

Preface

The plan for this book started with a visit of Princeton University Press editor Robert Kirk to Leeds University in the spring of 2005, during which he asked whether we had an idea for a new book. Inspired by a trip to Kenya and its wealth of animal life, we were at first thinking of writing a broad text on how to analyze animal group structure in the form of an edited volume. However, after some thought we came to the conclusion that a more focused book specifically on social network analysis might be more useful (and also avoid overlap with other texts).

In the context of conference talks and departmental seminars, we have frequently been asked by colleagues and students over the last couple of years where to find information on how to use the network approach. However, no text on this topic exists that is written specifically for behavioral biologists. Furthermore, we noticed that many biologists adopt a quasi-networks approach, albeit without statistical analysis. This encouraged and finally convinced us to attempt to write a book on this topic.

One of the problems of writing such a book is that—unlike some areas of biological statistics—this one is far from being a mature subject. Many different views on how to analyze networks abound in the literature, and large numbers of articles on methodological issues are regularly published. The fact that this field of research is developing so rapidly is the reason that we included the word “exploring” in the title of our book. The aim of this book is to introduce novices to the study of social networks and to invite them to join us in their exploration. For the more-advanced reader we hope to provide stimulation partly by drawing attention to some of the more tricky issues involved in social network theory. We readily admit that many problems in this field remain unresolved and that we cannot provide final answers. Nevertheless this should not discourage us from carrying out the many interesting things that already can be done using social network theory and start addressing some of the tougher challenges in this field.

A large part of the planning for this book and some of the writing was done during a retreat at the Ptarmigan Lodge in the Cairngorm National Park in Scotland—a location we can strongly recommend to fellow authors in search of a peaceful place away from the distractions of everyday university life.

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