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## **The Strength of Weak Affects**

Comment on Frans van Winden, “Affective Social Ties—  
Missing Link in Governance Theory”\*

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I will discuss two aspects of Frans van Winden’s approach. The first is partly conceptual, partly substantial: it concerns the equation of affect-laden relationships with close relationships. The second deals with the plausibility of one of the underlying hypotheses of the social ties model: the presumption that positive affective reactions are dependent on an actor exceeding expectations. Both topics are connected and the results of their discussion can be integrated as should become clear at the end of this comment.

Van Winden recommends “the social ties model” especially from the perspective that it is able to explain the psychological mechanism that generates *close relationships*. He contrasts such close relationships with “exchange relationships that economists typically focus on, in which goods or services are exchanged in repayment for prior benefits or in expectation of future benefits” (2). He claims that close relationships are “more affect-laden” and that, as a consequence, “people care about each other, have a concern for each other’s welfare, and respond to each other’s needs” (2).

Van Winden emphasizes the importance of affect-laden close relationships and “friendship networks”, because “closeness may solve important problems like trust, which is supposed to play a central role in coping with social dilemmas”. Nevertheless, the significance of emotional factors in determining voluntary contributions to cooperative enterprises and “the antecedents and consequences of close relationships (affective bonds or social ties) in social groups dealing with common-pool resources and public goods have been neglected” (3). Van Winden believes that an approach that considers the role of closeness and friendship networks can be a relevant extension of Elinor Ostrom’s theory of how people manage to govern common-pool resources by themselves.

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## 1. Do We Need to Be Friends to Govern the Commons?

My first reservation in regard to this approach is conceptual. Van Winden, at least implicitly, equates ‘affect-laden’ relationships with *close* relationships. He exclusively mentions close relationships as instantiations of affect-laden interpersonal relations and praises the social ties model especially for its capacity to explain the development of close relationships and friendship networks. Moreover, he explicitly claims that such relationships and networks may play an essential role in promoting cooperation in public good or common good environments.

It seems inadequate, however, to classify *every* relationship in which positive affects between actors obtain as a ‘close relationship’. And the social ties model itself does not imply this. Affective bonds are operationalized as *any* positive weight that is added to the payoffs of other actors. According to the model, such a process can be triggered by an emotional impulse an actor may experience if another person behaves benignly in a context where such a behavior is not the selfish choice. This could be the notorious passing guest who tips a waiter in a motorway restaurant. It is quite plausible that the tipping will indeed trigger a positive affective impulse in the waiter – but is this the beginning of a wonderful friendship, of a close relationship? Hardly. The evoked emotions may include feelings of sympathy or gratitude, but they will remain ‘weak’ affects that will not lay the ground for ‘closeness’ or deeper personal bonding.

Van Winden himself illustrates the supposed psychological mechanism by an example which also suggests that the involved affects may be rather weak. He refers to a Prisoner’s Dilemma (PD) situation, thereby using a context that is very near to an economic exchange from which he primarily wanted to separate his concept of social ties.<sup>1</sup> Again, it is indeed quite plausible that cooperative behavior in a situation when defection is the dominant choice triggers a positive emotional response and may lead to reciprocating cooperative behavior. But also in this case this obviously does not resemble a ‘close’ relationship or friendship in which people genuinely and comprehensively care about each other’s welfare and well-being out of intrinsic motivation. Yet van Winden does not propose any differentiation in this respect.

To discriminate between strong and weak affective ties on the one hand and close and ‘loose’ relationships, on the other hand, is not a definitional issue of minor concern. To equate all relationships that are shaped in a more or less intense way by affective components with close relationships or friendships is misleading. This is especially true if the social ties model is recommended as an instrument to extend and advance the theory of self-governance, and when its usefulness is justified with the argument that it can take into account the role of closeness and friendship networks in contributing to a successful self-management of common pool resources.

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive analysis of exchange mechanisms and “antagonistic cooperation” is presented in Kliemt 1986.

