



Weak Ties: Overlooked Social Connections

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When thinking about what social connections have the greatest impact, its natural for one to think only about one's closest friends, ignoring the people they have less contact with, however by doing this it is easy to overlook a group of people who have a dramatic effect on our happiness. Weak ties, also known as acquaintances, are generally the people around someone that they interact with a little bit each day, like a coworker, a classmate, or maybe a worker at a store they frequent. This group of people have been shown in various psychological studies to be very important in maintaining one's happiness, but as mentioned earlier they are very often overlooked when it comes to evaluating social wellbeing. This raises the question, why do people undervalue their weak tie relationships?

To begin with, the data showing the effects of weak tie relationships is very clear, showing the increase in happiness that comes from interacting with weak ties. According to a study by Sandstrom and Dunn (2013), interacting with more weak ties than a person's mean amount led to a statistically significant increase in one's happiness, growing larger the greater the amount of weak ties interacted with. In addition, according to an article by Susan Sprecher (2022), weak ties also are useful in increasing the amount of new information we receive on a given day, providing a greater sense of belonging, and reducing the burden on closer ties. The same article also seconds the findings of Sandstrom and Dunn, while also adding that weak ties, similar to strong ties, have a positive effect on one's overall health and wellbeing.

Returning to the premise of this paper, the dramatic effects of weak ties really calls into question why they are so overlooked when it comes to social wellbeing. While this specific topic does not have much publicly available information, there are various psychological theories that could explain why they are so overlooked. To begin with, there is the classic idea in social psychology that the brain does not actually know what it wants, especially when it comes to social connection. This is shown very clearly in a study by Gilbert & Ebert (2002), where they found that when photography students are told they can only take home one of their favorite photos, they think they will be happier if they have the opportunity to switch later on, however in reality it was found that the group who did not get the opportunity to change their decision were much happier with their choices. Another example of this comes from a study by Eastwick & Finkel (2006), where they discovered that in speed dating, a person's stated preferences did not significantly correlate to the person's preferences at the actual event. This disconnect between stated and actual preferences is supported by broader psychological theories. Nisbett & Wilson (1977) showed that people often cannot accurately explain the causes of their own choices, a phenomenon known as the introspection illusion. Similarly, research on affective forecasting finds that individuals consistently incorrectly predict what will make them happy (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). All of this research goes to show that our mind often does not have a good handle on what would truly make it happy, making the overlooking of weak ties seem much less unnatural.

Despite the mind's tendency to not know what would make itself happy, there still must be a reason for weak ties to be overlooked so heavily despite their great impact. One reason for this may be the increased focus on making close friends rather than having a high quantity of friends. Research by Baumeister & Leary (1995) supports this, showing that individuals often focus their energy on maintaining a small circle of close friends rather than building a larger network, leading to less focus on the less close relationships i.e. acquaintances. This prioritization is likely one of the main reasons weak ties are so overlooked in social wellbeing, because they are not a conscious focus most people have, but rather naturally occurring parts of being in social situations. The same thing can happen with friends when being in a romantic relationship, where the prioritization of the closer and seemingly more important relationships decreases focus and interest on the less close relationships, such as close friends and acquaintances (Milardo, 1982). With the goal of socializing usually being developing close ties and romantic relationships, it makes sense that people who remain as acquaintances will be consistently overlooked when it comes to social wellbeing. In addition, acquaintances are also often seen as stepping stones to achieve prioritized relationships, so it is logical that when one is focusing on their current close relationships, interacting with acquaintances would be even less of a priority.

The lack of priority of weak ties as well as the mind's tendencies to not know what would truly make it happy are likely why weak ties are so overlooked when it comes to social wellbeing and overall happiness. However this lack of priority is not necessarily a bad thing, as one of the greatest strengths of weak ties is their ease of maintenance, and their "cost effectiveness," allowing one to maintain many without much focus and effort (Sprecher, 2022). However, because of this lack of priority, it is important that the general population understands the importance of having a wide network of weak ties in order to make sure that people do not neglect the acquaintances all together. Weak ties are extremely important to social wellbeing and overall happiness, and raising awareness of their importance can help people realize the often overlooked type of connection they might be missing in their lives.

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