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Social Conventions and Personal Confidences: Mario Luis Small's *Someone To Talk To: How Networks Matter in Practice*

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Someone To Talk To: How Networks Matter in Practice
Mario Luis Small
Oxford University Press, 2017 (Reprint Edition, 2019)
296 pp.

If I asked you who you would talk to about your personal problems, you might suggest a close friend, partner, or family member. This seems fairly straight forward on the surface; confiding in someone about our problems requires a level of trust to offset the perceived risk of being honest and vulnerable. Social conventions dictate that we do not enter into such disclosure with strangers or acquaintances, and practically, we are more likely to have access to those that we have a closer relationship with; for example, as I type this, my partner is sat on the other side of the room playing the Xbox, and while she might not initially be too happy about being disturbed, if I needed someone to talk to, its common sense that I would ask her, right?

Theory about social networks and who individuals speak to about problems reflects this common-sense thinking; expressed in the form of ‘strong’ ties (those closest to us such as friends and family) and ‘weak’ ties (those we have less interaction with, such as acquaintances, colleagues), the accepted assumption is that we will turn to our strong ties to confide in. This assumption has stood untested for some time. Yet, Small draws attention to the point that when individuals are asked who they last turned to for support, a question that inquires about the actuality of how people act as opposed to their perceptions of how they would act, the answer of who we actually spoke to often contradicts who we say we hypothetically *would* speak to, raising questions about how such decisions are made, and casting doubt on the taken-for-granted theory regarding social networks, weak and strong ties. This is the starting point for *Someone to Talk to: How Networks Matter in Practice*.

Starting on the Ground

While it has been long established that we are social creatures for whom “it’s good to talk” (as the 1990’s British Telecom advert proclaimed, and regular campaigns against isolation express), the question of how we decide who to talk to has been neglected, potentially due to what Small, drawing on Daniel Kahneman, refers to as “theory-induced blindness” (xi). Seeking to challenge the conventions of network analysis, Small invokes an inductive research process that begins with lived experiences to build up to theory that accurately reflects what people actually do, rather than just what they say they do, or what theorists say they do.

As an academic who specialises in teaching research methods, and who has an interest particularly in qualitative and feminist research methodologies which centre lived experience, the decision to start on the ground, with the data, rather than to accept assumptions or deductively test pre-conceived hypotheses, resonates with me. At the same time, the methodological approaches and theory which I align myself with, emphasise the importance of participants’ voices, the narratives individuals tell, and how narratives can reflect multiple

realities. Therefore, I can't help but feel a slight sense of unease at the notion of trying to uncover the 'truth' and reality of what individuals actually do compared to what they say they do—it feels a bit too positivist-leaning for me—the notion that there is an objective external 'truth' that we as researchers have the skills to uncover—and implies an automatic distrust of what our research participants tell us.

While it has been established in areas such as eye witness testimony that individuals often do misremember and inaccurately recount the 'facts' of events, there is still something interesting to be explored in the narratives individuals construct, in their own right, rather than as accounts of reality or truth. Indeed, one of the key strengths of the book that bring it to life are the personal stories told about participants and others through which findings and theory are explored. It would have been useful to explore the role of narrative further, rather than using it mainly to compare what people say they do to what they actually do. However, it is understandable that the author wanted to distance himself from the existing theory which relies solely on what people say, given its dominance in network analysis.

Small suggests that the reasoning for the mismatch between what people say they do and what they actually do is largely due to our desire to be seen as rational with intentions that are followed through on, which does not reflect much of our actual thought processes and behaviour in practice. For me, this is perhaps oversimplified, in the same way that network analysis oversimplifies individuals' behaviour, which is a limitation the author recognises in relation to network analysis and seeks to unpack further, but does not see in relation to his own study and assumptions. It is also accepted that participants will tell the 'truth' about their past encounters when asked who they last spoke to, yet, as empirical evidence about eye witness testimony and the fallacy of memory reveal, we cannot necessarily depend on individuals' accounts to be trustworthy of reflecting 'reality'. Obviously, this is a criticism that could be levelled at any research which gathers data retrospectively, however, given this research's clear focus on trying to uncover the 'truth' of what actually happens compared to what people say would happen, the need to consider this potential limitation is more pressing. Again, it provides fodder for a more in-depth qualitative approach that explores individuals' narratives. However, perhaps because of the methodological traditions in network analysis, where typically large scale questionnaires are carried out and quantitatively analysed, the research this book draws on is deliberately mixed methods.

Furthermore, despite initially setting up a convincing methodological argument for utilising an inductive approach that starts with lived experiences via in-depth multiple interviews with graduate students (one at the start of the first semester, followed by another 6 months later, and a further final interview 6 months after this), there is a lot of testing of hypotheses based on previous theory. This has the benefit of providing a clear structure to the book and focus for the findings (through the device of 'what we expect to find based on the theory versus what we actually find'), but it is potentially limiting and removed from the epistemological foundations of such inductive qualitative research. Nevertheless, a key strength of the book is the intertwining of comments on the research methods used with the data produced, alongside the inclusion of appendices which provide a detailed methodology and data analysis. More books should follow this lead to enable transparency of research, replicability, critique, and better understanding of the research process. Notably, Small writes up his methodology honestly and reveals the messiness of doing research, an important aspect that

is often removed from sanitised journal article papers that present the research process in a linear simplistic manner.

To Whom Do We Confide?