Contesting this aspect of his approach does not mean to disagree with van Winden that close relationships and friendships can indeed “solve important problems like trust”. Those who have such ties can cope with social dilemmas more easily than those who merely command relationships that are based on material exchange or which are restricted to superficial and short-term contacts. The point of disagreement concerns the assumption that relationships with strong affective ties are also key elements in a successful operation of self-governing processes in which the provision of collective goods in common pool contexts are at stake. In many if not in most cases where common-pool resources are endangered, considerably large social groups and communities are involved with several hundred or even thousands of members. It is hard to imagine that groups of this dimension can cope with social dilemmas by nurturing close relationships and friendship networks that simultaneously involve *all* their members.

Even if we assume that large groups will not consist of an unstructured mass of atomized individuals but will contain several clusters of people who are internally linked by strong ties of close relationships and friendships, this would not naturally produce spill-over effects and facilitate cooperation in the group as a whole.

The crucial problem was identified by Mark Granovetter in his seminal article “The Strength of Weak Ties”. The article is actually mentioned by van Winden himself. According to the theoretical analysis and empirical findings presented by Granovetter, groups which contain clusters of people who are connected by strong ties like friendship or kinship can even be detrimental to overall cooperation. This could happen if these clusters are socially isolated from each other and maintain just few and volatile contacts. Only if the isles of friendship and kinship are connected by stable and enduring ‘bridges’, can it be expected that (larger) groups successfully cooperate and realize common aims.

It is one of Granovetter’s essential assumptions that such bridges between social clusters of strong ties cannot normally be built by strong ties themselves but only by weak ties: “bridging friendships” (11), to which van Winden refers, are unlikely. Weak ties are social ties which lack the intensity of strong emotional bonds and personal closeness. Nevertheless, they are capable of creating trust relationships, thereby laying the ground for exchange and cooperation beyond the confines of the clusters which enclose friends, relatives and companions.

If Granovetter is right, the key for successfully governing the commons would be, in most cases, neither purely instrumental exchange relations without any emotional dimension nor strong social ties, as they are created by the intense emotional bonds between friends or in other close relationships. The key would be instead an efficient network of weak social ties which are nevertheless ‘strong’ enough to create trust between the members of a group and intrinsic motivation to contribute to the preservation of common resources and the maintenance of the supporting institutions. But how ‘strong’ is strong enough?

Elinor Ostrom herself gives an indirect hint of how effective weak social ties have to be to promote sufficient cooperation in common-pool problems. As she

states already in “Governing the Commons” (1990, 94ff.), it is essential for the facilitation of self-governing processes that a significant part of the members of a social group possess a disposition for “quasi-voluntary compliance” and act according to a “contingent self-commitment”.<sup>2</sup> Persons with such a disposition could be called *conditional cooperators*. Conditional cooperators are persons who are willing to contribute to a public good or common enterprise contingent on whether they believe that ‘sufficiently’ many other members of their group are doing the same. The cooperation of conditional cooperators differs from a strategy of conditional cooperation based on expedient choice. Conditional cooperators are committed to cooperate even under the condition that the personal gain generated by their individual contribution is smaller than its costs – as long as others are contributing as well. The driving motivation of conditional cooperators is not opportunistic calculation but the desire to become neither a sucker nor a free-rider.

It is not far-fetched to assume that conditional cooperators can be motivated by an affective bond that attaches them to the other members of their group: they simply may not like the feeling that they gain a personal advantage by cheating on them or because they refuse to shoulder a fair share of a common effort. Feelings of sympathy or solidarity may prevent them from profiting at the expense of their fellows. However, it seems to be quite obvious as well that the emotional ties necessary to back such a motivation must not be exceptionally strong. By participating in the production of a public good, an actor needs to be reassured that he will not be called upon to transfer resources unilaterally to other persons or service them without generalized reciprocity. In short, actors may want to do ‘the right thing’ and contribute for non-opportunistic ‘emotional’ reasons, yet at the same time resent inviting others to a free-ride.

