Another take on the theoretical motivations of recent work in social network analysis
Theoretical/intellectual strands that social network analysis touches upon

- Group process/social constructivist theories
  - How powerful are constructed realities?
- Power and influence theories
  - Parsons vs. Emerson
- Views on the rationality of individuals and other social actors – comprehensive (neoclassical econ) vs. bounded (Herbert Simon & most soc theory)
  - The roads vs. plains theory of action
- Sociology’s attempt to meet the economists’ imperial ambitions
Going to the extreme

- As Wasserman & Faust suggest, in *extremis* social networkers tend to say relations are the only thing that matter – as the economists say that individuals are the only thing that matter.

- A more nuanced view is emerging that tries to bring together an appreciation of relations and attributes – see Granovetter (1985).

- Let’s look at an interpretive example that actually isn’t a social network analysis.
Elijah Anderson

- *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*
- Not a network study (ethnography) – but its findings can be thought about in network terms
- Problem: what has happened to the relatively stable African-American urban communities over the last 20 or 30 years?

“Black people have always been poor, but we haven’t always been killing each other while we’re poor.”
Study of Urban Philadelphia

- The book analyzes the changing nature of the neighborhood just north of the Drexel and Penn campuses – the Powellton Village section (though the book uses a pseudonym)
Old Heads & Young Boys

- There is a particular network structure that Anderson found in this area that depended partly on the structure of Philadelphia itself.
- North Philadelphia on the Delaware River used to be heavily industrial.
- Whites & blacks are relatively segregated.
Old Head & Young Boys

- Old heads worked as laborers in the factories of North Philadelphia and commuted back to the West Philadelphia.
- Young boys were the next generation.
- Old heads could get young boys “mules” – jobs that required little education but paid fairly well.
- The quid quo pro was that the old heads were the “law” in those communities – built on relations of dependence.
Network-wise
Old heads and young boys

- Then industrial America hollowed out in the 60s and 70s. The old heads lost their jobs.
- The emerging black middle class moved elsewhere – the black men most likely to become old heads left the neighborhood.
- Without the jobs, the remaining old heads had no leverage with the young boys – no relations of dependence.
- Segregation – spatial, educational, and cultural – kept young blacks from gaining access to alternate job networks.
- Other structures took hold – the drug culture, the gang culture.
- Families became the protective barrier in some cases.
- Some proportion of blacks sought other outlets, like the military.
Network-wise

Drug Dealer → Drug Kingpin

Gang

YB

Legitimate Employer

Family

P

GP

YB

YB

YB
What’s going on?

- The strength of weak ties (old heads to young boys) may lie in what they link and the nature of dependence relations.
- The strength of strong ties may lie in what they can thwart, prevent, or potentiate (gang behavior).
- Network structures can be powerfully shaped by larger social phenomena like geography, race, & class.
- The structure of social networks limited what options were available to young boys.
- Race, geography, class, and social connections reciprocally shape the possible outcomes for young boys.
- The reality of bounded rationality and social construction may help explain why young boys chose to take up socially destructive behaviors.
The network upshot

- Social construction of economic and social possibilities can depend on network structure
  - Most economic theories invert this relationship – economics determine social connections

- The ability of families and other protective units in the community ecology to protect children may depend on what weak ties bring to the neighborhood – jobs or drugs?

- Policy levers sometimes focus on only part of the issue
  - Job loss is obviously a part of the problem, but…
  - Bringing jobs into this community is no longer the entire solution…
  - Because the social networks have changed
  - Economic development can’t happen without social development

- Network analysis can help to provide a fuller picture of the policy environment