done through social networks between volunteers to help other people, including refugees. Social networks are a significant mechanism at play in the prosocial behavior. Through the network structure people perform their prosocial behaviors because it is sometimes impossible or difficult for them to accomplish what they want on their own. Rather, they need to depend on others through forming social networks for maximum effectiveness and efficiency. Previous studies have no clear theoretical foundation addressing the social networks structure, in particular indirect ties, relating to volunteering based on the combination of basic social network theory, structural hole theory, and social capital theory. Given the importance of these social network issue, this article contributes a theoretical understanding of social networks as a mechanism providing social capital (benefits) for volunteers donating their time to help refugees combination the three theories. The network structure can illustrate which volunteer connects with another (creating direct ties between them) and which volunteers are not connected with

each other (forming indirect ties). Both structural and social capital theories can illustrate the network structure, including how the states of being connected and not connected can be mechanism of obtaining social capital that ultimately aids the volunteers' activities.

From the perspective of network theory, ties connect people together that allow enable them to receive more opportunities in life; people's social context is considered to be extremely important, as being with other people has been shown to provide multiple benefits. The main notion of this theory is that connections among people represent a mechanism of behavior. Social network theory illustrates how ties between people form a network structure, which then affects people's behavior; social ties thus connect people together in a way that can benefit all of them (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010; Kirke, 2009). Furthermore, structural hole theory argues that people who have direct ties with others who are themselves not directly connected can benefit, for example controle benefit, from this situation (Burt, 1992); if people connect with only friends directly, the resources for getting information are limited, but connecting with other possible networks, then there are more chances to access different types of information. Based on social capital theory, it has argued that people who have direct ties to other people can also benefit such as information flow (Coleman, 1994). This means that both types of social networks can provide benefits for volunteers who donar their time to help refugees. Volunteers can access and sharing different types of information. They can exchange ideas with other volunteers relating to volunteering. Then, they can do volunteer work that benefits volunteers and refugees. The theoretical understanding of social network provide avenue for future research on social networks as a capital for those who are not only volunteers, but also conducting for employees who help other people in their work applying the combination of basic social network theory, structural hole theory and social capital theory.

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