Reviewer's report

**Title:** The role of social networks in the development of overweight and obesity among adults: a scoping review

**Version:** 2  
**Date:** 15 June 2015

**Reviewer:** Stephanie Broyles

**Reviewer's report:**

This paper aims to provide theoretical clarity around processes by which social networks can contribute to development of overweight and obesity. This is an important and timely research topic, and I am enthusiastic about what the authors set out to do. The methods appear to be robust, although vague/confusing at points (see comments below). However, I found the paper in its current form to be too “loose” – i.e., many terms/concepts/constructs (e.g., social network, social capital) are used throughout the paper without providing standard definitions and citations, and this created a situation where I still felt lost at the end, rather than better informed. With more clarity and structure, this work could be an important addition to the literature.

**Major compulsory revisions**

1. **Precision of terminology/concepts**

   In the introduction, please define what you mean by “social network” (that framed your research and that will frame the reader’s understanding of rest of the paper). You provide references to other work and provide many examples of types of social networks, but leave it to the reader to form their own working definition. E.g., is any type of social interaction a social network? Currently, the working definition of “social networks” isn’t provided for the reader until the methods section (line 140) and is still vague.

   In the introduction, you seem to set up two concepts – 1) types of social networks and 2) social processes within social networks – but describe them mainly through examples from the literature with terminology that readers are probably not familiar with and which all sound similar. Are there any standard “types” that can be listed for the reader? Are there social processes which are already accepted concepts in the social network literature? It would help to have a sense of this to start with – assuming that this is what the authors started from and then reviewed the obesity/social network literature to see which concepts appear to be most important. Right now, it’s not clear how this work already builds on the current social network literature.

   Later in the results (lines 172 onward) more examples are given. It was unclear to me whether these are standard types or derived from the review. The types of networks seem so broad that the review is hard to follow conceptually. Is it okay to be comparing all of these types of networks? Were characteristics of the
networks like density, size, strength of ties considered in the review and how?

I’m not sure where the best place would be for this (introduction or results?), but I think a table with terminology, definitions, citations would be very helpful. I also encourage the authors to use the same terminology throughout the paper, rather than using synonyms, as it’s not always clear whether you refer to the same concept or a variation on it. (As an example, subcategory in results is “social capital” but in the discussion it’s referred to as “access to social resources.” Call it one thing, define it, and stick to it.) Related to this, the authors describe recording their work in a thematic chart (line 161) – it would be helpful to see this chart, maybe in conjunction with the terminology/definitions/citations. Some sort of conceptual diagram would be really helpful, too – especially to structure the outcome, which is also broad, encompassing behaviors (diet and physical activity), body weight norms/ideals, objective body weight, etc…

As another example, in the results section on social capital (starting line 279), it would help to have a definition with citations that explains how they are using the term. Entire books have been written on social capital, and it’s a very broad concept with both positive and negative influences.

2. More details about aspects of the methods

I got lost in the jump between the paragraph starting on line 172 and the next that started on line 184. In the first paragraph, the authors just list lots of network types and weight-related concepts and then they immediately drill down to 3 social processes that link all of the above. Something seems missing that could better describe how they reached these groupings. Just feels under-described to me.

Paragraph starting line 123: Please describe the broad exclusion criteria that were developed.

Related to the use of the thematic chart (line 161), how were the categories harmonized with existing concepts in social network and related literature?

Minor essential revisions

1. Figure 1: On line 103, the authors mentioned that the initial database search yielded 390 records, but the numbers 490 and 390 appear in Figure 1.

2. Line 182. “body size norms…” is repeated.

3. Line 284: Use the term “higher” (e.g., higher social capital) when cross-sectional results, and “increased” when longitudinal changes/increases were observed. I didn’t note all of the places where this occurred.

Discretionary revisions

1. Given the already very broad focus of the research question, the authors could consider restricting the geographic focus of the research. E.g., should social networks in a undeveloped, isolated, and culturally different Amazonian village really be compared to those in industrialized and technologically advanced first-world countries? A sociologist might be better able to weigh in on this, but
worth thinking about as authors and addressing for your readers.

2. Figure 1: The line from “records excluded” to “records assessed for eligibility” is confusing. Should this be from the 136 articles box? … Also it would be helpful to have subheading in the figure; it was hard to reconcile with the description in the text. … Please also clarify (e.g., footnote) “articles identified by other means”.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.