

There's More Love Than Money Changing Hands, So Get Networked

Chance favours the better connected – in money and in love! Social networks transmit love, trust, opportunity and reciprocity from person to person and you can even get some of these things from people you don't even know, such is the power of social networks and the additional super-charge that they get from social media. Your friends' friends, or even your friends' friends' friends, might be your access to, say, a job, an internship, finding a carer for a family member or another important opportunity. If you are well *connected* and *engaged*, receiving good fortune or good luck is more likely, plus your ability and motivation for giving is more fruitful too.

Cultivating and tending social networks can make all the difference especially for people who are not well connected. Here we are not talking about 'well-connected' in the careerist old boys or new girls networks sense - as getting on in your career is but a tiny fraction of the socially networked world. *Connection deprivation* and, with it, loneliness and social isolation is a fairly modern social malady that social networks can alleviate. Our social networks are more complex than before and access to some of them is more conditional than was once the case. Neighbours or long term workmates were once the universal core of social networks alongside family and kinship groups. These are now less reliable phenomenon whilst more complex and specific social networks proliferate, again charged up or helped through sophisticated social media.

People who are on the peripheries of social networks with few friends, acquaintances and connections miss out on being connected to opportunities, services or activities that can change their lives. In their seminal book *Connected*¹ James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis managed to show through studying and mapping thousands of networks how bad connectivity presents a big social problem and relative disadvantage. We know a great deal about how to tackle racial prejudice, disability discrimination and sexism, for instance. We have decades of legal and social interventions that redressed many imbalances and biases in these areas. Yet we know less about the far greater social disadvantages that isolated, lonely and badly connected people suffer. This is Christakis and Fowler's assertion based on their researches.

Social Networks – introducing their power

"A social network is an organised set of people that consists of two kinds of elements: human beings and the connections between them"²

Most social networks are informal and often hard to actually see. They occur naturally as part of our anthropomorphic ways of operating as social beings. They can be seen more easily through social media like Linked In or Facebook as these social media help us organise part of our social network world. These social media are just devices for helping to operate social networks.

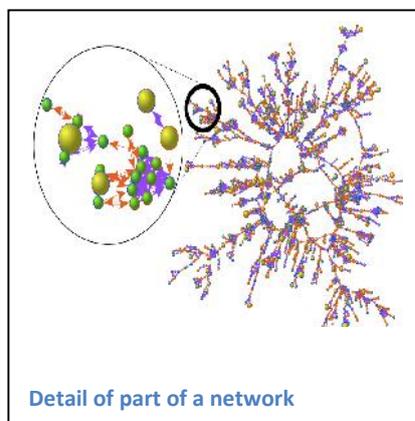
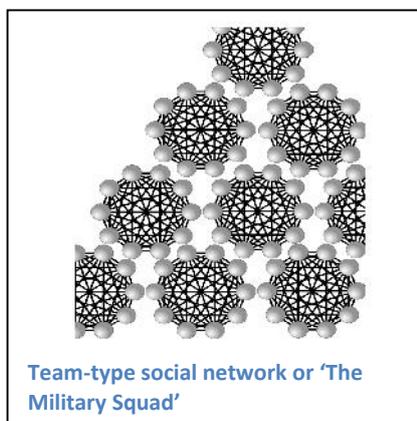
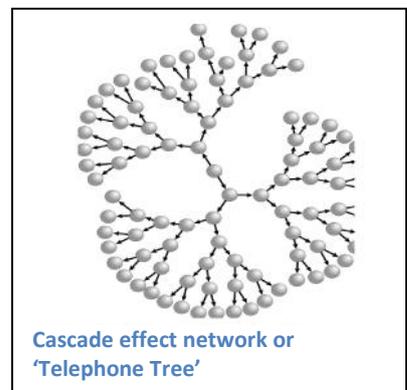
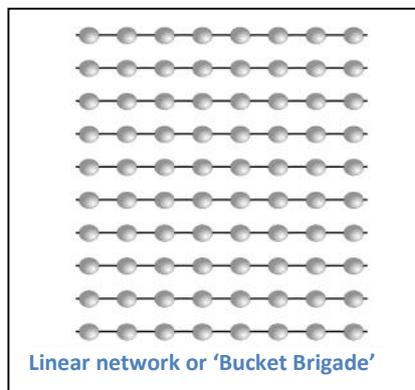
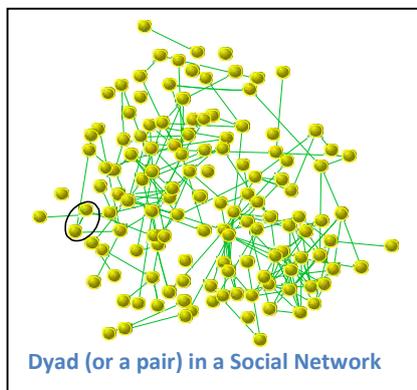
¹ *Connected- The Amazing Power of Social Networks*,, Cristakis, N., and Fowler, J. 2009

