The construction and reproduction of network density in everyday life

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Classical social networks studies have taken measures of "density" for granted, associating high network density with both positive and negative outcomes for individuals. Yet, little qualitative work has elaborated the social interactional mechanisms behind the construction and reproduction of network density itself. Using nearly two years of ethnographic fieldwork in a "close-knit" community of Italian-Americans, this paper examines the everyday construction and reproduction of density as a *perceived* network property - distinct from an *actual* property - and discusses the consequences such a construction may have for the reinforcement of cultural norms and values.

1 Introduction

Whenever 79-year-old ex-mobster Tony DiBiasio[1] lowers his voice, everyone knows it's in their best interest to listen. So when he started to whisper to me one day — as he stood on the stoop of my triple-decker house in his puffy green winter coat, white baseball cap over his thick glasses, intent on telling me about why the Italian-Americans in Providence, Rhode Island might be different than Italian-Americans elsewhere — I knew that I should pay attention.

"When you're in Rome, you do as the Romans do," he started. "Well, you're in Rome now, you understand? Small town, everybody knows everybody, everybody is, well, not *shy*, but they're cautious in this town."

"Why?" I was genuinely curious.

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[1] All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the privacy of subjects.

"On what they say, and what they do, everythin' most of the time is calculated because it's a small state, and they may have to deal with each other somewhere along the way."

The phenomenon that Tony explained to me that day - that "everybody knows everybody" - is called *density* in the language of social networks scholars. Density is a measure often used to describe how far a given network is from a completely connected one. In most studies, it appears as a number between 0 and 1, calculated by dividing the *actual* number of connections between individuals by the *possible* number of connections between them. This number captures how likely it is that one's friends are also friends with each other: a density measure of 1 means that everybody knows everybody, whereas a density measure of 0 means that everybody is isolated.

Like other properties of networks, density is typically discussed in absolute terms — as a concrete, measurable statement of the physical structure of connections between individuals. Most studies involving density lean on these calculated figures to say something about network structure, and then to examine the ways in which that network structure affects the individuals embedded within it. Such studies have found that highly dense and connected networks are associated with lower residential mobility (Uhlenberg, 1973; Dawkins, 2006), limited prospective mobility (Connerly, 1986), lowered rates of crime and deviance (Sampson and Groves, 1989), higher levels of social influence (Haynie, 2001; Kohler et al., 2001), the faster spread of disease (Bearman et al., 2004), and the more efficient spread of ideas and adopted behaviors (Centola and Macy, 2007), for example. The thread common among these studies relates the structure of a group of people to the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors of its individuals: a dense and clustered social network structure can create optimal conditions for the reinforcement of certain norms and values (Mitchell, 1974), and can also have important implications for the ways in which new resources can or cannot flow through the network (Granovetter, 1973).

But networks are not only physical structures: they lead a "double life" — as simultaneously physical structure and mental creation (Krackhardt, 1987; Mehra et al., 2014). Individuals have some *perception* of their social relations which may or may not be accurate (Bernard et al., 1984). They may, for example, perceive their networks to have various "small world"[2] properties (Kilduff et al., 2008), or believe that individuals in their network

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[2]A "small world" network is colloquially described as one with few "degrees of separation" between individuals, made possible by clusters of nodes connected to each other by the occasional far-reaching path. This phenomena was originally described in Travers and Milgram (1977) and formally / mathematically elaborated by Watts and Strogatz (1998).

generally like to associate with others who are ethnically similar to themselves (Lee and Reade, 2015). Despite the accuracy or inaccuracy of these perceptions, individuals act upon their beliefs, potentially working to create and re-create the very social network structures which constrain them (Brands et al., 2015; Krackhardt, 1990; Krackhardt and Kilduff, 1999).

This article's contribution is to unearth the social interactional mechanisms underlying the construction and reproduction of network density as a perceived property of a social network. Below, I review the literature on density as a structural network property. I then make the case that density research so far hinges upon a limited and superficial notion of what a dense social tie actually *is*, and that a full understanding of density's causes and effects (or the causes of and effects of any structural network property, for that matter) requires a more in-depth investigation of on-the-ground social relations. I then use ethnographic data from two years of fieldwork among a group considered by its members to be "close-knit" to describe how density was perceived, continually constructed, and emotionally reinforced over the course of social interaction. I end with some theoretical implications of the ways in which these constructed perceptions affect individual action and group-level structure, and discuss why a more detailed understanding of these mechanisms could aid in future quantitative network analyses.

