



**The Company We Keep:
The Impact of Diversity
in our Social Networks**

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We've all heard the popular saying that it's not just what you know, it's also who you know. Though we understand its premise and its implications regarding the importance of networking for career success, few of us ever think about its application with regard to diversity. Accordingly, I often find myself challenging my friends, family, and students (and myself) to examine the heterogeneity of their social networks by asking: What proportion of your closest friends are poor, Black, Jewish, disabled, Hispanic, Muslim, Asian, gay, lesbian, elderly, uneducated, or rich? It seems that, at some point during my educational training, I developed the notion that many of our thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors are influenced by those immediately surrounding us—the company we keep. Amazingly, the majority of my contacts (and I imagine this generalizes beyond my sphere as well) have never given any significant thought to the makeup of their networks or the influence that it could have on the way that they choose to think and behave. Here, I will review (albeit not exhaustively) some recent research examining the validity of my notion. It is my hope that this discussion will stimulate readers to devote further attention to the analysis of their own network and its impact on their lives.

To begin, let's take a look at what the literature suggests about the typical level of heterogeneity in individual social networks. From an early age, it seems that most of us restrict the diversity of our networks by seeking out similar others. For instance, as early as preschool, children use sex similarity as a criterion for friendship (Martin, Fabes, Hanish, & Hollerstein, 2005). Although it is easy enough to understand why this occurs (e.g., similarity attraction, social identity enhancement), its ultimate outcome is unfortunate. We tend to continue this pattern of relative isolation from dissimilarity throughout life, developing social networks that are homogenous in terms of race, sex, religion, sexual orientation, education, social class, and age (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Mollica, Gray, & Trevino, 2003; Muraco, 2005).

Undoubtedly, many will read the preceding conclusion and wonder why the writer would describe this phenomenon as unfortunate. Certainly the tendency to categorize others into in-groups and out-groups and associate more often with the latter is not new. In fact, it is probably accurate to describe

social network homogeneity as an enduring legacy that has been passed down (inadvertently or intentionally) through history like a family heirloom. So, if similarity traditionally has been the norm, why should we be concerned now about the continuance of this trend?

There are at least two key reasons why it is imperative that we break this cycle. First, the tendency toward similarity in social networks helps to perpetuate many of the inequalities that continue to plague our business organizations. For instance, by restricting exposure to dissimilar others, social network similarity limits the potential for minorities to access society's powerbrokers (Thomas, 2001). Second, this network similarity creates a perpetual cycle of ignorance whereby people are never forced to challenge the stereotypical nature of their beliefs about members of other groups. Thus, individuals never come to realize the fallacy of their commonly held misconceptions. In short, our propensity to avoid intergroup relations enhances the potential divisiveness of the faultlines (Lau & Murnighan, 1998) associated with our social identities. In the sections that follow, I take a closer look at how social network homogeneity (a) perpetuates inequality and (b) fosters intolerance.

How Social Network Homogeneity Perpetuates Inequality

In western societies such as the United States, there is an extensive history of intergroup inequality. Traditionally lower status groups (e.g., Native Americans, Blacks, disabled people) were systemically disadvantaged in the competition for resources and were forced to live a separate and unequal existence from higher status groups. Although most of the laws pertaining to physical segregation have been amended or repealed, our society has remained highly divided. People continue to live and learn in the same types of racial and ethnic enclaves as their parents and grandparents (Dawkins, 2005; Saporito & Sohoni, 2006). Moreover, despite legislation protecting the rights of many minority groups (e.g., the disabled, religious minorities), they have yet to be fully integrated into many aspects of mainstream society, including the workplace. Consequently, it is not altogether surprising that individual social networks remain relatively homogenous as well (McPherson et al., 2001).

The manner through which this network homogeneity perpetuates intergroup inequity remains the same as it always has been. Remember, it's not just what you know, it's also who you know. If a job applicant is trying to secure employment, it certainly helps to know job incumbents—people that currently occupy the type of position sought (Mouw, 2002; Petersen, Saporta, & Seidel, 2000). Thus, for many types of positions or industries wherein minorities are severely underrepresented, the networks of minority candidates place them at a serious competitive disadvantage. Moreover, once an individual manages to secure a job offer, it's time to negotiate a salary. Social networks again come into play by providing access to critical information, and minorities find themselves outside of the loop (Seidel, Polzer, & Stewart, 2000).

