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10. Your friendship networks

are they any of the government's business?

Dr Perri 6

Networks of friendship and acquaintance among citizens matter to government.[1] Almost every aspect of life that citizens care about and want government to tackle is affected by the patterns, the nature and the distribution of social ties between people. Your chances of catching the common cold as well as many other aspects of health status are significantly affected by the extent of your social support. Getting out of unemployment is most often achieved using informal ties to find work. The pathways into crime are best traced along the connections young people have to those already involved in criminal activities. Educational attainment is hugely affected by the culture of attainment among your peers. We get through the grief of bereavement better for being supported. Remaining independent into old age rests greatly on being able to draw upon friends and neighbours and not just on close relatives.

So it is hardly surprising that policy-makers are interested. But can government do anything deliberately to influence our patterns of friendship and acquaintance? And indeed, should it, or is a step too far towards the intrusive, authoritarian state? Should friendship and acquaintance be off-limits to policy-makers?

Government shapes whom we meet

Certainly, almost everything that government does has an unavoidable impact on our personal social networks. Housing design,

slum clearance and transport policy bring some people together and keep others apart, and make it easier or harder for them to reach each other. The now 50-year-long debate about tower blocks and 'communities' is really a debate about the ways in which government shapes patterns of friendship and acquaintance. Education famously creates ties between pupils and students that can sometimes last for a lifetime. Whether social services are provided in ways that bring people with similar problems together (think of special day centres for people with mental health problems, or lunch clubs for older people) or whether they are organised around providing services to people individually, these decisions greatly affect the chances of forming and sustaining certain types of bonds. When government offers job clubs and special training programmes to unemployed people to help them seek work, they tend to meet mainly other unemployed people, who may be the least useful to them in seeking work by informal means. Nonetheless, these services can significantly affect whom users get the chance to meet.

So it is hard to see how government could do other than have a huge effect on our social networks. Even the 'minimal' or 'night-watchman' state advocated by neoliberals would have a huge impact, both in the process of dismantling the apparatus of civil government, and in the ways in which people would have to adapt. As Polanyi argued 60 years ago, free markets are only ever created by government action, which itself brings about massive change to social networks.[2]

Networks as an objective of policy?

Public services inevitably and vastly influence our networks in unintended ways. But may government legitimately, and can it feasibly, deliberately and directly pursue specific policy goals to influence friendship and acquaintance? Or, in other words, does government do better or worse, and does it violate fewer rights or more, when it tries consciously and with care to achieve something that it will affect massively in any case?

These are questions that ought to be addressed seriously before

governments rush to develop 'social capital building' programmes. One key problem is that all the good things in social life do not go together, and different types of networks generate different sorts of outcomes, which must be better understood. For example, the kinds of social networks that conduce to thriving in the labour market tend to be quite open, stressing acquaintance with people in situations different from one's own. By contrast, the networks that help people in later life tend to be more bounded, dense networks where all those who provide support know each other and share linked lives. In another context, the network forms which characterise neighbourhood renewal efforts are often marked by dense ties among the residents of a tightly defined neighbourhood. These may well not be conducive to the kinds of local economic development processes that are most important for improving an area's connections with the surrounding travel-to-work area. If governments are to try to influence their citizens' friendships and acquaintances deliberately, they must first of all acknowledge the need for trade-offs between different types of networks. Then policy-makers have the choice of focusing on the special cases where only one type of network is beneficial, or else on trying to balance different forms.

Network types

It is helpful to offer a framework for classifying the basic types of social networks, so that we can at least identify the elements between which trade-offs might have to be struck. It has been argued that there are four basic types of networks (see Figure 1):[3]

Individualistic networks, which are sparse but open, allow for the kinds of entrepreneurial and instrumental use of ties that link one to people very different from oneself. This, then, is the freewheeling world of the promotion-hungry 'networker'. *Enclaved networks*, by contrast, are dense but strongly bounded and tend to reinforce ties to those similarly situated. Here is where we find the mutual support clubs and some inward-looking 'communities'.