1.1 Density as a structural property of social ties

> "At first sight this seems to be an odd relationship, for it is hard to see why the social relationship of other people with one another should affect the relationship of husband and wife..."

These are the words of Bott and Spillius (1955), who noted a curious relationship among British urban families in the mid-20th century — that the more "close-knit" any family's social network was (consisting of neighbors, coworkers, and friends), the higher the level of conjugal segregation (the separation of husband's and wife's duties) within the family's household. Their "odd" discovery paved the way for the study of density as a structural property of social relations: the implication was that the level of connectedness among individuals in a network could affect the ways in which different ideas spread or were adopted (in their particular case, ideas about the relative social roles of married men and women).

Lurking beneath Bott and Spillius (1955) and decades of social network research which followed is the foundational understanding of social ties as resources - later known as social

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capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Individuals have differential access to resources depending on their social ties. Such resources can be material - money, goods, or other forms of social support, for example - or immaterial: the provision of norms and values, reinforcement of certain understandings about social obligations and expectations, and any sort of information can similarly flow through social ties. In all cases, the availability of these resources, as well as the likelihood individuals are able to effectively mobilize them, is intimately bound up with the physical structure of their social relations and where the individual is located within that structure (Lin et al., 2001).

Granovetter (1973) formally brought these discussions of network density and social resources together in "The Strength of Weak Ties," a theory which laid the groundwork for scholars interested in the relationship between network density and access to information. "Weak" ties, Granovetter argued - ties between acquaintances, or between individuals whose friends may not be friends with each other - are more likely to be a source of new information than are "strong" ties, in dense networks, between individuals whose friends are friends with one another. In his elaboration, the more dense a social network (i.e., the higher percentage of "strong ties" it exhibits), the more redundant the information individuals are exposed to: "individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends" (Granovetter, 1983, p. 202). Empirical support for the theory has been gathered over the years; for example, Granovetter himself (1995) found that a majority of individuals who had changed jobs recently found their jobs through "acquaintances" rather than friends (and, importantly, the effect was strongest for those moving upwards in occupational status), and Friedkin (1980) found similar information dynamics operating in the social networks of biologists.

Though complications related to the theory have also been presented (see, for example, Gans (1974)), the consequences of social network density for the exposure to and flow of information became entrenched in the minds of networks scholars after Granovetter. As Campbell et al. (1986) point out, individuals who are embedded within wide-ranging, loosely-connected networks - filled with acquaintances who may not be connected to one's close friends - have generally been found to be at an advantage with regard to many different classically measured socioeconomic outcomes, as their networked positions come accompanied by a greater possibility for access to varied resources. These sorts of personal networks are much more likely to be seen among the socioeconomically advantaged, spatially mobile (Connerly, 1986; Dawkins, 2006; Uhlenberg, 1973) and highly educated in

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urban areas (Fischer, 1982).

High-density networks, on the other hand, are more likely to be found in rural areas and in smaller, less affluent towns. Marsden and Copp (1986) and Marsden (1987) - similar to Bott and Spillius (1955) - report that these highly dense networks are prime grounds for the flourishing of "traditional" belief systems, perhaps in part due to the fact that they may be somewhat shielded from the fast-moving trends in ideology or belief which may originate in looser, urban, heterogeneous networks. In addition, traditional beliefs - or any beliefs - in a highly connected network might be more likely to be continually reinforced, as the forces of social influence may flourish in well-connected environments (Granovetter and Soong, 1983; Haynie, 2001; Kohler et al., 2001). Though these denser networks may in some ways be informationally limited and culturally and normatively stagnant compared to less dense networks, they are often associated with better mental and emotional health (Carter and Feld, 2004; Dozier et al., 1987; Kadushin, 1983) and lower instances of loneliness (Stokes and Levin, 1986).

Despite the abudance of research related to the consequences of structural density, the *causes* of it - apart from general size of the network (Scott, 2017) - remain relatively poorly understood (Carter and Feld, 2004). Where and when do dense networks arise, and what forces work to perpetuate it? To understand more about structural network density, I argue, one must understand the ground-level experience of dense social ties themselves.

