

Networking Canada

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How the Fordham Baldies Showed The Way –

I am a Canadian by choice: Thirty-four years ago, I turned down an appointment at the University of Hawaii and accepted one at Toronto. I submit this as convincing proof that the mind can govern the body.

I study social networks – part of a sizeable, strong body of Canadian scholars. You can read about what we do in the forthcoming special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Sociology* on Canadian sociology in the milleninium where David Tindall and I review network analysis in Canada. Or look it up on my website.

But before gazing into the future, a bit of stock taking. Most of us have a few defining, "A Ha!" moments when the true nature of the universe becomes clear. My first such moment came in the late 1950s when I was a teenager in the Bronx, New York City. Although my relatives lived elsewhere, I never was lonely. I mostly hung out on neighborhood street corners with my friends. We played basketball and stickball; we cruised up and down the shopping streets, in and out of stores. We looked at girls, and evaluated them. Sometimes we talked with them, and occasionally we dated.

There were about twenty guys in our bunch, a shifting set of people. There was never a time when everyone would be there, but someone always was. We knew that if we went to the street corner or the schoolyard basketball court, we'd always find five or ten buddies there.

We all lived in multiple worlds. Although we had an active neighborhood life, we scattered on weekends. We used the subway to go downtown to Manhattan, or we drove with our parents to visit relatives who lived elsewhere in New York. I learned that only a few of our worlds are wholly -- or even predominantly -- local.

We went to different high schools. One day, the "Fordham Baldies" disturbed our world. Rumors spread that the Baldies, the baddest gang in the Bronx, were going to attack my high school: the erudite but defenseless Bronx High School of Science. Those were the days when newspapers were filled with horror stories about the teenage gangs who roamed the streets of New York City.

Finally the day came. We all got excited and girded ourselves for battle. We hoped we'd be brave; we knew our chances would be hopeless. After a few days of expectant waiting, we came to realize that the Baldies would never show up to test our manhood. Perhaps they had changed their minds, perhaps the rumor was false, perhaps the Baldies had never even existed. After all, I had never met one nor seen anyone wearing a Fordham Baldies jacket. For all I know – or knew – they might have been what we now call an urban legend: a mythical tale, much like the alligators that may one day come up through the pipes and pop out of New York City toilet bowls.

The threat of the Baldies wasn't wasted, because our near-encounter started me thinking about the myth and reality of gangs. Many of us hung out with different crowds on different days. Others came driving into my neighborhood to hang out on our street corner with friends of theirs. We each had multiple affiliations and multiple loyalties.

I came to realize that gangs didn't exist as real entities. They were just convenient group labels that were easier to think about than coming to terms with the shifting, evanescent nature of actual gang participation. It was inherently impossible to draw up an inclusive membership list of who belonging to what gang. When a fight was coming up, groups of friends would call each other and come together to be the "Baldies" or the "Fordham Flames" for that night. On another night, when other friends would call, some of the same teens would become members of another gang. Most nights, they weren't involved in any gang at all. They stayed home and watched television, went to the movies, or hung out with friends. People were always coming and going. Very few -- if any -- belonged to one gang only and saw themselves as fully committed to that group. It was as futile to draw a map cleanly delineating each gang's turf as it is to draw precise ethnic boundaries in eastern Europe. (See Magoscsi and Matthews' 1993 atlas of Eastern Europe, plate 30.) Most people didn't know what they belonged to; they only knew that they would help their friends if asked

The Baldies had led me to realize that people live simultaneously in multiple social worlds. Yet when I got to Harvard graduate school in 1963 I was surprised to read that the world consisted principally of bounded groups, and that cities, lacking such groups, were anti-social places. The folks who wrote this stuff had never been to the Bronx!