Hierarchical networks are also bounded, but link people with very different powers and resources in more rule-bound ways. This

describes the kinds of ties that link people to those formally allocated to mentor or counsel them, or the informal ties that link many chairs of tenants' associations with the town hall professionals who make decisions about investments in their housing estates.

Isolate networks, the final type, are not necessarily those in which people know literally no other people, but rather the mix of sparse and casual ties to others with a few very close ties perhaps to immediate family members, but which admit of very little reliable support beyond immediate needs and afford little scope for collective action.

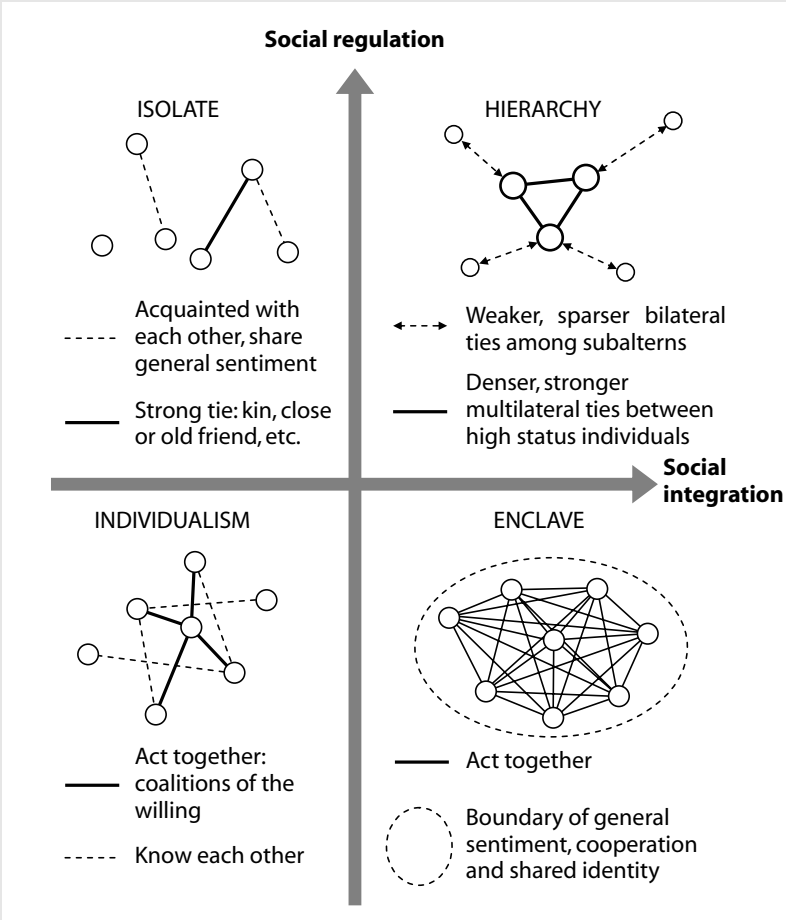
Each of these network types has its strengths and its weaknesses. Individualism is useful in many labour market situations; hierarchical networks are valuable in some educational settings; and enclaves can be very supportive for people who find themselves rejected by mainstream institutions. Even the isolate form has its uses, for it provides a way of coping during adversity.

Do governments know how to make a difference?

Assuming (a very big if) that governments can know better than citizens themselves what network forms ought to be promoted, what tools could they deploy through public services to cultivate among citizens some beneficial mix of these types? And how could these tools be deployed without violating rights such as liberty and privacy?

