

# **the surprising power of weak 'social ties'**

I've just been to the Farmer's Market here in Edinburgh and I set myself the challenge of being more chatty than usual to the stallholders I was buying food from. I 'pushed' myself to be friendly & talk more than I've ever done before (and I've been going to the market intermittently for years) ... and it was such fun. Tender, bubbly, jokey, light. And I had more of a spring in my step for hours afterwards. And it didn't mean that I took much longer doing the shopping than I usually do either. And as one might have predicted, this 'good mood' and happy positivity then splashed over into my actions subsequently (as predicted by Barbara Fredrickson's 'Broaden-and-build' theory of the function of *positive emotions*) ... so walking home, I came across a great idea to amuse the grandchildren when they visit next week and bumped into an acquaintance who I was so warm & caring with. Not that I wouldn't have been friendly anyway, but there was a tenderness that was even more than typically. 'Virtuous spirals' rather than 'vicious circles'. Wonderful to feel this building inside and to feel bubbly & happy ... and this 'surprising power of weak ties' is discussed in the research abstracts below ... and links to the sister handouts 'Cooperative behaviour cascades' and 'Be the change you want to see'. Try it ... everybody wins.

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Epley, N. and J. Schroeder (2014). "*Mistakenly seeking solitude.*" *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 143(5): 1980-1999. Connecting with others increases happiness, but strangers in close proximity routinely ignore each other. Why? Two reasons seem likely: Either solitude is a more positive experience than interacting with strangers, or people misunderstand the consequences of distant social connections. To examine the experience of connecting to strangers, we instructed commuters on trains and buses to connect with a stranger near them, to remain disconnected, or to commute as normal (Experiments 1a and 2a). In both contexts, participants reported a more positive (and no less productive) experience when they connected than when they did not. Separate participants in each context, however, expected precisely the opposite outcome, predicting a more positive experience in solitude (Experiments 1b and 2b). This mistaken preference for solitude stems partly from underestimating others' interest in connecting (Experiments 3a and 3b), which in turn keeps people from learning the actual consequences of social interaction (Experiments 4a and 4b). The pleasure of connection seems contagious: In a laboratory waiting room, participants who were talked to had equally positive experiences as those instructed to talk (Experiment 5). Human beings are social animals. Those who misunderstand the consequences of social interactions may not, in at least some contexts, be social enough for their own well-being. See too an excellent discussion of this research in the *New Yorker* at <https://tinyurl.com/y7xfx66y>.

Sandstrom, G. M. and E. W. Dunn (2014A). "*Is efficiency overrated?: Minimal social interactions lead to belonging and positive affect.*" *Social psychological and personality science* 5(4): 437-442. When we buy our daily cup of coffee, sometimes we engage in a social interaction with the barista, and sometimes we are in a rush. Every day we have opportunities to transform potentially impersonal, instrumental exchanges into genuine social interactions, and the happiness literature suggests that we may reap benefits by doing so; in other words, treating a service provider like we would an acquaintance (i.e., weak tie) might make us happier. In the current study, people who had a social interaction with a barista (i.e., smiled, made eye contact, and had a brief conversation) experienced more positive affect than people who were as efficient as possible. Further, we found initial evidence that these effects were mediated by feelings of belonging. These results suggest that, although people are often reluctant to have a genuine social interaction with a stranger, they are happier when they treat a stranger like a weak tie.

Sandstrom, G. M. and E. W. Dunn (2014B). "*Social interactions and well-being: The surprising power of weak ties.*" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40(7): 910-922. Although we interact with a wide network of people on a daily basis, the social psychology literature has primarily focused on interactions with close friends and family. The present research tested whether subjective well-being is related not only to interactions with these strong ties but also to interactions with weak social ties (i.e., acquaintances). In Study 1, students experienced greater happiness and greater feelings of belonging on days when they interacted with more classmates than usual. Broadening the scope in Studies 2A and 2B to include all daily interactions (with both strong and weak ties), we again found that weak ties are related to social and emotional well-being. The current results highlight the power of weak ties, suggesting that even social interactions with the more peripheral members of our social networks contribute to our well-being.

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