Someone To Talk To

SOMEONE TO TALK TO

Mario Luis Small

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For Tara

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PREFACE

When I try to explain to my friends what I have been studying for this book, I ask them a kind of question used in sociological surveys to elicit respondents' networks: "There are people with whom we talk about matters that are personally important. Who are those people for you?"

If I were asked that question at the time I drafted this preface, I would answer by naming my fiancée, a former college classmate to whom I am still close, and a dear childhood friend with whom I never lost touch. When my friends are asked the question, they typically answer in a similar way: they name a spouse, one or two friends or family members, and one or two close colleagues or professionals. These three or four people are known to sociologists as the network of "strong ties," the close friends and family members who provide support when people need a confidant.

But then I ask my friends a different pair of questions that would seem to capture the same issue. First, "What are the most personally important matters that currently concern you?" In my case, at the time I wrote this paragraph, the answer would be clear: my upcoming nuptials, the declining health of one family member, and, frankly, all of the anxieties concerning this book. Each of these matters has been stressful, and at times overwhelmingly so, over several months. Each has also been quite personal, and if I am honest with myself I would probably not confess publicly that I was even stressed about them were I not doing so for the purpose of this preface. My friends, when asked, offer their own version of a similar answer; they list worries that typically involve their work, their finances, their own or a loved one's health, and their family or relationships.

The second question, though, matters more, because it asks people what they have actually done: "Now, consider the topics you listed, say, the last one. Think of the last time you talked to anyone about that topic. Who was it?"

The last person I spoke to is a sociologist at a different university. Before I first drafted this paragraph, we were on the phone to discuss a future academic conference. To make conversation, she asked how I was doing, and since I had been working on this book, I blurted out that I was stressed about it, concerned about the difficulty of producing a manuscript that treats complex topics with the care that they deserve but avoids unnecessary jargon. Striking that balance had been harder than expected. We talked about it—I vented, in fact—for 15 or so minutes.

This colleague was not a close friend. In fact, I had ever only seen her, in person, twice, including the time we first met. If you had asked me whether I would ever confide something as personal as my anxieties about a book to someone I had only seen twice, the answer would obviously be negative. And if you had asked me to name my close friends, I would never have thought to include her in the list. In fact, there is practically no way to have worded the abstract question at the start of this preface—whom do you typically talk to?—that would cause me to list her as one of the people I would be willing to confide personal matters to.

Every time I have repeated this exercise—asking the first question and then the second two—I have consistently found that, for at least one and usually more of the matters that people found personally important, the last person they had actually talked to was someone they had not first named as a confidant, and was neither a family member nor a close friend. Sometimes, they had confided in someone entirely surprising, like a hairdresser or a long-lost acquaintance they had randomly run into. In fact, judging from their actual experience, my friends seem willing to confide personal matters to a vast network of people, including some who are so distally related they might as well be strangers.

This book is the product of my attempt over several years to understand whom we turn to when we need someone to talk to, and why. Confiding in others is an elementary way of seeking social support. It is an essential component of our mental health and well-being. It is a primary means to avoid a sense of isolation. It is a need that cuts across class, race, gender, and other differences and advantages. And it is a fundamental part of how we relate to our social networks. Understanding how we confide in others would mean grasping something at the root of the social nature of the self.

Soon after I started the project, I realized that the standard tools of network analysis could only take me so far. A good network analyst would first specify the network and then try to determine how people use it. That is, I would first identify the most important people in the lives of those I studied and then examine how they chose whom to talk to among these. But that approach would have missed the colleague to whom I had vented unexpectedly about my book. In fact, I soon began to wonder if the power and rapid growth of network analysis as a field had produced what Daniel Kahneman has called a “theory-induced blindness” that undermined how we answered simple but fundamental questions.

How people decide whom to confide in—the question is not complicated. Yet the standard tools were pushing me to answers I found untenable, since they required assumptions—about how people make decisions and how they relate to different kinds of ties—that clashed repeatedly with what I observed in the field. Even elegant rules of thumb about the difference between strong and weak ties seemed far too often inconsistent with lived experience. To understand what people actually did, I had to change perspectives. As a result, my inquiry became not only sociological but also epistemological, and the book eventually probed not only how people use their networks but also how we should study such questions.

