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Nathalie Chauvac, Laurence Cloutier, Adrien Defossez, Grégori Akermann,
Ainhoa de Federico

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Special issue on Social Networks

"Negative Ties, Lost Ties, Latent Ties"

by

Nathalie Chauvac¹ Scool – Coopérative de recherches en sciences humaines et sociales et
Membre associé LISST-CERS, Université de Toulouse 2

Laurence Cloutier – Doctorante, LISST - CERS, Université de Toulouse 2.

Adrien Defossez – Doctorant LISST - CERS, Université de Toulouse 2.

Grégori Akermann – Doctorant LISST - CERS, Université de Toulouse 2. et

Ainhoa de Federico – MCF LISST - CERS, Université de Toulouse 2.

Résumé

Ce numéro spécial propose d'apporter un éclairage particulier sur certains aspects peu explorés des liens sociaux, à savoir les liens négatifs, les liens perdus ou les liens latents. Les textes présentés ici ont été rassemblés à la suite d'une journée d'études portant précisément sur cette thématique. Des analyses de terrain rendent compte de la présence de réseaux sociaux « inefficaces », « conflictuels », « absents » ou « interdits » et une réflexion théorique est engagée pour explorer et caractériser les différents liens sociaux. L'accent est mis sur les méthodes employées pour appréhender ces situations relativement difficiles à saisir, en théorie comme en pratique. En prenant en compte ce type de liens, ces travaux ouvrent une voie heuristique pour la sociologie des réseaux sociaux.

Abstract

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Mots clefs

Relations sociales, liens négatifs, liens perdus, liens latents, liens absents, réseaux sociaux, réseaux personnels

Keywords

Social relations, negative ties, lost ties, latent ties, absent ties, social networks, personal networks

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Work on social relations has developed in recent years and permitted to put the spotlight on a certain number of social phenomena such as access to employment, support from professional or personal networks, and the evolution of friendship networks. The study of social networks has generally been on existing ties or links, their creation, their mobilization, but there is little research on negative ties, lost ties or latent ties. The objective of the Third Inter-Congress Conference of the *Association Française de Sociologie (AFS) Réseau Thématique 26 (RT26)*, "Social Networks", and Seventh Meeting of the "Social Networks in Toulouse" (ReSTo or *Réseaux Sociaux à Toulouse*) restaurant group, held on 5-6 April 2012 at the University of Toulouse, was to allow researchers from different disciplines to address these topics, and to discuss and share their research. Twelve presentations were made and this scientific exchange attracted fifty researchers from France and abroad. The topic of the meeting had emerged from discussion among PhD students concerning a nagging question that bothered at least two of us, and about which the students had asked each other. The relative difficulty of finding work on this topic² led us to propose this theme to the ReSTo group, which was received with enthusiasm by Ainhoa de Federico, **from that point the organizing committee was established**³. The presentations made during the meeting are the basis of this *BMS* special issue which offers an exploration of the topic of negative tie.

Social network analysis can be defined as **the study of all the relationships that an individual or group has with others, taking into account the form taken by these relations, and the analysis of all relationships to identify relevant groups retrospectively and understanding in practical terms how structure constrains behavior while emerging such interactions (Degenne and Forsé, 2004)**. The numerous studies that focus on social networks can be interested in the nature of relationships between individuals or groups, their frequency, their content. A more holistic approach focuses on the structure of the networks, their density, and the potential centrality of individuals. Still others try to understand how social networks evolve over time, moving from one particular event to another. But such existing works focus on active and positive relationships; for example, those allowing access to a resource, to a support, to a presence with favorable effect; that is to say, ties mobilized or "mobilizeable", or ties encouraging the "positive aspects" of an individual's social life.

The project we presented was to explore and characterize ties that were negative, lost or latent; those that the network prevents or does not allow, the gaps and the losses. The work presented at the meeting and here in this issue of the *BMS* has resulted in progress in the definition of what could be a negative relationship, either by starting from the analysis of field work as done by Cécile Plessard, Adrien Defossez, Marie Pierre Bès and Nathalie Chauvac, or by offering theoretical reflection as proposed by Alexis Ferrand. If negative ties are defined as social relations whose existence, instead of allowing access to a resource, forbid it (Ferrand in this issue) or limit (Chauvac in this issue), or provoke its loss (Comet, 2011), the call for proposals and replies highlighted especially the rarity of such work in research and publications. Nathalie Chauvac explains that, for her, negative ties emerged while trying to understand some job-hiring sequences told by interviewees, which resisted modelization by currently proposed concepts and analytical frameworks. How does one understand that an experienced employee seeking a job in the sector in which he has worked for many years, staying in the same region, does not rely on his professional network to find a job? It is with

² It is interesting to highlight that at about the same time, a similar initiative emerged from Karoly Takács which ended with a meeting at the Corvinus University of Budapest on April 19-20th 2012 gathering a group of researchers specialized in social network analysis on negative ties. Also this august 2013 discussions, mentioning very recent references, have been very active on negative and latent ties on the SOcNET international forum for social network analysts, which shows that this question is emerging with increasing strength.

³ We also wish to thank Michel Grossetti for his support taking part in the organizing committee.

the use of mixed methods, based on extensive interviews thematically analyzed and quantified that allows one to return to the corpus to understand and realize that the professional relations in question constituted an obstacle to the extent that they were all aware of the reason for the previous job termination of the potential candidate.

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