1.2 What *are* dense ties? The case for ground-level network experience

Nearly all of the density literature takes the definition of a "strong tie" - a tie in a dense network - for granted. But as Krackhardt (1992) and Torres (2019) point out, Granovetter's original definition is lacking in specificity:

> "...the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie." (Granovetter, 1973)

This definition poses some analytical problems. By these terms, it is possible that two pairs of individuals who are in a dense network and are each considered to have "strong" ties to each other might actually be exchanging very different sorts of resources across their bonds. For instance: a pair of individuals tied to each other with high emotional intensity might be considered just as "strongly" tied as a pair of individuals who more frequently see each other, but are not as emotionally attached. On top of this complexity, three out of

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four of Granovetter's ingredients — emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services — are inherently messy; they are difficult to define and evaluate consistently across samples and situations (Krackhardt, 1992). Further, the central role that face-to-face interaction plays in all of these realms points to a need for a more in-depth qualitative examination of the nature of social ties in general.

Strong social ties - characteristic of dense networks - are in fact much more thoroughly defined outside of the networks literature by microsociologists, social psychologists, anthropologists, and others who bring everyday life into analytical focus. Erving Goffman, for example, writes in chapter 2 of *Relations in Public* that strong social bonds are those which display a high level of "familiarity," or intimacy: "if an individual is to join someone in some kind of social bond," he writes, "surely he must do so by giving up some of the boundaries and barriers that ordinarily separate them. Indeed, the fact of having given up these separatenesses is a central symbol and substance of relationship" (Goffman, 1971). Similarly, some social psychologists argue that in order to understand the strength of a social tie, one must observe the emotions which emanate from the tie; strong, intact social bonds endenger pride in their participants, for example (Scheff, 1994). In addition, social ties in a network are too often examined within a single, temporal cross-section, erasing the much more complicated natural history which exists in a relationship between any two individuals (Emerson, 2015).

But at any one moment in time, it is impossible to "see directly the whole of the bond" between two people (Goffman, 1971). This means that the data required to properly observe what a strong social tie *is* — and therefore, what, precisely, can or cannot flow through it — must be ethnographic in nature. How can we properly observe the "giving up [of] some of the boundaries and barriers" which mark intimacy between two connected individuals if we do not spend time with them as they interact with one another? And can we fully understand the emotional content - or the natural history - of each relationship if we only measure connection via survey, as most of the quantitative social networks density literature has done? These elements of social ties - many of which involve a consideration of relationships between individuals who have known each other for many years - can be uncovered only when a researcher observes and participates in the lives of individuals over an extended period of time, by immersing herself fully and completely within a community. The next section details how I accomplished this in a "close-knit" community of Italian-Americans.

2 Data and Methods

In the Spring of 2017, I moved into a triple-decker house on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island, about a seven minute walk from the front doors of an Italian bakery. Over the two years that followed, I became immersed in the social world of that bakery - where I began working - as well as in the world of its surrounding community, subjecting myself to the "set of contingencies" that played upon the daily lives of those who live there — so that I became "close to them while they [were] responding to what life [did] to them" (Goffman, 1989).

I had little theoretical direction at the beginning of the project other than an initial interest in Italian-American ethnicity. I took an inductive "grounded theory" approach to fieldwork, aiming to 1.) understand and experience the lives of Italian-Americans in the area to the best of my ability, and 2.) to build any theoretical contributions which emerged from that understanding from the ground up (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As Charmaz (1995) describes, grounded theorists begin with initial research interests, but do not force preconceived ideas or theories onto their data as in traditional hypothesis-based work. This approach means that the researcher must analyze data in the process of collecting it, paying close attention to the themes which emerge from richly detailed "thick" descriptions (Geertz, 1973) that the researcher has collected. Emergent themes should reflect the topics which respondents define as crucial, and a careful analysis of those themes then guides the process of future data collection. Network density - and the everyday experience of social relations - became one of these emergent themes.

