



(Re)thinking Ethics and Moral Behaviors as Complex Contagions: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Networks in *The Good Place*

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Abstract

While viral transmission is studied using simple contagions in network science, behaviors—which are more challenging to transmit or instill, fall in the category of complex contagions. Using network scientific concepts such as complex contagions that are typically applied in the domain of health and innovation diffusion, this paper is a unique contribution at the intersection of media and society, as it attempts to evaluate the sociocentric exchange of ethical and moral behaviors between the characters of Michael Schur’s *The Good Place*. To this end, the paper uses qualitative content analysis to extract the context and conducive conditions in the social setting that are essential to bring about such behavior change. For this, the author emphasizes on the tenets of Geertz’ thick description. Finally, the paper discusses implications that may be worth exploring in orchestrating social rehabilitation interventions aimed at transforming individuals into civically responsibly citizens in a controlled setting.

Keywords

Complex Contagions, Good Place, Moral Behaviors, Social Networks, Qualitative Content Analysis

1. Introduction

The influx of speculative fictions on television and web, portraying a utopian reality, has created a stir in the digital world. The plot of Michael Schur’s *The Good Place* (2016-2020), a fantasy-comedy that first appeared on NBC and is now streaming on Netflix and Hulu, revolves around a group of deceased humans who are (mistakenly) rewarded to live in the “good” place for their afterlives despite having scored negatively for their somewhat—if not extreme—immoral behaviors during their life on Earth and showcases their journey as they collectively learn and internalize moral behaviors. Interestingly, the series has garnered accolades—from audiences and critics—for its creative and effective use of ethics and moral philosophy. However, the science underlying the social experiment(s)—depicted throughout the series, has not received much attention in social scientific research. Using theoretical concepts originated in network science, this qualitative analysis studied the transactional exchange of ethics and moral behaviors amongst the characters of *The Good Place*.

1.1. The Good Place

The story begins with *Eleanor* (played by Kristen Bell) getting “accidentally” transported to the “good” place following her untimely death on Earth. She meets three other deceased humans—*Chidi* (William Jackson Harper), *Tahani Al-Jamil* (Jameela Jamil) and *Jianyu/Jason* (Manny Jacinto), who all arrive at the “good” place at the same

time as her. This premise of the show is ostensibly based on a “point system”, i.e., the computation of a score which is a function of both good and bad deeds of an individual during their life on Earth. What follows is a series of adventures of the four protagonists along with *Michael* (Ted Janson) and *Janet* (D’Arcy Carden) as they seek to understand the mysteries and fix anomalies of the system that guides the three realms of “good”, “bad”, and “medium” place. During this tumultuous journey, they all fight their inner demons and face the complexities of being a “good” human in a place wherein morality does not matter as the score count stops after death. To this end, the plot revolves around internalization of philosophical and ethical ideas within the group, for which different philosophical texts including trolley problem, Kantian philosophy, utilitarianism, and Buddhist philosophy, are emphasized.

1.2. Previous literature

Research studies have limited their scope to innovative exploration of ethics in media narratives (May, 2022; Pickens, 2022), especially for efficacious classroom teaching (Meyer, 2020; van Esch et al., 2021). Particularly, an educational study conducted by Meyer (2020) used episodes of *The Good Place* as a case study to teach students of a Masters’ level ethics class in public administration. With this, Meyer purported to explore the potential role of television shows and movies in ethics education. The humorous examination of ethics on the show was of particular importance and was incorporated directly in classroom discussions that revolved around ethical dilemmas. The results revealed the value-laden application of *The Good Place* in terms of contextualization of ethical concepts for her students. William Irwin’s book, *The Good Place and Philosophy: Everything is Forking Fine!* brings out the multi-layered philosophical universe by not only introducing the main ideas of the show but also bringing attention central questions raised throughout the show, categorized into four themes: community, moral development, moral punishment, and free-will (Irwin, 2020; Pickens, 2022).

1.3. Social networks, support, and influence

Throughout the series, the show highlights the importance of social group and social support in influencing individual change in ethics and moral behaviors. Cohen and Syme (1985) stated how social support is crucial to alter behavioral and emotional characteristics as it facilitates individuals to accept new self-perceptions. Similarly, Wendorf Muhamad et al. (2019) posited that “peer influence, persuasive effects, and situated cognition” contribute to the creation and acceptance of ideas emphasizing the integrity of social support and organizations on individual behaviors (p. 102). However, of equal importance is the role of interpersonal ties who constitute the social support system of an individual. Social roles are a set of prescriptions defining the behavior of a social member, and stem from the interactions between individuals (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Mead, 1934). According to Herrmann et al. (2004), roles result from the social interaction and negotiation between the actor and those with whom they interact. In the context of behavior change, social roles have varying effects on the extent to which each interpersonal tie may influence an individual. In their study on health behaviors, Fleig et al. (2016) established how motivated individuals provide different contextual cues to trigger a response from others towards the same positive behaviors. Thus, both presence and constitution of social support may determine how individual morality changes in *The Good Place*.