Networks, not Groups

Fortunately, I had Harrison White, Charles Tilly and Chad Gordon as my mentors. Harrison White was just developing his entire depiction of societies as social networks, Chuck Tilly opened my eyes to how systematic research revealed how city-dwellers were heavily connected in multiple social networks, and Chad encouraged me to use both qualitative and quantitative information. They, plus the Fordham Baldies, helped me to set my lifetime research agenda:

- (a) Demonstrating that the world is composed of networks and not groups.
- (b) Understanding how the kinds of networks people are in connect them to each other and the larger world, and channel resources to and from them.

My work started with showing how communities still existed in cities – even Toronto – but that it no longer has been bound up in neighbourhoods. With a number of collaborators – most notably Barry Leighton, Paul Craven and Scot Wortley – we showed that while only about an eighth of people's active ties were with neighbours, they nevertheless led active, sociable lives, giving and getting an abundance of social support. These are specialized ties, so that the people who supply one kind of support – such as emotional aid (often, your sisters) are different than those who supply financial aid (they're known as parents) or provide companionship (friends). Besides these findings, our work help lead to the reconceptualization of life as lived in multiple networks, rather than in all-compassing groups.

The details of this and our new work are on my website. Recently, with Ken Frank, the NetLab has provided evidence – not just rhetoric – to address the agency problem. We've shown that the provision of social support is a function of the kinds of networks you're in as well as the kinds of ties you have, and the kinds of social characteristics you possess. For example, while gender affects support – women give and get more – so does frequent contact – ties with a lot of contact give a good deal of material aid – but so also do emergent network properties – you get even more support if you're in networks in which a lot of people are in frequent contact. It's nice to have data to help develop theory; without it, theory so often descends into assertion that is justified only by its aesthetics or political correctness. Proving that old data never die, Dean Behrens and I are now using the same qualitative and quantitative data to provide real-world understanding of how reciprocity and exchange operate – in ties and in the networks in which they are embedded.

Computer Networks Are Social Networks

A decade ago, after twenty-five years in the business, I had the implicit choice: Keeping doing what I had been with increasing staleness; stop doing research, and become a semi-retired pundit; or switch fields. Fortunately the Internet became popular, although I had been on its precursors since 1976. The Internet was made for the social network approach, for when computer networks connect people or institutions, they are social networks.

It's been an interesting decade:

First, I got to work with computer scientists – who are generally smart, interesting, and much better funded.

Second, I got to apply much of my community and social network lore to interesting new problems. It's been fun educating computer scientists – in academe and the corporate world – about the stuff we take for granted such as status and power.

Third, I got to design new stuff rather than just analyze what already exists.

Fourth, I have been able to do a daring, politically incorrect thing for a sociologist – focus on social opportunities and not just abuses. Surely such abuses exist – as any visit to this conference shows – but surely they are not the only thing in the world and it is nice to be talking about ways of creating opportunities.

Just take a look at what our NetLab has been studying – the details are on my website:

- C *How loosely-coupled organizations use computer-mediated communication as virtual workgroups – especially scholarly networks.* Nancy Nazer, Emmanuel Koku, Kristine Klement and I have mostly been looking at scholars here. We find that friendship drives scholarly communication as much as the work that people are doing together. We're finding that people use all media to interact – even if they are located next door, friends and co-workers use email a lot. There does not seem to be any special privileging of email or of face-to-face meetings.
- C *How social networks affect the productivity of scholars.* When Howard White and I examine the intersection of citation networks with social networks, we find as you might think that friends cite each other an awful lot.
- *Using sociology to design ad hoc communication systems in which people work and find community with shifting sets of others.* Anabel Quan and I are developing prioritizing rules so that your significant other's email and voicemail gets in ahead of your department chairman's – or at least mine.
- *Analyzing how home-based white-collar teleworkers interact with office colleagues and family/community members.* Janet Salaff, Dima Dimitrova and I are finding that even when people work at home, organizations require that their domestic life and their work life stay separate. People seem to telework better in certain jobs than in others.
- *Discovering the online and offline lives led by residents of "Netville": a leading-edge wired suburb of Toronto.* Keith Hampton went and lived for two years in the suburban hinterland, among the Netvillers, folks who had access more than 10 times faster than even those of us blessed with High Speed Sympatico or cable modems. We've found "glocalization" (globalization + localization) that comes with wired living via advanced connections to the Internet and other online services. It turns out that the Internet doesn't support the global village. Many emails are local, and in Netville were used to fight the developer and foster interpersonal support. We've also found that the Internet

does a wonderful job of maintaining relationships with friends, relatives and neighbours after people move.