Early on in the book, the research data reveals that the assumption that people confide only in those they are closest to is incorrect; instead students often confide in weak ties. Small goes on to ask why and explores different reasons, mainly that in some instances, individuals intentionally avoid close ties. This seems irrational at face value but makes sense in the context of risk, with there being less to lose with a ‘weak tie’ than a ‘strong’ one. Two other significant contributors to whom the students spoke to about problems were titled ‘institutional mediation’, where institutional roles and expectations influenced who students confided in, again related to the risk of consequences; and emotional reciprocity, as well as the importance of topics. Here, students confided in others in similar positions to themselves, as they perceived the person to have a better understanding or empathy of their situation. These decisions were clearly premeditated. However, one of the central findings of the book is that often decisions about who to speak to are made in the moment, and not predetermined or rationally thought through. Central to the argument that individuals do not act rationally in line with their preconceptions about their relationships and how they would hypothetically act, nor in line with how network analysis theory presupposes individuals will act, is the importance of the context of interaction. In this respect, spaces mattered, as they allowed for the possibility of incidental and spontaneous interactions.

The importance of space, particularly physical and institutional spaces, is not new; the water cooler is recognised as a site for informal discussion, the architecture of buildings is designed to produce particular interactions; for example, open office spaces were originally considered to encourage communal working (although this has since been critiqued). Significantly, while spaces play a central role in organising our actions, contexts are not fixed. Small states that as contexts change, who people confide in is also likely to change. For Small, this is justification for the need to pay serious attention to the “epistemological shift, from network structure to network practice” (131) and from the macro level to the micro level.

We have witnessed a drastic change in context with the COVID-19 global pandemic which creates a significant challenge to one of the book’s central claims about the influence of everyday interactions in institutional spaces on who we choose to talk to. The pandemic resulted in long periods of physical and social isolation and the shift to working from home, which looks likely to remain in mainly sectors, who are introducing ‘agile’ working to enable employees to work more from home than was ever previously imagined pre-COVID-19. Such changes raise glaringly obvious questions about how such disconnect and move towards private space away from public and institutional spaces, with decreasing opportunities for spontaneous interactions with those we are not close to (or weak as opposed to strong ties in the language of network analysis), will impact on who we choose to speak to. Given that the book was originally published in 2017, the author can be forgiven for not being able to predict such an unprecedented future. What is less excusable is the relative absence of the impact of social media and the internet on social networks, interpersonal interactions, and who we might choose to speak to.

Remarkably, online spaces are only briefly referred to; the first mention being on page 21 where Small casts a glance over online interactions in the context of institutional settings. Indeed, online interactions and the potential impact of technology on individuals' decisions about who and how they speak to others is only considered in passing, and always in relation to the author's central arguments; on page 176, Small claims that 'In spite of what is possible online, people are deeply responsive to the social interactions they encounter routinely'. While this may be the case, that face to face everyday interactions remain central to individuals' lives (although much less so during a global pandemic), the neglect to consider in more depth the role of online interactions is a glaring omission for me, which results in the book feeling dated. Had the online dimension of social interaction been considered in more detail (or even at all, really), it would perhaps be easier to make connections between the research and the context of COVID-19, given the centrality of virtual interactions in the past 18 months, both socially and professionally.

Despite the very specific sample of graduate students in the US, a specificity that has its limitations which are acknowledged by the author, there are attempts to generalise from the research findings by drawing on other data sources about Americans in combination with the research study findings. While generalisability, or transferability as is more apt in qualitative research, is often considered the ultimate aim of all research, I was interested in knowing more about the specifics of the study's sample. Early on in the text, Small notes that he made the methodological and ethical choice to protect participants' privacy and identities by presenting 'no racial or other physical descriptions of the participants, and [giving] them all common Anglo-American nicknames' (23). While this might be done with good intentions, doing so effectively erases difference and, with it, the specifics of individuals' experiences that is often the value of such in depth qualitative research, as well as the ability to analyse such experiences through the lenses of structures such as race and class, although there are partial glimpses of their impact in some of the examples discussed relating to financial difficulties and cultural differences.

The Bigger Picture

Similarly to the intended aims of Small's research, this review has focused mainly on the micro level of the book's content, to conclude I will now draw back to consider the macro level, in this case the wider structure of the book, and its final conclusions in relating theory to practice. Overall, the book follows a very clear structure which is enjoyable to read and logical, spanning from the problem in the literature, to the research question, methodology, initial findings, further probing of these findings (from the 'how' and 'what' to the 'why'), before finally spanning out to consider the generalisability of the findings and how the empirical data relates back to the theory. Small proposes a 'shift in perspective', building on network analysis's propensity for metaphors, and embodying Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) famous argument that we make sense of things and our experiences through metaphor. He contends that the 'network' metaphor invokes images of a small pool of close people who will be there to catch us in times of need.

By comparison, Small proposes we consider a 'stream' of interactions, which reflects the everyday flow of multiple encounters we have with different individuals in different settings and the continuously changing nature of who we choose to speak to, depending on the

contexts we find ourselves in. Given that this analogy has change and movement built into it, we might be able to apply it still to the post-covid context. However, it is clear that further research is needed to examine what this stream might look like in practice that takes much more account of the role played by virtual spaces. Moreover, if Small's stream reflects the constant flow of daily in-person interactions and changing physical spaces we find ourselves in, it unfortunately might be the case that COVID-19 has caused a stagnation of these running waters, and for individuals to retreat back to their pools of close, 'strong' ties. As Small argues, it is likely that the most insightful way to investigate this is to pay close attention to the micro level of individuals' practice, and, I would add, their narratives about these practices.

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