

Connected

- ❖ The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives.
- ❖ by Nicholas A. Christakis, MD, PhD and James H. Fowler, PhD
- ❖ 2009, Little Brown and Company: New York, NY
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The big picture

- ❖ As the authors studied social networks, they began to think of them as human super organisms. They grow and evolve. All sorts of things flow and move within them. This super organism has its own structure and a function, and they became obsessed with understanding both. Once we see ourselves as part of a larger network, we can better understand our actions, choices, and experiences. These connections are natural and necessary and a force for good. Just as brains can do more than single neurons, so can social networks do things that no single person can do. To know who we are, we must understand how we are connected.

Basic examples

- ❖ A bucket brigade is described as a type of social organization that can accomplish something that would not be possible without it. It is linear with no branches. Each person except the first and last is connected to two others. Typical social networks are much more complex and in them each person (node) has his or her own unique set of connections with others.

Rules of life

- ❖ 1) Humans deliberately make and remake their social networks all the time with people who share interests, histories, and dreams. Sometimes it is not a matter of choice as in family and work relations.
- ❖ 2) Your place in your network shapes you. Not only are the number of connections important, but number of connections for the people you are connected to also makes a difference. It determines how central you are and being central makes you more susceptible to whatever is flowing in the network.

More Rules

- ❖ 3) Our friends affect us. The people we spend time with influence us in that humans tend to copy one another's habits and behaviors.
- ❖ 4) We also copy our friends' friends and our friends' friends' friends.
- ❖ 5) A network has a life of its own that is neither controlled or even perceived by the people in it.

Six Degrees of separation Three Degrees of influence

- ❖ In general, you are connected to just about anyone else in the country by an average of six connections. One's influence, however, does not extend beyond three connections. The three degrees of influence is what allows our social network to help us achieve what we could not achieve on our own. If you are happier, richer, or healthier than others, it may have a lot to do with where you happen to be in the network. If we want to understand how society works, we need to fill in the missing links between individuals. We need to understand how interconnections and interactions between people give rise to wholly new aspects of human experience that are not present in the individuals themselves.

Keep smiling

- ❖ Emotions of all sorts, joyful or otherwise, can spread between pairs of people and among larger groups. Emotions have a collective and not just an individual origin. People can “catch” emotional states they observe in others over time frames ranging from seconds to weeks. When waiters are trained to provide “service with a smile” their customers report feeling more satisfied, and they leave better tips. Emotions precede language. What they lack in specificity compared to oral language, they make up for in speed. You can tell when someone is happy or mad immediately.

Who's in the center

- ❖ Happy people tend to cluster with happy people in a social network and they are also more likely to be at the center of the network. Unhappy people who cluster together seem more peripheral and they are much more likely to appear at the end of a chain of social relationships or at the edge of the network. Each happy friend you have increases the probability of a person being happy by 9%. Each unhappy friend decreases it by 7%. Proximity also matters. A happy neighbor or a happy sibling who lives nearby makes you happier, while happy people down the block and happy siblings who live out of town do not.

Your Happy level is resistant to change

- ❖ A change in a person's circumstances may make them initially happier or sadder. After a while people return to their original level of happiness. Studies of lottery winners and spinal chord injury patients reveal that after a year or two they are no more happy or sad than the rest of us. We overlook our ability to adapt to circumstances. (Dr. Doug: This proved true for my wife who suffered with ALS for the last three years of her life. During that time I cared for her 24/7 and felt we were no less happy than we ever were.)

Feeling in love

- ❖ People around the world are different in many ways but they have very similar if not identical feelings and they respond in a similar manner to the feelings of others. One emotion central to human experience that is key to understanding social connection is love. Being in love is a key mechanism by which certain important social ties are formed, and it is therefore highly relevant to the origin and function of social networks. Almost two-thirds of married couples were introduced by family, friends, or some one they knew. This number is closer to half for one-night-stands. Married couples also exhibit homogamy, which is the tendency to marry someone who shares many traits from education to ethnicity.

Sex & your network

- ❖ Peers are more likely to promote sex than discourage it. Adolescents who believe that their peers would look favorably on being sexually active are more likely to have casual, nonromantic sex. These peer pressures underlie the changing mores regarding oral sex seen among American teenagers in the late 1990's. People with more partners also have more variety in their sex lives. Your network will also promote acceptance or discrimination, (Dr. Doug: This seems to explain why the country seems to be so divided on same sex marriage.)

