

## social networks: the value of variety

*People are healthier and happier when they have intimates who care about and for them. But they also do better when they know many different people casually.*

Having close kin and intimate friends helps with many things, from coping with everyday problems to living longer. But what about the hundreds of more casual connections individuals have? What of acquaintances, workmates and neighbors? We tend to make such fast friends easily and lose them without noticing. Nonetheless, these seemingly thin social bonds are quite valuable when they are diverse.

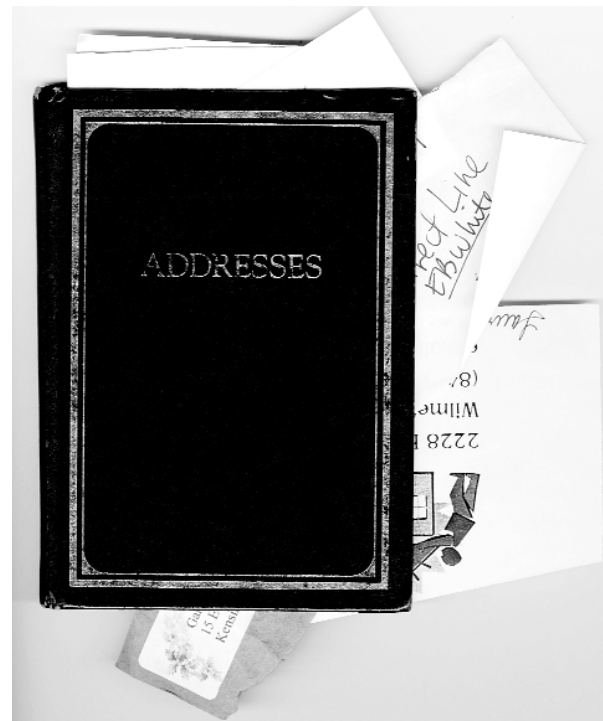
Variety is the key. Knowing many kinds of people in many social contexts improves one's chances of getting a good job, developing a range of cultural interests, feeling in control of one's life and being healthy. Sometimes knowing many kinds of people is helpful because it improves the chances of having the right contact for some purpose: hearing of an attractive job opening, borrowing a lawnmower, getting the home cleaned.

Network variety can also be useful in itself, for example in jobs that call for diverse contacts. Either way, the critical matter is the variety of acquaintances and not the mere number.

### understanding acquaintanceship

Sociologists have measured acquaintance networks by focusing on occupations. People in different occupations differ from each other in many important ways. The work we do reflects much of our pasts, such as schooling and family background, and shapes the ways we live, such as tastes and lifestyles. Generally, someone who knows people in diverse kinds of jobs will thereby know people who are diverse in many respects. The standard strategy is to present a respondent with a list of occupations that range from very high to very low in prestige, and ask whether the respondent knows anyone in each. The greater the number of occupations within which a respondent has a contact, the more the variety in the respondent's social network.

Researchers using this measure have found interesting differences between respondents in different nations. For example, a study in Albany, New York and a study in East Germany before the fall of the Communist regime each asked respondents about the same 10 occupations: Did they know anyone who was a lawyer, small business owner, teacher, engineer, motor mechanic, secretary, bookkeeper/office clerk, salesperson, porter/janitor or waiter?



**One resource for keeping track of diverse acquaintances.**

The average respondent in Albany knew someone in 4.5 of these occupations, compared to an average of 3.8 for East Germans, so the American networks were about 20 percent more diverse. This is not surprising given that East Germans were wary of strangers in a totalitarian society in which about one in ten people in every work group was an informant for the secret police.

Such acquaintances are a more diverse set than are the few people to whom we feel really close—both because weak ties greatly outnumber strong ones, and because our close ties are usually limited to people very much like ourselves. For example, when I studied the private security industry in Toronto I asked whether people knew close friends, relatives, or anyone at all in each of 19 occupations. My respondents knew relatives, on average, in about two of these occupations, close friends in about half a dozen and anyone at all in about a dozen.

In every country that has been studied in this way, being of higher status goes with having a wider variety of acquaintances.



Job listing with preference for individuals who have lots of friends.

tances. In the Toronto security industry, business owners had contacts in 15 occupations, managers in 13, supervisors 10, and mere employees 9. In Hungary, before and even more so after the end of Communism, wealthier people had more diverse networks than the less wealthy. In Taiwan, more highly educated people have more diverse acquaintances than the less educated, and men have more diverse acquaintances than women do. In general, every kind of social advantage tends to generate a network advantage, which in turn helps the socially advantaged to stay ahead.

## networks and jobs

Diverse networks can help people to get good jobs. Having a variety of acquaintances improves a jobseeker's chances of having one really useful contact, and variety itself is a qualification for some upper-end jobs.

