Obesity, Identity and Community: Leveraging Social Networks for Behavior Change in Public Health


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What are the topics discussed in this paper:

- How and under what conditions social networks influence behavior change.

- Analysis of recent empirical work in obesity research that explicates social network influences on eating behaviors.

- Relational rather than individualistic view of personhood should help us better understand the content and context of social network relations that inform social networks together.
• Each person’s values are chosen in contexts that involve learning from and engagement with others and each must learn and practice the skills necessary for making responsible choices in social circumstances.

• Same-sex relationships exerted stronger influences than opposite sex ones—same-sex friends (even those living far away) were more influential than spouses or opposite-sex siblings.
The paper argues that in order to construct more effective and ethical approaches to health behavior change, it is crucial to recognize the relational affective features of human experience.

The paper expands upon the concept of relational autonomy introduced by Baylis and colleagues (2008) by introducing a concept that not only links the individual with her relational reality, but also attempts to explicate the components of relational personhood that develop and reinforce particular health behaviors.
• The paper argues that the power of both weak and strong social network ties in reinforcing (positive or negative) health behavior lies in their ability to affirm some quality of affiliation that is tied to one’s identity—or how one views oneself.

• Identity-constitutive affiliation is an affective relation that takes as input a person’s values for others and the embedded contexts in which those valuations occur.
The output behavior is change or reinforcement for a person, and (just as importantly) helps form, reinforce or shift that person’s sense of identity by means of the behaviors of those to whom she is affectively connected.

The recognition of affiliations that are tied to economic and emotional survival as well as those which are traditionally targeted to enhance empowerment or social support.
• This paper also briefly discusses about the paper by Christakis and Fowler, 2007 which analyzes the spread of obesity using longitudinal data over 32 years.

• In that paper the authors applied a social network approach to show that the spread of obesity is due, in large part, to the influences of social networks of individuals connected not necessarily through geography but through affiliations based on personal identifications of close affective connection.
• The paper also noticed that there was no increased risk of obesity for an individual if a neighbor became obese.

• Being in close physical proximity to someone who has become obese does not in and of itself appear to affect weight gain.

• Living in the same community with the same environmental constraints does not necessarily translate into the same risk for obesity.
• This paper draws a contrast between the notion of geography and that of context.

• Where geography is defined by placement of physical structures, context is defined by the relationships, shared values and practices and the particular social networks of which individuals are members.

• The finding suggests that subtle factors regarding identification with others who one believes are similar to oneself may influence behavior patterns.
• Their study suggests that if one person feels a close connection to the other, this will influence her health behaviors, even if this affective component is not reciprocal.

• The ways in which the individual prioritizes the elements of the social network are causally relevant and also only visible through an examination of the individual as situated member of a social network.
• Kaufman and Karpati use standard ethnographic techniques to study how socio-cultural practices embedded in the community of particular families influence the eating behaviors of the children in those families.

• The researchers found numerous food practices that contributed to childhood obesity in the interviewed families.
• In the participant interviews it became clear that overfeeding to produce overweight toddlers and children was central to some participants’ notions of good parenting and body image for their children.

• Two main beliefs are involved: (i) it is important to give children what they want—gratification through (among other things) food is the job of parents; (ii) heavier children are aesthetically pleasing and healthier; thinner children are at risk for injury, illness and also less attractive.
• Overfeeding was seen as an expression of love or caring, and was a source of bonding across many relational groups, including mother–child, father–child, grandparent–mother–child and neighbor–neighbor.

• Attempts to curb practices like adding sweetener to milk, adding an extra meal to a child’s diet, or sharing high calorie treats with a visiting father were viewed by participants as a threat to important parent–child relationships.
• A crucial component of how social networks reinforce eating patterns is that many of these relational patterns were driven by food insecurity in this economically strained community.

• Inhibited mothers’ attempts to provide healthier food for children; when relatives brought fried chicken or ham and egg breakfast sandwiches for children, it was considered both rude to refuse such offers and also a necessary addition to the fluctuating food supply in the household.
• Many of the participants also engaged in what they called ‘taking credit’: buying foods at local bodegas on credit when their finances at the end of the month prohibited shopping at a supermarket.

• Because of lesser price, the selection of foods tended to be less healthy (like fewer fruits and vegetables, and many high-fat or sugary processed foods), participants relied on them regularly, and the practice had been established for more than one generation, according to one participant.
• It is clear from this in-depth study that the embedded mechanisms that reinforce negative eating patterns for this community are affected not only by emotional connections but also by the very real need for survival during continued economic hardship.

• The goal for intervening such process would be to provide members of that social network with behavior change options that respected their important relationships and did not put at risk their community-based food safety net.
This paper proposes a four part framework which is used to understand how the social network affects individual behaviors in general.

- First, the social connection needs to matter (that is, satisfy some affective criteria of importance). These criteria may be tacit, and individuals may not be consciously aware of them.

