In an article titled "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks", authors Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M Cook explore the different ways in which homophily manifests itself in social networks. Homophily can be distinguished as baseline homophily or inbreeding homophily, with baseline homophily coming from demography, and with inbreeding homophily coming from that which one is not born with, as well as those above opportunities. The authors then explore patterns of homophily in race and ethnicity, sex and gender, age, religion, education, occupation, social class, and attitudes. An aspect that I found surprising was how strong homophilic ties exist for race and ethnicity compared to other patterns of homophily, such as sex/gender and age. Additionally, I did not realize that patterns of homophily in religion were strong amongst the Jewish community, as I assumed the article would talk about how homophily would be strong among communities such as the Mormons or the Amish.

I wonder how the internet has changed these patterns of homophily. With technology and the rise of the internet, it has become easier to connect with people without geography being a factor. For example, in aspects of baseline homophily—such as race—technology and the internet have become factors in bridging communities, like how the Chinese community often uses WeChat in the U.S. to make friends and organize events. I think that with the internet, we can now form network connections that would not have existed or would not have been close before. Additionally, the internet has also allowed people to actively seek out others who have the same interests as them. Communities on the internet can also shape one’s beliefs. Is the internet itself, then, a new source of homophily, or is it simply a means of homophily?

In an article titled “Beyond and Below Racial Homophily: ERG Models of a Friendship Network Documented on Facebook”, authors Andreas Wimmer and Kevin Lewis examine racial homophily and its relationships to endogenous ties. They took the Facebook profile pages of 1640 students and found that friends in pictures were the most adequate ties of study. Then, they proceeded to classify categories into facial categories and ethnic categories, with facial categories being White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, or Mixed, and with ethnic categories dependent on the user publicly signaling membership in an ethnic club. The main message of the study was that if one was to run ERGM, one would find strong racial and ethnic homophily. However, if one controlled for endogenous ties, the coefficient decreases by half. In other words, at least fifty percent of racial homophily could be explained by the endogenous ties.

I have a couple of questions about this study. First, I would like to see how racial homophily may differ within a racial or ethnic group, such as racial homophily between Asian-Americans versus international Asian students. Is there perhaps a different dynamic that goes into each, or do we see the same patterns of homophily even within racial or ethnic groups? I also had some questions about the use of pictures to identify ties. These days, it is common for you to be Facebook friends with someone you do not really know. For example, if someone gets a friend request from a person who is already Facebook friends with many of their other friends, they are likely to accept their friend request. It is also common for people to be tagged in pictures where they do not really know the other people in those pictures. Are pictures truly a good measure for ties in this case?

Mouw’s article titled “Social Capital and Finding a Job: Do Contacts Matter?” explores the question of whether our job contacts actually influence labor market outcomes such as higher wages and “occupational prestige”. First, in the current literature before this article, there was not a consensus on whether or not job contacts influenced labor market outcomes. If job contacts really did not influence labor market outcomes, then labor market models in economics would be able to ignore the aspect of job contacts. Thus, Mouw tested the causal effects of job contacts on labor market outcomes by using “direct effects” models, “exogenous social capital” models, and “endogenous social capital” models. Through these models, Mouw concluded that there was no evidence that job contacts influence labor market outcomes. However, he cautions that this does not necessarily mean that contacts do not matter; rather, we are likely to overestimate the influence of job contacts on the labor market. Additionally, there are some discrepancies in the results, especially between single-firm studies and studies of workers. For example, while job applicants with connections are more likely to be hired, in the surveys of individual workers, the benefits do not seem to appear. Mouw attributes this to the idea of search models and that that perhaps well-connected workers receive higher wages regardless of whether they used contacts. I do not understand the explanation that Mouw supplies for this, as I do not see how it naturally follows that well-connected workers receive higher wages. Why would a more connected individual raise their reservation wages? Additionally, Mouw continues to use the idea of search models to suggest that “the relationship with wages…involves aspects of social capital not transmitted through networks.” What could he mean by this? What kinds of social capital are not transmitted through networks? By nature, shouldn’t social capital inherently include the existence of ties, and are therefore transmitted across or through networks?