Past measures used in various public services to influence social networks have a mixed record of success. Comprehensive schooling and mixed tenure schemes are examples of interventions that have not been terribly effective in promoting the kinds of social network structures that policy-makers have hoped from them,[4] although it is possible that they might be more efficacious when used in social contexts which are initially more communitarian in their institutions. The evidence (to the extent that we have been able to interpret it) is equivocal regarding the efficacy of excluding pupils from schools, funding voluntary organisations and setting up 'buddying' schemes in influencing social networks in Western countries. This may be either because the effects may be modest, because the effects do not last, or

Figure 1 Network signatures of the basic institutional forms of social organisation



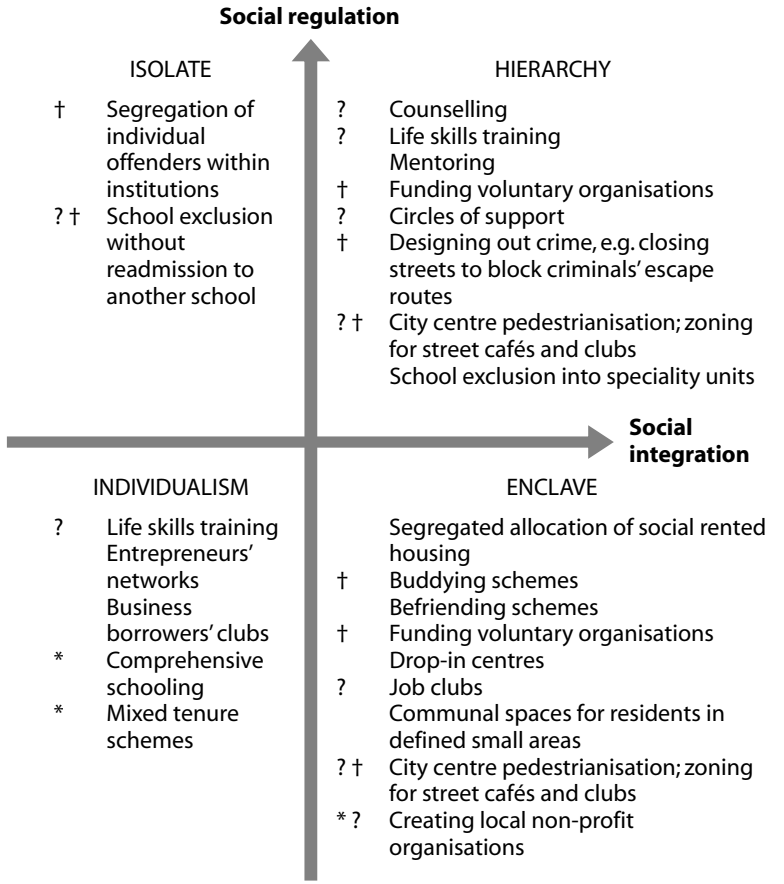
The network forms in the top half of this diagram exhibit more bilateral ties, with those in the bottom half exhibiting more multilateral ties. Similarly, those to the left involve a lower ongoing mutual dependence for material resources and support, with those to the right involving a higher mutual dependence.

because the intervention may provoke significant counter-organisation towards other network forms. The impact of other types of government action, such as life skills training and job clubs, we simply do not know. Figure 2 shows the distribution of a range of initiatives identified by the kind of solidarity that they might have promoted if they were effective, and what we currently know about their actual effectiveness.[5]

The evidence available in the literature[6] suggests that, so far at least, public services have yet to develop very sophisticated tools on which to build any grand strategy for deliberate network shaping. The evaluative literature is very thin indeed. It hardly considers the interaction effects of the combinations of multiple measures as they affect the same groups of people and is weak in examining unintended consequences. In addition, it does not really examine the extent to which privacy concerns are being respected or the extent to which professionals are using these tools to gain greater discretionary power. Some evaluative instruments have been developed, especially in the field of care for frail older people (by Clare Wenger and her collaborators[7]), that attempt to capture the impact of services upon client's social networks, but they are still not being widely used.

