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Confessions of a Weak Tie

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Recently, I was asked to contribute a blurb for the cover of a forthcoming book, a collection of original chapters, mostly by scholars in political science or international relations (Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill [eds.], *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict* [Cornell University Press, 2010]). Each chapter focuses on how numbers are created, promoted, and used to justify policies related to such international issues as human trafficking, the illicit drug trade, refugees, and warfare. The numbers come from both national and international official agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and scholars, and these figures turn out to be subject to the same sorts of flaws found in the statistics I've studied about domestic social problems. When advocates want to encourage governments to take action, they produce big numbers that demonstrate that the problems are too large to ignore, but when governments want to justify inaction, they point to small numbers suggesting that the needs aren't all that pressing. Several of the chapters include damning quotations in which advocates acknowledge that their numbers may be quite wrong, yet justify the inaccuracies in terms of some greater good, such as the need to inspire action to address their pet cause. It is, by the way, a very good book.

As I read the book, I was struck by my good fortune in being asked to write the blurb. Otherwise, I might never have learned of the book's existence. I don't follow the literature in political science, and I'm not sure whether the publisher intended to send review copies to—or place advertisements in—sociology journals (which I do read). But, given the glut of books being published, there's no guarantee that the editors at those sociology journals would decide to review a collection in which only a couple of the authors were sociologists. *Sociological Abstracts* doesn't index material from other disciplines. There's an excellent chance I would never have learned of this volume, had I not been contacted by the publisher.

This near-miss made me wonder how often I miss analyses about the production of bad numbers that appear in other disciplines. Certainly it happens. I know that because a couple of the chapters in *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts* refer to an existing *anthropological* literature on “audit culture”—also utterly unknown to me. These are folks not that far removed from me—they're in other social sciences, working on topics that basically parallel things that I've written about, and yet I haven't been made aware of their work. I realized I need to take a look at this work.

There is a famous sociological article, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” by Mark Granovetter (*American Journal of Sociology*, 1973). Basically, he argues that we can envision social networks in which lots of the members know one another, and information spreads easily, along many alternate pathways (if Adam and Betty

and Chuck and Daisy are all acquainted, there are lots of ways Daisy can learn what Adam knows—A-D; A-B-D; A-C-D; A-B-C-D; A-C-B-D). But imagine two networks that have only a single member in common (say, Daisy); Daisy is a weak tie—the only link between two otherwise unconnected networks—but this means she can play a vital role in disseminating information from each network to the other.

This is an important insight for a group calling itself the National Numeracy **Network**. It is my sense that many NNN members are either mathematicians or people involved in mathematics education, and I imagine they have lots of ways to communicate with one another. But NNN also involves other sorts of folks: some are interested in teaching numeracy; some are interested in particular consequences of innumeracy, and so on. Such diversity has the potential to foster a lot of weak ties to people and networks in other disciplines. This is important, because it's hard to know what's going on in all of the pockets of academia, and we may be just one invitation-to-blurb's distance apart.