When it comes to whom they turn to for support, people do not quite do what they say they are inclined to do. As evidenced by their actions, they are willing to cast a wider net than might seem rational; they are more sensitive to expectations and responsive to opportunities than either they themselves or network theorists seem to believe. People will go far to avoid this core form of isolation, the feeling that the difficulties of poverty, illness, loss, or failure must be confronted alone.

Yet understanding why requires unshackling one’s thinking from the powerful chains of network science. The principles of the latter work better as tools than as articles of faith. Understanding how people mobilize their networks requires beginning not with structure but with *practice*, not with the composition of a network but with the motives behind a decision.

I arrived at this problem not through the deductive methods standard in the field but very much inductively, as I found myself frustrated by the inability of several elegant theories to account for what I was observing. Along the way, as I asked question after question to many of my colleagues, I accumulated a number of debts, both personal and professional. Some of the most important were to journal reviewers. As I began to think about these questions I produced three papers—one sole authored, one coauthored with Christopher Sukhu, and one coauthored with Vontrese Deeds Pamphile and Peter McMahan—that were published in the journal *Social Networks*. Several tables are reproduced here with permission. The editors and anonymous reviewers improved my thinking on these questions immeasurably. Chris, Voni, and Peter were astute, hard-working graduate students who quickly made the shift from research assistants to collaborators. A version of Chapter 6 was presented at the “Pragmatism and Sociology” conference in 2015 at the University of Chicago. Early ideas were also presented to the Social Interactions, Identity and Wellbeing group of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research; at the 2013, 2014, and 2015 Sunbelt Meetings of the International Network for Social Network Analysis; and at a 2016 Radcliffe Institute conference on Ego Networks in the Era of Network Science. A large number of people provided ideas, critiques, complaints, or questions that forced me to think more deeply, more precisely, or more imaginatively about what I was uncovering: George Akerlof, Peter Bearman, Roland Benabou, Irene Bloemraad, Alison Wood Brooks, Elizabeth Bruch, Ronald Burt, Kathleen Cagney, Damon Centola, Mina Cikara, Anna Counts, Matt Desmond, Steven Durlauf, Claude Fischer, Henk Flap, Filiz Garip, Rachel Kranton, Clemens Kroneberg, Michèle Lamont, Edward Laumann, Jennifer Lee, Miranda Lubbers, Peter Marsden, John Levi Martin, Tey Meadow, Michael Norton, Devah Pager, Betsy Paluck, Paolo Parigi, Brea Perry, Bernice Pescosolido, Todd Rogers, Robert Sampson, Kristen Schilt, Ned Smith, Kate Stovel, and Jocelyn Viterna. Some of them read passages, entire chapters, or one of the early papers; others read nothing but asked questions that troubled me for weeks or months; all of them helped immensely. Ron, Claude, and Peter Marsden, pioneers in the study of personal networks, helped me correct some errors in my account of their own roles in an exciting time in the history of survey methods for network research. Laura Adler, Kelley Fong, Robert Manduca, and Bernice Pescosolido read the manuscript from cover to cover and provided invaluable feedback; Tara García Mathewson did the same, for multiple drafts. The four thoughtful reviewers for Oxford University Press were helpful in various ways. Although I benefited greatly from the kindness of all of these people, I stress that my acknowledgment of their help should not be read as their endorsement of my book.

James Cook at Oxford was a supportive, enthusiastic editor when this manuscript was little more than an idea. As I was developing the book, collaborating to organize sessions and conferences proved invaluable. Sessions organized with Bernice Pescosolido and Brea Perry, and with Ned Smith and Tanya Menon, at the International Network for Social Network Analysis were a great source of ideas. Organizing a conference on ego network analysis with Bernice, Brea, and Ned—with the generous support of the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University and the Indiana University Network Science Institute—proved an exceptional opportunity to think and refine my ideas about what has been missing from network analysis. Readers will also detect the strong intellectual influence of the works of John Dewey, Claude Fischer, Mark Granovetter, Daniel Kahneman, Clyde Mitchell, Bernice Pescosolido, Alfred Schutz, Georg Simmel, and Herbert Simon.

