

African Journal for the Psychological Studies of Social Issues

Volume 29 Number 2, June, 2026 Edition

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Journal of the African Society for THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF
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JA BARNES' (1954) STUDY OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN COMMUNITIES, AND THE STRENGTH OF TIES: A REVIEW

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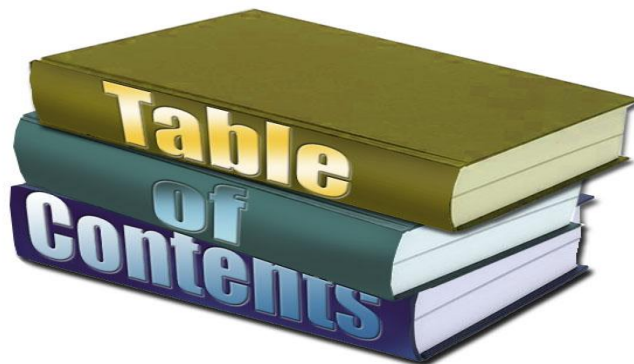


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Chapter 1

Introduction

John Arundel Barnes' seminal 1954 study of social relationships in a Norwegian fishing village represents a foundational moment in the development of modern social network analysis.

By systematically examining patterns of interpersonal ties, Barnes introduced the concept of the *social network* as a structural framework through which social life could be understood. His analysis demonstrated that relationships vary in strength, ranging from close, kinship-based ties to more diffuse, acquaintance-level connections, and that these variations critically shape the circulation of information, the cohesion of communities, and the integration of individuals into broader social systems.

This work not only challenged prevailing notions of social organization as rigidly bounded but also anticipated later theoretical developments concerning the role of weak ties in bridging otherwise disconnected groups. Barnes' contribution thus established a methodological and conceptual foundation for subsequent scholarship in sociology, anthropology, and related

disciplines, underscoring the enduring importance of relational structures in the study of social life.

Statement of Problem



Before Barnes' study, social relationships in many communities were often viewed in terms of lineage, class, family, and organizational structures like church, mosque, and societies.

JA Barnes observed that the approach overlooked the informal networks of friendship, acquaintance, and association that shape everyday life. Barnes opined that individuals' interactions (ties) play a significant role in the flow of information in a community, as well as in engendering community cohesion, decision-making, and social mobility.

Barnes believed that communities are sustained not only by close, strong ties (such as family and intimate friendships) but also by informal networks, without which scholars risk missing out on how information flows, how influence is exercised, and how individuals navigate social structures.

JA Barnes' Study Objectives

- ❑ **To reveal the hidden structure of social life through networks** with a view to documenting, categorizing, and analyzing how interpersonal relationships shaped class, authority, and decision-making in a Norwegian setting.
- ❑ **To examine the structure of social relationships within communities** by identifying both formal and informal ties that connect individuals.
- ❑ **To analyze the relative strength of social ties** (strong vs. weak) and their role in sustaining community cohesion and facilitating social interaction.
- ❑ **To investigate how weak ties function as bridges** between different groups, enabling the flow of information and resources across social boundaries.
- ❑ **To assess the influence of social networks on decision-making and mobility** within communities, particularly in contexts of social change.
- ❑ **To contribute to the development of network analysis in anthropology and sociology** by applying Barnes' insights to broader theoretical frameworks of social organization.

CHAPTER 2

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE STUDY



Barnes was agitated by the limitations of viewing social relationships only through rigid structures like church, family, lineage, or formal societies. He asked probing questions that challenged the adequacy of these categories.

Do formal structures capture the full reality of social life?

He questioned whether kinship, class, or religious organizations alone could explain how people actually interacted day-to-day.

What about relationships that cut across these structures?

Barnes asked how friendships, acquaintances, and casual ties — which don't fit neatly into lineage or class — influence community cohesion.

How do individuals navigate overlapping memberships?

People belong simultaneously to families, churches, committees, and informal friendship circles. Barnes wondered: which ties matter most in practice?

Where does influence and information really flow?

He challenged the assumption that authority and communication are confined to rigid institutions, asking instead how gossip, favours, and casual conversations shape decisions.

Can weak ties be more important than strong ones?