In an article titled “The Integrative Power of Civic Networks” authors Delia Baldassarri and Mario Diani explore the nature of civil society in democratic regimes. Civil society is an interesting subject because of the nature of network relations; it is a third sector of society distinct from government and business, with its own way of creating and maintaining ties. Additionally, it includes the family and private sphere, and it is mainly self-policed rather than having an entity like the government to oversee it. Most politicians would say it is generally ideal for a democratic society to have a robust civil society. However, Baldassarri and Diani found something interesting in their results, which was the following: beyond a certain point, increased participation from citizens in civil society may lead to social fragmentation into clusters. My question is, at what point will we see this social fragmentation and factionalism? Additionally, what implications do these results have for political parties that prioritize participation in civil society over bureaucracy and business? It seems like we should think about adding more structure into other sectors. Additionally, it was interesting to see how the structure and behavior of civil society as a whole change depending on voter cleavage. For example, when there is a deep cleavage, indicating that there are deep ideological differences between voter groups on certain issues, we see civil society fragment into clusters that are dense but do not interact as much with others. When there is less cleavage, civil society appears to be more centralized. Since this article was written in 2007, I wonder what the authors would have to say about the existing cleavages in U.S. politics right now, especially with the splintering of the Republican Party (fragmentation into clusters) or the striking down of Roe v. Wade (interference in civil society as well as deepening cleavage). Finally, is civil society created by structural democracy, or do you need to have a strong civil society to bring in democratic structure?

The article titled “Network Ecology and Adolescent Social Structure” by Daniel A. McFarland, James Moody, David Diehl, Jeffrey A. Smith, Reuben J. Thomas explores how environmental factors affect different networks within a particular place. Namely, it was interesting because previous studies thought that if different networks were comprised of the same type of people, the same hierarchies should arise, but this does not seem to be the case. How can we explain global variations if the network is explained by the same tie formation mechanisms? The study took two approaches: the ecological approach and the non-ecological approach. The ecological approach explores the dynamic interactions between the social environment and network structure. The non-ecological approach treats the network itself as the most important social context and uses global network features as the combination of the individuals. The findings were that both selective and elective aspects contribute to segregation; for example, the school assigning classrooms (selective) leads to segregation, as does self-assigning classrooms (elective). Additionally, as the classroom settings become freer, more of the natural bases of association, such as homophily, begin to arise. However, if classroom settings become more socially controlled, these natural bases of association begin to decrease. These findings have implications for school and classroom culture as well as the physical environment that contributes to network formation. For example, school desegregation will lead to homophily across the school but heterophily the classroom.

I’m interested to see network ecology and social structure on higher levels other than classrooms. For example, why do schools in the same school district have different network structures? What are the environmental factors that can have an impact on these structures? What effect does having different teachers and different classmates have on adolescent social structure? How about the way the classroom is physically structured?

The article titled “Network Interventions” by Thomas W. Valente describes and explains network interventions, types of network interventions, and when and where network interventions may be selected or applicable. First, network interventions use the social network data provided to produce social influence, “accelerate behavior change or improve organizational performance, enhance social change, and improve dissemination and diffusion of innovations.” There are four types of network interventions. The first network intervention is at the individual level, where individuals are selected as nodes based on how they are selected as “champions”. For example, members of the network can elect or nominate leaders, facilitating social change. The second type of network intervention is segmentation, where interventions are now directed at a group of nodes within the network rather than an individual. The third type of network intervention is induction, where interaction between peers creates a behavioral cascade through the network. Finally, the fourth type of network intervention is alteration, where the network itself is altered; one may remove or add nodes, remove or add ties, or restructure ties. The type of network intervention that one should select will be dependent on many factors, including the social and environmental context of the network as well as the type of behavior being disseminated.

I am particularly interested in network interventions in the context of the internet. Does network formation—and do network interventions—work differently or disseminate differently across the internet than if the network was comprised of real-life ties instead of online ties? The article mentioned that segmentation would be more difficult over social media unless an entire group adopts. Additionally, how would an induction method like word-of-mouth be different? Would it be easier to track since it is online? For other network interventions, how would one proceed with alteration of a network, such as re-wiring ties?