The Structural Principles behind the Forbidden Triad and Structural Holes

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores youth friendship by examining a unique structure of personal networks. It is rare for an adolescent to develop a friendship network in which the two closest friends are total strangers to each other. Such an "open network" has inspired different views: It reveals either a "forbidden triad" that implies awkward social interactions (Granovetter 1973) or a "structural hole" that opens up opportunities (Burt 1992). This paper evaluates the principles behind such networks with a network perspective that focuses on both the adolescent's (ego) ties with close friends and the ties among close friends. The data were drawn from the Taiwan Youth Project. In a 2002 survey conducted in 40 middle schools (level-3 data), 2619 students (level-2 data) listed three best friends each. Each alter-to-alter tie, along with two ego-to-alter ties, was taken to construct a triadic network (level-1 data, n = 7802) that consisted of the ego and two alters. Overall, 17.8% of these networks were open (i.e., the two alters did not know each other) and thus were considered as forbidden triads. Multilevel analyses using HLM show that a forbidden triad tends to form when the ego and alter differ in individual characteristics, and when ego-alter ties are weaker.