²Christakis N., and Fowler, J, '*Connected: The Amazing Power of Social Networks and How they Shape Our Lives*'

Well-being and happiness research identifies ‘connection’ and ‘engagement’ with other people as key elements of our well-being and happiness. Social networks are the systems of connection between people and the health and vitality of social networks matter because they organise and mediate so much of our social experience and opportunity, or lack thereof.

Where someone is located in a given social networks and, in turn, how these people are connected further away in the cascade of connections makes a big difference to their lives and positive outcomes for them. So your employment, your choice of partners and even your healthy or unhealthy behaviours is in part determined by your social networks and how you are connected.

Networks have two ingredients – people and ‘ties’ or social connections. These ties are not necessarily linear relationships so the amount of social ties that exist in a social network can grow exponentially. These examples of social networks show people or organisations that get called ‘nodes’ – the small circles – and the connections between the – the lines connecting the circles.



A friend of a friend, or a friend of a friend of a friend that you do not know about can be critical to, say, introducing you to a new pursuit or critical information about a job or a course. They can influence you and you can influence them. Back in the 1960s the ‘six degrees of separation’³ was researched showing that we are all connected by 6 degrees of separation from one another. Christakis and Fowler’s research suggests that we can influence and be influenced up to 3 degrees of separation – friends of friends of friends – thereafter the degree of influence starts to wane.

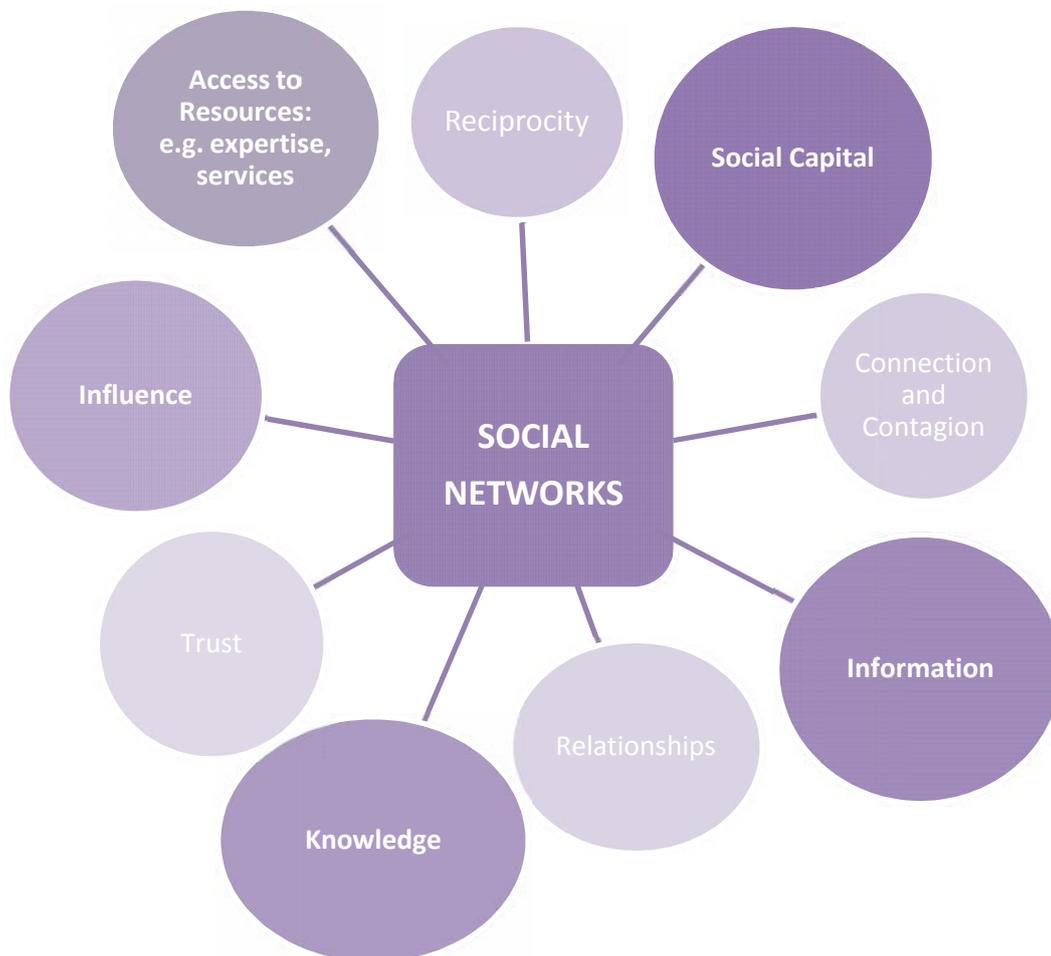
³ Stanley Milgram’s experiment in Nebraska USA

