1 The next steps in the study of missing individuals in networks: a comment on

2 Smith et al. (2017)

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- 9 Abstract

Social network analysis is now used widely to study social behaviour in humans and non-human animals, and missing individuals can represent a problem for network studies. This problem is becoming especially frequent in studies using bio-logging to collect interaction data, especially in animals. This therefore represents an important audience for Smith *et al.* (2017) who investigate how sub-sampling from networks impacts the outcome of subsequent analysis. Here I take advantage of the progress made by this paper to outline key issues that still require addressing to understand the effect of missing individuals on social network analysis.

- 17 Keywords: network sampling, precision, bias, accuracy, statistical modelling
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19 Introduction

As a consequence of being relational data, the sampling of networks might inherently be expected to result in greater bias than other types of data (Alba, 1982; Silk et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2017; Smith and Moody, 2013). This could apply both to missing individuals (nodes) and missing relationships (edges), but the former is easier to quantify and address. A number of studies have explored the impact of missing individuals on network analysis, the most recent of which is Smith *et* al. (2017). The authors made substantial progress on a number of key issues, in particular in: a)
assessing how non-random missingness of individuals might change the effect of sub-sampling from
a network, and b) in providing a tool to allow researchers to determine the likely impact of missing
individuals in a range of network structures and sizes.

29 Smith et al. (2017) stated that "By looking at a wide range of networks, measures and types 30 of missing data, we can offer recommendations and best practices for applied network practitioners". A major application of network analysis away from the social sciences is in the study 31 32 of animal behaviour (Croft et al., 2008; Krause et al., 2014). Missing individuals are a frequent 33 problem in animal network studies, when it is often necessary to capture and mark individuals to 34 gather data. However, as the use of bio-logging technology becomes more widespread to study 35 human social networks (e.g. Isella et al., 2011; Kiti et al., 2016; Mastrandrea et al., 2015), similar 36 problems often arise. I will provide a perspective as an applied network practitioner working on animal social behaviour as to the utility of their new findings, and then build on this to highlight 37 38 important outstanding questions relating to missing individuals in networks. Finally, I will present 39 some R code designed to test how missing individuals affect the calculation of network metrics in 40 animal social networks that I hope will complement the java applet provided in that paper.

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42 An applied perspective on the implications of Smith *et al.* (2017)

Smith *et al.* (2017) built upon previous work by the same authors (Smith and Moody, 2013) in exploring the consequences of missing individuals on the calculation of a range of network metrics. Together, especially when taken alongside complementary findings in other fields (e.g. (Silk et al., 2015)), the results of this work have revealed a set of important considerations when analysing networks with missing data, of which the general rules are already very useful to applied network practitioners. In particular, knowledge of how network structure and size influence the impact of sub-sampling from a network is paramount, as is an understanding that more global 50 metrics (such as Betweenness) are less resilient to the presence of missing individuals. Finally, the 51 exploration of biases in missing individuals addressed by Smith et al. (2017) is especially valuable 52 from the perspective of animal behaviour research. This is partly as an aid in determining which individuals to collect data on when resources are limited, but also because methods of capture to 53 54 make individual animals identifiable for network studies may place implicit biases on which 55 individuals are most likely to remain unsampled. However, one opportunity that is missed here is the opportunity to discuss the importance of different types of "bias" caused by missing network data. I 56 57 would like to highlight here the nomenclature/approach used by Silk et al. (2015) which looked at 58 the effect of sub-sampling on three distinct properties of network metrics. In this paper the authors 59 looked at *precision, accuracy* and *bias* of metric values in sub-sampled networks. As defined by these 60 authors, precision is the correlation between values calculated in the partial (observed) network and 61 those in the equivalent true network, accuracy is the value of the metric obtained from the observed 62 partial network relative to its true value, and bias is systematic variation in the precision of metric values in the partial (observed) network. The impact of sub-sampling on each of these properties can 63 64 depend on network structure and the type of network metric being investigated. Considering each 65 independently is important in wider applications of network analysis, as these different properties 66 can be used to address different questions. For example, in animal network studies it is the precision 67 of metric values in sub-sampled networks that is important if a researcher asks a question about 68 whether network position and a personality trait are linked, but it is accuracy that is important if a 69 researcher seeks to compare the true values of network metrics between different contexts.

