

TOOLKIT ESSAYS

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"If you don't belong to some kind of social network, you soon may not belong anywhere," warns cyberpundit Daniel Tynan (2007). He's talking about the explosive proliferation of social networking software, with *MySpace* claiming more than 100 million participants. While "all web statistics are lies" (Malda 2007) and many accounts are dormant, my students report networking with 100–300 "friendsters" (to pun on one early service) as well as with real friends and relatives.

There was a time when the only networks Americans knew were ABC, CBS, and NBC. Now, many people are enmeshed in multiple social networks. They get their information from the Internet, itself the product of multiple organizational and interpersonal networks. At least three times per week, someone adds a link to new social networking software on *Wikipedia*. In 2007, journalist Malcolm Gladwell won the American Sociological Association's first Award for Excellence in the Reporting of Social Issues, in part for his discussion of social network phenomena in *The Tipping Point* (2000).

How the world has changed! Thirty years ago, I could not even sell the term "social network" to sociologists. On the one hand, survey research was individualizing people as discrete respondents; on the other hand, Parsonian theory emphasized bounded groups socializing people through the injection of norms. Now, the network metaphor is in the air.

Linton Freeman tells the story well of the social network paradigm's development. He shows that while the network approach has largely been based in sociology, adherents to the church come from all of the social sciences, as well as history, mathematics, statistics, and recently, physics—where it has come on with a big bang. The membership of the field's professional society has gone from 175 at its founding in 1977 to 1,200 thirty years later.

The Development of Social Network Analysis: A Study in the Sociology of Science, by **Linton C. Freeman**.
Vancouver, CA: Empirical Press, 2004.
205pp. \$15.99 paper. ISBN: 1594577145.

Freeman pays special attention to the field's origins, starting with Simmel's "web of group affiliations" as the ur-statement. He dedicates his book to two pioneers in making social network analysis a self-aware field: (1) J.L. Moreno, the 1930s eccentric original "sociometrician" who started the tradition of systematically observing interpersonal relations in small groups that so influenced James Coleman and others; and (2) Harrison White who has seduced doctoral students since the 1960s into thinking structurally and using nifty mathematical and statistical techniques to tease out social structure. Freeman describes how the small social network cults before the 1960s coalesced into a sect by the 1976 founding of the International Network for Social Network Analysis, and blossomed into an institutionalized multidisciplinary church by the 2000s.

Linton Freeman tells a rich tale. He makes a persuasive argument that social network analysis is peculiarly *both a theory*—a way of looking at the world—and a *methodology*—a set of techniques for making sense of it that goes beyond the 1960s' simplifying assumptions of individual and group. It was the advent of widespread computer use in the 1970s, he suggests, that afforded analysts the ability to tease out social structural complexities.

What is so special about the social network paradigm? Freeman argues that it has four basic tenets (p. 3):

1. Motivation "by a structural intuition based on ties linking social actors." In other words, there is no *a priori* assumption that the world is composed of bounded groups, and the emphasis is on

relationships between individuals, rather than on discrete individuals joined only through regression and cross-tabs.

2. "Grounded in systematic empirical data," rather than in deductive assertions or one-off cultural studies.
3. "Draws heavily on graphic imagery": the familiar graphs of lines (ties) connecting points (nodes), be they persons or nation states. Indeed, even *Facebook* now allows its participants to graph their social networks.
4. "Relies on the use of mathematical and/or computational models." This is where Freeman and I part company, as many fine ethnographic network analyses eschew such models.

In sum, a network consists of one or more nodes (persons, organizations, websites, etc.) connected by one or more ties (which may contain multiple relations such as financial aid or discussing important matters) that form analyzable patterns whose emergent structural properties are more than the sum of the ties and nodes. The approach allows thinking about engaging in multiple relations at once, with multiple sets of others, and makes the discovery of densely knit groups an empirical question. Hence, social network analysis is more than a method; it is a perspective on the world armed with tools and a body of applications ranging from questions of social isolation (and inclusion) to the structure of international relations and the world wide web. In short, it is a rapidly proliferating and institutionalizing paradigm.

The book is a model of the sociology of science. Freeman interviewed many of the pioneers and their followers, including those such as J. Clyde Mitchell, who are no longer with us. He makes copious use of detailed record keeping: who did what when and with whom. He writes well, deftly interweaving tales of people and pow-wows with the interpersonal transmission of ideas. Much

credit is given where due, to the obscure as well as the prominent. I met old friends along the way and discovered new ancestors such as Robert Merton. Despite Freeman's comprehensiveness, his church could be more ecumenical. He neglects three major movements of the 1970s–1980s: (a) empirical Marxism devoted to understanding the structural basis of capitalist classes; (b) world-systems analyses delineating relations among nation-states; and (c) social movement analysis moving away from normative frustration analysis to those emphasizing the relational bases of collective action.

The book is richest through the 1970s; the last decades are presented more hurriedly, with an emphasis on institutional developments. Reflecting on this, I realize how much the world—and sociological battles—have changed. On the one hand, the hundreds of millions of social networking denizens rarely are aware of social network analysis: they just network as they maneuver among clusters of ties. Where people used to think they ran in groups, they now maneuver in networks. To network has become a verb as well as a noun. On the other hand, who now reads structural functionalism: the network analysts' *bête noire* of the 1960s–1970s? Now the debates are with other analytic movements, especially the turn to idiographic cultural studies. However, just as networking rules the ether, social network analysis permeates our journals: minimally as a metaphor, often as a method, but most usefully as a paradigm.

References

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