2.1 Top-down construction: density and "smallness" in public thought

The Italian Bakery where I met most subjects was located in Johnston, Rhode Island, my own hometown — locally "famous" for having the second-largest percentage of Italian-Americans of any municipality in the country. (Nearly half of its residents claim Italian ancestry.[3]) At a population of over 29,000, Johnston is not a "small town" by any conventional definitions. But it can still *feel* small: nearly every other week during my fieldwork, as I took long walks along Atwood Avenue, the main street in town, I'd watch two people driving in opposite directions stop, beeping, to wave to each other, or in some cases even reach out their windows to try and greet the person they knew. This is perhaps in part

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[3]More precisely, 45.5% - 13,231 of its 29,095 residents - claim Italian ancestry (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). A similar figure was also featured in a recent *Providence Journal* article by Parker (2015).

due to the fact that Johnston had been settled largely by connected families of Italian-Americans in the post-World War II era — an outpouring of a homogeneous population from the same Italian enclaves within Providence, a small *city* in the smallest *state* in the United States. By focusing on these Italian-Americans within the larger population, I was paying attention to a group of people who were, in many instances, already connected to each other, who perceived their town as small, regardless of whether or not it actually was small. The word "small" in fact was often used to mean "dense," and the perceived *size* of the state of Rhode Island was often cited as a cause of dense social connections.

For example, on my first working day at the bakery, owner Raymond Francesco DeAngelis questioned me about my family history, and we established that my grandmother's friend grew up next to Ray's father. I could tell that Ray was immediately put at ease by this common connection: it almost became a way for him to brag as he introduced me to everyone in the bakery that first day, though he'd often get the particulars of our connection a little mixed up. "Her grandmother grew up next to my father!" he'd say, beaming, and anyone he introduced me to would smile, more trust in their eyes now than before, and utter the same sentiments, like "huh, small world!" or "that's Rhode Island, where everybody knows everybody!" I noticed that the fact that he and my grandmother had a tie in common from the older neighborhoods in Providence - where he was raised - seemed to mean much more to him than the initial fact I had presented when we first spoke: that I myself am from Johnston, close to where he lives and works today.

As Ray and I dug deeper into our connections, we found that my grandfather Tony's barber shop was just across the street from Ray's uncle's gas station in the Federal Hill enclave through the 1960s and 70s. Other connections like this came up as I met more of the bakery workers, some of whom - like the Rhode Island College student Jessica Russo - had close friends who had introduced her to my cousins years ago, or - like another young Rhode Island College girl, Emily Tocco - had a relative who had married a boy my younger brothers played baseball with. Some of these conversations between workers establishing their connections with me resulted in the discovery that *their* friends and neighbors were connected to each other. The overarching sentiment that accompanied my entry into the bakery world - and my time in Rhode Island more generally - was this: not only did everyone seem connected to me in some way, but their connections were often also connected to each other.

It was an official sentiment, too, quoted frequently in programs on local television, in newspapers, and on the radio. Even such illustrious figures as Buddy Cianci — the Provi-

dence mayor who was famously re-elected after he was found to have assaulted a man by putting a cigarette butt out in his eyeball and hitting him over the head with a fire log (Stanton, 2003) — would speak of Rhode Island's smallness often, touting its tight-knitness as a beautiful thing, or praising the fact that the state has always been perceived of as a place where "people get to know more about each other" (Seay, 2014). In a recent piece about the Providence-focused podcast *Crimetown*, former Rhode Island attorney general and radio personality Arlene Violet laments this very same perception so commonly held among Rhode Islanders: that Rhode Island is a close community, that "somebody always knows somebody, and you end up being related" (Violet, 2017). In her eyes, however - by contrast to Cianci's - the small state's ultra-connectedness is a source of "crookedness" and political corruption. Regardless of whether or not this connectedness is good or bad, it is certainly perceived as real, and it is believed to be an inevitable and unchangeable fact of life in a small state.

So while Johnston is not a "small town" in any classic sense, it is a suburb of a small city, and local social network experience contributes to it *feeling* small. It is difficult to pinpoint the source and accuracy of these perceptions: the idea that Rhode Island is small is not only promulgated through local news and media channels, but it is also built up from the everyday experience of discovering social connections, many of which can be traced back to the fact that a large portion of residents in the Providence metropolitan area were descendant from families who dispersed outwards from the same ethnic enclaves in similar ways, during similar times. Perceptions of a dense, small-town community – however accurate or inaccurate they are – can shape the values and actions of residents in important ways (Wuthnow, 2013). The sections that follow focus on this process.