Another major step forward in Smith *et al.* (2017) is the development of a tool (a java applet) that can provide an idea of the impact of missing individuals (incorporating any biases in their centrality) according to network size for a range of network structures. For an applied network researcher that has worked on study systems with substantial proportions of missing individuals this is an exciting development, and has the potential to be useful as a guide to researchers designing network studies. However, from this perspective I also feel that it is essential to see a tool designed

76 in this way just as a starting point. The use of network analysis in animals is now highly question-77 driven and such a fixed tool has only restricted possibilities for use. It would be great to see a more 78 modular set of functions that were able to use pilot empirical data or researcher knowledge to 79 simulate a realistic network structure, and then sample from this structure, before determining how 80 it might affect the outcome of a range of network analytical perspective. Such a package of functions 81 would be best developed as a community, preferably with researchers from a range of fields so that 82 the generation of networks, and the types of metrics to calculate (or statistical models to assess) was 83 relevant to as wide a range of studies as possible. The advantages of taking this approach is that as a 84 user assesses a new sampling framework and/or question, the code they used can be added to the system and shared with researchers who might be faced with a similar problem in another field. 85

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87 Three outstanding missing network data problems

In this section I will highlight some important gaps in our understanding on the impact of sub-sampling from social networks that simulation-modelling could easily test and greatly aid the design of empirical studies. While these ideas come from a background of employing network analysis to study animal behaviour, I feel all are widely applicable in the use of social networks more generally.

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94 What is the best way of sub-sampling social networks?

In many animal network studies time, cost and effort is required to capture individuals and make them individually identifiable for social network studies. This trade-off is now becoming more frequent for all types of network study, including in humans, as the use of bio-logging approaches to produce reality mining data on social behaviour is increasing (Barrat and Cattuto, 2015; Isella et al., 2011). Often these approaches are costly, and it is possible to use only relatively small sample sizes. 100 Therefore, deciding how best to deploy bio-logging devices for network studies remains an open 101 question. For example, is it best to intensively sample a small part of a network or sample a larger 102 part of the network more sparsely? Or similarly, how would studying replicate networks in multiple 103 populations trade-off against the intensity of collaring individuals within each population? It is likely 104 that the type of question being asked is important to making this decision. For example, work 105 focussing on fine-scale behavioural interactions, such as dominance behaviour in animals (e.g. Dey et 106 al., 2015), is likely to benefit from intensively sampling particular groups. In contrast, for the study of 107 population-level processes such as disease transmission, a more even distribution of identifiable 108 individuals throughout a population may be beneficial, especially when attempting to record 109 infrequent interactions.

In order to assist empirical researchers making these decisions it will be important to move simulation models of non-random sampling beyond the missingness-centrality correlation investigated by Smith *et al.* (2017) to assess the impacts of the clustering of identifiable and unidentifiable individuals within sub-sampled networks. Exploring this in a range of social network structures will be an important step forward in aiding the study design of network studies in natural systems, especially for studies using bio-logging approaches.

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117 How do missing individuals affect individual-level hypothesis testing in networks?

The relationship between social network position and other individual traits has been a major cross-disciplinary research focus (e.g. Aplin et al., 2013; Bollen et al., 2011; Goodreau et al., 2009; Rosenquist et al., 2011). The most popular methods to test these hypotheses has been different, for example the use of exponential random graph models (ERGMs; Lusher et al., 2013) and stochastic actor-oriented models (SAOMs; Snijders et al., 2010) in the social sciences, versus the development of randomisation-based generalised linear mixed model approaches in animal behaviour (Croft et al., 2011; Farine and Whitehead, 2015). Regardless, the impact of missing individuals (and edges) on statistical inferences made using these all of these approaches remains anopen and important question.

127 Smith et al. (2017) made a step towards addressing this, by looking at the consequences of 128 missing individuals for tests of behavioural homophily within a network (and finding that it was 129 possible to detect patterns of behavioural homophily when there was both a high proportion of 130 missing individuals and a bias in which individuals were missing). However, a notion of the 131 preponderance of type I and type II errors when different modelling frameworks are used to analyse 132 networks with missing individuals would represent a considerable step forward in our understanding 133 of the consequences of sub-sampling social networks. For example, while Shalizi and Rinaldo (2013) 134 have suggested that ERGMs estimated on a sampled network are unlikely to reflect population-level 135 parameters (accuracy in the framework outlined previously), this may not affect their ability to test 136 hypotheses related to individual differences.

137 It would seem fairly simple to build on previous simulation-modelling work to examine how 138 hypothesis testing using any of the statistical models mentioned above might be affected by the sub-139 sampling of networks. For example, the addition of a response variable that depended on network 140 structure to the R function outlined in the next section would enable the impact on inference from 141 generalised linear models to be addressed. In the case of models relating individual traits to 142 individual-level network models, such as those suggested above, there are two main considerations 143 to make. Firstly, the structure of the network, specifically the distribution of metrics used as an 144 explanatory variable, is likely to influence the problems generated by sub-sampling. As a case in 145 point, networks with higher modularity will have highly-skewed distributions for some metrics and 146 missing individuals may reduce power considerably, especially if missingness is non-random. 147 Secondly, the distribution of the response variable will also be an important consideration. High 148 levels of overdispersion or zero-inflation in the response variable may exacerbate any problems 149 associated with missing individuals. For example, individual traits with a negative binomial

distribution (such as parasite infection load) are likely to be problematic. Again, there might be a particularly large impact on statistical power if there is a correlation between trait values and missingness.

