

Politics, Performance, and the Public

Exploring the Hidden Connectedness of Social Networks

"Even the poorest in social relationships is a member in a chain of social contacts which stretches to the world's end."

-- Robert MacIver (1970)

"The brotherhood of man is not a mere poet's dream: it is a most depressing and humiliating reality"

-- Oscar Wilde

How are people connected to other people in the world? This workshop explores connections between people using a graphical representation called a network or graph. The idea is simple: each person is represented by a point on a piece of paper. If there is a direct connection between two people, then a line can be drawn and there is a distance of one between those people. In this workshop we will work with the concepts of networks and social distances to help uncover the advantages and disadvantages of this conceptual tool.

1. Get into groups of 2-3

2. Using the questions below discuss networks and social distances using your own social connections (45 minutes). Budget your time so you spend at least some time on each question.

- *Social distances.* What is the smallest number of links between a member of your group and Hillary Clinton? How did you arrive at the answer? How about between somebody in your group and Karl Rove? What do you think is the fewest links between somebody in your group and a person in a remote village in China? Trace one or more actual or theoretical paths. What about to people in the media or to social activists?
- *Linking the "unlinkable."* Consider some "incommensurable" relationships (between, say, a "pro-life" and person and a "pro-choice" person). Can you describe a path that you know of that connects them? If no could you speculate on a path that does?
- *Geography.* To what places do people in your group have direct links?
- *Roles.* Looking at a graph (on paper or in your mind) try to ascertain different roles within the graph the people may assume. Try to look for "bridges" or "hubs" for example. In what ways are people in your group bridges?
- *Social phenomena.* What sorts of social phenomena could network analysis help describe? (One way to proceed in addressing this question would be to list some social phenomena (e.g. organizing a party for an elderly relative or finding a place to rent) and see if network analysis could play some role.)
- *Working the network.* How could you (or other people) "take advantage" of your personal networks and your knowledge of networked relationships?
- *Thought (or actual) experiments.* What types of experiments could you dream up that would help teach us things about networks. How could you test your theory? Some examples include getting information to somebody, asking a favor, coping in an emergency situation.
- *Using computers.* What ways could computers or computer networks be used to understand or use the network models of social relationships. Examples include facilitating or modeling social networks.
- *Extra Credit!!* Try to identify a person that two or more people in your group know that nobody in the group had realized that the other(s) knew.

3. Class discussion. (30 minutes). Be prepared to discuss your answers.