2.2 Bottom-up construction: the local experience of density

Right after we established our common connections, Ray took me on my first tour of the bakery. He showed me the bakery's giant freezers and refrigerators; he told me about the history behind his two body-sized rotating ovens; he explained how he mixes the dough in his chest-high mixing bowl; I felt the slippery oil beneath my sneakers for the first time, the warmth from the ovens on my skin; I smelled the smells of dough, of tomato sauce, of pizza in the oven, of cake batter stirred. But I also then learned about the cast of characters he surrounds himself with. He introduced me to everyone as someone who was "gonna write a book about Italians," told them I'd be around, that I'd be asking them questions, and that they should be willing to answer me. In each of them I saw the extent of Ray's

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influence, his power in the bakery, the awe and respect he inspires in and commands from his workers. His authority became so instrumental in my gradual acceptance there.

Many of Ray's thirty-seven workers were his own family and friends. Rob DeFazio, his grand-nephew, was the pastry chef. Tony DiBiasio, Ray's friend for the past fifty years from "the neighborhood" of Federal Hill, helps out in the store on weekend mornings. Two of Ray's daughters from his first marriage, Diane and Deborah, both in their 40's, hold other dayjobs – they work as middle managers at the local Johnston branches of Citizens Bank and Progressive Insurance Company, respectively – but their father's bakeries have been such an integral part of their lives that they can't keep away: they continue to help out in the back on weekends, making pizza, bagging one-pound chunks of dough, or cooking "lunch" (at about 8:00am) for the Dominican immigrant oven staff. 74-year-old Anna DeFazio, Ray's big sister, works six days a week at the bakery, slicing eggplant and baking hot pizzas. Ray's fraternal twin brother, Paul, rolls out pepper biscuit sticks on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Ray's own mother - Louise "Ma" DeAngelis - sliced eggplant by Anna's side until she died at 93. His granddaughter, Isabella, would work the 3am shift sometimes on the weekends, leaving at 9am on Saturday morning with frizzy, curly brown hair, full of oil from the pans and pizza she'd handled all night. His grandson, Stephen, would pop in now and then, occasionally making deliveries for his grandpa, placing hot rolls - fresh out of the oven - in large brown paper bags to load up in his car and bring to restaurants on Federal Hill. And his cousin, Kathy, would wander in about once a week, looking for some free bread and pizza — her privilege as a blood relation, she seemed to feel. "She belongs in a fuckin' mental institution," Ray would complain whenever her eager face appeared on the other side of the counter, *HI RAYMOND!*, waving homemade crocheted pot-holders in the air, trying desperately to catch his attention. "My wife has 300 of these potholders," Ray will roll his eyes. But he'll always give her something, maybe a couple of fresh rolls, or some pastries that were already on sale, pretending they were put in a box all special just for her. "What am I gonna do. She's my cousin," he'll say. "You can't pick your relatives. You're stuck with 'em."

Ray's wife Sarah McMillan has her own family clan there, too — with a mixture of Italian, Irish, and English ethnic heritage. This includes Walter, her grandfather; Lucy, her grandmother (Walter's wife), who serves as the resident bakery decorator, climbing on ladders before every holiday to change the streamers and little dangling pumpkins or Santa Clauses from the ceiling tiles; and Pat, Sarah's mother, who is the only woman - only person, really - who could talk back to Ray and tell him what's what. "Uh, who are

you?" Pat had asked me, bluntly, aggressively, without a hint of a smile, the first time we encountered each other.

It became clear very quickly that any outsiders were immediately spotted. Customers, even, were frequently friends of one of the bakery families, or at least friends of Ray — his cop pals, some local farmers, and other male friends of his would often wander in, wishful eyes peering over the counter, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ray, just to say hello, or to walk out with some free bread, cementing their connection to him, and through that connection, their own importance. Each person had their purpose and was sought out to fulfill it. Ray had his "mushroom man" Mike, who walked in proudly a few times a week, May through September, with his latest *Signorina* mushrooms. He had his zucchini man, Al, who would bring in fresh zucchini flowers on early summer mornings, battered and fried by his wife. And he had his farmer friend, Sal, who would come in with some heads of Romaine lettuce, or some homemade wine, and would leave arms full of bread and pastry.