I also thank my undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Chicago and Harvard University, who in many seminars over several years unwittingly helped me think through these ideas. I especially thank the reading group on qualitative network analysis at Harvard, a group that provided invaluable feedback on a near-final version of the manuscript. For their institutional and financial support, without whom this project would be impossible, I especially thank the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, the University of Chicago, and Harvard University. Finally, and most important, I thank the graduate students at Hillmount University, women and men whose generous time and willingness to share their experiences with my team and me were indispensable. A few of them were kind enough to read draft chapters, those in which their lives were extensively profiled, to help me assess whether I got their story right. I am grateful beyond words. To them and all the interviewees: I hope that expressing your difficulties so generously will help other people overcome theirs.

Someone To Talk To

Introduction

Much of our everyday life consists of managing the difficulties that befall us. Many such difficulties, on top of their particular annoyances, pains, or complications, are also emotionally fraught. The prospects of divorce, the stress of a recent job loss, the fear of an imminent eviction, the news of a cancerous growth—these and other stressors drain one's emotional reserves, and often stimulate the need to talk. So do those difficulties that require a course of action, such as whether to end a pregnancy, to publicly come out of the closet, to come clean about a dishonest act, or to finally make the move to a retirement home.[1] Whether venting or brainstorming, talking can make a difference. To live is to experience emotional difficulties—but when the strain is sustained, the prolonged worry and stress can harm mental and physical well-being. And while talking is no panacea, people have found repeatedly that confiding in others improves their mental state.[2]

Philosophers have made the point for centuries. As Adam Smith wrote, "How are the unfortunate relieved when they have found . . . a person to whom they can communicate the cause of their sorrow? Upon his sympathy they seem to disburthen themselves of a part of their distress."[3] Immanuel Kant proposed that "[w]e all have a strong impulse to disclose ourselves," and he called "such self-revelation" a "human necessity."[4]

Scientists have now made the point as well, with abundant evidence to support it. Research in medicine, psychology, and sociology has increasingly found that when people confide in others their mental and physical health improves; when they do not, it suffers. As early as 1985, a major review of the existing studies concluded that having confidants seemed to buffer against the effects of stressful events (such as losing one's job) and ongoing difficulties (such as feeling economic strain); it was accompanied by lower anxiety, less clinical depression, and fewer symptoms of physiological stress.[5] Many studies have since affirmed these findings. A study of the spouses of suicide and accidental-death victims found that those who confided in others after the death of the loved one ruminated less and reported lesser illness.[6] A dramatic study of breast cancer patients found that those randomly assigned to confide their problems in others and to perform mental exercises lived almost twice as long after the intervention as the control group, about 37 versus 19 months.[7] In fact, the mere act of expressing one's difficulties appears to improve health. For example, a study of patients with asthma found that those randomly assigned to write about stressful life events had significantly improved lung function four months later.[8] A critical review of the literature concluded that, across 13 randomized control studies, written expression had improved "physical health, psychological well-being, physiological functioning, and general functioning."[9]

These findings are not surprising; they are consistent with the enormous body of work documenting the measurable effects of social support.[10] Support promotes health through several different mechanisms, and the ability to confide in others may be one of the most important. Though researchers have yet to unravel precisely how and why, the conclusion seems clear: when people are facing difficulties, talking to others makes a difference.[11]