- The person making the connection to another has to see herself as like the other in a way that is important to her sense of self.
• These connections are important for understanding the links between identity and motivations for behavior.

• For instance, a student may identify with a teacher in an academic context, thus forming views about how she sees herself as an intellectual or a future scholar.

• Emotional connections within a person’s social network appear to have powerful roles in embedding identity; this fact helps explain why it is critical to take them into account when attempting to promote behavior change, and possibly utilizing their power in the context of a social network intervention.
• Second, in order to understand causes of complex phenomena like obesity, it is important to identify in which contexts social network influences of others are salient for individuals.

• For instance, tacit norms about permissible snacking behaviors that hold sway over an individual at a party with friends may fail to have any force in the workplace even if some of the same friends and food triggers are present.
Third, at the mechanism level, the connection needs to influence the behaviors of the persons in these networks.

For instance, when a relative brings food after a meal has been recently eaten, it is important to know whether that triggers eating in effect an additional meal.

Exactly which behaviors are triggered may vary among individuals, although investigation has revealed some generic types of behavioral responses to particular triggers.
• It turns out that in group-eating contexts, average calories consumed per person increases as group size increases (Bell and Pliner, 2003; Herman et al., 2003).

• Identifying typical responses of individuals who are members of the same social network may prove useful, especially when designing interventions tailored for their community.
• Fourth, the connection needs to yield an identity constitutive outcome; in part through the behaviors triggered by the connection, the individual gets to experience or view herself as like those with whom she is connected.

• In the student–teacher case above, the student may engage in behaviors (studying more, applying to college) through her identification with the teacher.

• Actively participating in these behaviors then enables her to see herself as a future teacher herself, an intellectual, or a future college graduate.
• An obese individual, through connections with obese family members, may see her own body size normalized, and thus experience herself as not overweight.

• In part because she does not see herself as overweight, she does not change her eating patterns that are maintaining her obesity.
Some illustrations discussed in the paper:

- An overweight/borderline obese working-class college student works part-time at a fast-food restaurant. He identifies strongly with the other employees, most of whom are also students who work and take classes.

- He enjoys the camaraderie of the group; they joke together and also talk about struggling to balance work, school, social life and family obligations.
Despite the student’s weight and health concerns, he eats a fast-food meal at work at least four times a week, and also stops by for free meals (given to him by fellow employees) at least twice a week. None of them ever brings food from home to eat during shifts.

The student has recently gained weight, which worries him. However, he cannot afford to quit his job, and he enjoys the connections with the other employees—in fact, because of time constraints, it serves as a surrogate for social activities with his other friends.
• His social network is also constrained by economic need. Work provides relief of that need both through wages and meals.

• His eating patterns conform both to the constraints of his situation and the norms set by the group of employees.
• Also in this paper, a positive case is discussed in which identity constitutive affiliations within a newly created social network help bring about healthier eating and activity behaviors.

• An overweight sedentary woman living in a suburban area wants to be more active. She remembers enjoying bike riding as a kid—it was her most pleasurable exercise.
• She increases her stamina by riding 5–10 miles at a time. Over the course of a few months, she loses a modest amount of weight—increasing exercise and body awareness help her pay more attention to what she is eating as well.

• Once she feels like she is in a better shape, she starts to look for a group to ride with. Despite the fact that she is well informed and motivated, she wants the structure of a group, along with a sense of solidarity, created through the emotional connections of shared interests, norms and goals.
• In response to her needs and the lack of organized groups, she contacts friends and neighbors and starts organizing casual rides first in her neighborhood, and then for longer distances.

• Over time, the group becomes more organized, fit and enthusiastic. As the group becomes larger, they plan rides using subgroups of different fitness levels, speeds and distances.
• Although weight loss is not an explicit goal of the group, many members report modest losses, and as their activity levels increase, they find themselves eating more nutritious foods, sleeping better and feeling an overall sense of greater wellness.

• Here, the individuals involved often lose weight and begin to develop better eating habits. We see the notion of relational personhood reinforcing the development of behavioral change, with the interplay between the individual and their affiliations.
Conclusions:

- This paper examines two recent studies in which social networks exert strong influences on individual eating behaviors.

- The subsequent analysis and case descriptions of this paper show that a relational account of personhood is necessary to examine adequately the content of social network connections as well as the context in which those connections are embedded.
• This approach is crucial to understanding both how they function and how interventions should be tailored to the values, needs and constraints of those within those contexts.

• The links between strong and weak social ties that define relational autonomy and changes in identity and behavior based on those social ties are discussed.
• It is not sufficient just to focus on interventions that tempt individuals with the possibility of new positive self-images through positive health behaviors; it is also important to get inside social networks that underwrite negative health behaviors, and see if there is some way to adjust the structures constraining the networks in a way that preserves or even feeds that positive self-image, but also hooks up to positive (rather than negative) health behaviors.
Thank You