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Simmelian Ties

Super Strong and Sticky

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The importance of informal relations in organizations has been a well-established theme in the organizational literature, dating back to Mayo's famous Hawthorne experiments (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). Most of the work in this area since that time has underscored how the structure of such relations can have profound implications for the members of the organization (Burt, 1992; Krackhardt & Brass, 1994). A small number of scholars have forced attention on the overlooked fact that the content of these relations should be taken into account when making substantive predictions about their consequences (Krackhardt, 1992; Lincoln & Miller, 1979). The purpose of this chapter is to combine both these perspectives and show that the quality of a dyadic relationship fundamentally changes as a function of the overall structure in which the relationship is embedded. To do this, I build on Granovetter's theory of weak ties and on Simmel's classic discussion of the social triad.

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Strong Versus Weak Ties

There is perhaps no more cited work in the literature on networks than Granovetter's (1973) "The Strength of Weak Ties." He proposed that weak, infrequent ties are often more influential and critical than strong ties in assisting an individual in gathering and taking advantage of information that is disseminated through the social network. His seminal paper has generated years of mostly confirmatory research (Granovetter, 1982, 1994).

Recently, however, some have questioned this diversion from research on the strong ties that are critical links in systems under some conditions (Krackhardt, 1992; Krackhardt & Stern, 1988; Nelson, 1989).¹ I draw from this discussion to build in a new direction. Granovetter (1973, p. 1361) suggested that strong ties are composed of four elements: (a) the amount of time spent interacting, (b) emotional intensity in the interaction, (c) the extent of "mutual confiding," and (d) the degree of "reciprocal services" performed. Krackhardt (1992) amended this set of criteria, suggesting that trust is the key element that makes strong ties important. He asserted that the strong tie requires simultaneously (a) frequent interaction, (b) affection, and (c) a history of a relationship (i.e., there is no such thing as an instant strong tie). To differentiate his definition from Granovetter's, he used the term *Philos*, the Greek word for "friend," to identify a relationship that had all three of these qualities.

These concepts have in common a focus on the dyad. Both Granovetter and Krackhardt suggested that, to determine whether a tie is strong or not, one has only to observe the interactions and sentiments between a pair of people. I extend this thinking about the importance of a strong tie by broadening the focus beyond the isolated dyad.

Simmel's Triadic Model

Simmel also focused attention on social relationships as a key to understanding how and why people behave and think as they do. Also, while others have examined structural units larger than dyads (e.g., Kadushin's [1968] "social circles"; Alba & Moore, 1983), Simmel (1950, pp. 135-169) provided the first and most thorough theoretical foundation for the idea that social triads are fundamentally different in char-

acter from dyads. This difference is not due simply to the fact that triads have more participants. Rather, the difference is one of quality, of dynamics, and of stability. Because this difference is key to motivating this chapter, I briefly describe the main arguments in Simmel's model.

Simmel (1950) distinguished dyads from triads on several grounds. First, he noted that dyads preserve much more individuality than triads because, within a dyad, no majority can be mustered to outvote any individual. In any group of three or larger, an individual can be outvoted by the other group members, suppressing individual interests for the interests of the larger group.

Second, individuals have much more bargaining power in a dyad than in a triad. When faced with only one other partner, the dyadic group can be dissolved if the demands of one of its members are not met. In a triad, the demanding individual can withdraw, but the group still remains as a dyad. The withdrawing individual has the most to lose by withdrawing, isolating himself or herself while the others retain each other's company. Thus, the threat of withdrawal carries less weight.

Third, conflict is inevitable in any relationship over time and is more readily managed and resolved in a triad. In a standard dyadic arrangement, conflicts escalate and positions harden. In the presence of a third party, such positions are more likely to be moderated. The third party can reformulate and present the concerns of the other parties without the harsh rhetoric and emotional overtones. As Simmel (1950, p. 145) stated, "The appearance of the third party indicates transition, conciliation, and abandonment of absolute contrast." Even if a third party does not act decisively in resolving a conflict between two parties, his or her mere presence can ameliorate dissension: "Such mediations need not occur in words: A gesture, a way of listening, the quality of feeling which proceeds from a person, suffices to give this dissent between two others a direction toward consensus" (p. 145).