Nevertheless, confiding one's problems is risky. Since sharing one's difficulties requires exposure, trusting the wrong person can hurt rather than help. How much it hurts will depend on how private, important, morally charged, or otherwise sensitive the difficulty is. The consequences can be emotional. Consider the exposure involved in confessing that one has failed an important test, has cheated on a spouse, has decided to apply for food stamps, has entertained suicide, or has become regrettably pregnant. Confiding in the wrong person may lead to embarrassment, frustration, despair, depression, or worse. The consequences can also be social. Consider the potential loss of privacy. Some years ago a White House intern unwittingly found her problems shared with the entire world by confiding her affair with her boss to the wrong person. While few of our personal difficulties would make international news, many of our private worries would damage our social relations if they suddenly became public knowledge. Ponder the news of the unexpected pregnancy or the act of marital disloyalty. Confiding in a person who violates that trust may mean turning a private matter into a public crisis. The consequences can also be professional. Consider that most employers place a premium on confidence and competence, and exposing oneself in a work-related context may hurt one's reputation, shaping how others treat and evaluate one in the long run. Seeming weak, immoral, or troubled can seriously and even permanently undermine one's professional prospects. In short, to confide in another person is to become temporarily vulnerable in potentially serious ways. Everyone understands this fact: though talking to others is essential, it is also fraught with risk.

For this reason, to whom people confide their difficulties is an unusually clear window into whom, in practice, they trust. And how they make the decision reveals a lot about how they think about those they are connected to, how they manage their problems, and what they judge or value when using their networks for support. That is, as one of the most elementary forms of support, confiding in others provides an especially unencumbered view of what researchers have variously called "help-seeking behavior," the "activation of social ties," or the "mobilization of social networks."[12] To understand this decision is to grasp fundamentally one core aspect of people's relations to their networks.

Thus, this book is driven by a simple but consequential question: when people need a confidant, when they need someone to talk to about a personal difficulty, how do they decide whom to talk to?

There is a common-sense answer to this question: since confiding in others requires personal exposure, people will tend to approach only those to whom they are close. It is the answer, for example, that both Kant and Smith proposed. Kant seemed to believe that the kind of trust required for true disclosure "can exist only between two or three friends."[13] Smith found it self-evident that since we can "expect less sympathy from a common acquaintance than from a friend[,] we cannot open to the former all those little circumstances which we can unfold to the latter."[14] In fact, that seems to be the answer most Americans would provide. A recent survey asked representative adult Americans who they would first talk to if they felt "just a bit down or depressed," and 91% reported they would turn to either a family member or a "close friend."[15] Certainly, particular circumstances will call for a given close friend or family member, rather than others. Yet being vulnerable ultimately requires trust, and it makes sense that the kind of trust needed for personal matters of emotional import is reserved for one's inner circle.

The common-sense answer is consistent with current social theory. Sociologists of networks have proposed that most people have a "core discussion network," a set of close friends and family they turn to regularly when they have important matters to talk about. It is the network of individuals to whom people are strongly tied. Because this network comprises strong, not weak ties, several expectations follow. Since strong ties tend to be in-bred, the people in this network are likely to be close to one another. Because of its density, this network is likely to be steady and stable—it will change and evolve, as all of them must, but only slowly and deliberately, over the life course. And just as people will first turn to the inner circle, they will also avoid those outside it, lest exposing private feelings proves a costly error. As a set of distinguished sociologists has recently written, "There are some things that we discuss only with people who are very close to us. These important topics may vary with the situation or the person—we may ask for help, probe for information, or just use the person as a sounding board for important decisions—but these are the people who make up our core network of confidants."[16]

These ideas are sensible. But they are so consistent with common sense that they have rarely been tested. They are so foundational to how we understand ourselves—after all, who would trust personal matters to people they are not close to?—that they are taken for granted, more assumed as a matter of course than subject to empirical scrutiny.

Someone To Talk To examines these ideas directly, probing how people actually make this decision over the course of their everyday lives and unraveling the implications of the process. The book argues that most of these ideas are either only partly true or else largely inconsistent with the facts. People are far more willing to confide personal matters to those they are not close to than they are inclined to believe about themselves, than network theory would propose, and than social science is likely to uncover without expanding the way it studies networks.

