Introduction

Social networks are currently attracting increasing attention from commentators of all kinds: from academic journals in various disciplines to employment agencies, via social workers and internet service providers, the notion of the network society is rapidly becoming established. This notion is undoubtedly not unconnected with the increasing affirmation of the individual dimension of social life, in contrast to the influence of institutions and authorities, which appeared to be dominant before the 1970s. Rather than being determined by their origins, their position in the social structure, and their culture, individuals are now regarded as strategists and masters of their own destinies. As such, they have become reacquainted with the risk of fragility and solitude and are expressing their need for social relations by attaching great importance to the network dimension, which is supposed to reconcile society and individual freedom. As actors in their own personal lives, individuals like to think they are also actors in their social lives and are supposed to try to surround themselves with the "right people." But what is the situation in reality? Over and above this way of thinking and the injunctions to "get networked," what actual practices are adopted in constructing social ties? What are the dynamics of this construction process? How do interpersonal relations emerge, change, and fade away? What is the structure of "real" networks, those used by ordinary people, who sometimes act reflexively and strategically but are also frequently governed by the environments in which they live and the vagaries of their lives?

The subject of this book is social relations, the concrete ties that are established between individuals and the networks these ties constitute. It puts into practice a sociology taking into account relational dynamics. Family members, friends, neighbors, business or work colleagues, romantic partners, vague acquaintances: all play a part in people's lives, helping,

1

influencing, and giving them ideas, but also preventing them from doing certain things. Some they entrust with little secrets and problems; with others they share leisure time and evenings out. Each individual's vision of the world and of himself – the moods and the confidence he has in the future – depend to a great extent on this network of persons with whom he discusses, argues, works, has fun, and faces life's difficulties. When this network changes, following the severing of a tie or the arrival of a new person, life also changes to a greater or lesser extent. Equally, a significant change in life has repercussions on the individual's network: he sees less of certain friends and more of others who more closely match new concerns and desires. Some of them help to find work or somewhere to live, sometimes by giving useful information, sometimes simply by pointing in the direction of someone else who can help. If the individual has money problems, he knows there are some he can call on to get out of a fix or to provide more substantial assistance. Some may even be able to give his life a new direction through the advice they give or the example they set. For their part, these people know they can also rely on him up to a certain point, even if only for a brief chat. He feels close, intimately or emotionally committed, to some of them, while regarding the others as mere acquaintances whose absence would scarcely affect his mood. All these people constitute one's personal network, which is more or less narrow or extended depending on the degree of intimacy by which one chooses to define it.

Interpersonal relations, indeed everything that constitutes everyday sociability, may appear of little significance compared to the major social and political issues. However, what is not seen may be just as important as what is emphasized in social life. Studies of social networks carried out over several decades have revealed the importance of interpersonal relations in economic activities, social movements, politics, and many other areas of social life.[1]

More than that, however, interpersonal relations are the basic building blocks of social cohesion, which is derived not solely from the fact that people talk and spend time with each other in one-off interactions but also from the vestiges of these interactions, which persist in time and constitute relationships. Simmel, one of the founders of sociology, perceived this to be the case in the very early days of the discipline:

---

[1] For a general summary of these studies, see, for example: A. Degenne, M. Forsé, *Introducing Social Networks* (London: Sage, 1999).

Beyond its first origin, all sociation rests on a relationship's effect which survives the emergence of the relationship. An action between men may be engendered by love or greed of gain, obedience or hatred, sociability or lust for domination alone, but this action usually does not exhaust the creative mood which, on the contrary, somehow lives on in the sociological situation it has produced. Gratitude is definitely such a continuance. It is an ideal living-on of a relation which may have ended long ago, and with it, the act of giving and receiving. If every grateful action, which lingers on from good turns received in the past, were suddenly eliminated, society (at least as we know it) would break apart . . .. But "benefit" is not limited to a person's giving things to another: we also thank the artist or poet who does not even know us. This fact creates innumerable connections, ideal and concrete, loose and firm, among those who are filled with gratitude toward the same giver. In fact, we do not thank somebody only for what he does: the feeling with which we often react to the mere existence of a person, must itself be designated as gratitude. We are grateful to him only because he exists, because we experience him.[2]

Thus, taken in their entirety, these vestiges "make" society. Relationships, and the networks they constitute, form the basic framework of social life.