Social Network—coined by Barnes (1954; Barnes, 1969)—essentially constitutes of actors and relationships between them in a specific social context. These actors, also called “agents”, are connected based on one or more interdependencies that may include shared values, ideas, visions, conflicts, financial exchanges, or trade (Serrat, 2017). In this context, Simmel (n.d.) defines *forms* as the patterns of social interactions between agents while *content* is defined as motives and feelings in their interaction. Equally important is to understand how the content is transmitted or exchanged in a social tie.

1.3.1. Complex contagions

The theory of *Complex Contagions* suggests that collective behavior spreads through social contact. This concept has advanced recently in applied studies, particularly in the domains of health, innovation diffusion, social media, and politics (Centola, 2018). Guilbeault et al. (2017) state that it is essentially concerned with the effects of network topology on diffusion, as well as the effects of individual-level attributes and thresholds. Spread of infectious diseases is typically simple contagions—i.e., contagions for which a single activated source can be sufficient for transmission. However, “preventive measures are typically complex contagions i.e., behaviors, beliefs, or attitudes for which transmission requires contact with multiple sources of activation. While repeated contact with the same person can increase the likelihood of transmitting a simple contagion, the transmission of complex contagions re-

quires reinforcement from several contacts. Any social contagion that is costly, difficult, or unfamiliar is likely to be a complex contagion, requiring social reinforcement to spread” (Guilbeault et al., 2017, p. 4).

Here, contagion is not merely a virus or a disease or a harmful idea—so it is not necessarily used in a negative undertone as the literal meaning of contagion suggests, but that contagions can be “positive” or “pro-social”. Although most research on social networks has been in public and global health (Hagen et al., 2018; Holtrop et al., 2018; Hunter et al., 2015; Zhang & Centola, 2019), this paper will explore how it may also be used to spread morality.

Moral behaviors are socially recommended patterns, while moral grounds are derived from applying the accepted rules, and moral issues involve the required social standards (Whiteley, 1960). Behaviors—in general—are a function of an individual’s knowledge and attitudes coupled with behavioral intention and normative influences (Glanz et al., 2008; Gochman, 1997). This implies that morality is also a result of social influences. Further, Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997) suggests that behaviors have a possibility of “relapse”, indicating their complexity in terms of adoption and maintenance—which is a crucial storyline in the plot of *The Good Place*. This warrants ethics and moral behaviors in the show to be studied as *complex contagions*.

Interestingly, Dehghani et al. (2016) studied whether shared moral values encourage people to connect and organize into communities. However, the proposed study aims to explore if the converse is true: does a supportive social network motivate people to adopt and maintain moral behaviors? The focus would be to study the social structure to understand the underlying mechanisms to explore the extent to which the fictional social experiments of *The Good Place* could be replicated in real world to spread ethical and moral behaviors.

2. Study purpose

This study explores the underlying social mechanisms that influence the spread of ethical and moral behaviors. To this end, it analyzes *The Good Place* to understand how ethics and moral behaviors spread within a group in an ostensibly neutral setting such as the “good” place. While doing so, it also identifies the enablers and barriers to change. The paper also visualizes graphically the transaction of ethics and moral behavior by mapping the network emerging in *The Good Place*.

The current research is an instrumental addition to the literature at the intersection of media, society, and moral philosophy. It not only studies the media content to understand how group dynamics function in *The Good Place*, but also extends its social applications by presenting a novel, contextualized and nuanced perspective on the importance of networks in the spread of ethics and moral behaviors.

3. Methodology

Qualitative approach to two methods—content analysis and social network analysis—was undertaken to answer the aforesaid research questions. While content analysis was used as primary method to understand the mechanisms that foster change in moral behaviors, the latter was used to substantiate the findings that emerge from the primary method by exploring the social roles of and social relationships between the characters.

3.1. Qualitative content analysis

Content analysis of media offers a non-intrusive way that enables examination of a wide data set—in this case, an audio-visual web-series—to discern plausible meanings of its content (Macnamara, 2005). A qualitative content analysis is the systematic description of the meaning of qualitative data, wherein the researcher not only operates with a coding frame within the domain of analysis, but also utilizes the flexibility allowed by the method (Schreier, 2014). In this sense, the study is not concerned with reducing the size of studied data through quantification and codification; it determines the relationship of text (explicit-), subtext (implicit meanings) and context (setting) —as portrayed in *The Good Place*—within the theoretical framework of *complex contagions*. Thus, a *summative* approach was adopted: one that went beyond word count or occurrences of phenomenon and incorporated latent content analysis. This also enabled the researcher to undertake a subjectivist interpretation of the content by identifying patterns and emerging themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) that are key to understand the social structure of *The Good Place*.

Using a qualitative inquiry to content analysis allowed the researcher to adopt a humanistic approach to make inferences about the culture and society (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Specifically, the method was used to explain what the pre-requisites are for ethical change and evaluate whether “fictional” social experiments have practical

applications. This is also in congruence with two (out the four) roles of content analysis as a methodology, i.e., descriptive and predictive (Macnamara, 2005; Neuendorf, 2002).