Marriage & life Expectancy

- ❖ In general, people who are married live longer than those who are widowed or single. The marriage benefit for men is an average of seven years. For women it is two years. The most important reason for this seems to be causal. The emotional support spouses provide has numerous biological and psychological benefits. It costs less to live together so money is less likely to be an issue. Men gain more as they tend to give up “stupid bachelor tricks” such as risky behavior and poor eating habits. When men die they leave much of what they brought to the marriage behind such as money and property. When women die, they take much of what they brought with them. This includes emotional support, a connection to others, and a well-run home.

Susceptibility issues

- ❖ The more paths that connect you to people in the network, the more susceptible you are to what flows within it. The book uses sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) to make this point. People are at risk not so much because of who they are, but because of who they know. Behaviors are contagious. The authors cite a study they did that shows how obesity is contagious as if it were a germ-born disease. What spreads from person to person is what social scientists call a *norm*, which is a shared expectation about what is appropriate. As being overweight becomes more acceptable, (a norm) others are more likely to copy it.

Smoking & Drinking

- ❖ The reduction in smoking over the past 40 years from 45% to 21% follows the social networking theory. When one person quits smoking, it has a ripple effect on his friends and others elsewhere in the network. People who persist in smoking find themselves progressively marginalized in the network. The separation between smokers and nonsmokers has increased over time. Well-educated people are more likely to imitate the smoking-cessation behavior of his peers. The authors also note that people are much more susceptible to influence by peers of the same sex which explains why spouses have less influence on each other.

The Strength of weak Ties

- ❖ Strong ties may bind individuals together into groups, but weak ties bind groups together into the larger society, and are crucial for the spread of information. Most workers find jobs via weak ties rather than close friends, which is much the same way they find sexual partners by searching their social network beyond their immediate ties. Since information flows freely within a close circle of friends, it is likely that people know more or less what their friends know. When you move socially farther away, there is less overlap in experience and information, thus it has more value.

loans to networks

- ❖ Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for his discovery that loans could be made to groups of poor people who only had the social collateral of their network to offer. He found that peer pressure worked to keep groups honest and that groups were stronger if they came into being by themselves. The bank he formed in Bangladesh loaned almost exclusively to groups of women, who due to their gender had more social capital. The discovery that the use of social networks can reduce inequality holds promise for their use in other manners.

Enter technology

- ❖ In the recent past, our social networks have been subjected to technical advances such as multiplayer online games, social-network websites, collective information sites, and dating sites. While the social networks formed online may be abstract, large, complex, and super modern, they also reflect universal and fundamental human tendencies that emerged in our prehistoric past when we told stories to one another around campfires. Even advances like the printing press, the telephone, and the Internet do not take us away from this past; they draw us closer to it. Electronic communication enhances, rather than replaces direct social ties of the kind Americans typically have with their neighbors.

Real Poverty

- ❖ Your chance of dying after a heart attack may depend on your friends. Your chance of finding a job may have more to do with the friends of your friends than your skill set. Your chance of being treated kindly may depend on how well connected you are. To reduce poverty, we should help the poor form new relationships. When we target the periphery of a network to help people connect, we help the whole fabric of society, not just the disadvantaged individuals at the fringe.

Needed research

- ❖ Science has to expand beyond studying parts of things, such as individuals, to studying the whole, such as networks. It is not easy to determine how a person is located in the social network, but digital communications such as e-mail, mobile phones, and social-network websites are making it easier to see networks on a large scale without necessarily surveying individuals at great expense. The science of social networks offers an entirely new way of understanding human society, because it is about individuals and groups and, indeed, about how the former become the later.

feed your network

- ❖ When we take better care of ourselves, so do many other people. When we practice random acts of kindness, they can spread to dozens or even hundreds of others. And with each good deed, we help to sustain the very network that sustains us. (Dr. Doug: Taking care of yourself should come first. If you fail to do so, you won't be much good for others. Being kind to others is also selfish, as the way you behave will determine how others treat you. I find these to be guiding principals of my life and I am convinced that they are working for me. The other important point is that behaviors are contagious. We all need to exhibit the behaviors we want to see more of. Try smiling more often and see how it works for you. Good luck.)

Stuff I left out

- ❖ In an effort to encourage my readers to buy this book I have left out enough content to encourage anyone interested in my summary to get this book in their hands. Here are some topics that I did not include in my summary.
- ❖ Is suicide contagious?
- ❖ The role of people who are influenceable.
- ❖ The rational for voting and the impact of people who vote.
- ❖ The social network on the Survivor TV show.
- ❖ Genetic issues