People in North America find their jobs with the help of a contact roughly half the time. We might assume that such helpers must be close friends and relatives willing to work hard for the jobhunter. But this is not the usual story in Western nations. Close friends and kin want to help, but often cannot do very much because they are too much alike: they move in the same social circles and share information and influence, so

they can do little for the candidate beyond what he or she can do alone. But acquaintances are more varied, less like each other, more likely to have new information and more likely to include people highly-placed enough to influence hiring. Thus family and close friends provide fewer jobs (and often worse jobs) than do people outside the intimate circle. This is the surprising finding that Mark Granovetter called "the strength of weak ties" (the title of one of the most frequently cited articles in social science).

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The strength of strong ties applies best to the few people at the top, because they have highly-placed kin and friends who collect a lot of information and can exert a lot of influence. In general, more highly-placed people can connect a jobseeker to more highly-placed jobs, and one big advantage

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of having a diverse network is the improved chance of knowing such a useful contact. The Albany study found that people with more diversified acquaintances were more likely to get help from contacts holding more prestigious jobs, which led in turn to getting a job with higher prestige. On the other hand, for most people, using a friend or relative as a contact meant using someone with a lower-ranking job, and hence getting a worse job. For the few who came from privileged backgrounds, all kinds of helpers—friends, relatives or acquaintances—were in high-status positions on average, and all those kinds of contacts helped them get good jobs.

Having a diverse set of acquaintances matters where there is a fairly free market in jobs and a fairly rich supply of jobs. If jobs are scarce, those in the know will hoard access to good ones for people they care about the most, so strong ties are

more valuable in these circumstances. In non-market systems run by the state, the private use of personal contacts to get jobs may be risky: networking subverts state power and policy, and influential people may not want to be responsible for the occupational or political errors of acquaintances whom they help. Well-placed people still provide personal help, but mainly to jobseekers or intermediaries whom they know well and can trust. Thus studies show that both the Chinese and the East Germans (before the change of regime) used strong ties the most, far more often than in the West.

Diversified acquaintances are valuable as an ensemble when employers want to recruit both a person and the person's contacts, to make his or her network work for the organization. This is especially true for higher-level jobs because it is only higher-level jobs that include consequential responsibility for the "foreign affairs" of the organization. For example, in my study of the private security industry in Toronto, I asked employers how they hired for jobs from security guard up to manager and asked whether the employer required "good contacts" for these positions. For lower-level jobs, they did not. But for upper-level jobs, employers often did want people with contacts they could use to monitor the industry and its environment, to get information, to recruit new customers and to maintain good relationships with powerful outsiders such as the police.



Diverse acquaintance networks help individuals locate health services and assistance.



Photo by Linda Sanderson

**Acquaintanceships developed at this urban dog park have led some members to new clients, services and job prospects.**

When employers think of good contacts, what do they mean? In a word, variety. Employers named desirable contacts of many kinds (in their own industry, government, the police, senior management, etc.) and sometimes explicitly wanted variety as such (“all available”). The more varied a person’s network, the more that network can do for the organization.

Employees with more network variety got jobs with higher rank and higher income. This was true whether or not people got those jobs through someone they knew. Again, a network of acquaintances is more useful than one of intimates, because acquaintances have the diversity employers seek.

Does all this add up to “it’s not what you know, but who you know?” Not really. Sometimes what you know is critical. Even in the security industry, which has no formal certifications, employers often want to hire people with contacts and skills, not contacts instead of skills. Because employers look for both, using personal connections helps most to get a job at the top or bottom of the ladder, not in the middle. At the bottom, skill requirements are modest. Employers just want a reliable employee and jobseekers just want an adequate job. Using contacts is one cheap way to make this match.

At the top, skill requirements are important but also hard to measure (how do you know whether someone will be a dynamic manager with current knowledge of the market, for example?) so employers look for prospects they know or can-

didates recommended by people they trust. In the middle, skill requirements are serious and fairly easy to measure through credentials (like a recent computer programming degree from a good school) or experience (like a strong track record in sales), so who the candidate knows matters less.

Acquaintance diversity also contributes to being better informed about health. People with wider networks are better informed about most things, but they may not realize how many of their good health practices go back to a thousand tiny nudges from casual conversations.

### networks and health

Knowing people is important in getting a job, but it also matters for other areas of our lives that are less obvious, such as good health. Research has long shown that having close friends and family is good for a person’s health. People who say they have someone they can count on feel less depressed, get less physically ill and live longer than those who do not. The newer news is that having a variety of



**Most parents found this pediatric clinic through recommendations by friends and acquaintances.**

acquaintances also improves health. In a study of a Toronto social movement, I asked people about both the diversity of their contacts outside the group and the diversity of their contacts within the group. I found that people with more diversified general networks were less depressed, and people with more diverse contacts in the group more often felt that participation had improved their health. Such findings may seem odd, because our intimates play a more obvious

role in our health. We discuss our health concerns with those we trust and get care from those who care about us.

Acquaintances make more subtle contributions in small, invisible increments over the long run. One such contribution is a sense of control over one's life, a well-documented source of good health. People who feel more in control are less depressed just because of that, since feeling pushed around is a miserable and unwelcome experience. Moreover, having a sense of control encourages people to tackle problems they encounter, so they cope better with stress. This valuable sense of control grows with the diversity of acquaintances.