Interpersonal relations are often perceived as a world of freedom and equality that stands in contrast to the constraints of organizations, groups, or even families. A society structured by largely involuntary associations and the constraints that accompany them is replaced, it is argued, by a world of ties freely chosen between equals on the basis of affinities of all sorts. However, even friendship has a social dimension: it is recognized, is subject to norms, and conforms to certain rules.[3] Relationships are also sometimes perceived as a shameful aspect of collective life: thus clientelism, "string-pulling," "wheeling and dealing" are all denounced, along with all the other shortcuts that enable individuals to circumvent common rules and obtain small, unjustified privileges. In both cases, relations between individuals are contrasted with the regulated and hierarchized social worlds. Nevertheless, there are many links between the two, even though there are sometimes tensions between them.

As the social sciences (essentially anthropology and sociology) have attempted over almost a century to get a grip on these varying perceptions, hundreds of studies have accumulated findings that turn out to be astonishingly consistent.[4] It is now known, for example, that relationships are

---

[2] G. Simmel, K. H. Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1950), 388–389.

[3] Graham Allan, *A Sociology of Friendship and Kinship* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1979).

[4] For a history of the analysis of social networks, see Linton Freeman, *The Development of Social Network Analysis: A Study in the Sociology of Science* (Vancouver: Empirical Press, 2004).

not independent of social hierarchies: the wealthiest or most highly quali-
fied individuals have more relationships than others and derive more
advantages from them. It is also known that the interplay of elective
affinities tends to produce ties between individuals who resemble each
other, have similar levels of education, come from similar social
backgrounds, and are similar in age. It is also known that relationships
are enormously influential in areas as different as access to employment,
entrepreneurship, mental health, the ability to overcome ordeals such as
illness, bereavement, unemployment, and family breakdowns as well as
expressing happiness or deciding to start a family.

The aim of this book is to offer an overview of social relations and their
dynamics at the level of individuals and their social surroundings. We
draw, first, on two surveys we carried out and, second, on the accumulated
findings of the tradition of social network analysis or, more specifically, of
studies of "personal" networks (an individual's relationships), which
include data that we have analyzed specially. However, before we present
further details of the data and of the book and its organization, we need to
clarify what we understand by relationships and networks and how this
aspect of the social world is linked to other entities such as groups,
organizations, and "social circles" in general.

RELATIONSHIPS, NETWORKS, AND CIRCLES

What is a social relationship between two individuals? Throughout the
book, as in most studies of social networks, this expression denotes the
existence of an association that goes beyond mere interaction, is sustained
over time, and has developed beyond one-off exchanges. When someone
goes into a grocer's shop where he is not a regular customer and buys a
packet of detergent, the exchange he has with the shopkeeper is based on
the various codes of politeness and civility in use in a given space and time,
which determine the things it is preferable to say ("hello," "please," etc.)
and to do or not do (in a small grocer's shop at the present time, one does
not go behind the counter to serve oneself unless invited to do so by the
shopkeeper). Such an interaction in no way implies a relationship as we
define it here, since the codes used make no reference to previous inter-
actions between the same individuals and would also be used with a
different grocer. Let us now imagine that the same shopper goes to buy
bread at the baker's with whom he always has a little chat about life in the
neighborhood and whom he also encounters at meetings of a parent-
teacher association. This time, the exchange will take a more personal turn

and will make reference, explicitly or implicitly, to past interactions, to what each knows of the other, and to what he is expecting of the exchange. With another baker or parent, the exchange would be different. Finally, let us take the case of a mother-daughter relationship: apart from the fact that the bond between them will generally be immediately perceptible from the outside, it will have many complex dimensions and an intimacy and intensity that even years spent on a psychoanalyst's couch would probably not be sufficient to explain to the protagonists themselves.