Individuals sharing in the provision of goods that are in their common interest do not need to be especially caring or altruistic. The only thing that is demanded of them is to bear the same costs as all the others and dispense with special privileges or advantages. Additionally, although the personal benefit from an individual contribution to a collective good may be smaller than the personal costs of this contribution, the total gain participants receive from a common project is generally larger than the personal costs of their contributions. Therefore, the ‘gap’ that must be closed by ‘emotional bridging’ is smaller than in the case of a transfer of resources with net costs—as in the case of supporting a friend who is in trouble and will not be able to compensate for the received benefits.

To sum up: it seems to be misleading to ascribe a special importance to close relationships and strong social ties for successfully governing the commons. Close relationships and friendships in the usual meaning of these terms can unite only relatively small numbers of people. Groups which are affected by common pool problems or other problems of collective cooperation are in many

<sup>2</sup> A similar point is made by H.L.A. Hart when he emphasizes the indispensable role of an “internal point of view” for the maintenance of any social and legal order (Hart 1994). In Baurmann 2009 I discuss Hart’s concept in comparison with rational-choice theory.

cases quite large, therefore their capability of successful cooperation cannot be based on closeness and strong affective bonds alone.

Moreover, isolated clusters of strong ties can even undermine trust and successful cooperation in the overall group, thus the importance of weak ties with bridging qualities that create a social network that encompasses a whole group. It is plausible to assume that emotional factors play a role for these ties as well. However, precisely because they are weak, they can prevent people from acting merely on behalf of the particular interests that would guide them in small closely knit sub-groups in which they behave unselfishly and altruistically only in a special context. An adequate social ties model should be able to explain the emergence of weak social ties based on weak affects as well as allowing for strong ties. In any event it must not be restricted to close relationships and friendships.

From this perspective, my second reservation deals with the plausibility of one of the underlying hypotheses of the social ties model. As will be seen, this query is connected to the first one as it may further clarify the meaning of weak ties and weak affects and to what extent the social ties model can be accommodated to explain how they are generated.

## 2. Do We Like People Only If They Do Better Than Expected?

The social ties model assumes that an individual's affective tie to another person is fed by impulses reflecting the affective experience triggered by that person's behavior. The central hypothesis in this regard states that these impulses are supposed to be related to the difference between a person's most recent contribution and a *reference contribution* (4). As noted previously, van Winden illustrates the model by means of a PD-situation. If, in this situation, an actor decides to cooperate, then, according to the model, the other actor will experience a positive impulse if the reference contribution is *defection*, which is, of course, the dominant choice here. This impulse would lead to a positive affective tie of a certain weight and could, if sufficiently significant, turn cooperation into a preferential choice for the other actor too.

I would like to question the central premise that a positive affective impulse is dependent on the fact that a partner in an interpersonal exchange must outperform an *ex ante* defined reference contribution. In the example of a PD-situation, the reference contribution is assumed to be the dominant choice of selfish, inconsiderate individuals with no affective ties to their counterparts. It is, of course, a psychologically plausible assumption that cooperative behavior in a PD-situation would indeed trigger a positive affective reaction on the side of the beneficiaries. But is it really the case that such positive affective impulses are *necessarily* dependent on (the expectation of) a reference contribution?

In the example given, the reference contribution is equated with the expedient choice. That invites the interpretation that reference contributions are generally meant to be those contributions which can be expected from standard selfish, opportunistic behavior and that positive affective reactions are connected to contributions that exceed this kind of standard 'rational choice' behavior. Formally, however, the model leaves open which kind of reference contribution an individual presupposes. The model demands only that such a reference contribution is always present in one way or other: otherwise the emergence of affective ties could not be explained on this basis.