Over the last three decades, Qualitative Content Analysis has been widely used for examination of fictional and non-fiction media including soap operas (Bullerjahn & Gldenring, 1994), television debates (Anitha, 2014), and film music (Lichtenstein et al., 2019). Its application in the assessment of scripted television has taken different routes. For instance, Capuzza and Spencer (2017) employed it to explore the representation of transgender—lead and supporting—characters of scripted television that aired between the years 2008 and 2014. The study coded episodes for casting, identity, visibility, embodiment, and social interaction for its transgender characters. Further, Borer and Alexander (2018) used the methodology to undertake a comparative analysis of two situational comedies—*All In The Family* and *Modern Family*—to determine whether the same gender norms in terms of parenting were portrayed in the two shows being produced 30 years apart. More recently, the method also compared the fictional medical diagnoses of the *Grey's Anatomy* with publicly available data on medical illnesses to find that the show depicted diseases that were rare, very rare or extremely rare (Meyer & Yermal, 2020). The current study contributes to the literature at the intersection of qualitative content analysis and scripted television, especially situational comedies, by evaluating the processes of moral behavioral change in *The Good Place* for real-world applications.

3.1.1. Scope of analysis

Since the present study intended to study network dynamics of ethical change, it did not analyze the complete series. Specifically, findings were deduced from the storyline revolving around the “other” four humans brought to the “good” place for a “second” social experiment to assess the social structure that enables spread of “right” and ethical behavior. It is noteworthy that this storyline allowed the author to assess the morality not only in the protagonists who were aware of the stakes of this experiment but also the “new” humans, who were unaware about the gravity of the situation. Thus, the last two episodes from season three and the first ten episodes of season four from the series were selected purposively and examined.

3.1.2. Coding frame

Although a coding frame was developed before the content analysis began, but to stay true to the studied data—a data-driven and iterative coding process was adopted. This is similar to what Altheide (2000) emphasized, i.e., the discovery and description of content in a qualitative inquiry. Therefore, coding of the data was performed inductively, implying that the process of honing down the codebook and its application were performed simultaneously. Regardless, coding frame was at core of the methodology and constant comparison of emerging codes with themselves and with the content was done to ensure unidimensionality, coding consistency and exclusivity of all coding categories, as prescribed by Schreier (2014).

3.2. Social network analysis

Since the current study uses the theoretical framework of *complex contagions*, it was imperative to use a qualitative social network analysis (qSNA) as a supplementary method to examine how patterns of relations can shed light on the change in ethical ideas and moral behaviors of the characters in *The Good Place*. The study intended to look at the network causes of these phenomena. Serrat (2017) assumed the importance of relationships and defined social network analysis as a method that “maps and measures formal and informal relationships to understand what facilitates or impedes the knowledge flows that bind interacting units” (p. 40). Over the years, social network analysis has been viewed as a paradigm that is driven by structural intuition based on social ties between individuals (Freeman, 2004), but assesses more than mere social support (Smith & Christakis, 2008). Smith and Christakis (2008) argued that social network analysis observes the characteristics of surrounding nodes or actors. The magnitude of influence may vary from none to most, but each actor is responsible for the behavior change in some way or the other—direct or indirect.

Interestingly, Nan et al. (2015) utilized *deep concept hierarchies*¹ for undertaking a network analysis to study the temporal shifts in relational ties between the six characters of popular NBC sitcom, *Friends*, over the course of its 183 episodes, intending to extrapolate the application of the model to the complex and diversified social net-

¹A deep learning neural network (quantitative) model embedded in the concepts of mathematics and computer science.

works in the real world. On the other hand, literature on qualitative inquiry to network analysis of scripted television was not found. For the current study, it was used more like a mixed data analysis technique for transformation of numerical data into qualitative diagrams while the underlying processes and phenomena were understood with content analysis of the narrative, as prescribed by Yousefi Nooraie et al. (2020). Further, Barash (2011) used network analysis to investigate socially contagious phenomenon that may arise as a result of the actions of (multiple) rational agents within their local information settings.

Similarly, the current study assumed ethics and moral behaviors as complex contagions, and the “good” place as the setting, and the roles and relationships were explored to understand the spread of ethical ideas within the group. Particularly, relationships were understood in terms of complementarity of roles (i.e., active/mutual or passive/one-way), homophily (or similarity) between characters, and types. Further, conversations directly related to the overall goal, and not trivial conversations were included in the analysis. These are also substantiated with compelling themes emerging in the qualitative content analysis to provide an insightful glance to the readers. Together these were interwoven to develop a social network of *The Good Place*.

4. Findings

Findings from the two methods are presented in an integrated manner. Frequencies of the codes do not accompany the categories as themes are to be equally critical to moral behavior change, even though the magnitude of effect may vary. Codes emerging from the qualitative content analysis directly inform the development of the sociocentric network illustrated at the end of this section.

4.1. Morality

Morality determines the “right” or “wrong” way to behave in terms of one’s approach of fairness to others. It also mediates the social behavior of individuals living in groups (Ellemers et al., 2019; Gert, 1988). Tahani’s conversation with Janet [“(…)That’s exactly what the Bad Place wants me to do. They sent John here to drag me back into my old patterns... insecurity, obsession with social status.”] suggests how she realized that she did not need to give in to her temptations and “relapse” (Transtheoretical Model; Prochaska et al., 2008) into her old, somewhat unethical behavior with John—the gossip columnist. Here, it is also important to note that Janet did not influence Tahani’s thoughts but the fact that Tahani had someone to confide in, facilitated her thought process to take a moral direction—which indicates Janet’s ability to be a listener and a facilitator, like a social support (discussed later). In Tahani’s life on Earth, such a person in her network was missing. And she continued to showcase morality in her actions with John by extending a proposal to “let bygones be bygones” when she said [“John, I’m happy you’re here with me. This is going to be good for both of us, and I look forward to putting the past behind us and becoming your friend.”].