We will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 1 the problem of defining the scope of relationships and the sociological questions this raises. It is sufficient here to note that, of the three examples described above, only the last two will concern us directly. In our definition, relationships are exchanges that last and cannot be reduced to a functional or one-off interaction. It includes family ties, romantic partners, and all types of relationships – whether elective or more obligatory – with friends, partners, and other intimates as well as with mere acquaintances, neighbors, colleagues, etc. Moreover, relationships do not appear suddenly out of nowhere and are not isolated from each other; rather, they knit different circles together, mixing together their actions, influences, and characteristics. At the very beginning, each of them takes shape within a specific environment. Two people meet somewhere, under certain circumstances, in a particular place and at a particular time. These places and times are not without implications for the development of a relationship and for its nature and quality. Someone encountered at a dance will not, on the face of things, play the same role in our lives as a person we know from work. Subsequently, if the relationship becomes firmer, the activities undertaken, the places visited together, the routines established for meeting, and the shared circles of friends and acquaintances will all change. Each person will introduce the other to new people, places, and knowledge; they will try out leisure activities together and share a growing intimacy. The situations and spaces explored together will imbue the relationship with a particular color and tonality that will imprint themselves on the memory. It is important, therefore, not to separate relationships artificially from the contexts in which they emerged and developed. This is not to say that a relationship should forever retain its place of origin label or be reduced to the characteristics of the situations and spaces explored: as we shall see, its particular characteristics may indeed be a product of the way in which it breaks free from those same situations and spaces. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny the influence of these contexts on the very existence of the ties that

emerge and develop within them and on the characteristics that develop as the relationship evolves.

Interpersonal relations are not simply the specific result of practices linked to sociability. They form the very basis of a fundamental element of the social world, namely social networks. Each of our relationships is, after all, connected to others; together, they form a network that surrounds us, and which, if the connections are pursued one after the other, links each individual to the rest of society. Thus, it is possible to imagine a vast network that, link by link, connects the entire world. Each individual's network is just a tiny portion of this vast global social network.[5] However, our analysis is not located at this level. We are concerned rather with the processes whereby social circles are constituted and evolve and with the personal networks made up of all the direct relationships an individual enters into. Made up of relationships old and new, work- or leisure-related, of a romantic or merely friendly nature, family-based or sports-related, such networks have a form and structure that has an impact on each of their constituent links. A childhood friend, who does not know any of the new acquaintances and with whom the person meets up once a year for lengthy one-to-one discussions, will not have the same place in her life, the same influence over her actions, or the same feeling of belonging to a group as a team of work colleagues with whom she eats lunch every day next to the office.

Networks are an essential component of the social world. Although they can be defined in extremely simple terms as sets of relationships, their structures and dynamics are very complex and they play a central part in most social processes. The analyses published here belong to the tradition of "social network analysis," which can be defined as a broad range of approaches in which the emphasis is on networks as lasting structures produced by interactions. We have drawn on the methods used in this tradition to list interpersonal relationships and reconstitute networks. The analyses produced by these methods are much more precise than studies of sociability considered as a generic practice.

---

[5] In order to obviate any possible confusion, it should be noted that, according to the definition of the notion of social network that we are using, and which is the standard one in the social sciences, so-called social networking sites such as Facebook are not in themselves social networks, even though the relationships that are formed and made visible there may match the definition of social relations used here (although this is not always the case). In our view, such sites are "aids to sociability" or, in more theoretical terms, "mediation mechanisms." This is discussed in greater depth and empirically in Chapter 12.