Looking at the network picture on the top left (above) it is easy to see how activity can quickly spread and flow through a network.

This *social contagion* can spread good things like healthy behaviours, friendship and support, joy or bad things like hostile behaviour, depression or obesity. For instance increases in breast-feeding rates or reductions in smoking have spread through social networks and created health benefits.

For anyone who needs to help social networks reach people better, a starting point is to identify *people* and *organisations* who appear better placed in social networks. These *influencers* will help you get to people that otherwise you would not reach.

Here is an illustration of what social networks contain and what they do:



Access to resources: Through social networks people influence one another and connect one another to, for instance, a service, someone with key knowledge and expertise or access to a support network.

Trust and reciprocity: The process of social action and interaction helps to build up feelings of trust and reciprocity. The research evidence tells us that this is so. Without trust and reciprocity social

networks collapse. If people were not prepared to initially give, even with no certain expectation of receiving something, social networks would breakdown.

Relationships: social networks facilitate many kinds of relationships; building relationship is the fuel of social networks. Some social networks require face-to-face contact and work better this way and others work through social media. Different, closely knit social networks that are not connected can become connected through *bridging people* who have broader social networks and intuitively recognise the benefit of connection. Often these people are socially capable and curious and sometimes keen on social entrepreneurship or business creation.

Social capital: social capital is built up through social networks. Social networks build feelings of trust and reciprocity plus they build up connectedness and exchange between neighbours, interest group colleagues or co-workers. In turn this creates that stock or trust and mutual interest that comprises social capital and social capital is only able to be built through strong social networks.

For instance if you want to build up a community group, a self-help organisation, a business or a campaign you need the trust, reciprocity and positive expectation that social capital gives in communities. This social capital is transmitted through social networks.

Connection, social contagion and behavioural imitation: Information, activity or opinion can spread fast and deeply through social networks hence the term contagion. People who group together because of similarity influence each other – the *birds of a feather stick together* idea. People want those closer to them to share their views and preferences and be like them. People tend to mimic and mirror one another. For instance in a major study of obesity it was found that over-weight people were clustered together *before and after* their weight gain. Through studying the same large sample researchers also found people quitting smoking together, in clusters influenced by their friend, families and colleagues rather than alone.

'Behavioural imitation' can make us sporty or arty, fat or thin, rowdy or demur!

Community development can do a lot to enable people to build up their social networks, connections and engagement. It can also develop social networks for positive gain such as health and well-being, community participation or modelling positive behaviours.

Social networks are relevant to equality and opportunity, as people who are on the periphery of social networks are disadvantaged. As important to recognise is that networks form, re-form, expand and contract and are un-controllable. Even where formal networks are constructed – like organisational hierarchies - informal social networks will still form, re-form and evolve. Networks of influence, information and knowledge shape people's behaviour, opinions and actions both for good and for ill. Action in communities can also identify people who have better connections in social networks. These *social influencers* inside networks and *bridge builders* between networks can be recruited to promoting positive activity rather like mentoring, community leadership or cascading useful knowledge and activities.

To finish up this introductory piece here is another quote from *Connected*:

"The Spread of Goodness

In spite of (these) potential negative effects we are all connected for a reason. The purpose of a social network is to transmit positive and desirable outcomes, whether joy, warnings about predators, or introductions to romantic partners. To some extent, the transmission of bad behaviours ...are merely

side effects that we must endure in order to reap the benefits of networks; they are grafted onto an apparatus that was built, evolutionarily speaking, for another more beneficial purpose.”⁴

“We gain more than we lose by living in social networks, and this drives us to embed ourselves into the lives of others”⁵

⁴ *ibid 1*

⁵ *ibid1*