Here, Tahani’s sense of morality dictates her actions because the “good” place was designed in a way that everyone was equal, and there were no power hierarchies. Lammers et al. (2015) argued that (lack of) power can morally elevate individuals by amplifying their moral impulses and creating a behavioral disinhibition. They also posited how lack of power in individuals may drive them to ethical and “other-beneficial” behavior – which became true during Tahani’s afterlife unlike her earthly life.

When Simone ascertained that the events of the “good” place were all happening in her head and justified her immoral behavior, it was Chidi who explained to her the importance of morality by saying, [“You know, in a larger sense, if you go around acting like no one else matters, then you end up doing things like knocking over cakes and pushing people into pools and just generally acting like a jerk. Why not treat them better, just in case they’re real? I mean, what do you have to lose by treating people with kindness and respect?”]. While emphasizing the need to be considerate to others, he also made sure to inform her that it would not be bad to give others a deferential treatment to persuade her to contemplate her current actions. This is in line with the contemplation stage of the transtheoretical model (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997) wherein individuals tend to weigh the pros and cons—based on their awareness – of the behavior under consideration before action. Also, the undertone with which Chidi talks to her i.e., in a non-judgmental way, indicates his own morality.

The first time Brent portrayed a sporting spirit was the time when he congratulated Simone on winning a cards game during their trip [“Congrats again on the gin rummy win. I thought I was gonna take you down because I used to play all the time back in college.”]. Although it is possible that him “acting nicely” was to fulfil his ulterior motive to be eligible to get into the “best” place that Michael and Eleanor had informed him about, this was different

than other instances when he pretended to be good because of the way he brought it up by himself. Also, the use of the term “again” implies he had already congratulated her once before, which was unlike his usual self. Further, this was by far the only time when he commented on his past achievements in a non-narcissistic manner. This may have been a result of his bond with the group during that vacation.

4.2. Social support

Michael made a case for the Judge about the importance of social support by saying [*...The new residents will also seek help, support each other, make wise decisions, improve.*]. Based on his observation with the original four, Michael claimed that the same would happen in the second experiment as he attempted to refute the point system to evaluate a human’s fate for their afterlife and suggested the importance of group dynamics for collective internalization of ethics and moral behaviors. This excerpt also indicates that this support may be proactive (“seek help”) i.e., the realization of the need to change one’s behavior may lead them to seek social support actively. Wills (1991) defined social support as the perception or experience of an individual about being loved and cared for by others, esteemed and valued, and (an indispensable) part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations. Thus, a realization to change alone does not determine whether one’s morality would change, but supportive others are equally crucial—and vice-versa.

Tahani’s knowledge about John’s personality led her to take a unique route for imparting ethics in him i.e., not a bookish, passive way, but using entertainment to subtly influence his ideas about ethics [*“Philosophy may not be his way forward. Genuine human connection shall be his course of study. And first up on the syllabus, he and I will be unironically watching the Britney Spears movie “Crossroads” together...*]. By referring to the film—Crossroads, it is implied that she wanted to present some ethical dilemmas (as per the plot synopsis) characters are often faced with, and how to overcome those in a light-hearted manner which would be more comprehensible for him. Social support was also evident in John’s remark about how Tahani played a crucial role [*“Oh, well, ever since I arrived here, Tahani helped me realize that gossip was an unhealthy way for me to boost my self-esteem.”*], indicating that he was not merely informed about his behavior, but was made to realize his shortcomings gradually. Tahani, being an acquaintance from his life on Earth, was somewhat obligated to him in doing so, but served as a supportive anchor assisting him in reevaluating his actions i.e., gossip, and in turn internalizing ethics about others’ privacy. This comment was made in context of Jason’s—pretending to be Jianyu—identity, and how John successfully overcame his internal struggle and refrained himself from “breaking the news” to the neighborhood because of what Tahani had made him realize. Moreover, John’s truthful admission to Chidi denotes John’s trust in him, which is a pre-requisite for supportive communication (Liu et al., 2019). According to Jung (1990), reciprocity is an essential element of social support to reduce stress, which was exemplified when Chidi empathized with him upon his admission letting him know he understood his mental unrest, but to pacify him, he praised and encouraged him to continue to show his support for their mutual friend, Jason.

Last, when Michael meets the Judge following the experiment, he specifically asks to pull up the score improvements of a few people in the personal circle of Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani and Jason, and how the protagonists’ brief revisit to Earth helped change their ethical outlooks, and therefore behaviors [*“Your honor, the people I want to look at are not random. They’re four humans the cockroaches helped on Earth. No magic. Just... just kindness. And I bet their emotional support made those four people better.”*]. By emphasizing that there was “no magic”, he indicates that the value of social support in this experiment had potential and spontaneous practical applications.