Very often people advocate fashionable measures for which the evidence of sustained impact on the social networks of their clients is largely missing. Robert Putnam has famously argued for much more generous public subsidy for voluntary organisations in the belief that they will conduce to 'social capital' – by which he means almost any kind of network other than the isolate form; he does not seem to accept that there are incompatibilities between these network forms that require trade-offs and even tough choices between them.[8] However, there is really very little evidence that the social networks of clients of voluntary bodies are influenced in any lasting way by using their services, and the few studies that have been conducted actually suggest that, if there are effects, they are short-lived.[9] Even religious bodies, said by some to be better at stimulating ties, actually turn out in the few studies done to be no more impressive than comparable government services.[10]

Figure 2 Interventions by solidarities they are designed to promote



* Interventions which the evidence suggests have not been effective in promoting the kinds of social network structures that policy-makers had hoped from them.

† Interventions where the evidence about their efficacy in changing social networks is equivocal. Effects may not last, may be modest, or the intervention may provoke counter-organisation towards other solidarities.

? Interventions that may or may not in practice conduce to that solidarity.

Certainly, if we are interested in the promotion of ties between the worse off and the better off – which is important in stimulating labour market mobility – then there is no evidence that voluntary bodies are any more effective in this than are comparable public bodies. Furthermore, social services agencies are less effective than education bodies, irrespective of sector. While membership of voluntary bodies may be associated with attitudes such as willingness to trust others,[11] it is far from clear that membership causes any change in attitudes: associations may well typically recruit people who are already readier to trust others.

Interestingly, the evaluative studies do suggest that the most effective interventions are the least direct and the least coercive. For example, support for voluntary social networks of local small business entrepreneurs has been found effective in stimulating the kinds of typically individualistic networks that can help in local economic development. In addition, providing life skills training to those least able to form friendships and acquaintances for various reasons appears often to be capable of making a significant difference at the individual level. Least effective in influencing social networks in any lasting way appear to be the many interventions whereby public services provide an 'artificial friend' such as a mentor, or a specially created group (these measures may have other merits, of course). Physical measures to change architecture and town layout tend to be effective mainly in the negative sense that certain kinds of crime can be made more difficult, and certain spaces more easily surveyed by residents. However, their effects on actual social networks seem not to be very great, and least significant in respect of forming new ties that would not otherwise have been created.

The policy challenge

Moreover, implementing such measures can be very challenging. The skills required are not always available. Indeed, some public service professions have been reformed in recent years precisely to shift their work away from influencing patterns of social networks. Social work has increasingly focused on practical support for older people and

protective interventions for children. Probation has been directed towards more supervisory work, such as risk assessment, cognitive behavioural interventions at the individual level and enforcement, and away from its traditional role in shaping the social aspects of rehabilitation. The pastoral role of teaching has been squeezed by the need to focus on curriculum delivery and maintaining discipline. While new skills for helping people to cultivate networks may be emerging in neighbourhood renewal work, and perhaps even among some employment advisers, they are hardly formalised, trained or valued as such.

It is also clear that the tools for shaping social networks are better developed in those services that work with the least advantaged. For those who think that public services should always be targeted upon the worst off, and for those who think that problems about social networks mainly affect the poorest, perhaps this is not a problem. But government should be concerned about the extent to which the least well-off can use their networks to access people who are better off than themselves, not only for instrumental reasons to do with seeking work, but also to avoid the deepening mutual enclaving of the social classes in respect of social ties that tends to follow whenever any society goes through a period of growing income and wealth inequality combined with high levels of fear of crime. In this context, the limited nature of the toolkit with which government can address the social ties of the better-off might well be a matter of some concern.[12]

This suggests that government ought to be very cautious before advocating ambitious policies for 'promoting social capital', as some enthusiastic researchers and even some policy advocates in the World Bank have been doing.[13] This is not only out of suspicion of grand social engineering projects in general but, more practically, because policy-makers ought to recognise how little we really know about how public services can develop sets of practices that might have lasting influence on the social networks of service users and non-users alike. In addition, they must recognise how far we are from understanding how to strike trade-offs or make intelligent choices

between the different types of social networks that government might consider trying to promote.