Nevertheless, in contrast to many analyses of social networks, which focus on the structure of the networks and tend to reduce relationships to mere channels for the transmission of resources, our study has two specific characteristics. Firstly, our aim is to investigate relationships in all their complexity, as the basic units of networks. Secondly, we take as our starting point the principle that the social world cannot be reduced to a network and that it contains other forms with which networks and relationships interact. Thus, around these relationships and networks are other group-ings, which may be more or less fluid, more or less structured, more or less ephemeral or durable. We introduce here the dimension of "social circles." This notion is well established in sociology even though it has been somewhat neglected.[6] A social circle is a set of individuals, bonds, "shared motivations," and norms that are mutually recognized as shared, even though their boundaries are not always very firmly fixed. They cannot be reduced to the sum of the interpersonal relationships that are present in them nor limited to networks; rather, they are defined by particular habits and norms, motivations, identities, sometimes even names, that transcend the characteristics of the persons and connections of which they are constituted. Kadushin (1968) attributed the following characteristics to social circles: "(1) A circle may have a chain or network of indirect interaction such that most members of a circle are linked to other members, at least through a third party. It is thus not a pure face-to-face group. (2) The network exists because members of the circle share common interests – political or cultural. (3) The circle is not formal."[7] This third characteristic excludes, for Kadushin, formal organizations, while we prefer to consider them as one of the possible kinds of social circles. Kadushin's definition helps to distinguish social circles from groups (in circles members do not directly know all others) and from networks (as there are common interests underlying the circle).

Some of these social circles are institutionalized and are sometimes very highly organized and hierarchized, with their official rules, membership cards, flags, and medals. Others are more informal and fluid and are sometimes imperceptible from the outside. A large circle of friends, a basketball team, a company, an association, a neighborhood facing a new housing project, or some regulars at a pub who defend ideas or a lifestyle are all examples of these "social circles," the reality of which transcends the

---

[6] Simmel, Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel.*
[7] C. Kadushin, "Power, Influence and Social Circles: A New Methodology for Studying Opinion Makers," *American Sociological Review* 33(5) (1968), 692.

individuals that constitute them and the ties that bind them. Individuals may leave, others may join and friendships may break up but the circle's "spirit" will remain intact. When talking about a circle to which they belong, people say "we." These kinds of circles produce norms, opinions, specific knowledge, and sometimes linguistic codes that are likely to influence habits, thinking, and life choices. By providing examples of how to live that are more specific and accessible than the great mythical, political, or cultural models, they can be used by individuals as reference frameworks or action models. For Célestin Bouglé, a sociologist active at the beginning of the twentieth century, a social circle was created when the passengers in a coach, for example, caught sight of a rival coach or of a bandit; suddenly animated by a common will, the passengers, who had previously been ignoring each other or daydreaming in their own seats, would start to talk to each other, get organized, and attempt to achieve a shared objective, namely to win the race or defend themselves.[8] This rather antiquated but very apposite example shows that the boundaries, membership, and strict definition of a social circle are less important than the strength of the "common motivation" that drives its members and gives them a sense of "togetherness," at least for a time. This helps to differentiate the notion of "social circle" from that of "group."

Relationships, networks, and social circles intermingle without overlapping completely. Relationships exist more or less independently of the circles to which their protagonists belong. Firstly, when they are initially forged within a circle, they may survive that circle's disappearance (e.g., two students may remain in contact after leaving university). Secondly, even when they remain rooted within a particular circle, they frequently extend beyond its boundaries. If we take the example of two work colleagues, we can say that a relationship exists between them as soon as their interactions become specific and go beyond their professional roles and they are no longer wholly substitutable one for the other (like the baker mentioned above). The relationship will have become partially independent of the circle in which it first developed and will now form part of a network. For their part, circles cannot be reduced to bundles of relationships, as shared motives go beyond individuals and their ties. Thus, these various social forms – relationships, networks, and social circles – constitute each person's relational environment. The dynamic association

[8] C. Bouglé, "Qu'est-ce que la sociologie?," *Revue de Paris* (1897), 3–32.

between them is the object of the sociology of relational dynamics that we are putting into practice here.