Barnes anticipated later debates (like Granovetter's *Strength of Weak Ties*) by asking whether seemingly minor connections — neighbors, acquaintances — might actually be crucial for bridging groups and spreading knowledge.

Methodology & Design

JA Barnes used a mixed methodological design: He combined ethnographic fieldwork with systematic mapping of interpersonal ties. It was an empirical, inductive, and community-based observation.

1. Fieldwork Setting

LOCATION: Conducted in a small Norwegian fishing community (Bremnes parish).

ETHNOGRAPHIC IMMERSION: Barnes immersed himself in the everyday life of the community, observing both formal institutions (church, committees, kinship, and groups) and informal interactions (friendships, gossip, and favors).

2. Data Collection

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: Barnes lived among the community for two years, attending meetings, church services, and social gatherings.

INTERVIEWS: Spoke with villagers about their relationships, committee memberships, and kinship ties.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: Examined parish records, committee rosters, and local organizational structures.

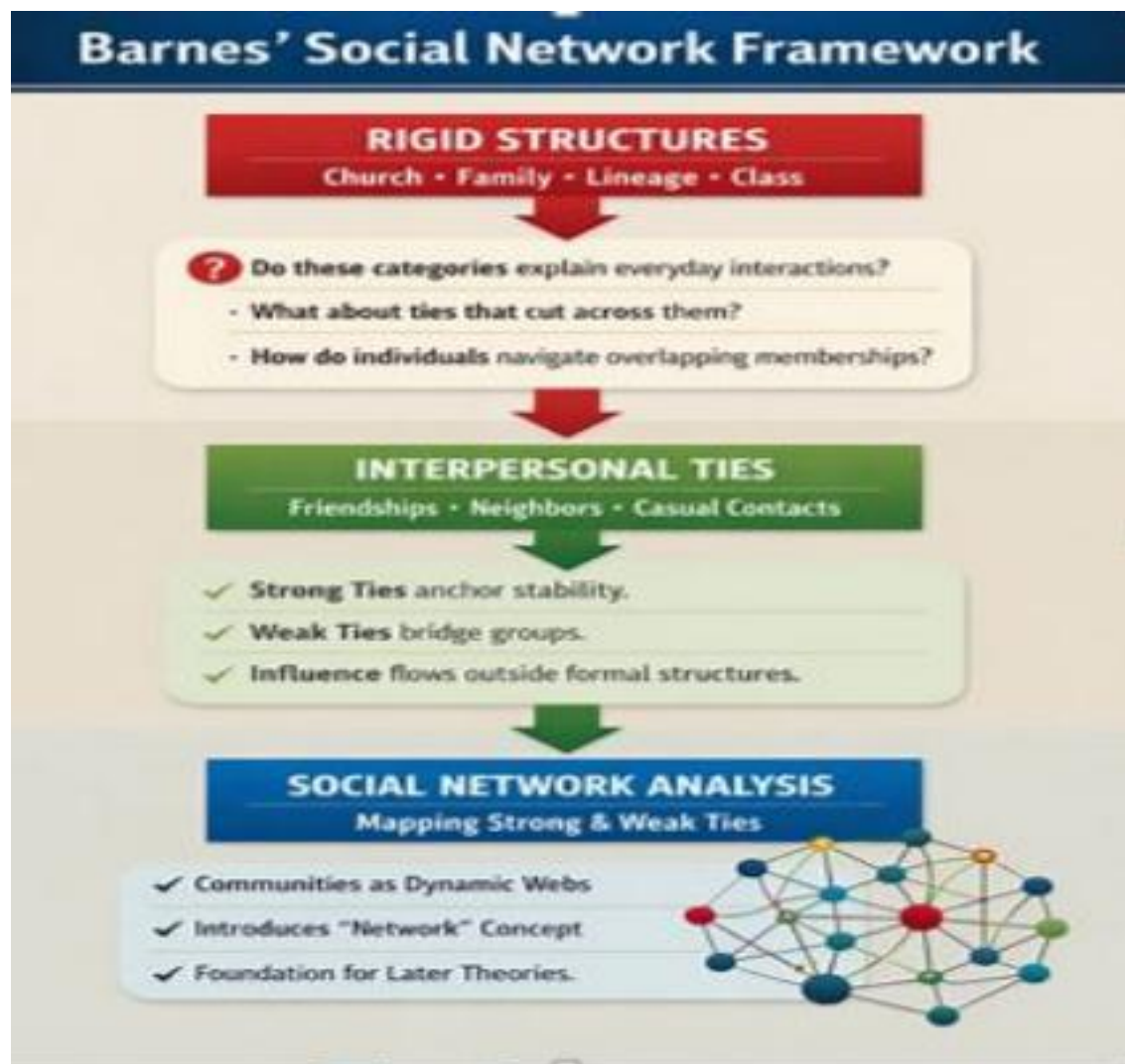
3. Analytical Design

NETWORK MAPPING: Instead of treating family, church, or class as isolated structures, Barnes mapped how individuals were connected across multiple domains.