These men were not paid contractors, but rather were friends, who understood that a favor to Don meant a future favor in return. They were ensnared in webs of mutual obligation, built upon a mutual dependency. These sorts of dependent bonds, according to Illouz (2012), bring strong emotional satisfaction to their participants. Embedded within these sorts of micro-level interactions is a sense of purpose, of usefulness, of positive reinforcement of self-worth. These connections, Illouz claims, provide a "thick emotional glue" that binds individuals with clear social roles to one another. In this way, individuals play out "dramas of self-worth" during the course of each and every interaction they have, and their self-worth becomes inextricably tied to their social roles (Goffman, 1967): being Don's one and only "mushroom man" is a boost to one's selfhood, one's ego, the "part of [one]self with which one identifies his positive feelings..." (Goffman, 1971).

To be among these various neighbors, friends and family members was an all-encompassing emotional experience. It seemed as though nearly everyone who mattered to those in the bakery were there in the bakery themselves. Pat, in fact, didn't own a cell phone for precisely this reason. "Why would I need one?" she explained to me. "Everyone I would need to talk to is already here."

How Life Should Be

Surrounded by family, bound up in the local — this was not only how most of the bakery workers lived, but it was also how they *wanted* to live, at least when asked about it. During the midst of some talk about the Powerball lottery jackpot (a generally very popular topic

of conversation around the bakery), bakery worker Anna DeFazio confessed her Powerball wishes to me, telling me what she'd do with all the money if she'd won it:

> *Anna:* "If I won Powerball, I'd buy every house on a cul-de-sac and give one to each of my sons and family. It would be the DeFazio cul-de-sac! That's my dream. We'd all be near each other."

Her family was all in Rhode Island already - with the exception of one granddaughter, who had followed a man to North Carolina (and who had returned home over the course of my fieldwork) - but she wanted them even closer, on the same street, nextdoor, always around. She valued being close to her family above all else, and it showed in the way she lived her life. On Sundays, her only day off per week, she told me she usually made 13 or so pounds of pasta and a giant pot of gravy and meatballs for her family to come over her house and have dinner together. "They use it to congregate, to see each other," she beamed. It gave her a sense of great pride and purpose to think of her Federal Hill triple-decker as a central gathering location for everyone she loved.

And it wasn't just Anna who felt this way. Most of the Johnston residents I grew to know inside and outside of the bakery felt similarly: it just made sense, felt good, to be rooted, to live near one's family, to stay in a place where it was possible to be known. Movement out of the state was in some cases actively discouraged, especially by middle-aged and older residents. Jo-Ann Ricci DeBellis, a 61-year-old raspy-voiced Pall-Mall-smoking dance instructor down the street – who would sometimes have her dance students sell raffle tickets outside the bakery's door – told me once that she felt no need to leave Rhode Island, not even to travel; if she wanted to see something different, she said, she'd "watch it on television." She continued:

> *Jo-Ann*: Like, I could live in the Hallmark movie channel, Christmastime town, that's never seen another state. Like live in that little village every day, go to the same butcher and the hairdresser... that's like, how I think life should be.
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> *Me*: What's appealing about that?
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> *Jo-Ann*: It's closeness, it's warmth, it's togetherness. That's what's important to me. Not seein' Hawaii, and spendin' ten thousand dollars, and then all you do is remember it when you go home. Big fuckin' deal! So you saw some water and hula dances![4]

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[4]Interview with Jo-Ann DeBellis, 1/5/18.

Jo-Ann's 28-year-old daughter, Brittany DeBellis, business parters with her mother at the dance studio and a frequent bakery customer herself, lamented what she saw as her mother's unwillingness to step outside of her "comfort zone" in Rhode Island. "It hindered [her] from experiencing a lot of things," Brittany told me. Brittany herself does like to travel, does like to get out of Rhode Island every once in a while. "I think being from Rhode Island, from Johnston," she told me once, "because it's so small, I feel like I need to go see other places!" This impulse led her to travel to New Hampshire, Florida, Maine, Cancun, and Italy, her mother said. But Brittany still comes back; she has always lived here, in Johnston, now in her own unit in a four-unit house on Lafayette street, where most of Jo-Ann's family also lives – her stepson, her sister, and both her daughters – and has no impulse to actually move away. (The land was all owned by Jo-Ann's father, and when it was passed down to her, she and her husband developed it and parceled it out among their family.)