4.3. Social setting

Social setting is characterized by “conduciveness” of a surrounding environment, which is basically providing the right conditions for something good to happen or exist. Eleanor’s efforts to help Brent in switching to moral behavior included tailor-made interventions: [*“(•••)Force him to help someone without actually thinking about it.”*] and [*“If we could get him to listen to anyone else, he’d hear how much better they are than he was, which might make him realize that he doesn’t belong here.”*]. Both these excerpts suggest that Eleanor wanted to create a situation specifically for Brent that would make him choose ethical behavior but also wanted to make sure that it was something that enabled him to act on his instincts. This is warranted as a social setting due to the use of “help someone” or “listen to anyone” that indicates the importance of others—albeit strangers—in creating that situation for individual good. Here, human-led simulation could be an appropriate way to integrate with the overall ethical intervention.

Further, by creating situations for the group to bond was another example of social setting, either by getting all of them to play Pictionary or by sending them off to the lake house [*“And you five are going to a gorgeous remote lake house. Swimming, water skiing, the works.”*], it was evident that they were supposed to engage at first in simple group tasks such as icebreakers or fun “team-building” activities, which would open the avenues for intense, complex conversations about ethics and moral behaviors. Typically, icebreakers are the initial point of a discussion between two or more “strangers”, so they get-to-know each other, loosen up and build a repertoire before they talk about the issue of concern (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2004).

On the other hand, since all characters played Pictionary by splitting into two groups, they showcased a team effort as they discerned “together” what the drawing meant. Although these are not cues to action (Health Belief Model; Rosenstock, 1974) to behavior change, this paper characterizes social setting contextually. Similarly, Gladwell (2000) reiterated the power of context arguing that humans are more sensitive to their environment than they are even aware of, hence the ostensibly “inconsequential” activities also had a profound influence on the flow of moral behaviors.

4.3.1. Neutrality

The “good” place manifests a neutral setting which allows the humans to feel liberated from the constant problems or challenges they face during their life on Earth. Chidi argued that [*“His (Michael’s) Neighborhood gave us the chance to become better people because it removed all the variables that make life on Earth hard.”*] and Eleanor concurred with [*“...Yeah, uh, there was no rent to pay, no racism, no sexism.”*]. To extend this statement—about Chidi, it was not as if he was making bad choices on earth, but the mere task of deciding something made him anxious and stressful, and in turn made the life of those around them much difficult. The “good” place pulled away that task—when Michael showed him his home and told him that he would not ever have to choose his breakfast because the refrigerator would automatically do so, the happiness and excitement in Chidi is palpable.

Further, John’s perception about the “good” place being perfect is another example [*“I’m so excited for Spa day. I mean, I know I can eat whatever I want and not gain weight and the air is obviously perfect and no one has any jobs or stress or problems, but I just feel like I need this.”*]. Although these seem trivial, the mere fact that they are accentuated throughout the show by different characters makes it a critical factor that facilitates change in individual morality.

Gaspar et al. (2019) propounded that neutral affect has no influence on human cognition or behavior. However, it is important to note that these findings present neutrality in reference to the overall setting and not the affective state of an individual; instead, it is this neutrality because of which individuals hold a positive valence that eventually drives them to moral behavior, which is in congruence with what Gaspar et al. (2019) stated about providing valence-relevant information that leads to behavior change.

4.4. Resistance

Any change intervention may suffer some sort of challenge or resistance. Similarly, John accused Tahani of a false friendship when she urges to rethink his “bad” actions [*“You know what? I see what this is. This has been a fake friendship. This whole week has just been a wind-up to a sucker-punch.”*]. His frustrated complaint reveals how people may be compelled to an extreme (negative) reaction following repeated, coercive, and overt attempts of others to change behavior, especially when they are “called out” for their actions. This is also referred to in Tahani’s conversation with Eleanor and Michael [*“We’ve been getting on quite well, but every time I bring up self-improvement, he just shuts me down. I haven’t encountered this much resistance since I tried to get Timothée-Chalamet to go out into the sun.”*]. The fact that she uses the term, “self-improvement” denotes that she might have bluntly asked John to “mend his ways”, eventually compromising her somewhat positive relationship with him. Tahani’s comment about the progress with John indicates a very explicit attempt in her quest for ethical behavior transaction, perhaps that was the reason he was reluctant to follow her advice. This calls for a subtle messaging to individuals about what may be good for them, like a behavioral nudge. Thaler and Sunstein (2009) framed “nudge” within choice architecture as a method that “alters people’s behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives” (p. 14). Although application of “nudge” in behavioral sciences and public health has been well-contested (*Can Nudge Theory Work In Public Health?*, 2017) due to human tendency of contemplation and deliberation—here, “behavioral nudge” is proposed at a micro-level i.e., interpersonal network, rather than a macro-level, public sectoral application.