Simmel (1950) focused on the triad, then, as distinct from the dyad as a unit of analysis and representative of larger structures. By defining the specific features of dyads, he was able to demonstrate how the addition of a third party produced a fundamental change in the dynamics between the original two actors. He argued, however, that adding more people to the group did not change the dynamics commensurately: "[Adding a third party to a dyad] completely changes them, but . . . the further expansion to four or more persons by no

means correspondingly modifies the group any further" (p. 138). Thus, the key to understanding the quality of a tie between two actors can be reduced to asking whether it is part of a strong triad or not.

All three of the forces—toward reduced individuality, reduced individual power, and moderated conflict—contribute to the group's survival and preserve its identity at the expense of the individual, at least when compared with the isolated dyad. Thus, as a consequence of this theory, one would expect that individuals who are a part of a three-person (or more) informal group are less free, less independent, and more constrained than a person who is only part of a strong dyadic relationship.

Simmelian Tie Defined

Based on Simmel's (1950) theory of triadic structures, I define a "Simmelian tie" as follows: Two people are Simmelian tied to one another if they are reciprocally and strongly tied to each other and if they are each reciprocally and strongly tied to at least one third party in common.

This definition resembles the concept of a clique (Luce & Perry, 1949), and there is a strong symmetry between the two ideas. Cliques are defined on a graph as a maximal set of three or more nodes (people, in this case), all of whom are directly and reciprocally connected to each other. Thus, each pair of people in a clique are Simmelian tied to each other; conversely, any pair of individuals who are Simmelian tied are comembers of at least one clique. Thus, I argue here that a coclique relationship—the existence of a strong tie that is reinforced through a common tie to at least one third person—is a qualitatively different tie that deserves attention and analysis in its own right, just as Simmel (1950) argued that triads are a fundamental sociological unit. I call such a coclique relationship "Simmelian" to differentiate it from Granovetter's (or Krackhardt's) definition of a strong tie.

Durability of Simmelian Ties

Simmelian ties might be best thought of as "super-strong" ties, ties that qualitatively add durability and power beyond that found in sim-

ply strong dyads. Thus, the primary proposition that emerges from a theory of Simmelian ties is that, once formed, Simmelian ties are “sticky”—that is, they will last longer than other forms of merely strong ties. Because a person Simmelian tied is less independent and less powerful, and because interpersonal conflict is more likely attenuated, people are less likely to want to or be able to sever a Simmelian tie. This leads to two immediate predictions.² The first easily follows directly from the primary proposition:

Prediction 1: A Simmelian tie from actor A to actor B at any point in time will more likely be followed by a tie from actor A to actor B at a subsequent point in time than will a non-Simmelian tie.

Scott Feld (1997), in an exploration of Granovetter’s concept of embeddedness, made a similar prediction. He operationalized the concept of embeddedness between two actors as the extent to which others nominated both actors. This is a modification of the Simmelian tie, as defined here, for two reasons. First, Feld counts the number of alters who nominate the two parties. The Simmelian argument, as mentioned previously, suggests that the effect of groups larger than three is not substantive, and therefore only a dichotomous value is used; a tie is either Simmelian or it is not. Second, for any given pair of nodes, A and B, Feld counts the set of third others who jointly nominate A and B; thus, asymmetric ties are allowed. The argument here is that ties from third others should be strong ties (reciprocated ties) to enforce “group” norms and values. Scott did show, however, a small correlation between the extent of embeddedness and the probability that a tie would continue to exist for 6 months.

Although it is true that one could predict specifically the subsequent existence of Simmelian ties (rather than the simple existence of any tie), it is sufficient to show that the Simmelian ties are more likely to be followed by any kind of tie to support the proposition. For purposes of this chapter, I focus only on this definition of stability.

The second prediction also follows from the primary proposition but requires more explanation:

Prediction 2: Simmelian ties will occur with greater frequency than would be expected by chance, given the overall structure of the relations.

