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Sycamore Hall
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47401
Telephone 812-337-5295

Karl F. Schuessler, Editor

Marvin E. Olsen, Book Review Editor

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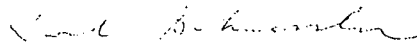
Mr. Mark S. Granovetter
Lowell House N-21
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

Dear Mr. Granovetter:

Thank you for the opportunity to consider your article entitled "Alienation Reconsidered: The Strength of Weak Ties" for possible publication in ASR. We have completed our evaluation and reluctantly regret to notify you of our decision against publication. The reasons for our decision are set forth in suggestions prepared by our readers for your use. Perhaps these quite generous comments will be of some service to you should you rework your materials before submitting your manuscript for publication elsewhere.

Again, our appreciation for the opportunity to examine your paper.

Sincerely yours,



Karl Schuessler
Editor

KS/ar

Enclosures: comments of two readers

MS returned under separate cover

REFEREE'S SUGGESTIONS TO AUTHOR

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This exceedingly long paper is beautifully written, and interesting in many respects, but it should not be published. I respectfully submit the following among an endless series of reasons that immediately come to mind. First, Author makes recourse to "alienation" for no other reason than the unfortunate fact that this concept has become eximious sociological cul-de-sac. The blessed thing means all things to all people, and ends up by meaning nothing in the blind alley of sociological taxonomy. For Marx, alienation, which expressed itself in several forms, had meaning only in the context of (1) man's relation to his economically productive sphere and (2) man's relation to those who, having robbed him of his "joie du travail," also imposed on him life conditions which were alien (i.e. unnatural) to his basic human needs. Of late, alienation has come to mean powerlessness, anomie, estrangement, loneliness, unhappiness, etc. ad nauseam. I dare suggest that one fundamental aim of science is to analyze multifarious phenomena rather than render them ever more obscurely complex. In any case, Author is correct, though hardly informative, in arguing that "weak ties" have tonic properties for both the social self and the social fabric. But he does not show that the corpus of sociological literature defines living in a context of weak ties as living in an alienating situation, however he might define (which he does not) alienation. What the literature seems to show is that modern society multiplies secondary associations (or weak ties)--and then amply shows also that primary associations do not disappear thereby. It would be a feat of supreme brilliance to be able to show that there is an optimum point in the balance of weak and strong ties for any given state of social being; it is wasteful and quarrelsome to perpetuate ill-delineated arguments.

Second, the paper strikes me as trivial and as an addition in the endless series of thrusts beyond unsettled frontiers. Consider the statement on p. 22, lines 5-6 from bottom, that "extensive enough" weak ties "can" knit together large numbers of people and make organization possible." I may be wrong, but my reaction is, of course they can and do knit together. Societies beyond purely familial aggregates would hardly exist without such knitting. I fear that our Aristotelian scientific Weltanschauung gives us too much joy in a continuous rediscovery of culture. More specific problems also arise. For instance, what does Author mean by "make possible"?

Third, in the section on the effects of weak ties, Author takes a step further and argues that they "breed cohesion" by generating cultural similarity" (p. 35, lines 1-2). Again, for me "breed" has perfect denotative meaning in biology, but what does it mean in a sociological argument, however exploratory? But let us assume that we are dealing with (1) a causal link and (2) a heterogeneous society (not a family, for instance, where, Author would probably agree, weak ties do not breed cohesion). I would submit that it is not "weak ties" that breed cohesion but certain acts, exchanges, etc. that serve as vehicles through which the strong sentimental ties of primary associations are transferred and diffused in a somewhat weaker form. What Author does is to isolate a form of cohesion where, from a primary-group

perspective, none would be expected precisely because ties seem to be "weak." And he attributes causal influence to these ties when they are really indicators of a form of cohesion that lies beyond the social horizons of "primary groups." The question of why some form of cohesion exists in large social contexts is indeed a good one, as Durkheim showed in The Division of Labor, but it must be answered in terms of "what ties together" not in terms of a definition of the ties themselves.

Fourth, in the absence of specific rules for isolating "weak" or "strong" ties, it is not possible to determine whether Author or reader is correct when they disagree (as Author and I often do) on whether given ties are weak or strong. On p. 2, lines 11-14, Author defines strength of ties in terms of (1) amount of time, (2) emotional intensity, and (3) intimacy that characterize the ties. Does "amount of time" refer to amount of time the participants spend with each other? Well, I see my family of orientation (in a foreign country) only every other year or so, but I would argue that my ties to it are second in strength only to those tying me to my (here present) family of procreation. Moreover, how do the three characteristics relate to the strength of ties? Discretely? Jointly? Cumulatively? Etc.

