



Networks and Behavior C

"Cascading Benefits of Clusters: The Impact of Perceived Network Density on Tie Strength"

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We outline a theory of clustering, to explain the prevalent tendency of actors to group in homogenous structures within and between organizations, as well as in society at large. An inherent duality in networks is the tension between connectivity and clustering: networks enable flows, including those of knowledge and practices, among others. However, empirically, networks tend to compose of internally homogenous clusters that are loosely connected. Clustering can be problematic to organizations, as well as to other collectives, because it hinders flows and increases isolation. It has been suggested that perception of high density can mitigate the effects of clustering, by allowing for more ad-hoc (performative) ties between individuals. We propose that individuals reap cascading benefits from belonging to dense network clusters and thus will prefer social ties that are embedded in such clusters. Using an experiment, we find that individuals revise tie strength according to the perceived density of the network in which the tie is embedded. The revisions are greatest when the pattern of density differs from expectations, e.g. when a strong tie is perceived to be contained in a sparse network. We suggest that the expectation for cascading benefits may play a role in network transitivity and the general tendency for clustering. We also highlight the importance of perception in affecting network outcomes.