This book shows that people are not always close to those they call their confidants. Furthermore, these confidants do not always know one another, because they are colleagues, therapists, priests, or random friends with no reason to interact with one another. Yet named confidants are still whom people say they confide in, not necessarily those they have actually confided in—they represent belief, not behavior. When we uncover whom people have actually talked to, the picture differs even more. Certainly, people often confide in their spouses and others they are close to. Yet rather than consistently turning to their spouses, friends, or family, people will often studiously avoid their inner circle for many of the issues they most care about, precisely because the expectations involving many of these relationships make them too close for comfort. At times the best confidant is one with some distance.[17] And though people might believe otherwise about themselves, they will repeatedly, willingly, and even without much reflection confide deeply personal matters to individuals they are not close to, even to those they barely know. In fact, approaching individuals they are not especially close to appears to be what adult Americans do more than half the time they confide in others. Their decisions, in the end, are motivated less by affection than by pragmatism, and more by their institutional and organizational contexts than research has hitherto acknowledged.

In sum, this book proposes that people are far more willing to confide in individuals they are not close to than common sense suggests, because they are less deliberative, more sensitive to expectations, less attached to the past, and more responsive to context than normally believed. Networks of emotional support are thus at once smaller and larger than typically proposed. They are smaller because strong ties are too complicated in concrete ways to be consistently reliable sources; they are larger because, when deciding whom to talk to, people seem to seek empathy, respond to opportunity, and pursue pragmatic options far more than they consider how close they are to potential confidants.

Some decades ago, the people who called themselves network researchers, in anthropology, psychology, and sociology, spent much of their energy analyzing and thinking deeply about questions of this kind. They pondered what motivated people to approach others, how psychology, emotion, expectations, and context joined to shape behavior. Today, that moniker often refers to those who analyze increasingly large datasets using ever more powerful computers to map the underlying structure of networks and their consequences. Network research has exploded, spreading from sociology, psychology, and anthropology to economics, physics, neuroscience, chemistry, and many other fields. This revolution has led to an effort to uncover common structures across networks of great diversity—of people, firms, nations, airports, computers on the web, neurons in the brain, and many others.[18] Some of these studies now involve millions of connections among hundreds of thousands of nodes. The signal image for the field today is the sociogram, the usually dense web of nodes and ties that graces the covers of dozens of popular science books and that represents with clarity the ultimate object of attention: the network structure.

But social networks are no ordinary networks, for people, and only people, have interests, preferences, insecurities, emotional needs, gut feelings, a belief in good and bad, a sense of obligation, and the capacity to trust. People can and do maintain complex relations that confound the easy heuristics—strong versus weak or positive versus negative—often used to capture network ties. People can at once love yet hate another, feel joy yet envy for a friend's success, and disdain a competitor while seeking their approval. They can love a relative yet feel queasy when discussing certain topics. They can trust a total stranger in the aisle seat on a plane. The complicated nature of social relationships, and the contexts where those relationships take place, inevitably shapes decisions about whom to turn to when seeking a confidant.

This book, therefore, begins where structural network research ends. It homes in on not the macro but the micro, not the functioning of large structures but the actions of the individual. It does not reject the well-established notion that people's decisions are shaped by network structure—in fact, it takes as given that structure matters and makes frequent use of the insights of that field. Yet the book shifts the focus of attention from the network to the decision to ask for help. The concern is not structure but practice. There are neither sociograms nor taken-for-granted assumptions about people's motivation. Rather than focusing on what people say they typically do, the book pays careful attention to what they have actually done, seeking to reconstruct the varied and complex factors that affect the decision to confide in another person.

The book does so by digging deep into a case study, following a set of people small enough that their motivation, thinking, and decisions about whom to trust with what can be examined with some care. It follows people as they enter a new context with new challenges and stresses, a context where forming a new set of confidants is an option, yet retaining the lifelong inner circle of support that many are presumed to have remains appealing.