STRONG VS. WEAK TIES: Distinguished between close, enduring relationships (family, kinship) and weaker, casual ties (neighbors, acquaintances).

OVERLAP OF MEMBERSHIPS: Analyzed how individuals belonged to multiple committees or groups, creating cross-cutting ties that linked otherwise separate social circles.

Rigid Structures → Interpersonal ties → Social Network Analysis.



CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND KEY FINDINGS

- ❑ Barnes pioneered the use of social networks and relational mapping.
- ❑ His early articulation of tie strength shifted scholars' social relationships focus from rigid structural categories (family, church, class) to dynamic social networks.
- ❑ His work bridged micro and macro sociology by creating a middle ground between small group interactions and large scale social structures, allowing researchers to analyze how individual relationships constitute broader social system

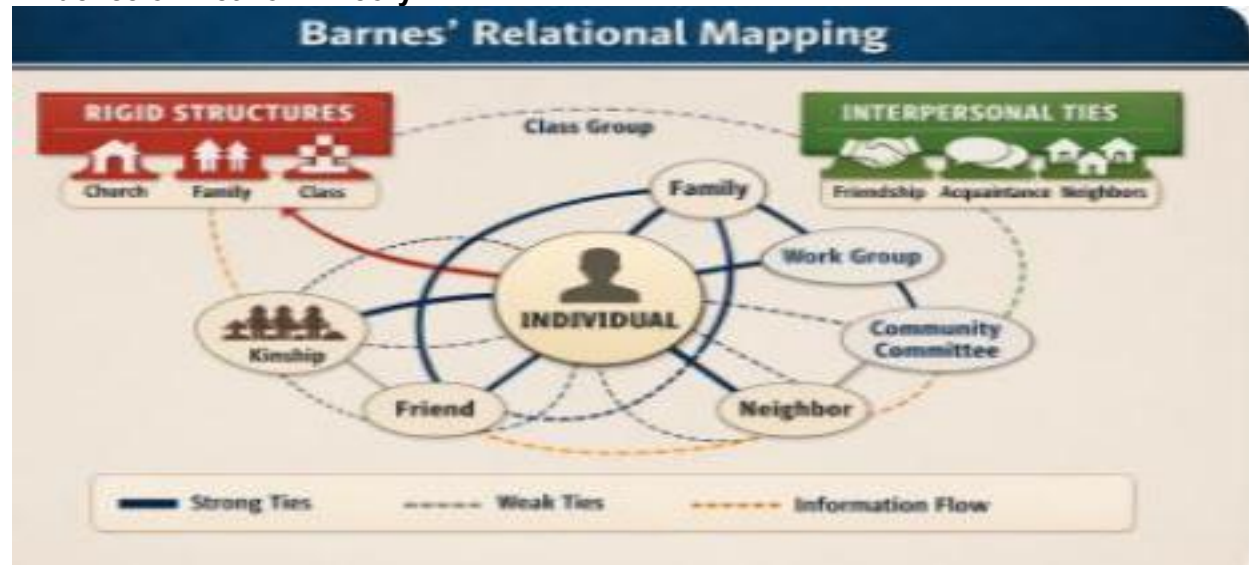
Key Findings:

- ❑ Barnes' study revealed that relationships vary in **strength and intensity**. The relational mapping approach showed how individuals are linked through both formal structures and informal ties. The study categorized ties as strong or weak

-**Strong ties** (family, close friends) providing trust and support.

