



Who benefits from network analysis: ethics of social network research[☆]

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Abstract

The success of social network research (SNR) has led to expectations that in addition to academic research, SNR can introduce people to one another, solve organizational problems, map the epidemiology of AIDS, and catch criminals and terrorists. Since SNR requires that names of both respondents and their contacts be collected and used in most analyses, Institutional Review Boards become very concerned. Experiences of the author, participants in the 2003 Sun Belt Conference and the Social Network List Serve illustrate ethical issues. Proper handling of the data and the analysis, including complete control by the investigator can virtually eliminate harm to respondents and those they nominate, though perhaps not to the satisfaction of IRBs. On the benefit side, academic researchers always benefit, organizations, society and science may benefit, but individual respondents rarely do. © 2005 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The social network field may have become a victim of its own successes. The mapping of social networks with names, dates and places has become a major industry. Barry Wellman reports that “Business 2.0 anointed ‘social network applications’ in 2003 as ‘The Technology

[☆] Appreciation for comments and ideas to the Sunbelt 2003 session on network ethics, to Ron Breiger, Scott Feld, Joe Labianca, and the Social Networks List Serve. This paper is a personal statement, however, and I take full responsibility for its content and positions on ethics.

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of the Year” (Wellman, 2003). The New York Times has celebrated social networks as one of the “new ideas” of the year (Gertner, 2003). PC Magazine reviewed five Internet sites that attempt to introduce people to one another.

Introduced by Stanley Milgram in 1967, the theory of six degrees of separation, which supposes that you’re just a half-dozen introductions away from anyone you want to meet, has found the Internet. Sites like LinkedIn, which take hold of the six-degrees concept and put it to practical use, let you take advantage of chains of acquaintances to contact people down the line. They’re known as social-networking services. Such services use the Internet to help users expand their networks of personal and business relationships.

The process is simple. After joining one or more of these sites, you send messages to people you know, asking them to join. They in turn invite people they know, and so on. In this way, you construct an enormous network of people to whom you have personal links.

... Friendster boasts three million users; none of the others has even approached 100,000 (Metz, 2004), p 131.

One of these sites has applied for a patent. The value of one’s network of friends can be calculated.¹ At the other extreme there are maps of terrorist networks and firms that apparently make a living by providing crime fighting units with software to map criminal networks. Saddam Hussein was said to have been captured in part through the application of social network mapping (Fassihi, 2003). Many organizations attempt to improve their efficiency through sociometric analyses (Krebs, 2003). Research and development laboratories map major gatekeepers of critical information. There are maps of who works with whom in biotechnology. Epidemiology was founded on the tracing of agents who carried disease and modern network methods have been applied to the HIV positive field. Structures of national leaders and decision-makers have been studied, as well as the structure and function of corporate overlaps. One could go on and on and produce what is essentially a bibliography of important social network studies.

The ethical issues are both straightforward and complex. In standard practice social science research, anonymity and confidentiality are both routinely granted to respondents, informants, and subjects in experiments and observations. In large-scale survey research with at least several hundred respondents these guarantees are very easy to keep. The researcher has no interest in the particular names of respondents, except in the case of panel studies when prior respondents need to be contacted again. Looking them up serves no purpose whatsoever.² In smaller scale qualitative studies, often organization or small community studies, who are the respondents even when given promises of anonymity may be

¹ The authors are apparently unaware of Burt’s work (Teten et al., 2004).

² In the days before computer databases, it was almost totally impractical to check up on any one respondent. Now, with computers and linked files, it is easy enough if the links can be made, but from a practical point of view still useless to the researcher, though valuable to a law enforcement agency that may wish to discover who, for example, are using illegal drugs, if that is the topic of the survey.

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