This requirement is disputable. Let us look at a slightly modified example. Imagine an iterated PD-situation with two participants in which exchange takes place indefinitely. The equilibrium choice for both is a super-game strategy according to which the behavior in each round of play is *cooperation*. If we determine the reference contribution analogously to the first example of a one-shot PD, then it should be *cooperation* in each round of play, since this is the equilibrium choice a selfish rational actor would take in this ongoing interaction.

Now, if we apply the social ties model, the prediction must be that *no* positive affective impulses could be triggered from a cooperative exchange under such conditions. The cooperative choice just corresponds to the reference contribution—this would even apply if the exchange had taken place over an extended period and yielded significant returns for both participants.

Is this a plausible conclusion? Not really. Folk psychology tells a different story: if people engage in mutually successful exchanges, this will frequently, *ceteris paribus*, create feelings of sympathy and affection between the participants—even if they just do what self-interest prescribes and what they expect from each other. And folk psychology is indeed supported by experimental findings. Edward Lawler and his collaborators conducted a series of experiments where they could demonstrate convincingly that purely material exchange to pursue individual gains could generate positive feelings even between totally anonymous strangers in a laboratory setting (a list of their publications is in the bibliography). Therefore it seems that exceeding a reference contribution is not a necessary condition for the emergence of positive feelings between the participants in an exchange relation or a common project. Such positive feelings may just presuppose that cooperation is working properly. In fact, Emile Durkheim already developed the theory that ordinary market exchanges create feelings of sympathy and affection that can even provide overall solidarity in a society that is based on the division of labor (Baurmann 1999).

Of course, the reference contribution in an iterated exchange relation could nevertheless be *defection* if one of the participants suspects that the other is driven by spite, envy or miscalculation. In this case, one may very well be positively surprised if the other behaves cooperatively. But this depends on special circumstances that cannot be generalized. The same applies if the reference contribution is the result of errors or personal anxiety. In these cases, the social ties model may be applicable. The main objection yet remains that positive emotional responses can also be produced in ongoing exchange relations if the

reference contributions and the actual contributions are identical and represent just the prevailing equilibrium choice of *cooperation*. Accordingly, a difference between actual contributions and reference contributions and the pleasant surprise when an attitude surpasses expectations would not be necessary for triggering positive emotions and creating positive social ties.

What could be a plausible hypothesis on the psychological background to explain such a phenomenon? A very simple one, indeed. The causal factor that induces positive emotional responses in such cases would not be a *better* outcome than expected, but the fact that mutual exchange improves the situation of the participants compared to their status without exchange. Partners in an exchange relation are mutual sources of well-being: my counterpart in an interpersonal exchange does things that improve my situation, by transferring products or resources I want to have, by delivering services I want or need—or by contributing to a common good that is in my interest. The simple assumption could be made that if other persons are sources of my well-being, I will tend to react with positive emotions towards these persons—irrespective of the fact that they are acting in this beneficial way in order to improve their own situation or that I expect their friendly reaction anyway. This process will be the more substantial, the longer an exchange takes place over time, the larger the benefits it creates and the more it is perceived as a relationship on fair terms. More generally speaking, we all respond with affirmative emotions to being part of a social nexus that we perceive as a positive externality.

The plausibility of this hypothesis is supported once more by quoting van Winden's own characterization of the difference between economic exchange relationships "in which goods or services are exchanged in repayment for prior benefits or in expectation of future benefits" and close relationships in which "people care about each other, have a concern for each other's welfare, and respond to each other's needs". These types of relationships are not so far apart as van Winden suggests. Even in the exchange of goods and services, people have to care for each other, must have a concern for each other's welfare, and have to respond to each other's needs in order to keep the exchange going. Of course, the other directed empathy is required in commercial relations only to a limited extent. It is restricted to the dimensions of welfare and needs that are relevant in this exchange context and to the goods and services that are under consideration. Nevertheless, these apparent resemblances support the hypothesis that even a mundane and prosaic economic exchange process can endogenously create positive affective impulses, because it demands from the participants sensitive adjustments to the preferences and wishes of their partners and thereby actively promotes their interests and welfare. This applies even if the positive affective responses that are triggered through this process will probably remain *weak*.

