

How to be a social climber: A study reveals the mechanisms of 'opportunist' societies

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"He landed the job because he has connections." How many times have you heard these words? Now a study confirms what is apparently only a stereotype. The research, published in the *Journal of Statistical Physics*, which also involves the International School for Advanced Studies of Trieste, is entitled, quite eloquently, "The Social Climbing Game."

The researchers have carried out a social network [simulation](#): each individual is represented by a node, while links, connecting the nodes, represent social interactions. Each individual has the tendency to enhance their social importance, and to do so they necessarily have to connect with the "most central nodes", that is, to the people who count. However, to advance socially an individual has to break with the past: technically speaking, abandon old nodes and connect with the most central ones. But how many have an inclination to break up with old connections to aim high? In other words, how many opportunist individuals are there within a society?

"Actually", replies Giancarlo De Luca, a Ph.D. student in Statistical Physics at SISSA and co-author of the research, "all individuals are 'social climbers'. The fact that society is in an egalitarian or hierarchical phase does not depend, therefore, on the number of individuals aiming at social climbing, but rather on the importance that individuals of that society ascribe to social prestige."

Therefore, a society that features a strong dominant class may indicate, according to the simulations, that there is a greater "yearning" for social

prestige on the part of the inferior levels. "It works a little like [Facebook](#)", explains De Luca. "The more contacts I have, the more popular I am. In our model, the number of links determines the closeness to the centre, and belonging to the élite." In a totally egalitarian society all individuals possess the same number of nodes, of contacts. Obviously, what occurs in reality is rather different: only a small number of individuals have a very high number of contacts, while the majority have only a few of them.

"A further interesting aspect we have observed," adds De Luca, "is that those who achieve centrality tend to stay in the position of predominance for a long time. Conversely, individuals who are attempting to climb the social ladder, that is to say, are in an intermediate position, move much more rapidly, both in a positive and negative sense."

The study also highlights that in a society with a well-structured hierarchy it is easier to identify the central nodes, that is, "those who count more", and this is why their members will have a very clear idea of who to befriend in view of their climb to success. In such a way, a very hierarchical network will be increasingly more hierarchical, and will feature a great quantity of social climbers.

Provided by International School of Advanced Studies

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