People with diverse contacts consciously adapt to different situations and manage conflicting obligations. They have to decide whom to see, how to act appropriately with others differing in their expectations, how to balance sometimes conflicting demands. As they navigate their intricate options, they develop a well-grounded sense of control over their lives. Thus I found that members with more diversified acquaintances outside the Toronto movement felt more in control of their lives overall, and members with more diversified acquaintances within the group more often felt that participation had empowered them.

Acquaintance diversity also contributes to being better informed about health. People with wider networks are better



Photo by Mark Bosler

**"English club" members in Davis, California discuss books, cultural events, work and internship opportunities.**

informed about most things, but they may not realize how many of their good health practices go back to a thousand tiny nudges from casual conversations. They may know that they are committed to pushing down the broccoli and getting some exercise, while forgetting how many acquaintances mentioned the importance of such healthy habits. My study of the security industry shows a clear link between diversity and information flow, not only about health, but on a variety of topics. People with more varied connections knew more about each of several different kinds of things: the arts

(books and artists), popular culture (sports stars), and business culture (business magazines and restaurants suited to power dining).

Feeling in control and being well-informed both flow from the diversity of the whole ensemble of acquaintances. But health, like work, sometimes benefits from a varied network because varied connections are more likely to include particular useful ones. For example, people who knew many kinds of people in the social movement group were much more likely to get some help with health (from organic vegetables to massage) from associates in the group. They knew what to look for and whom to trust to provide it.

Diverse networks also improve people's health indirectly, by helping them get ahead economically, and wealthier people tend to be healthier people. But the connection between wealth and health might suggest that all these benefits of having a variety of acquaintances might really just reflect the advantages of high social position. People with more network variety, better jobs, more feelings of control and better health may be that way because they come from more privileged circumstances. It is important to note, therefore, that all the studies that I have described have taken into account other characteristics of individuals, such as educational attainment and gender. Nonetheless, the diversity of acquaintanceship itself improves health and happiness.

### what next?

Other possible benefits of network variety are yet to be studied. Students of politics have speculated that interacting with a range of people expands one's sources of political information and activity, and increases tolerance for others different from oneself—but this is only speculation at present



A craft center class generates diverse acquaintanceships.

Photo by April Gafni

because political research has focused exclusively on close relationships such as the handful of people with whom a person discusses important matters.

Another critical avenue for future work is the way in which we think about and measure network diversity. At present, almost all studies focus on the variety of occupations within which a respondent knows someone. This works very well, because occupation goes with so many important differences of resources, views, lifestyles and so on. But occupation is not the only way in which the social world is carved up into different kinds of people—gender and ethnicity also shape networks.

For instance, men occupy more powerful positions in organizations, so knowing a variety of men may help one's job search more than knowing a wide variety of women. But women take more responsibility for health, including the health of others, so knowing a good range of women may be better for one's health than knowing many kinds of men. In countries like the United States or Canada, ethnic groups have distinctive cultures and, sometimes, even labor markets. Knowing a variety of people in an ethnic group may lead to better jobs within the ethnic economy, to richer knowledge of the ethnic culture, to better access to alternative medicines and to feeling better about the group. At the same time, having acquaintances exclusively in an ethnic group may cut one off from broader social benefits.

Indeed, there are many kinds of network variety: variety of occupation, gender, ethnicity and much more. Each probably goes with a somewhat different menu of benefits. Future research should elaborate on the finding that, not only is knowing people good for you, but knowing many different kinds of people is especially good for you. ■



Acquaintances among commuters who board at this train stop have helped them find music instructors, back care specialists, legal services, teaching jobs, publishers, child therapists, bicycle repair shops, travel agents, house painters, computer software, elder care facilities and clerical services.

## recommended resources

Coser, Rose Laub. "The Complexity of Roles as a Seedbed of Individual Autonomy." Pp. 237-62 in Louis A. Coser (ed.), *The Idea of Social Structure: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Merton*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975. Explains why acquaintance variety should lead to a greater sense of control over one's life and to more sophisticated language and more abstract thinking as well.

Erickson, Bonnie H. "Culture, Class, and Connections." *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (1996): 217-51. Shows that knowing many kinds of people goes with knowing a lot about many kinds of culture—and how knowing about culture matters at work.

Fischer, Claude S. *To Dwell Among Friends*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. Strong ties matter too. This book describes their benefits and the kinds of people who benefit more or less.

Granovetter, Mark. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973): 1360-80. Enormously influential, this essay concerns the advantages of acquaintances both for individuals and for communities.

Lin, Nan. "Social Networks and Status Attainment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 467-87. Authoritative review of research on networks and getting a job. It includes references to the Albany, East Germany, and China studies discussed in this article.

Lin, Nan, Karen Cook, and Ronald S. Burt (eds.). *Social Capital: Theory and Research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2001. Includes a number of recent, high quality theoretical discussions and research reports concerning the benefits of social networks, including a chapter on the Toronto security industry study.

Wellman, Barry (ed.). *Networks in the Global Village*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1999. A wide-ranging collection of studies on strong ties and weak ties, around the world and on the Internet.