Moreover, Michael’s dialogue on the relationship of two specific characters [*“Brent and Simone is our trickiest*

relationship. She tends to make snap judgments about people, and he's a guy who repeatedly confirms the accuracy of her snap judgments. We need her to believe that Brent is better than his worst actions.”] exemplifies conflict through their interaction. It becomes even more complicated when Brent’s book blatantly objectified women and that contradicted Simone’s beliefs. Michael brings up the shortfalls of both individuals to rationalize what lacks in their relationship, leading to conflict arising due to differences in their personalities, as identified by Bushe and Gossling (2006), implying a lack of homophily that is crucial for “clustering” in social networks. In fact, the conflict is also evident in Simone’s complaint to Eleanor [“Why are we still dealing with this shirt in *The Good Place*? When people like him are ignorant jerks, why are people like us asked to forgive him?”]. Interestingly, Simone’s questions are directly linked with morality; by expressing about Brent’s “ignorance”, she inadvertently justifies why he deserves her forgiveness. This partly suggests that a singular relationship may have larger threatening effects for the overall network tailored for behavior change. However, this does not mean that conflict is always bad, because he emphasizes, she needs to believe Brent is better even though he can “act” bad. Thus, harnessing conflict for the “greater good” of a network intervention is key.

4.5. Reinforcement

Reinforcement may be defined as extra personnel who increases the strength of the group. There is a consensus on the potential of Chidi as the one who imparts ethical behavior to other residents in the “good” place: whether it is Jason, [“I believe everything Chidi ever tells me because of his brain and how he looks like one of those owls that graduated from college.”] or Eleanor, [“This is Chidi Anagnonye. He was a professor of ethics and moral philosophy, so I figured he might be able to help...”] or Michael, [“Chidi’s study group should be off and running. We can go check in on how Brent’s doing. (...) Chidi might make the new humans better all on his own.”] or Tahani, [“Our resident philosopher Chidi Anagnonye leads an ethics study group in his apartment.”].

Interestingly, in spirituality, an owl symbolizes a “humble pursuit of knowledge”. In fact, they always introduce him with reference to his position at the university to give credence to his individuality and highlight his credibility for others. Also, the fact that Chidi runs a tutoring group on moral philosophy for the residents of the “good” place strengthens his effectiveness in influencing morality. Additionally, he was termed as an “ethical sleeper agent” on the show by Michael—which is similar to a double agent who is part of in group but is also knowledgeable, and humble—so not in a “know-it-all” kind of a way, but one who is willing to help others with the use of their knowledge to realize the overall goal of the intervention and network.

Further, a hub is the effective center of a network. Chidi’s indispensability is also prominently displayed when Michael says [“Chidi’s an absolute mess. (.....) He’s clearly being tested like never before. (.....) Eleanor, he told an outright lie. We don’t want him so freaked out that he can’t help anyone else.”] suggesting that overburdening the hub may compromise the experiment and yield counter-productive results. However, activating the hub is of equal importance to harness the potential of a social network—[“Because the more miserable he is, the more he’s going to teach you, and then everyone, and then he’ll save humanity. He’s like Superman with nervous diarrhea.”]. Clearly, activation and delegation of work are interdependent in this sense. Thus, it is imperative to strike a balance for optimum results.

4.6. Leadership

Leaders are individuals who can provide appropriate resources to their followers to complete an assigned task with their cognitive abilities and motivation and directing them rightfully without managing their tasks (Winston & Patterson, 2006). [“Okay, okay! Focus, team! Michael and I will prep for Simone. Tahani, keep an eye on John. Jason, talk to no one. Go nowhere. Do nothing.”]—the undertone with which Eleanor spoke was always assertive. Also, whenever Tahani or Jason perceived problems in the neighborhood, they always talked to Eleanor. The demon who visited the “good” place in the episode, *Tinker Tailor Demon Spy*, demanded he spoke with Eleanor to share a secret about the “bad” place. Like all leaders, she also had her fair share of criticism from her team when the experiment went wrong—[“We just can’t help but question her decision-making. She balked at bringing Chidi and Simone together. She ignored my concerns about Linda. Her plans for Brent backfired. We’ve made precious little progress. Perhaps leadership isn’t her forte.”]. Further, for the new residents, Eleanor was the architect or the manifestation of “God” after Michael had a panic attack before the start of the experiment. In the bigger picture, she was the one who also mediated many relationships as she introduced residents to each other. This suggests that the astuteness of a leader is a requisite in identifying how the existing network may be transformed into a condu-

cive setting for behaviors to spread.

4.7. Social network

Mathematically, Marsden (2002) referred to egocentric measures of network centrality in terms of data on a node’s first order zone, and sociocentric as the complete measures of the overall network data. Thus, qualitatively, egocentric networks may be defined as networks revolving around one actor—who is the ego—surrounded by their alters or peers, while sociocentric network presents a bird-eye view of the larger network at play.

For this study, Figure 1 illustrates a sociocentric network of *The Good Place* and includes a color scheme based on the social roles that each actor played in the larger social setting. The network is tied with “two-way” and “one-way” arrows to indicate the flow of communication based on the number of conversations initiated and held to achieve the goal of social experiment. These do not include any trivial conversations that were short-lived. Further, the red arrows denote the behavioral transaction and flow of morality, ethics, or goodness.