These networks continue to be important throughout one's career. Take, for instance, the case of mentoring. According to a recent meta-analysis, mentoring is associated with the enhancement of a number of key career outcomes, such as higher salaries and more promotions (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). The impact of mentoring on these outcomes, however, is largely contingent upon the mentor's characteristics. For instance, through what Ragins (1997) called the power perspective, protégés of White males receive more career development functions and compensation than protégés of women and minorities (Dreher & Chargois, 1998; Dreher & Cox, 1996; McGuire, 1999). Thus, unlike their White peers, minorities must attempt to diversify their networks if they are to succeed at a comparable rate (Ibarra, 1995; Thomas, 2001). Mouw (2002) succinctly sums up this process in stating that "the combination of high levels of racial social segregation and the informal organization of the labor market results in the transmission of a substantial amount of job information along segregated social networks" (p. 507). Although much of the research in this area pertains solely to race and gender, comparable findings might be expected concerning other dimensions of social identity as well.

How Social Network Homogeneity Fosters Intolerance

The premise that social network homogeneity fosters intolerance is grounded in research on Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. Essentially, he argued that intergroup contact reduces stereotypes and prejudice, particularly when four conditions are met: Individuals have equal status, are united by a common goal, have support from authorities, and are not in direct competition with one another. Though not all of the subsequent research has supported the contact hypothesis, recent reviews of that literature (e.g., Connolly, 2000) indicate the premise is not without merit and that contact often decreases intergroup bias.

Applying the contact hypothesis in the current discussion suggests that those with more diverse networks should be less intolerant of those belonging to dissimilar groups. Numerous studies appear to support this position. For example, those with more racially and ethnically diverse social networks are more likely to participate in diverse groups and be involved in interracial romantic relationships (Clark-Ibáñez & Felmlee, 2004; Emerson, Kimbro, & Yancey, 2002). In addition, Avery and Thomas (2004) recently reviewed a number of other studies showing that various forms of intergroup contact help to promote more favorable diversity attitudes in the form of higher other-group orientation and universality–diversity orientation. Perhaps more importantly, they claimed that these attitudes are critical determinants of one's ability to manage a diverse workforce, suggesting that intolerance fostered by social network homogeneity could be a career impediment.

Another relevant recent study by Visser and Mirabile (2004) further illustrates the connection between social network homogeneity and intolerance. In a series of four studies using various methodologies, they found that indi-

viduals with less attitudinal diversity in their social networks were more resistant to attitudinal change compared to those with more attitudinally diverse networks. We are attracted to in-group members, in part, because we believe that similarity along surface dimensions is indicative of similarity along deeper dimensions (i.e., attitudes). To the extent that this is true, aligning with attitudinally similar others decreases one's openness to new ideas and ways of doing things. In essence, social network homogeneity closes us off from experiencing dissimilar perspectives that help to make us open to subsequent new experiences and diverse types of people.

Tying it All Together

So you might be asking at this point: What does this mean to me? As workforces around the globe continue to become more diverse, we are faced with the impending future of working alongside colleagues and serving customers who will be different from us along various dimensions. In such settings, it is imperative that we be able to relate to these dissimilar individuals if we (and our companies) are to be successful (Avery & Thomas, 2004). The literature discussed here illustrates how diversity in our social networks can help to reduce discrimination in the workforce while simultaneously making us more tolerant of differences.

Of course, this raises the question of how we can go about diversifying our social networks. Presumably, one reason that most people's networks are so homogenous is because it's easier to get to know similar as opposed to dissimilar others. Although there is some truth to the preceding statement, it is also a convenient excuse to avoid the initial discomfort commonly associated with meeting and getting to know someone different. In fact, most of us have the opportunity, nearly every day of our lives, to meet someone whose background and life story are considerably different than our own. For those whose settings might preclude or diminish such opportunities, I can name at least one that's probably on your calendar—the annual SIOP conference. For example, this past year alone, I had the experience of meeting individuals belonging to at least the following categories: White, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Indian, gay, lesbian, straight, male, female, disabled, younger, older, and too many religions to name here. All of these people will not necessarily become my friends, or even be added to my network, but they increase the likelihood that my future network will become more heterogeneous by enhancing my openness to different types of diversity.

In concluding, I have two questions for readers. First, how diverse is your social network? I encourage you to give this some serious thought. As the saying goes, you can tell a lot about a person by the company that they keep. Second, if your network is not very diverse, what are you going to do about it? Making a conscious effort to be open to individual differences is a necessary first step towards diversifying your social network.

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