

Book ~ Review Form

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Reviewer:

Shannon Downey, Community Health Program Manager, CORE Group

Book Name:

[Connected—The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives—How They Shape Our Lives—How Your Friends' Friends' Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do](#)

Author(s):

Nicholas A. Christakis, MD, PhD

A professor of medical sociology in the Department of Health Care Policy at Harvard Medical School, professor of sociology in the Department of Sociology in the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and professor of medicine and an attending physician in the Department of Medicine at Harvard Medical School

James H. Fowler, PhD

A professor at the University of California, San Diego, in the Department of Political Science and the Center for Wireless and Population Health Systems

Year Published: 2009

Author's argument (or perspective) and summary of the content:

Christakis and Fowler present compelling evidence for our influence on one another's tastes, health, wealth, happiness, beliefs, even weight, as they explain how social networks form and how they operate.

As a physician and a social scientist, Christakis' interest in social networks began with the simple combination of two people—husbands and wives. First noticing how the death of a loved one took a serious toll on their spouse, he became interested in how illness in one person might cause illness in another. Since 1999, he has been investigating how social factors and social interactions affect health and longevity. Christakis is best known how social networks form and operate.

For Fowler, it was his work as a Peace Corps volunteer in cholera-stricken villages in Ecuador that motivated him to ask the question, why are some people so much better at facing group challenges than others? He has devoted his life to unifying the study of political outcomes with the study of other natural processes. He spent a number of years studying the origin of people's political beliefs and examining how one person's attempt to solve a social or political problem influenced others.

Asking how did humans come together to accomplish what they could not do on their own?

Through their own social networks, the two came together to begin to explain how and why social networks operate and how they benefit us. Together, they began to think about the idea that people are connected in vast social networks and realized that social influence does not end with the people we know. If we affect our friends, and they affect their friends, then our actions can potentially affect people we have never met. They began by studying various health effects. They discovered that if your friends' friends' friend gained weight, you gained weight. They discovered that if your friends' friends' friend stopped smoking, you stopped smoking. And they discovered that if your friends' friends' friend became happy, you became happy.

As they studied social networks more deeply, they began to think of them as a kind of human superorganism. They grow and evolve. All sorts of things flow and move within them. This superorganism has its own structure and a function, and they became obsessed with understanding both. They feel that seeing ourselves as part of a superorganism allows us to understand our actions, choices, and experiences in a new light.

As they studied the different ways that people have come together to achieve a task they could not have done on their own or as efficiently, they asked why exactly a group of people arrange themselves in a certain way are more effective than the same group of people—or even a larger group—working independently? They wanted to know, “If the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, how exactly does the whole come to be greater? Where does the “greater” part come from?”

They observed that it was possible to increase the effectiveness of human beings by as much as an order of magnitude simply by arranging them differently. But then asked what is it about combining people into groups with particular configurations that makes them able to do more things and different things than the individuals themselves. Before answering these questions they explain basic terms and ideas of network theory. These basic concepts set the stage for the individual stories and the more complicated ideas they explored as they investigated the surprising power of social networks to affect the full spectrum of human experience.

*So just in case any of you still think we are talking about Facebook, I will summarize the concepts and then share main lessons learned and applications for international MNCH work.

They clarified that a group can be defined by an attribute (for example, women, Democrats, lawyers, long-distance runners) or as a specific collection of individuals to whom we can literally point to as in those people, right over there, waiting to get into the concert. Then they explained that a social network is altogether different. While a network, like a group, is a collection of people, it includes something more: a specific set of connections between people in the group. These ties, and the

particular pattern of these ties, are often more important than the individual people themselves. They allow groups to do things that a disconnected collection of individuals cannot. The ties explain why the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And the specific pattern of the ties is crucial to understanding how networks function.

In a very basic sense, a social network is an organized set of people that consist of two kinds of elements: human beings and the connections between them. By illustrating and mapping these elements they began to explore the properties of different networks.

They discuss different experiments like those that look at *Six Degrees of Separation* and *Three Degrees of Influence*, and arguing that if we are connected to everyone else by six degrees and we can influence them up to three degrees, then one way to think about ourselves is that each of us can reach about halfway to everyone else on the planet. So while the observation that there are six degrees of separation between any two people applies to how connected we are, the observation that they are three degrees of influence applies to how contagious we are. These properties, connection and contagion, are the structure and function of social networks. They are the anatomy and physiology of the human superorganism.

Social networks, it turns out, tend to magnify whatever they are seeded with and the structure of your network and your location matter. They argue that understanding the way we are connected is an essential step in creating a more just society and in implementing public policies affecting everything from public health to economy. They believe that if we want to understand how society works, we need to fill in the missing links between individuals. We need to understand how interconnections and interactions between people give rise to wholly new aspects of human experience that are not present in the individuals themselves. If we do not understand social networks, we cannot hope to fully understand either ourselves or the world we inhabit.

