CATER BUTTS

Some Simple Constraints on Social Structure

While social networks are often considered to be "complex systems," many of the deepest insights into the nature of social structure come from relatively simple things. In part, this stems from the fact that the set of possible social structures is heavily constrained by the intrinsic dependence among structural features: fixing one feature of a social network necessarily constrains other features of that network. While this intuition extends back at least to the work of Simmel, its far-reaching implications are often overlooked. Likewise, basic contextual factors such as population size, geography, and heterogeneity can shape network structure to a much greater degree than is often appreciated. In this talk, I outline some of the important -- and often surprising -- ways in which "simple" constraints can enhance our understanding of social networks. I will also highlight some examples of such phenomena which persist even within highly disrupted social settings. Finally, I will argue that there is much that we do not currently understand regarding the basic factors which influence social structure, and that there is a great deal of room for the further study of allegedly simple constraints.