



## Nicholas A. Christakis – James H. Fowler: Kapcsolatok hálójában.<sup>1</sup>

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In nowadays' social sciences the expression 'network' is starting to resemble the concept of 'structure' common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is becoming a more and more central concept, the descriptions and explanations of social sciences are continuously discovering the effectiveness and usefulness of the concept. Where there were different social powers, social factors and relation systems, now researchers find social relations, social networks and effects of stronger or weaker bonds. These discoveries expand to the fields of biology, computer technology and economics, thus we can conclude that this is not a mere application of a social science approach, but we are witnessing the birth of a new way of thinking, which can be called 'network mentality.'

A great introduction to this changing mentality is offered by Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler in their book entitled: *Connected. The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, the Hungarian translation of which also has some surprises in store. The book has an enjoyable style, but approaches the social phenomena with a thorough scientific background, and it is fair to say that it completely subverts our ideas about the formative effects of human relations. It actually is the construction of a new paradigm about how social networks influence our thoughts, emotions, behaviours and different habits. This new paradigm is not only a new way of understanding social phenomena, but it also presents a novel possibility in handling and solving social-community problems.

The main discovery of social mentality is that the characteristics of the social network define our human behaviour. To make this nexus explorable, one must chart the main characteristics of social networks. The first part of the book makes an attempt to that. According to the writers, social networks are an organised mass

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1 In original: Nicholas A. Christakis – James H. Flower: *Connected. The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. New York: Little Brown and Co., 2009.

of people which contain two elements: the human beings and the relationships between them. The relations within the social network serve the distribution of different entities, thus the distribution is another important aspect of the network. A fundamental observation is that the network is more than the sum of the parts. Groups with a defined structure are able to do more than the individuals. This trait is explained by a few ground rules of the social networks, as follows:

- the network is malleable: the humans are constantly forming and changing the social networks;
- the network forms us too: our place in the social network has an impact on us;
- our friends and our friend's friends affect us: people mimic not only their friends, but their friend's friends too;
- the network has its own life: the network has characteristics that cannot be influenced by the constituent individuals, more to that, they might not even be aware of them;
- we are six steps apart from each-other: considering the acquaintance network, people on Earth are six steps (degrees of separation) from each-other;
- we are three steps apart from each-other: the influential ability of the individual is controlled by the 'three step' rule.

These statements are always based on complex monitorings backed up by many statistical and experimental data. The writers do not conclude their work with the laying of these rules, as the vast majority of the book consists of the presentation of those concrete researches, explorations and experiments that analyse the role of social networks in spread of joy, the search for sexual partners, the maintenance of health, the functioning of the markets, and the struggle for democracy. The effect of social networks is not always positive. The spread of depression, obesity, sexually transmitted diseases, financial panic, violence and even suicide, is also an effect of social networks that usually magnify the started processes. The social networks mostly ensure access to their inner flow. Happenings related to others seep through the network and reach us.

Due to lack of space, we will not present all the researched areas. Of the vast material of the book, we will introduce a few partial results of two researches that describe the effect social networks have on us.

In the exploration of the spreading of joy, it was concluded that in the friend-network, a person three step away from us, someone we might have never met, has a greater effect on our happiness than a wad of dollars in our pockets. At the same time, chances to be happy are greater if we occupy the central position in our network, thus we have more indirect friend relations.

The problem of obesity can also be examined with the method of network analysis. It is long ago proven that we have an inner drive to mimic others. It is a new finding, however, that within a network the obese and non-obese persons constitute separate groups and they are concentrated to certain regions of the

network. This differentiation also follows the three step rule, that is to say, an obese person is likely to have an obese relation within three steps, and beyond that the effect fades. It is also proven that people in distant relations can affect one another if the path between them is of exclusive relations. Surprising as it is, but joy and obesity are both contagious. If we are happier, wealthier, and healthier than others, it is caused by our position in the network.

These results are proven in other areas, too. The method of network analysis provided surprising results in the researches on partner selection, financial crisis and mood to vote. These results not only possess a scientific value, but also provide tools for treating certain social problems. The network can be manipulated; both its structure and its way of distribution can be changed. The writers provide a convincing demonstration of how network analysis improves the cost efficiency of interventions. In work conducted in the healthcare, one must consider not only people's financial state and place of residence, but also their acquaintances and the structure of their social network. An effective strategy against obesity is to convince the central figures of the network to lead healthy lives regardless whether they are obese or not. One also must take into account that the more immediate relations a person has in a given network, the faster the group will succeed in solving a problem. It follows that it is important to structure people in a way that is most efficacious concerning the solving of the given problem.

In the last chapter of the book, the writers try to answer the basic question behind networks: why do we construct these networks? The answer is surprising as most answers of the book are: the need for association is a genetical heritage. The social and community drive is genetically inherited. Some network formulas work better than others in solving problems. Cooperation is many times more rewarding, thus it becomes genetically fixed. Genes affect our instinct to form social relations through our emotional state. Since social relations help survival, persons with mental constitution that favours it are more likely to pass genetical selection.

The research of networks is a relatively new phenomenon. Though conditions for networks were given before, the difficulty to monitor them and the lack of information made research laborious. The appearance of the Internet, mobile phones and the more and more complex social life drew attention to the existence of networks, and made it possible to research many aspects of networks. The Internet created a whole new situation on the field of networks. The virtual presence, the individualisation, the growth of networks and information-sharing possibilities brought to life new forms of networks.

There is a generally positive view in the book concerning networks. The writers often emphasise the positive aspects of the functioning networks. Networks can be viewed as human superorganisms that have an intelligence of their own, can reproduce and heal themselves. The book sets the self-interest following person, the *homo oeconomicus*, against the network person, the *homo diktios*. While the

homo oeconomicus lives in a ruthless self-vindicating world, the homo diktios follows the will of the people in relation with him.

Finally, let us say a few words regarding the publishing. The book is related to networking not only by its topic, but also by its structure. The Hungarian edition does not settle for merely publishing the text, the editors called upon three Hungarian social scientists, György Bögel, Péter Csermely, László Lovrics, to comment the text. At the same time, there are spaces left for the reader to comment. Reading this book does not only take us into a topic, but also into an intellectual game. Reading the book, the comments and commenting expand the borders of the book, and draws us into a network once again.