

Are Some Social Ties Better Than Others? by Juliana Breines

Which is more important: your spouse or your Facebook friends? A social psychologist says we need both, for weak ties can make us strong—and sometimes strong ties can make us weak.

Do we live in an age of superficial social ties, incapable of genuine human connection? Our Facebook friends may seem to do little more than bombard us with trivial status updates. Texting, chatting, and tweeting appear to have dumbed down our conversations to quick, shallow exchanges.

There's no question that the digital age has changed the way we relate to one another, sometimes to our detriment, as MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle has argued in her book *Alone Together*. Though many of us can count Facebook friends into the thousands, research suggests that loneliness is rampant in the United States—we have fewer close friends than we did a generation ago—and takes a severe toll on our health.

But we have always built our lives across a range of social ties, from loose acquaintances to lifelong partners. Each of these types of ties, strong and weak, has the potential to help as well as harm us, and each can be enjoyed or abused. These ties are the building blocks of “social capital,” which researchers define as the tangible and intangible benefits we get from our web of contacts, coworkers, friendships, family, and more.

How can we make the most of the many dimensions of our social world? Let's look at four layers of social connection, from weakest to strongest, to explore what they're good for, when they're limited, and how to use them to build social capital.

1. Online contacts

What are they good for? For avid social media users, especially those whose livelihoods depend on rapid information sharing or self-promotion, it may seem like a no-brainer that social media connections are valuable—but the benefits may not be clear to the rest of us. We may even feel ashamed of our online connections due to the prevailing sense that these connections are less “real” than others, and that amassing too many online contacts could make us seem narcissistic (which it actually may, according to recent research).

But just as online contacts can be used selfishly in the service of enhancing our self-image, they can also be used pro-socially, as a means of giving and receiving practical advice and emotional support. Studies suggest that online communication may especially benefit less extraverted individuals by giving them opportunities to provide

support to others in a non-threatening environment, an experience that can in turn increase self-esteem and reduce depression. Contrary to popular opinion, research also shows that using Facebook can help satisfy our need for connection.

What are their limitations? Facebook is no cure for loneliness, and the positive feelings gained may be short-lived. Though online contacts can be great when it comes to sharing everyday joys and challenges, there are times when no sympathetic emoticons can replace the comfort of a loved one's physical presence. Using social media effectively requires knowing its limitations, and, as with a flaky friend, not expecting more from it than it can give.

Building social capital with social media. To leverage this resource, it may be helpful to seek out services that are relevant to important personal goals and interests, not just general networking sites. You could also allow yourself a certain amount of time each day to actively engage with others through these services (e.g., sending messages, responding to comment threads, offering ideas), rather than simply waiting for feedback. In short, it pays to be a giver on social media, not just a lurker or a taker.

2. Professional networks

What are they good for? Professional contacts can play an integral role in helping us launch or advance our careers. You might learn that your dream employer is hiring through a post from a seemingly random LinkedIn contact, or meet your future business partner through a colleague at a conference.

Researchers have referred to these kinds of ties, as well as other types of looser connections such as neighborhood acquaintances, as bridging capital. Bridging capital may involve weaker ties, but the breadth and diversity of these ties can expose us to new ideas and opportunities beyond what is available in our narrower inner circles.

Research suggests that job seekers who have wide-ranging weak ties are actually more likely to be successful in their search than those who have stronger close relationships. In addition, studies show that people with a large amount of bridging capital have a greater sense of connection to the broader community, a more open-minded attitude, and a greater ability to mobilize support for a cause.

What are their limitations? Professional networks are great for practical goals like finding a job, promoting a product, or striking a business deal, but, like other weak ties, they tend to be less useful when it comes to intimacy and emotional support. If we're always in networking mode, viewing new contacts merely as potential connectors or references, we may miss out on opportunities to connect with people on a deeper level and may fail to appreciate the value of our interactions with them beyond what they can offer us professionally.

Building social capital with professional networks. The same principles apply here as with social media, and the two are often interconnected. Joining organizations relevant to your interests and taking active steps to become more engaged in your professional community, like serving on a committee or organizing an event, can help you make the most of this form of social capital.

It may also be helpful to think about the quality of these connections. Even if your

interactions with someone are limited, you can maximize that limited time by focusing on meaningful rather than more superficial exchanges—and by offering up your own ideas and resources rather than just considering what you have to gain. People are more likely to want to go to bat for you if they feel valued by you and see the relationship as mutually beneficial.

3. Close friends

What are they good for? Friendship helps us meet our needs for belonging and our need to feel known and appreciated for who we are. It also allows us to know and understand others more deeply than we can know strangers: Research suggests that our friends bring out the best in us when it comes to empathic accuracy, or the ability to know and understand another person's thoughts and feelings.

In addition, research conducted by Greater Good contributor Elizabeth Page-Gould and colleagues has shown that friendships that cross ethnic group boundaries can help reduce anxiety and potentially even improve physical health among people who tend to feel anxious in intergroup settings.

What are its limitations? At times, however, friendship can be a source of jealousy and competition. According to a psychological theory called the self-evaluation maintenance model, we tend to be happy for our friend's success, but only if the success is not in a domain that is also important to us, and only if the friend is not too close. If our friend's success threatens our own self-esteem, we may distance ourselves from them or even try to sabotage them. Friendship can also be a liability if we base our self-worth on our friends' approval: For individuals high in friendship-contingent self-esteem, depending too much on friends can make our self-esteem unstable and increase symptoms of depression.

