

**Special Issue: Hidden Gems in Communication Studies****Anomia, Networks, and Communication: A Hidden Gem**Rachel A. Smith<sup>ID</sup>

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In 1977, Dr. Malcolm “Mac” Parks wrote a piece entitled, “Anomia and Close Friendship Communication Networks” that was published in *Human Communication Research*. Although Dr. Parks has received awards for other research, this piece has not been recognized with an award and has been cited only 28 times. It is undeniably hidden. I believe it is also a gem: smart, clever, and paradigm-shifting. First, I will summarize the study, and then I will elaborate on my judgments.

The study focuses on *anomia*—feeling estranged, isolated, powerless, and meaningless in one’s social relationships (Parks, 1977). Although *anomia*, as a term, has rarely appeared in communication research, related terms such as isolation, alienation, ostracism, rejection, and stigmatization have been focal concepts for interpersonal, health, and organizational communication research, particularly in the past few decades. In this piece, Parks employed a structural approach to the study of *anomia*, arguing “that characteristics of the social structure are prime determinants of the orientations of individual communicators within that structure” (p. 48). People have relationships with others, and those others may also have relationships: together these interpersonal connections form a structured system of relationships. In this piece, Parks focused on close friendships and three qualities of the friendship system whose absence could cause *anomia*: similarity, effort, and integration. For example, he argued that as our friends and their friends start to diverge in their values or behaviors, conflicts can emerge, and perceived similarity among friends (which is the bedrock of relationships and belonging) can deteriorate. People existing in social systems with less perceived similarity—amassed across pairs of members—are more likely to feel *anomia*.

In addition to features of the system, Parks described features of the person that influence *anomia*: mobility and interpersonal communication skill. For example, he predicted that people who moved geographic locations less often and who had more interpersonal

communication skills would experience less anomia. Further, he argued that effort, an attribute of the system, and mobility, an attribute of the person, could influence communication network's integration. Parks (1977) defined *network integration* as the "the extent of intermember communication among an aggregate of persons" (p. 49). As more of the close friends communicate with one another more often, their communication network becomes more integrated. When it takes less effort for friends to communicate with one another, and as people geographically move less often, communication networks show higher levels of integration.

Parks (1977) tested his hypotheses with a longitudinal study of 58 undergraduate students. At time 1, the participants reported on their close-friendship network: after reading a description of a close friend, participants listed their close friends and used this list for multiple measures. In waves 2 to 4, participants reported on the perceived similarity, effort, and frequency of communication between each pair of close friends in their self-reported friendship networks. Participants reported on their geographic moves within the past five years and completed scales of interpersonal communication skill and anomia. Notably, Parks introduced a mathematical formula for network integration that was a function of the sum of reported inter-friend communication, the friendship network size, and the highest level of communication frequency reported across the 58 friendship networks. Parks wrote that his formula represented an extension of network formulas offered by Farace and Monge (Parks, 1977; see p. 52).

His results showed that, as predicted, participants in friendship networks characterized by more inter-member perceived similarity, who reported less mobility in the recent past, and who had more interpersonal communication skill reported less anomia. A higher level of network integration was modestly related to lower levels of anomia, and friendship networks characterized as entailing

more effort had lower network integration. Although the study had limitations, according to Parks (1977), it provided an important challenge to research focusing on anomia solely as a result of "major macro-sociological forces".

Patterns of interpersonal communication were found to be an important determinant of anomia... The findings support Williams' (1951) assertion that research on the "basic units of person-to-person interaction" will be essential to the study of anomia. (Parks, 1977, p. 56)

I argue that this piece provided a critical intervention for communication scholarship as well. First, it represented a fundamental shift from a substantialist perspective to a relational perspective of social life (Emirbayer, 1997). The substantialist perspective focuses on entity-concepts as the fundamental unit of analysis, studied as "fixed entities with variable attributes" (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 286). For example, let us consider the concept of credibility. From a substantialist perspective, we can consider credibility as a characteristic of people that they bring to their social interactions. In contrast, a relational perspective focuses on structural relationships (the actors within a social system and their inter-actor ties) as the fundamental unit of analysis: "the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction" (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 287). From a relational perspective, a person's credibility is afforded to them by the others in their social setting and the social structures created by their interactions, which dynamically shift as a function of social processes. In this light, communication is an interdependent process by which people make sense of, influence, and are influenced by their worlds. People's interactions with one another create (often invisible) social structures that underlie key explanatory predictors and outcomes of communication at personal and/or social levels, such as power, belonging, norms, message

exposure, message transmission, and diffusion.

Parks' shift from a substantialist perspective to a relational one provided new insights into communication phenomena. Alienation shifts from being located in people who are alienated, isolated, or ostracized (i.e., people are anomic) to relational systems—structures and positions within them—that are alienating, isolating, and ostracizing. With this relational perspective, communication offers multiple mechanisms to promote or deter anomia. By finding ways to reduce the effort it takes for any two members of the social system to communicate and by increasing members' abilities to communicate well when they interact, we can reduce people's experiences of anomia in that social system. Parks also expands our conceptualization of the unit targeted for intervention: intervention may be needed not only on the person experiencing anomia or their dyadic relationship with a specific member. Rather, different dyads—pairs a tie or more away from those feeling the effects of disconnection—or the system itself may need intervention.

In addition, in this piece, Parks (1977) highlights a clever means by which to capture what may be thought of as invisible structures created by interaction patterns. Recently, within the communication field, networks and their analysis are sometimes discussed as a recent creation of big data, with data collection limited to scraping online behavior. Far from it. Communication scholars have theorized about networks and innovated ways to analyze them for decades. Parks shows just how clever scholars can be in capturing social connections, regardless of the channel used for communication. And finally, smaller systems of social interactions matter to understand aspects of everyday life.

Furthermore, in this article, Parks shows a level of intellectual precision that should inspire us all. He defined network integration both conceptually and mathematically. There was a time when communication scholars regularly offered

definitions in words and formulas and predictions in written narratives, visual path models, and mathematical models. Now, however, few scholars provide principled arguments in mathematical form. I worry that this scholarship will be lost as communication scholars lose the ability to consume (much less invent) ideas, claims, and predictions presented in the language of math.

If I were to truly embrace the promise of this hidden gem, then I may encourage us all not only to read (or re-read) this piece by Parks, but to seek out and read the research of the scholars connected to Parks at the time that he wrote it. I note that this piece was published a year after he earned his doctoral degree. Perhaps we can find inspiration in the work of his classmates and his faculty at Michigan State and the scholarship he read for classes during graduate school, or the visitors who may have crossed his path while he was earning his degree. My own introduction to this work was through the last type of interaction: when I was a master's student at the University of Arizona in the late 1990s, I was lucky enough to meet Dr. Parks when he visited campus. In a brief visit, our conversation and my introduction to his work profoundly shaped how I approached (and continue to approach) communication scholarship—an influence for which I am eternally grateful.

Without question, Dr. Parks offered us all a gem that has remained too hidden for too long. Thank you to the editors of this journal, Drs. Chung and Carpenter, for the opportunity to create a special issue of these hidden gems, that we may together build an intellectual network and inspire us all.

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