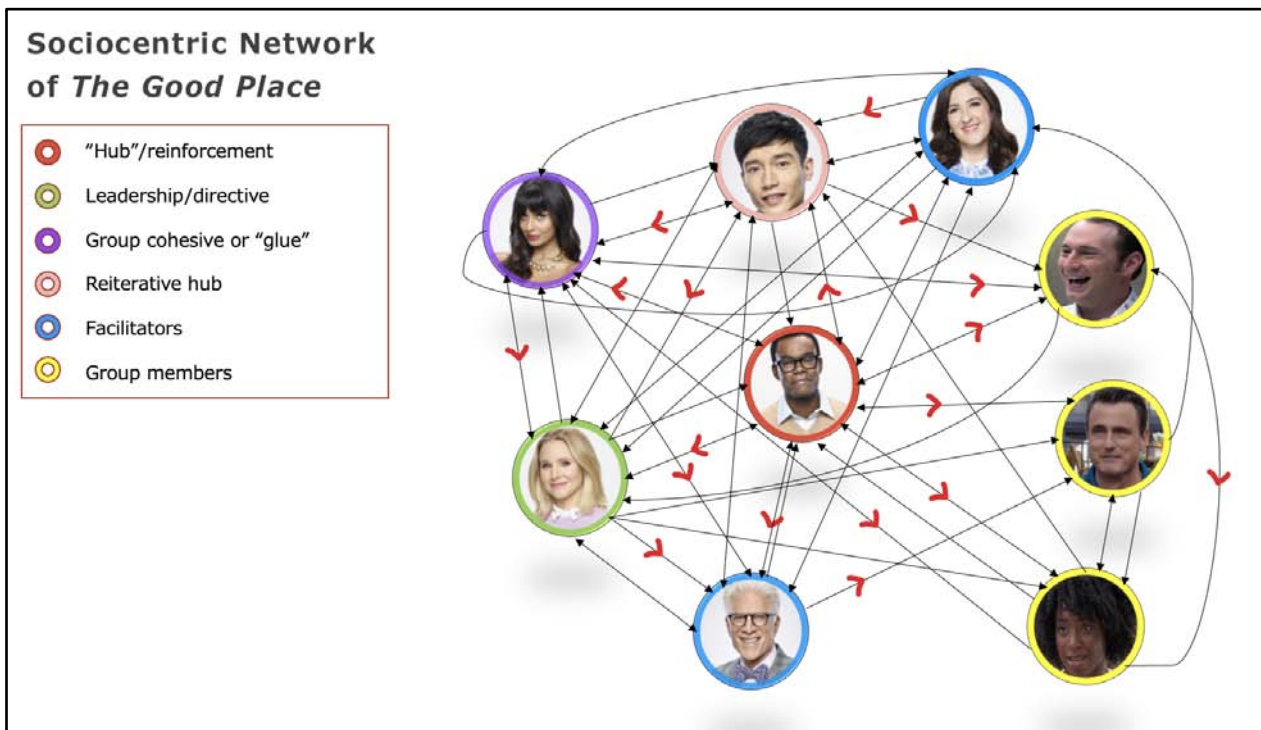


Figure 1. Sociocentric network illustrating transactional exchange of ethics and moral behaviors amongst major characters.

In network science, there are few vertices or nodes in the social structure with high degree centrality, i.e., most edges with other vertices (Kim & Hastak, 2018). On the other hand—considering Google, a hub is something that collects and stores information from different websites. Figure 1 depicts Chidi with the highest number of two-way arrows, which indicates he was not only a source of information, but also served as a sink with whom all people in the network conversed and confided in. He was the most connected social actor in the sense that he did not only impart ethics and moral behaviors with the virtue of his credentials as a professor but also acted as a listener, someone people confided in transparency and trust. Also, he was the first one of the “new” residents to know Jason’s real identity and John actively sought his help regarding his internal struggle to gossip, which validates the claim.

Second, Figure 1 shows highest number of one-way arrows emerging from Eleanor suggesting many one-way communication channels, thereby implying a directive role. It is recognized she is the lead character of the show with the longest screen presence, so most conversations are actively sourced from her to fulfill demands of the show. Regardless, it is believed that a leader does not merely oversee the social experiment, but also participates in the best interest for optimum effect of the intervention. From the network perspective, Balkundi and Kilduff (2006) posited that a leader builds and uses social capital, which has been termed as “the heart of social network analysis”

by Brass and Krackhardt (1999, p. 180). This is also supported by the “leadership” category of the current qualitative content analysis that found her to be mediating social relationships that may contribute to experimental success. Also, it was at her behest that Simone un-called the “sabotage” movement at Brent’s book publication event as she decided it would not have been fair to use “cancel culture” on him if they truly wanted him to mend his behavior.