Being close to family was often also why some residents claimed to have chosen to move to Johnston from Providence in the first place. "We just liked it," 56-year-old Carol Pannetti told me. "It was close to my family, close to [my husband's] family, 'cause his parents and my parents are both in Providence. And yeah it was right near the highway and everythin.'"[5] People here, according to the town clerk Vince Baccari, are homebodies. "My wife's like, let's just move to Florida," Vince told me as I looked through housing deeds at the Johnston town hall.[6] "Everybody says that. But your family is here! You don't just get up and leave your family."

It was hard to tell which came first. Was being close to family valued first, and movement patterns developed second? Or did settlement patterns mean that a dense and critical mass of Italian-Americans were close to their family members first, and then came to value that closeness? Either way, whenever I asked bakery workers or other residents about where their friends and family lived, all of them gave local answers. "They're mostly here in Rhode Island. Not like Massachusetts or anythin' like that," 59-year-old Lori Salatino told me. "Who lives outside of Rhode Island?" she brainstormed aloud. "Nobody!"[7]

Expectations for repeated interaction

So Rhode Island was "small" — i.e., dense. This was how it was perceived - as well as how it was constructed - in everyday life, by the particular group of Italian-Americans I

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[5]Interview with Maria and Carol Pannetti, 12/13/16.

[6]Discussion with Vince Baccari on 10/18/18.

[7]Interview with Lorin and Lori Salatino, 12/16/16.

began paying attention to in the suburbs of Providence. Moreover, that density was often valued for the emotional experience it seemed to provide — a feeling of warmth, closeness, and togetherness, of knowing and being known, of living in close physical proximity to both immediate and extended family. But this "smallness" was not only perceived and desired: it also factored into how individuals thought about their social relations, affecting the actions they took in their own relationships. I learned much about this from Tony DiBiasio, Ray's friend - and the ex-mobster quoted at the start of the Introduction.

When I first became friends with Tony, I was warned by many in the bakery that I should be cautious.

"You don't *know* him," Anna told me in a hushed voice, my first week, when she saw that Tony and I were becoming pals. "It's fine for you two to talk around here," she said, "but I wouldn't go over his house, or let him come over yours. He might think somethin' else."

"Tony is *scum. of. the. earth,*" Sarah's grandpa Walter told me just a couple days later, completely unprovoked. "Used to hang out with strippers and everything. I just wanted to let you know that."

I was left feeling disoriented in the wake of these comments; the impression that Tony made on me was that he was open-minded, perceptive, and inquisitive — he would continually want to talk about Rhode Island, about "being Italian," about how he was raised, about his observations of others in and outside the bakery. He seemed genuinely interested in understanding patterns of Italian-American geographical dispersal, and he would often ask me what I was thinking of writing about. He very clearly wanted to be involved in every stage of my research process. So I ignored the warnings from Anna and Walter and kept spending time with him. Below is the full text of our conversation quoted in the Introduction:

> Tony: I don't really know where you're goin [with this research]. When you said, you know, I heard you say that you're gonna zero in on Johnston, the bakery and what not... I would ask myself... what is she doin', where is she goin' and what does she wanna say? You know what I'm sayin'? And you know, if you want to say just about Italians in Johnston, that ain't gonna get you explainin' a national book. If you do, it's not gonna be right.
>
> Me: What do you mean?
>
> Tony: If you go to... Texas, and meet Italian people, you'll find that... they're way different than in Rhode Island. If you go to California, way different.

I don't know if it's an old Italian saying, but my father said it many times: 'when you're in Rome, you do as the Romans do.' Well you're in Rome now, you understand? Small town, everybody knows everybody, um, everybody is, um, not shy, but they're cautious in this town.

Me: Why?

Tony: On what they say, and what they do, everythin' most of the time is calculated because it's a small state and they may have to deal with each other somewhere along the way. It's like lawyers. No matter how much money a lawyer's gettin', he's gonna go to court and there's certain things he won't do for nothin', because he's gotta work with them lawyers all the rest of his life. See what I'm sayin'? And you're not gonna get honesty. You're not gonna get the real thing.