Building social capital with friends. How can we make the most of our friendships? One approach is to be mindful of the subtle ways that jealousy can erode friendship and to find ways to reframe friends' potentially threatening successes in a way that highlights shared benefits (e.g., your friend might be able to help you improve and reach your own goals) and that involves taking your friends' perspective. Friends need our support and encouragement just as much when they are up as when they are down, according to research.

The more we can shift our focus from maintaining our own self-image to remembering our genuine concern for our friends' well-being, the happier and healthier our friendships will be.

4. Significant others

What are they good for? For many people, there is one special person to whom they feel closest—often a romantic partner, but sometimes a best friend or family member. Significant others are the first people we turn to when we're suffering, and their support can benefit not only our mental health but also our physical health: Research suggests that receiving social support allows us to cope better with stress and gives our immune system a boost, helping us fight off infections more effectively.

Support in times of need is one of the major benefits of what researchers call bonding capital. Bonding capital may not give us the breadth and diversity of looser bridging-focused ties, but it gives us with the closeness and intimacy that even 10,000 Twitter followers might not provide.

Beyond the benefits we receive directly from our significant others in the form of support and comfort, our significant others also have the potential to introduce us to a whole new social network, the friendships and other connections that our partner has developed over the years. When we enter a partnership our networks double—our partner’s connections become ours as well, and vice versa.

What are its limitations? Significant others can deepen and broaden our social worlds, but they also carry the risk of creating a sense of insularity and disconnection from other parts of our social life. Staying in and watching a movie with our significant other can seem a lot more relaxing after a long week of work than attending a social event, but if we do this week after week, our other relationships may start to erode, decreasing our overall social capital. No matter how much we love our significant others, it’s unlikely that they alone can meet all of our social needs, and expecting them to do so can be damaging to the relationship over time.

In addition, the benefits of this form of social capital sometimes have costs of their own. For example, receiving support doesn’t always feel good—it can sometimes make us feel helpless, incompetent, and needy, especially when we feel like we are getting more than we can give back in return. While often a source of happiness and comfort, our closest relationships can also cause hurt and disappointment. There are many things you can do to try to keep your closest relationships strong, but there are also times when relationships fail or are lost despite our best efforts.

Building social capital with significant others. Stephanie Coontz, author of *Marriage, a History* has argued that the best way to maintain a strong, healthy marriage is to have a strong network of friends with whom we share common interests and can turn to when in need. While it might be tempting to be jealous of time your partner spends with friends, or possessive of his or her time, it’s healthier to see your partner’s friends as an asset to your relationship. They provide critical psychological support to your partner and an outlet for interests that you might not share. But your partner’s friendships are also a form of social capital for you—and it will pay to help your partner keep those networks going.

Inside the relationship, it’s critical to foster the perception that support is available if needed. Since support can often become unequal, thus creating ingratitude and resentment, sometimes the most effective support is invisible—meaning that it is not experienced as support per se, but rather as a gesture of caring that is not costly or burdensome to the giver.

For example, a person might choose to sacrifice work time to spend a romantic evening with their partner who has had a rough week, but this form of support will likely be better received if the person does not emphasize their sacrifice, but rather communicates a genuine desire to spend time with their partner. At the same time, however, Greater Good contributor Amie Gordon’s research shows that appreciation is a critical ingredient in healthy relationships, so it’s not always a bad thing to notice your partner’s sacrifices or to make sure that they know that you’re putting them first.

How do weak ties and strong ties fit together?

The sociological terms “weak ties” and “strong ties” imply that one type is better than the other, and in daily life we often disparage weaker social connections like Facebook friends.

But that’s a false dichotomy: As important as close relationships are, weaker ties also have their place. Research suggests that people who have a broad range of different kinds of social roles tend to be healthier and more likely to attain professional success. Occupying varying roles across multiple domains can create a psychological safety net that protects us against perceived threats to our sense of self-worth, and in turn we are likely to suffer less stress and stress-related illness.

Furthermore, with modern advances in communication and technology, our networks have the potential to extend more widely than ever across space and time, allowing us to live vicariously through our friends’ travels and helping us track down long-lost cousins.

But our broad networks can sometimes be overwhelming, and we may feel like we are being spread too thin, juggling emails and Twitter exchanges in addition to keeping up with work and family relationships. It can be hard to manage expectations and avoid leaving others feeling neglected—or feeling neglected ourselves. Some may find that the best solution is to cut off a layer or two of weaker ties, going on a de-friending spree on Facebook, or closing networking accounts for good. For others, it may be enough to set clear limits and prioritize certain relationships over others when necessary, remembering that depth is just as valuable as breadth.

From our closest friends to our most distant social media contacts, the strong and weak ties that make up our social capital provide the bedrock of our social and professional lives and have the potential to shape our health and happiness in dramatic ways.

But it’s important to remember that social capital, unlike economic capital, is not a concrete entity that we hold in our possession, but rather a fluid and ever-shifting network of relationships that need to be nurtured continually. The true value of our social capital may lie less in what we gain from it personally and more in what it allows us to build and create in collaboration with others.