Fifth, "postulate" on top of p. 3, "people tied weakly to each other move in different circles": given the definition of "strength" of ties (middle of p. 2) partly in terms of "time," and given the fact that moving in "different circles" is patently a question of time, this proposition is clearly a tautology. I am more than willing to grant that tautologies can be extremely useful in theory construction, e.g., when they are used for purposes of derivation, transformation, etc., but no such uses of this tautology appear in the paper.

Sixth, some propositions advanced in the paper are theoretically engaging, e.g., (bottom of p. 4): "information passed through weak ties reaches more people." It so happens, however, that this proposition has already been stated by Gabriel Tarde and Scipio Sighele among others. Others (e.g., some of those on the eufunctions of weak ties) have been advanced and discussed by Cooley. Are we destined to a never-ending rediscovery of our propositions? Why not try instead to pull them together contextually and organize them logically?

Finally, if I have taken the liberty of extensive criticism, it is because the paper is at least provocative. That is what Author himself hopes for his paper. But it is not enough.

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"Alienation Reconsidered: The Strength of Weak Ties"

My own major criticisms can be summarized in three main points:

1. The author, in his eagerness to overturn a particular current doctrine, has oversimplified its argument. Essentially he proposes that 'weak ties' are associated with urbanization and modernization, and hence with a general weakening or loosening of social bonds, as compared with folk societies. This is one way of characterizing the argument, but a careful reading of Wirth, Redfield and others who have espoused the position indicates that they were really saying that the kind of ties or social bonds in the urban environment are undesirable because they do not permit the human individual to realize his full, rich, potential. That is, the weakening or loosening effect was, I believe a careful study of the literature will show, a secondary effect; the primary being that of a loss of human quality. This failure to fully understand the criticized position leads the author to a major unclarity or confusion: he must assume, since he emphasizes the weakening-loosening effect, that the older position held that the characteristic urban-type ties--'weak ties'--were not functional; that is, performed no service in the society. I do not believe that the authors cited really held this, or if they did, it was a secondary effect or a verbal corollary. Actually, I do not find that they denied the functionality of these types of ties; rather, they did not like their quality. Therefore, since the major accomplishment of the paper is to demonstrate functionality, there is more than a little windmill-tilting in the paper. But despite this, there are good points and the general attempt to re-focus attention on urban social bonds is useful.

2. On pp. 41-42 the author does a capable job of summarizing my second major criticism: that to roll up in one ball a series of different kinds of social bonds and call them all "weak ties" is superficial and a rhetorical device only--not a scientific analysis. As one reads through the paper, he trembles with eagerness to call the author to account on this point; then finds that the author himself seems to be anticipating the criticism! This is no way to write a paper. If one must distinguish between strength and content; between generalized and specialized ties, etc., then by all means do so, and do not seek to publish what is simply a rough, general draft of a good idea. An example of this occurs on pages 35 and 36. On 35, the author cites the kula ring as an example of weak ties; on 36, he cites Gluckman's

REFEREE'S SUGGESTIONS TO AUTHOR

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"Alienation Reconsidered: The Strength of Weak Ties" (continued, page 2)

Tonga and Tallensi extended kinship peripheral relationships. The first example is simply not an example of 'weak' ties at all: these are highly specialized, long-lasting economic trading relationships--in fact, they are strong, not weak. The author here confuses specialization and short duration or intermittent contact with weakness. On the other hand, the Gluckman data is probably genuinely representative of weak ties--although even here the function of these ties in maintaining morality raises a question as to just how one can call a tie 'weak' when it serves to maintain moral postures. One begins to suspect that while there are some 'wak ties,' the varied functions of these ties and their varied specialized foci indicates that the strong-weak dimension is simply one among many.

Thinking along these lines, one wonders just what it is that the author is writing about? Or rather, that 'weak ties' are an idiosyncratic preoccupation of some kind, or at best, an inadequate organizing concept for some rather heterogeneous phenomena. But one must return to the point: that despite this confusion, there are some perceptive ideas here and they are worth more work. The author should attempt a new detailed classification of all the functions and types of ties, then ask himself: just what commonalities can be found among them? I suspect that 'weakness' is something he has imposed on the materials and it has not emerged from a careful study of the materials.

3. My third criticism can be brief: I find that the treatment of the alienation issue is totally inadequate, and the author's failure to come to grips with it is part and parcel of his fuzzy conception of the doctrine he criticizes, as well as his failure to seriously ask just what his universe may be.

I might also suggest that the author read a current book: W. A. Christian, Jr., Divided Island. Harvard, 1969. This is one of the best analyses of communication networks in a quasi-urbanized community I have ever seen, and has all sorts of theoretical hints for the author. In general, I find that his scholarship is somewhat elementary--he has not explored the many concepts and characterizations of social bonds in the anthropological and sociological literature, but has confined himself to a few older and obvious items.