Against this background, an extension of the social ties model seems to make sense in which the basic factor for triggering positive affective reactions would be an improvement of the status quo of an individual, effectuated by another person. If, in addition, this improvement exceeds expectations by outperforming

a certain reference contribution, this may put an extra weight on the positive tie—but it is not a necessary condition for the production of a positive reaction.

My two somewhat skeptical comments can now be linked together. They indeed support each other. The upshot of the first criticism was that weak social ties are more relevant for self-organized governance than close relationships with strong ties. If weak affects of mutual sympathy and solidarity can help to shape dispositions for “quasi-voluntary compliance” and “contingent self-commitment”, they can provide an essential basis for successful cooperation in large groups.

This leaves open the question of the social foundation and breeding ground for such weak social ties and their emotional anchorage. A hypothetical answer may now be given: sympathy and solidarity could emerge from the experience of successful cooperative relations and exchanges. This need not presuppose a willingness to invest more in such relations and exchanges than self-interest demands. However, out of self-interested participation in materially oriented exchange relations social ties could evolve and a socially embedded network can develop strong enough to facilitate and secure cooperative relations also in other contexts—though maybe not strong enough for friendship and love. Yet the commons can be governed without friendship and love, mutual respect and trust based on weak affective ties will do (Baumann 2007).

We need not, therefore, look for close relationships and friendship networks when we hope for successful self-governance. The basis for quasi-voluntary compliance and contingent self-commitment could be a history of continuous and stable exchange relations, even if these relations are driven by self-interest and the prospect of personal gains. Never mind if they focus only on goods or services that “are exchanged in repayment for prior benefits or in expectation of future benefits”.

The social ties model should incorporate dynamics that are based on fulfilling mutual expectations rather than exceeding expectations. Such a mechanism seems to be more suitable to explain the emergence of weak ties and weak affects than a mechanism that demands extraordinarily motivated individuals from the start.

An extension of the model would perhaps also help in providing answers to some of the questions which van Winden raises at the end of his paper, for example in regard to the influence of increasing numbers of people or the conditions for spill-over effects. I will only briefly refer to his last question of how we can make optimal use of the social ties mechanism for steering people out of negatively evaluated affective networks of bad reference groups. If we avoid building exaggerated pretenses like integrating people with shady companions into completely new friendship networks, then we can try to start by simply offering them new opportunities for exchange relations that will improve their material situation—and hope for the spontaneous trust- and affect-building forces of such relations. Stabilizing ordinary economic exchange may help as a first step.

This may sound too simplistic and overly optimistic, but a huge real-world experiment actually exists that supports this view. Today, there is a lot of



skepticism towards European integration, much of it well justified. However, we should never forget that European integration in at least one respect is a tremendous success story: it has changed hostile relations between nations and their people into stable cooperative relationships. It has turned deadly enemies into friendly neighbors and trusted partners. If we read the remarkable text of the “Preamble to the treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community” from the year 1951, we have to admire the authors for a vision which was amazingly optimistic at the time and which was based on exactly the same speculation about the endogenous ‘moral force’ of economic relations that was sketched out here: that the purely material interest in coal and steel would, by an invisible hand, be transformed into trust, mutual respect and solidarity—and the course of history has proved that the founding fathers of European integration were right, at least in this essential point:

The signatories of this treaty,

“RECOGNIZING that Europe can be built only through practical achievements which will first of all create real solidarity, and through the establishment of common bases for economic development, RESOLVED to substitute for age old rivalries the merging of their essential interests; to create, by establishing an economic community, the basis for a broader and deeper community among peoples long divided by bloody conflicts; and to lay the foundations for institutions which will give direction to a destiny henceforward shared, HAVE DECIDED to create a EUROPEAN COAL AND STEEL COMMUNITY.”

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