- *Learning if the Internet increase, decrease or supplement social capital?* The answer is Yes to all of these. That's what Anabel Quan and I are finding from a 40,000 person *National Geographic* web-survey. High use of email supplements face-to-face and telephone meetings (without increasing or decreasing it), but it increases organizational and political involvement, and it decreases people's sense of online community – probably they've become inured to it or been flamed too often.
- *Wondering if the lack of mentoring and institutional supports in low-income, segregated areas exacerbate poor people's and visible minorities' lack of access to computers and the internet?* Eric Fong, Rima Wilkes, Melissa Kew and I call this the "double digital divide". In addition to the well-known effects of poverty and rural location on using the Internet, the kinds of neighbourhood you live in makes a difference. This is because both hands-on mentoring and institutional supports are important for effective computer use.
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Win-Win

Working together is a win-win game, not a zero-sum game. I work by networks. There's been a lot going on, and our NetLab research network has really bonded. While no Erdős, I've co-authored with exactly eighty people, including psychiatrist Don Coates, computer scientist Bill Buxton, historian Chuck Wetherell, information scientist Caroline Haythornthwaite, statistician Stan Wasserman, and sociologists such as June Corman, Paul Craven, Janet Salaff and Scot Wortley. Then there are the NetLab exports to the U.S. – Keith Hampton to MIT, Ali Marin to Harvard, and Caroline Haythornthwaite to Illinois – the government world – Milena Gulia at Human Resources Development Canada and Barry Leighton at the RCMP – and the corporate world – Laura Garton at Nortel Networks and Nancy Nazer at Bell Canada. My perspective has been expanded by working with folks who have come here for short and long stays from Bulgaria, Hungary, Finland, Iran, China, Japan, Chile, and Guatemala.

There are so many people to thank, that I must be selective, but I do want to acknowledge current members of NetLab: Susan Bastani, Jeffrey Boase, Wenhong Chen, Dima Dimitrova, Melissa Kew, Kristine Klement, and Emmanuel Koku.

"What about Bev?" I hear some of you murmur indignantly. Bev Wellman gets deservedly special thanks. And saying this, I think with tears in my eyes and joy in my mind about my lifetime partner, always-on conjugal consultant, sometimes co-author, constant lover and wife. Every day of our life has been a win-win game.

When we got married, Bev had figured out that I wasn't the nice quiet type. I told her that I would always love her – 38 years and counting (including 2 practice years) – and that I would try to make her life always interesting – as I said, 38 years and counting. When I married Bev, I thought she would bring some quiet stability into my life. Stability yes; quiet? – once in a while. But I have learned so much from her – and I rely on her so. Some of you know that Bev is

a modern dancer. But I immodestly say that our best performances have been together – dancing a duet – with networks out – through life.

Pass It On

There is more to come -- more even than the measly seven years that the University of Toronto gives me before eviction into a retirement home. As this event certifies me as an old fart, I close by passing on some wisdom that was once given to me. My mentor Chuck Tilly once did me a favor, I asked in return, "How can I repay you?"

Chuck replied by saying, "When Sam Beer [the Harvard historian] helped me when I was a graduate student, I asked him the same question for the same reason. Sam Beer replied, 'Don't do anything for me. But pass on the mentoring to the next generation.' So [said Chuck Tilly to me], I'm asking you to do the same thing: Pass it on!"

I've tried to pass it on, every day of my thirty-four year career at the University of Toronto: to the scholarly world, to Canada, and to my students. I believe this accounts for why the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association recognized my work this year. And that's why I close by mentoring you:

"Pass It On!"