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# From social integration to health: Durkheim in the new millennium <sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

It is widely recognized that social relationships and affiliation have powerful effects on physical and mental health. When investigators write about the impact of social relationships on health, many terms are used loosely and interchangeably including social networks, social ties and social integration. The aim of this paper is to clarify these terms using a single framework. We discuss: (1) theoretical orientations from diverse disciplines which we believe are fundamental to advancing research in this area; (2) a set of definitions accompanied by major assessment tools; and (3) an overarching model which integrates multilevel phenomena.

Theoretical orientations that we draw upon were developed by Durkheim whose work on social integration and suicide are seminal and John Bowlby, a psychiatrist who developed attachment theory in relation to child development and contemporary social network theorists

We present a conceptual model of how social networks impact health. We envision a cascading causal process beginning with the macro-social to psychobiological processes that are dynamically linked together to form the processes by which social integration effects health. We start by embedding social networks in a larger social and cultural context in which upstream forces are seen to condition network structure. Serious consideration of the larger macro-social context in which networks form and are sustained has been lacking in all but a small number of studies and is almost completely absent in studies of social network influences on health.

We then move downstream to understand the influences network structure and function have on social and interpersonal behavior. We argue that networks operate at the behavioral level through four primary pathways: (1) provision of social support; (2) social influence; (3) on social engagement and attachment; and (4) access to resources and material goods.

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## Keywords

Social integration; Social networks; Social support; Mortality; Health status; Social epidemiology

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