AN INTERMEDIATE LEVEL OF ACTION AND INTERPRETATION

One of this book's key objectives is to show that individuals do not exist in isolation and that their actions are not driven by desires forged autonomously in a burst of creativity focused entirely on themselves. The elements that shape their decisions, the avenues open to them, the constraints that limit their actions, the routines that guide them, the range of possible options and the ideas they have are influenced by social factors structured on a large scale: national legislation, the education system, the labor market, gender roles, etc. Moreover, although they are much less analyzed in the social sciences, resource and constraint systems operating on a smaller scale and at an intermediate level – namely, those emanating from individuals' personal networks – are undoubtedly just as influential. Individuals are not isolated, and their identities and actions are guided by a relational environment that cannot be reduced either to the determinism of large-scale social structures or to one-off interactions. The relationship between society and the individual is made up of interconnections and interdependencies, of configurations of interpersonal relations, and the networks and social circles that form society's constituent matrix.

In looking for explanations for life in society at the level of individuals and their networks and subjecting their trajectories and their evolution to detailed scrutiny, we will inevitably also discern some of the effects of the macro-level social structures that classic sociology holds so dear (social groups, age groups, gender, territories, etc.). However, we will gain a clearer understanding of how these effects operate by locating our analysis at the level of the world that can be apprehended by individuals, while at the same time assessing in what ways the construction and evolution of their personal networks and affiliations help to reinforce or weaken these social differentiations. For individuals, after all, their network constitutes a social milieu that is both flexible and accessible, because it is located at a reasonable distance. This social form is situated at an intermediate level between social structures and institutions, on the one hand, and individuals, on the other. It is made up of a series of relationships that have temporal depth and are interconnected in a particular configuration.

Those around an individual – his friends, colleagues, and leisure companions – can provide personified examples of how to live that are within

his reach and comparable for him. They can "set an example" and offer interesting images and new ideas. They can also show him very clearly what he must avoid if he is not to suffer the same failures, thereby acting as warnings. They can, of course, help him or support him in very direct and practical ways, by lending him tools or money or giving him a little of their time. This help may or may not be mutual. It may be symmetrical or differentiated (when the same benefit is not expected on both sides, for example, in a doctor-patient or a parent-child relationship). In some cases, people can help as effectively as the institutions established for that purpose. They may also open up access to these institutions, act as stepping stones in order to facilitate his integration into the wider society, and give him access to crucial resources, sometimes by directing him to other people, depending on the scope of the network. They also hold out mirrors to him, show him what he is for them, what he is not, what he might be and help him to define, position and project himself.

However, it should not be forgotten that an individuals' network also defines constraints – a set of limitations and duties that are likely to lead to renunciations. The people providing assistance are also the ones who often expect services, time, and forms of recognition in return; the people one likes also bar the way to certain avenues and choices. An individual's relational environment is made up of various types of relationships and commitments, many of them double-sided. It is, above all, plural, more or less mixed, sometimes discordant and liable to include a range of different opinions. This relational environment does not take the form of a simple list of relationships or an indeterminate group; rather, it is a precise configuration of more or less interconnected relationships, whose structuring, whether it be tight or loose, dispersed or centralized, has specific characteristics that are very important and discriminating. It is this configuration that constitutes an individual's personal network. These relationships and this network are not set in stone; they do not emerge randomly out of nothing, nor are they permanent. Rather, they are constantly being reconstructed over the course of the person's life. Furthermore, individuals are actively involved in these interactions; they act on their networks, choose their friends, maintain or cut off contact with their families, stop seeing friends from previous periods of their lives, and reactivate connections that they cherish or which they think might be useful to them. It is this dynamic aspect of the interactive processes between relationships, networks, social circles, and life trajectories that is the focus of this book.