Throughout the rest of the book, they explore the research and science behind how networks drive and shape almost every aspect of our life including emotions, who we date or marry, who we vote for and even our health. From influencing health-related individual behavior to mobilizing communities to how our participation in CORE Group is affecting ourselves and those we serve, this book is rich with anecdotes and lessons to be applied to our personal and professional lives.

Main lessons learned/ applications to work in the international maternal and child health sector (list no more than 8):

1. The first example is more or less tied to epidemiology with regards to the spread of STIs. However, studies of social networks are showing that people are placed at risk not so much because of who they are but because of who they know—that is, where they are in the network and what is going on around them. And this structural perspective sheds new light on many social

processes. From syphilis to HIV, without information on individuals' partners' partners and their interconnections to other individuals in the population, we cannot determine whether a person is high or low risk of contracting an STI.
**(Page 104 example on the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa)*

2. They claim that germs are not the only things that spread from person to person. Behaviors also spread, and many of these behaviors have big effects on our health. They focus on the example of obesity and found that if a mutual friend becomes obese, it nearly triples a person's risk of becoming obese and go as far as to say that obesity is contagious.
3. People also copy the substance-use, drinking, and smoking behaviors of people they know directly and, more remarkably, of others who are farther away.
4. With regards to overall public health and behavior, they note that we do not ordinarily appreciate the ways in which one person choosing certain behaviors affects the health of others and why this actually provides a basis for public health. They suggest that networks could possibly be manipulated in terms of the pattern of connections or the process of contagion so as to foster individual and collective health. If network ties could be discerned on a community-wide scale (for example, using some of the new telecommunications technologies) we could be able to target influential individuals or those most at risk for being affected by interpersonal health processes. Moreover, if we knew people's ties on a large scale, we could design interventions to target groups of interconnected people.
5. If network science offers better ways to identify influential individuals by identifying centrally located hubs within the network, then this also has huge implications for our work with community health programming such as Care Groups, mother's groups, CHWs, community health systems, community mobilization and any other activities or behaviors linked to social networks.
**(Page 131 example)*
6. Figuring out how and why people adopt new ideas and how they can spread from person to person to improve underdeveloped economics has been a driving force in the science of social networks since its inception. It remains to be seen whether we can harness the power of social networks to improve the lives of the poor as fast as we are improving the lives of the rich. However, they feel optimistic that networks can be used to reduce inequality, both directly via loans and sound improved physical health and mental well-being. The main unresolved question is not about whether we have the ability to use social networks this way, but whether we will. In other words, how do networks affect our capacity to govern ourselves and to achieve our goals of spreading well-being?

Reader's professional opinion on the author's argument (perspective) [i.e. Was his/her point valid? How does the author's view compare to the opinions of CORE and its member organizations?]

Of course understanding what the implications of knowing that a key feature or our health depends on a key feature of the health of others near and far in our social networks are is paramount in our community health work. And asking, "Changing what we do, or changing what we think?" is at the heart of understanding social and behavior change.

I believe the authors have built a strong foundation of evidence and anecdotes to help us answer this question and to inform the process. As I mentioned in the beginning, this book challenged and enlightened the way I think about my own behavior and life, about community health programming and especially about the structure of CORE Group and other similar networks.

For views that are notably in-line with the CORE Group community, they insist that we must pay attention to our social life and the extraordinary effect a single change can make. We spend a lot of time focusing on economic inequality, but social network inequality may be a much more important problem because it creates a rich-get-richer cycle for those who are well connected. As we learn more about networks, we should do a better job measuring them and learning how to help people on the periphery stay connected. Plus, as we understand networks better, there may be a way for policy makers and public health experts (like us) to better target interventions within networks of people, to the benefit of all.

Unfortunately, based on the way the information was presented in the book, you find yourself asking, "Are we better off if we stay away from friends with negative habits? And buried at the very end in the Reading Group Guide, they say, "No. Stay connected! Although bad things can spread through networks, the overall effect of a close personal connection is usually positive: on average, every friend makes us healthier and happier. So instead of dumping friends who do things we don't want to copy, we should work to influence them to change."

To say the least, I was a bit frightened that my friends and colleagues might start distancing themselves because I'm no Jane Fonda. Although this book has many positive messages, I did feel this point should have been emphasized more. The content is much more profound than, "Your friends can make you fat," which has been used to draw in the masses. But fortunately, if you and they are drawn in, then you will walk away with a better understanding of how the whole of humanity comes to be greater than the sum of its parts and how this understanding can help us achieve our goals personally and professionally.

On a scale of 1(not recommend to others in SBC) to 10 (highly recommended for others in SBC) – how would you rate this book?

8.5