

Topic Page: [Social networks](#)

Definition: **social network** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

a supportive group of friends and relatives or acquaintances with similar interests, etc., who are in turn interconnected with other such groups in complex arrangements.

2.

such a group whose point of contact is an online website, allowing for the sharing of conversations, information, film and television viewing, etc.

social networker *noun* social networking *noun*

Summary Article: **Social Network**

From *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*

A social network is a system of interrelationships between actors within a social system. Most typically, the actors of interest are individuals within some defined social group, such as members of a family, students within a classroom, employees within an organization, or residents within a town. Researchers in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, epidemiology, and communications use social networks to define characteristics of groups or individuals within the network. For example, “dense” networks are those with many interconnections between individuals. At the individual level, individuals can be described as being “central” (or popular) if they are connected to many others, or as representing “structural holes” if the individual helps bridge a relationship between two otherwise unconnected people.

Social networks can be described using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitatively, social networks can be defined or portrayed through techniques such as participant observation or interviews with members of social groups. Quantitatively, social networks can be established through sociometric methods, in which researchers typically ask individuals to provide numerical responses to questions about some aspects of their relationships with other group members. Social networks are often represented graphically in a sociogram, which depicts who each individual or “node” is connected to, and sometimes the strength of those connections (i.e., strong or weak ties), or their valence (i.e., positive or negative ties).

Social networks are relevant to the discussion of humor because humor is thought to play an important role in creating and maintaining the social relationships that define a social network, and social networks provide the social context in which humor behavior happens. In other words, humor is both a cause and an effect of social networks, as it influences both whether and how people affiliate with one another. This entry discusses the role of humor in the formation, maintenance, and perpetuation of social networks and as a consequence of social network structure.

Humor and the Formation of Social Networks

Ties form within social networks for many reasons, including proximity, similarity, social sharing of knowledge, expertise, or kinship. However, humor might also play an important role in forming social relationships and shaping social networks insofar as it facilitates liking and interpersonal attraction.

There is also considerable evidence to suggest that humor appreciation and positive emotions are closely related, even at a neurological level. When we associate another person with positive emotions (i.e., it “feels good” to be around him or her), we want to be around that person more. In addition, there is some evidence that the sound of another person's laughter tends to attract people to that individual, and even more so over time. That is, over time, we associate the pleasurable experience of positive emotions with individuals with whom we share humor and laughter, and the very sound of our laughter tends to reinforce others' bonds to us.

Cecily Cooper (2008), in her relational process model of humor, expanded upon the impact of positive affect on relationships by noting that humor can be used to facilitate self-disclosure and perceptions of similarity and can decrease perceptions of hierarchy or status differences. For example, people can use humor to reveal things about themselves, which tends to heighten a sense of closeness and intimacy. Similarly, the types of things people joke about tend to reveal something about them, and if one's humor makes that person seem more similar to us, we like the person even more. Finally, humor has the potential to reduce perceptions of formal status differences between people, which might otherwise represent barriers to the development of relationships. In particular, self-deprecating humor on the part of a higher status person might alleviate concerns that a lower status person might have about developing a relationship with a high-status individual. However, it is important to note that humor can also be used to reinforce status differences and limit the formation of relationships. For example, use of strongly aggressive or sarcastic humor by high-status individuals, or humor that belittles or disparages others, tends to make the high-status person less accessible by others. In social network terms, positive affect, liking, similarity, and hierarchical salience can influence whether a given interpersonal bond exists at all, and if it exists, whether it is strong or weak, or positive or negative.

Humor and the Maintenance and Perpetuation of Social Networks

Once a social network is formed, as in a work group or group of friends, humor can play an important role in its maintenance and perpetuation. Within social groups, humor allows individuals to voice concerns or anxieties about the group, or to relieve stress experienced by the group's members. In addition, humor helps people communicate about serious matters in a less confrontational manner. Conflict within social groups is inevitable, but if it is not handled effectively, it can lead to member withdrawal, or even complete dissolution of the group. Humor is thought to be valuable in this regard because serious issues can be raised under the guise of “joking around.” For example, humor can be used by a group member to communicate mild rebukes or criticism of a group member in a way that reduces defensiveness and helps the individual save face.

Another finding regarding humor and social network maintenance is that social groups tend to develop unique “joking cultures.” Joking cultures involve a shared understanding of topics that are appropriate or forbidden for the purposes of humor and often involve a significant learning component whereby subtle “inside” jokes are strongly shared only by members of the in-group. Indeed, joking cultures can determine the boundaries of the social network, and the strength of ties within it.

Some researchers, most notably Avner Ziv (1979), have used sociometric techniques for examining characteristics of humor within social groups. Typically, these techniques ask group members to indicate something about the humor of other group members, such as who has a good or bad sense of humor or how frequently other individuals within the social network use humor. These techniques explicitly recognize the important social character of humor and have the benefit of relying on an

accumulation of experience that social network members have as both humorist and audience over a longer period of time. Such measures also avoid problems associated with self-report and can be used to examine the relationships between humor behavior within a group, and characteristics of social networks such as density, centrality (popularity), structural holes, and strong and weak ties. Indeed, sociometric measures of humor tend to be related to social network characteristics, such as number of friendships, liking by others, network centrality, and leadership.

Humor as a Consequence of Social Network Structure

There is some evidence that the nature of social relationships within a social network can influence the type of humor that individuals use and can dictate who is socially permitted to use various types of humor. One interesting set of findings about humor use within social networks concerns teasing behavior. Researchers have generally found that individuals who are teased by others in the group tend to be those with numerous and strong ties to others, rather than newcomers or peripheral members of the group. In addition, individuals who do a lot of teasing also tend to be the target of teasing. These findings suggest that good-natured teasing humor (as opposed to ridicule or humiliation) is an indicator of in-group status within social networks, as indicated by a high number of strong ties to others.

Some of the more complicated findings regarding humor and networks concern the role of hierarchical status in driving humor behavior, and there has been some debate surrounding this issue. Some scholars have maintained that humor tends to occur much more frequently in a downward direction in social groups where individuals differ in terms of formal hierarchical status. That is, humor by people such as managers in organizations is more acceptable than humor by low-status individuals, and that humor tends to be more aggressive and aimed at maintaining status differences and social control. In a similar vein, lower status individuals often push back against perceived status discrepancies by engaging in subversive humor such as mocking and ridicule outside of the presence of high-status individuals.

However, other researchers have found that high-status individuals can become part of the normal pattern of humor interactions within groups, particularly if they are first accepted by others as friends within the core social network. Also, as mentioned, humor can be used to reduce the impact of formal hierarchical differences between individuals. In social network terms, this line of research suggests that people with formal hierarchical status often use aggressive humor to maintain social distance and weak ties with others within the social network, and similarly, lower status individuals can use subversive types of humor to maintain that distance and to strengthen ties with other low-status individuals. However, it is also possible for high-status individuals to become more accepted and to forge strong ties by avoiding aggressive humor and perhaps using self-deprecating humor to reduce apparent status differences.

See *also* Joking Relationship; Relationships, Nonromantic; Subversive Humor; Teasing; Workplace Control; Workplace Humor

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