-**Weak ties** (acquaintances, committee colleagues, casual contacts) that act as bridges to connect otherwise separate groups. A finding later echoed and expanded by Mark Granovetter's seminal 1973 article "**The Strength of Weak Ties.**"

Influence on Network Theory



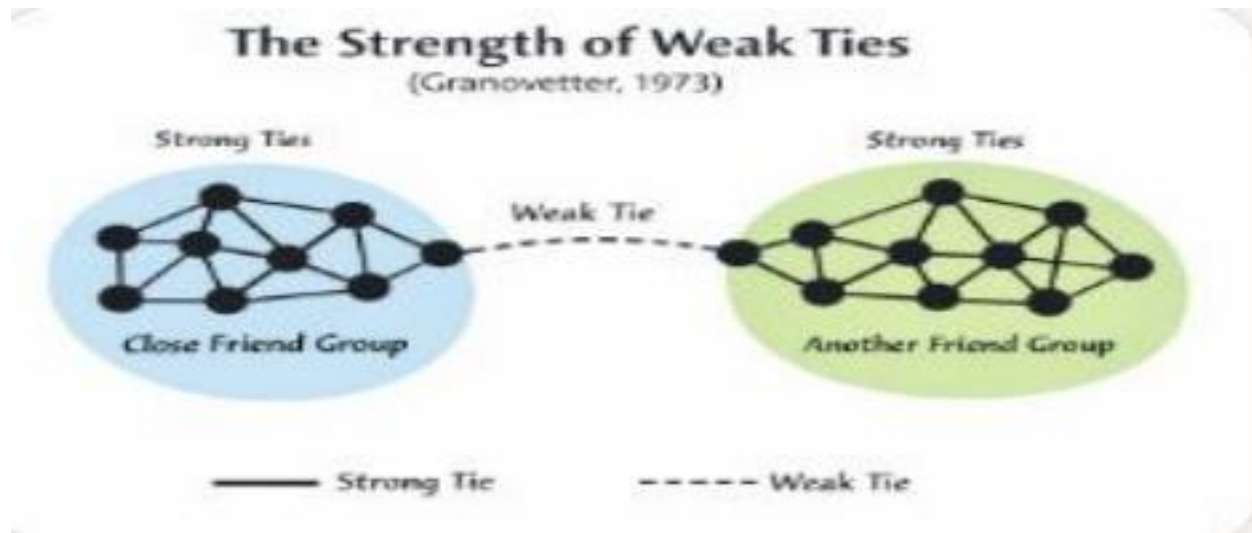
Network theory helps us understand how communication functions within complex, interconnected systems. Network theory identifies entities- individuals, associations, and groups within a system as nodes, and their interactions as edges (nodes and edges), thereby providing valuable insights into information flow, social influence, and the dynamics of communication in various contexts.

Barnes' study marked the formal introduction of the term "social network" into academic discourse and provided a new way to analyze social relationships as a complex, interconnected web of ties.

INFLUENCE ON LATER NETWORK THEORISTS' STUDIES

Granovetter 1973 "Strength of Weak Ties Theory"

- ❑ Without Barnes' demonstration that communities are woven from ties of varying strength, Granovetter's insight about weak ties as bridges would not have had its foundation.
- ❑ Granovetter's theory provided the theoretical leap on the principles established by Barnes that weak ties are crucial bridges between otherwise disconnected groups, enabling information flow and social cohesion.



Elizabeth Bott's "Bott Hypothesis" (1957)

- ❑ Bott's work on family and kinship in London drew directly on Barnes' network concept. She argued that the **density of social networks** (that is, the proportion of actual, existing ties between members compared to the total number of possible connections) around a family influenced marital roles: dense networks reinforced traditional roles, while sparse networks allowed more flexibility.
- ❑ This is an extension of Barnes' insight into how ties shape everyday life

Clyde Mitchell and the Manchester School

- ❑ Mitchell and colleagues applied Barnes' network ideas to African urban contexts by using network analysis to study migration, labor relations, and urbanization in colonial and postcolonial Africa.
- ❑ They used Barnes' notion of overlapping ties to explain how migrants maintained rural kinship while adapting to city life.

INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MEDIA

Contemporary social media platforms like WhatsApp, X, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, are essentially digital representations of Barnes' idea: they are built around networks of friends, followers, and connections rather than rigid groups.

❑ Networks as the Core of Social Life

Barnes coined "social network" to describe how interpersonal ties cut across formal and informal levels.

❑ Strong vs. Weak Ties

On social media, strong ties resemble close friends or family connections, while weak ties are casual followers or distant contacts that spread information across. Social media thrives on the bridging functions of weak ties

❑ Consensus and Influence

Barnes showed that consensus in Bremen emerged through overlapping ties rather than formal hierarchies; On social media, trends, hashtags, and viral movements spread through overlapping networks of users, not through top-down authority.

❑ Information Diffusion

Memes, news, and misinformation spread online are underpinned by Barnes' framework.

❑ Influencer Culture: Is a reflection of Barnes' insight that weak ties are powerful.

Barnes' study anticipated the logic of social media decades before it existed. His recognition that overlapping networks and weak ties drive cohesion, information flow, and influence is exactly what explains why social platforms are so powerful today.

ASSUMPTIONS

- ❑ Nature of Community: Geographically defined communities are not homogenous or closed; instead, they are interconnected through personal ties that extend beyond formal institutions
- ❑ Social Structure: Social life was organized through overlapping networks and not rigid hierarchies
- ❑ Decision Making: That decisions were made through consensus and negotiations
- ❑ Analytical Framework: That social relationship could be mapped and analyzed structurally
- ❑ Class & Power: That class distinctions were perceived and maintained through social networks and not just through economic or institutional structures
- ❑ Conflict & Change: That conflict, negotiations, and power are integral to social cohesion

EVERYDAY APPLICABILITY OF BARNES' INSIGHT

- ❑ Workplace Collaboration: Overlapping ties concept helps us to understand why informal relationships- coffee chats, cross department/ class friendship drive innovation more than formal hierarchies. For example, a coffee chat meeting between lecturers of different departments can lead to innovation within the university environment. Friendships, casual chats connect different parts of an organization, spreading ideas faster than formal channels. This is why companies today design open office spaces to encourage chance encounters
- ❑ Breakthrough through Triadic Connection: We can access vital information from a friend (weak tie) of our friend (strong tie) on ideas, innovation, new opportunities, and new products that can give us a breakthrough.
- ❑ Cross-Cultural Cooperation: Overlapping of ties often causes cross-cultural cooperation. For example, an Igbo member of a Yoruba-dominated group can engender cultural balance via the correction of egocentric biases.
- ❑ Public & Community Spaces: Regular interactions with the bus driver, shopkeeper, barber, etc., though not intimate, they provide information and small acts of support. Casual acquaintances at community events may later become a connector to new opportunities.
- ❑ Digital & Social Media: Following someone on LinkedIn or Instagram whom you don't know personally, but whose posts expose you to new ideas or job leads.
- ❑ Digital Marketing Influencer: Brands can identify key connectors/ influencers who can spread messages across networks.

CHAPTER 4

BARNES' STUDY RESEARCH TRADITION.

JA Barnes' 1954 study belongs to the social anthropological research tradition, specifically, the interactional-network tradition within social anthropology, that made a decisive shift from structural-functionalism to relational analysis. This tradition is the hallmark of the Manchester School's methodological innovation.

TRADITION KEY FEATURES

Empirical Ethnography: Detailed fieldwork among real communities (e.g., Bremnes parish in Norway, Ngoni in Zambia).

Relational Mapping: Emphasized *connections between individuals* rather than static institutions.

Conflict and Process Orientation: The Manchester School viewed society as dynamic, shaped by negotiation and social change.

Network Thinking: Barnes pioneered the use of “network” as an analytical concept, bridging anthropology and sociology.

Legacy

- ❑ Barnes is remembered as a foundational figure in social anthropology, particularly for introducing network analysis into the discipline.
- ❑ His writings remain widely cited in anthropology, sociology, and political science.
- ❑ He combined rigorous fieldwork with theoretical innovation, leaving a lasting mark on how scholars understand social structures.

CONCLUSION

Though Barnes' study was conducted in Bremnes, a small fishing community in Norway, his findings have become a global platform for understanding social relationships, especially in today's digital world.

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