Conclusion

In this situation it is much more sensible for governments to focus on more modest goals. Specifically, they should surely make it a priority to try to limit the clear harms their interventions do to people's social networks. For example, training programmes for the unemployed that facilitate the creation of ties with other unemployed people only do little to extend those individuals' access to informal routes into work, and may do some harm by way of peer effects on aspirations. Again, it should be clear from recent inquiries that 'care in the community' quickly becomes neglect in the community and 'domiciliary care' can readily become a humane form of house arrest if little or no attention is paid to the social networks of those who use these services. Community development programmes that focus all effort on building ties within a community and fail to address the importance of links outside can quickly reinforce enclaving. It makes far more sense at this stage in our knowledge for governments to be trying to develop piecemeal strategies with which to tackle these network harms. Along with this must go the most careful attention to respecting the privacy of much of the highly sensitive personal information that public bodies and their staff collect about the friendships and acquaintance of their clients. For without reassurance on these matters, the public will rightly be reluctant to trust in governments that seek to influence their social networks.

So, do governments do better by trying to influence the networks of citizens deliberately? Or do they actually do better when they simply provide material services and leave the network consequences where they lie? At the moment, the only answer seems to be that if policy-makers are to do better by trying to coordinate policies and measures deliberately, then they had better begin by being very modest in ambition; by prioritising to limit network harms that flows from public service provision; by recognising that all the good things

do not go together; and by accepting that they must care about all – not just one or two – types of networks.

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Notes

1 This article is based on work for a forthcoming book, Perri 6, *The Politics of Social Cohesion*; see also Perri 6, 'Can government influence our friendships? The range and limits of tools for trying to shape solidarities', in C Phillipson, G Allen and D Morgan (eds), *Social Networks and Social Exclusion: sociological and policy issues* (Aldershot and London: Ashgate, 2003); Perri 6, 'Governing friends and acquaintances: public policy and social networks', in V Nash (ed.), *Reclaiming Community* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2002).

2 K Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: the political and economic origins of our time* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1944).

3 Perri 6, 'Can government influence our friendships? The range and limits of tools for trying to shape solidarities', in C Phillipson, G Allen and D Morgan (eds), *Social Networks and Social Exclusion: sociological and policy issues* (Aldershot and London: Ashgate, 2003). The taxonomy is based on that of M Douglas, 'Cultural bias', in M Douglas, *In the Active Voice* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1982) and ultimately on É Durkheim, *Suicide: a study in sociology*, tr. J Spaulding and G Simpson (London: Routledge, 1951 [1897]).

4 This is based on a review of the available literature, but it should be noted that rather little of the research has been principally concerned with evaluating impacts on social networks, and there are many limitations and weaknesses in the studies.

5 Figure 2 refers to the Western world, with its relative aggregate weighting towards greater individualism rather than either of the strongly integrated solidarities. Interventions that seem ineffective in this context might be more efficacious when used in social contexts which are initially more communitarian in their institutions.

6 The full review of the literature will appear in Perri 6, *The Politics of Social Cohesion*, forthcoming.

7 GC Wenger, 'Social networks and the prediction of elderly people at risk', *Aging and Mental Health* 1, no 4 (1997).

8 RE Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

9 D Stolle, '"Getting to trust": an analysis of the importance of institutions, families, personal experiences and group membership', in P Dekker and EM Uslaner (eds), *Social Capital and Participation in Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2001).

10 M Chaves and W Tsitos, 'Congregations and social services: what they do, how

they do it, and with whom', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 30, 4 (2001).

11 M Hooghe and D Stolle (eds) *Generating Social Capital: civil society and institutions in comparative perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).

12 Perri 6, 'Profiles, networks, risk and hoarding: public policy and the dynamics of social mobility and social cohesion', paper for the Performance and Innovation Unit seminar on social mobility, 20 March 2001.

13 Available at www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/; see also S Aldridge, D Halpern and S Fitzpatrick, 'Social capital: a discussion paper', Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office, 2002, available at www.number-10.gov.uk/su/social%20capital/socialcapital.pdf.