From the conversation that followed, I gathered that Tony was worried about two interrelated ideas. First, he felt that Rhode Island Italian-Americans were in no way representative of Italian-Americans nationwide. He told me a bit about his travels beyond the Ocean State: "You take people from L.A., or even from Pennsylvania! From Philadelphia, or from Harrisburg. I don't care if they're Italian. I know Italians from Harrisburg, and you wouldn't believe that they're Italian. They cook Italian, you go to their house, you eat, and everythin' and what not, but there's a little more trust there." In his eyes, the uniqueness of Rhode Island Italian-Americans - and Rhode Islanders in general, it seemed - is connected to a second point: that the small size and the dense networks of Rhode Island encourage people to be more "calculating" in their social relations. There is a general awareness among residents that they'll have to "deal with" each other "somewhere along the way," and this awareness, in Tony's eyes, constantly affects their actions, viewpoints, and relationships.

I took these ideas back to the bakery a few days later, on an unusually slow Saturday morning. While working with the young counter girls up front, I asked the group of them what they thought about Tony's ideas.

"I think it's true what he was saying," Jessica Russo told me. "I really do."

I prodded her a bit more, and she proceeded to tell me about a friendship she had with a college classmate, Cynthia, whom she had met in Biology 101. The two were both nursing students, and they had quickly become close friends, but Jessica claimed that a miscommunication (involving a boy) had recently soured their relationship.

"What I think about sometimes is basically... I always think that because Rhode Island is such a small state, and I know we're going into the same profession - she's going into nursing, I'm going into nursing - I always think, we may be in a fight, but when am I gonna see this girl again? I might see her years from now. And I have to, you know, kind of plan on how I'm gonna act towards somebody. 'Cause you never know who you're gonna see! You know?"

*

Both Tony and Jessica understood their social world as one in which repeated interactions with the same individuals were to be expected. In a town like Johnston or state like Rhode Island – which were experienced and constructed as small and hyper-connected, especially within the network of Providence-based Italian-Americans – it was inevitable that Tony and Jessica would encounter many people they knew daily and repeatedly. This knowledge led them to "plan on how [they're] gonna act," restricting their behaviors during interaction to those that would be appropriate given the imagined scenario of encountering the other person again.

This restrictive force itself is one that appears in any small group setting, where members interact with each other repeatedly. Such a setting generally encourages normative conformity — the constraint upon and/or reinforcement of any social norms that are already present, through the provision of rewards and punishment (Hechter, 1988; Boyd and Richerson, 1992; Hechter and Kanazawa, 1993; Henrich and Boyd, 2001; Boyd and Richerson, 2002). This leads to a *stability* in the sorts of interactive behavior observed in a group which is well-connected (Boyd and Richerson, 1992), and it can be achieved through multiple mechanisms: a greater willingness among members of a cohesive group to directly sanction other members (Homans, 1961; Sampson et al., 1997), for example, or indirectly increasing the rewards given to those who punish deviant behavior (Horne, 2001). Through any of these mechanisms, the result is the same: stability of group norms and behavior is encouraged by the structure of repeated interaction — exactly the sort of structure I encountered in the bakery.

The bakery was its own small world, within the small world of Johnston, within the small world of Rhode Island. Inside the bakery walls, daily, repeated interaction was guaranteed among the same group of individuals. The force towards normative conformity operated behind many of the relationships I observed there: it drove Ray to reluctantly give his cousin Kathy free baked goods each week, for example, invoking shared beliefs in the

value of one's family, and also led Anna and Walter to treat Tony DiBiasio in a generally pleasant or neutral way to his face - tolerating his presence - while simultaneously harboring animosity towards him and spreading the word about his character behind his back. For better or for worse, everyone was stuck with each other in this dense social network, they seemed to believe, and they would all behave accordingly.

3 Conclusions

This paper has explored social network density as it was perceived, experienced, and reconstructed in the everyday lives of Italian-Americans on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. The Italian-Americans I got to know in the suburbs of Providence perceived their social networks as "small" and dense, regardless of their actual size and heterogeneity, valued that smallness for the emotional warmth it provided them (while working to perpetuate that source of emotional warmth), and took action in their own social relationships with such smallness in mind. This combination resulted in a continued structuring of their social world from the bottom up, many decades after it was structured from the top down through migration and geographical settlement patterns. These findings have implications for the study of "culture" more generally, as the reinforcement and continual re-structuring of dense networks could potentially affect how quickly or slowly group norms and values change over time.

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