Someone To Talk To begins by following the experiences of a set of graduate students in three academic departments over the course of their first year in their programs. First years often exhibit a boot-camp quality that heightens stress, undermines mental health, and repeatedly creates the need to talk—not merely about work but also about life goals, marriage, health, finances, and more. The book probes the students' worries, concerns, and struggles, asking whom they turned to when they needed a confidant and why. It finds reason to reject a number of beliefs about how people confide in others while developing an alternative view of social support, one in which actors are neither mostly affective nor mostly instrumental but, instead, mostly pragmatic in their decisions about expressing vulnerability, and one in which contexts—the institutional spaces where people spend their daily lives—are at least as important as network structure in shaping their decisions.

Nevertheless, most people are not in graduate school, and even graduate students only experience their first year for a short 12 months. Having probed deeply the views, actions, and decisions of a small set of people in a unique and analytically strategic context, the book then examines nationally representative populations. It separates the elements that should be unique to this case from the patterns of decision making that should, in theory, be common across adult Americans. It then tests these major propositions against several national datasets either newly released or else original to this project. The large-sample analyses with representative data make clear that while the experience of graduate school is unique, the students' reactions to it are not, with respect to whom to confide in and how. Most people, in their own contexts, confide in others in similar ways and probably for similar reasons.

The following chapter briefly reviews what researchers have found about these questions and points to reasons for considering an alternative. The subsequent five chapters, all focused on the graduate students, are five separate but highly connected studies that constitute the heart of the book. Chapter 2, "Weak-Tie Confidants," begins by following tradition. It examines the students' "core discussion networks" and finds that, contrary to traditional expectations, many of the ties appear to be weak, not strong. Chapter 3, "Beyond Named Confidants," shows that shifting from belief to action—from the perceived network to the decision to ask for help—confirms the finding, and also shows that students even talked to many people they did not name as discussion partners. These two chapters jointly make clear that students had no problem turning to weak ties to confide serious matters; the subsequent three chapters examine why.

Chapter 4, "Incompatible Expectations," shows that part of the reason is their avoidance of strong ties. Students avoided strong ties for particular difficulties when they feared that what they would expect of the potential confidant might not be compatible with what the confidant would expect about him- or herself, as a result of the formal and informal norms and rules surrounding the relationship. Institutional expectations of this kind affect many kinds of relationships, and often matter more to people's reluctance to confide in others than the strength of the tie.

Chapter 5, "Relevance and Empathy," shows that students did not just approach weak ties when avoiding strong ones, but also at times pursued them deliberately. They did so when they had reason to believe the potential confidant was likely to be fully or partly empathic—to understand their concerns from their own perspective—with respect to a given difficulty. They often found that empathy in one of several different forms of similarity, suggesting a mechanism through which homophily, people's tendency to associate with those who resemble them, operates. Ultimately, students valued empathy more than they feared being hurt.

Chapter 6, "Because They Were There," takes these questions even further, probing how much the students' decisions about whom to talk to were deliberative as opposed to spontaneous—whether they assessed pros and cons before deciding whom to ask or, instead, as one might to the person on the plane, spontaneously spilled their emotions on the spot. The chapter shows that spontaneous decisions of this kind are far more common than presumed, consistent with both classic propositions in pragmatist philosophy and recent experiments in behavioral economics. It suggests that several conditions regarding the space of interaction and institutional expectations may make such decisions more likely.

The final chapters look beyond the graduate experience. Graduate school, after all, is a unique institution, and the generalizability of the findings beyond the case must be addressed. Chapter 7, "Empirical Generalizability," presents each of the book's core propositions about what people do, and assesses it against nationally representative data on adults in the US. Relying on original surveys and newly released findings from other national studies, it confirms that though the students' experiences are unique, their responses to the latter are not. Graduate students largely behave the way everyone else does.

Chapter 8, "Theoretical Generalizability," considers the extent to which the concepts developed to explain the students' behavior are portable to other situations. After summarizing the perspective developed in the book, it shows that the perspective, which shifts focus from structure and its consequences to practice and its contexts, can help us think differently about matters as varied as when people will keep depression secret from their close ones, why people may avoid reporting sexual assault, how people may decide whom to come out to, and why even competitors can be among a person's best confidants.