Meier et al. (2012) postulated that mental stress and unethical behavior have an interdependent relationship, and John expressed appreciation for Jianyu, [*“Plus, Jianyu guided us on that amazing meditation. Oh, do you guys want to share what your mantra is? Mine is Cate Blanchett saying ‘Rihanna’.”*], implying his role (monk) was to reiterate what they had learnt from Chidi on ethics and moral behaviors through yoga and meditation, which is believed to bring internal peace, positive outlook, and focus (Roy & Suriya, 2020). Further, Tahani was identified as a “cohesive” because all group activities were deliberately mediated through her, whether it was organizing a “welcome party” for everyone at their arrival or having a picnic at the Lake House [*“Now head off to the lake house, and do your fabulous Tahani hostess thing.”*] or them going on a ski trip. Also, Tahani made sure that Chidi—who had initially skipped the picnic—joined everyone at the lakehouse so they could bond together. Literally, cohesion is “connectedness”; it is defined as the forces that make social members to stick together and remain in a group (Festinger et al., 1950). This is not *structural cohesion* as removal of Tahani would not disconnect the social network in Figure 1, but it is important to note that Tahani’s absence would immensely affect the experimental outcomes as the low-stake activities she mediated did the groundwork for complex behavioral transaction. Lastly, with Michael and Janet facilitating the overall functioning of the network, Simone, John and Brent were the quintessential, unaware group members having no “contribution” as their behaviors were studied in the show.

The current study somewhat supports Dehghani et al. (2016) view on the importance of purity homophily or the “love for same” in formations of connection in social networks. Tahani’s epiphany about her similarity with John was the turning point in their relationship that made her to be extra thoughtful about him [*“He spent his life in the bowels of the Internet, jealous and miserable with no real friends, while I spent my life in the upper echelon of society... jealous and miserable with... no real friends.”*]. However, Chidi and Simone had different outlooks on “soulmates” but being academics—they both relied on the power of data. Moreover, the relationships between the social actors ranged from romance, friendship, mentor-mentee, conflict, which when capitalized correctly would yield positive results. Centola (2018) postulated that focusing participants’ attention on social signal from neighbors or peers, could draw attention away from countervailing influences regarding desired behavior.

In his complex contagion experiments, Centola (2018) predicted that all social actors require a threshold i.e., a minimum number of activated connections to follow the same behavior, but that may vary. This study also highlights that all characters of *The Good Place* did not have equal thresholds. For instance, John was “activated” with three other neighbors, but Brent—being a narcissist therefore the most resistant social actor, was surrounded with all “activated” individuals exemplifying moral behavior at the end of the social experiment, but this was not enough to “activate” his moral behavior. It is therefore substantiated that not only do the individual attributes influence behavior change but also that each actor subconsciously assigns a weightage to their surrounding neighbors which may or may not follow reiterations. It was only when Chidi (of whom Brent made fun of throughout their interactions) made him realize his own selfless deed, did his moral factor surge – as noted by the Judge during the “Judgement” meeting.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Extending the importance of social support, the study establishes that providing people with right kind of social capital within a conducive social setting in their networks makes them more likely to be receptive about morality. On the other hand, absence of it limits their capacity for choice as they face challenges—the most significant reason why humans were able to make “better” decisions in the “good” place but not during their life on earth. Further, organizing a social mobilization network wherein all social actors have different roles in influencing change in moral behaviors of the group is believed to be worthwhile. However, the significance of emotional contagions on these moral behavioral transactions is still undiscovered.

Selective examination of the plot i.e., analysis of a storyline rather than complete series might have missed critical occurrences and context of the phenomena under study, but the time constraints did not allow for an in-depth analysis of the whole series. Therefore, the most appropriate episodes—with explicit and implicit references to importance of social group—were included for analysis. Also, manual mapping—not a computational software driven mapping—of social networks was undertaken to move beyond mathematical and algorithmic identification of so-

cial actors (and their ties) and yield a qualitative explanation of the interactions between them.

Thus, the current study highlights the power of *community* (i.e., social network and support), *moral development* (ethical and moral behavior uptake) and *free-will* (i.e., individual traits and decision-making)—as highlighted by Irwin (2020), in delineating the process of behavior change within the context of ethics and morals. While the idea of moral punishment was brought up in the series, it was out of the scope of the current study but may be studied for parallels with the “cancel culture” prevailing in the contemporary world.

Stemming from the human rights paradigm, it is believed that not all, but many prisoners are a subset of a disenfranchised population who commit immoral actions under the coercion of (unknown) social or economic constraints. With this thought, Duguid (1986) argued for a prison education program infused with moral dimensions. In this context, however, research has also shown that effective coping requires functional social support to prevent recidivism and to engender a pro-social response to stressful events that one may face (Blevins et al., 2010). Bathish et al. (2017) found that the transition from alcohol and drug addiction to recovery of 537 individuals was indicated by higher levels of social connectedness and enhanced self-perceptions of “recovery” identity. This warrants extension of social mediation in fostering other complex behavioral changes, including pro-health behaviors and prison-based rehabilitation, considering their similarity in terms of “relapse” possibilities—recidivism in case of inmates. Like Bina et al. (2020) extended the imaginative horizons from speculative fictions to social sciences with the aim of shaping up technologically determined urban futures, findings from the current study could also be applied to experiment with social rehabilitation programs for transformation into civically responsible adults or citizens, but also for self-actualization of inmates (e.g., youth delinquents or juveniles) in a setting that is void of the atrocities that may have led them to commit a misdeed or crime or perform an unethical action in their pre-confinement life. Thus, a social network intervention may be worthy of experimentation, especially for inmates whose penalty or punishment—to quote Chidi from the show—“is harsher than the crime” they committed earlier.

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