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4 How do missing individuals affect estimates of transmission processes?

155 A further major application of network analysis is to study transmission through populations; for example of information (Allen et al., 2013; Bakshy et al., 2012) and disease (Reynolds et al., 2015; 156 157 Rohani et al., 2010; Stehlé et al., 2011). A case study is the application of network-based diffusion 158 analysis (NBDA) as a powerful approach to detect social transmission in animal populations (Allen et 159 al., 2013; Aplin et al., 2015; Franz and Nunn, 2009). Sub-sampled networks would also be expected 160 to reduce the power of these approaches and/or lead to systematic biases in the inferences made 161 about transmission (Ghani et al., 1998). Further type II error may result if non-random missingness 162 means that more central individuals, which may spread information to more new individuals on 163 average, are not identifiable. This effect of this might be particularly substantial in networks with higher modularity in which certain individuals are likely to have high brokerage between 164 165 communities.

166 Smith et al. (2017) investigated the effect of missingness on measures of network topology 167 that will have important implications for transmission - component size, bicomponent size and 168 distance. All measures were highly sensitive to missing individuals (in the majority of the networks 169 they investigated) when there was a positive missingness-centrality correlation, and even a relatively 170 small proportion of missing nodes in this case had a substantial impact on these measures of 171 network topology. The authors highlighted that the impact of the missingness-centrality correlation 172 was expected in this case as more central individuals are more likely to be important to the cohesion 173 of the network. They also suggested implications for diffusion or transmission within the network, 174 although stopped short of using simulations to test this.

175 There are important applications of studying spreading processes in networks, including in 176 systems prone to missing individuals such as animal populations (e.g. Hamede et al., 2012; Reynolds 177 et al., 2015). As a result, simulation-studies that explore the impact of sub-sampling networks on 178 conclusions drawn about transmission represent an important area of future work. It would not be 179 too great an extension to simulate the spread of a trait across a static network and then 180 progressively remove individuals (either at random or in a biased manner) and monitor the change 181 in power of NBDA or similar approaches. In many cases, especially for disease transmission, the 182 acquisition of a trait can result in potentially important changes to social network position (Ezenwa 183 et al. 2016, Silk et al. 2017). Therefore, a further more complex extension would be to extend 184 simulation-modelling approaches to test the impact of missing data in situations where both the 185 network and trait were dynamic.

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187 A tool for generating and sampling from varying network structures

In the supplementary information I present R functions for generating and sub-sampling from weighted, undirected social networks in a range of structures. Similarly to java applet provided by Smith et al. (2017) this is intended to encourage researchers to consider the potential impacts of missing nodes on their analyses (and in many situations this tool will be sufficient). However, unlike the java applet the code enables readers to generate user-defined networks and sample from them. An added advantage is that the code is designed in such a way that researchers familiar with R could add their own functions to address sampling-related problems of interest to them.

The code draws tie strengths from a zero-inflated negative binomial distribution. In its most basic form, this negative binomial distribution is equivalent for all individuals. However, I present it with two possible extensions, which will be of general interest to many network researchers. First, the tool includes code that enables generated networks to be "spatially structured" by placing individuals in 2d space and basing the parameters of the negative binomial distribution on the 200 distance matrix of their locations. Many social network studies take place in populations where 201 social interactions are structured by space use, and in these contexts being able to develop 202 simulated networks that account for this is important. Second the tool includes the ability to assign 203 individuals into social groups of fixed or varying sizes. Different distributions of tie strengths can be 204 set for within-group and out-of-group ties in the network allowing the generation of networks with 205 the strong social group structure frequently found in many human and animal populations. It also 206 provides a highly tractable way to test network sub-sampling questions in networks differing in 207 modularity. The capability of this tool to produce a whole range of potentially realistic network 208 structures is demonstrated in Figure 1. If preferred then networks could alternatively be generated 209 by using an exponential random graph model to create networks with a set of desired target 210 statistics, and the networks generated using this method could be used in the subsequent R 211 functions in the same manner.

212 The supplementary information also includes code that is able to sub-sample from these 213 networks, as a simple illustration of how it can be used to address some of the issues discussed in 214 this paper. This calculates and outputs the precision, accuracy and bias of four centrality metrics 215 (degree, strength, betweenness and eigenvector centrality) in partial networks of pre-defined size 216 (i.e. the proportion of the population made identifiable). The precision, accuracy and bias of these 217 metrics calculated in the networks depicted in Fig. 1 is provided in the supplementary material. In 218 this example networks of 50 nodes were generated using the three models specified in the legend of 219 Figure 1. Network a) contained no (imposed) modular and limited spatial structure, network b) 220 contained strong spatial structure and no additionally imposed modular structure, and network c) 221 consisted of 10 modules of five nodes with strong spatial structure between groups. Therefore, the 222 examples provide a clear indication of a range of sensible parameter values. The second R function 223 was then used to randomly sub-sample these networks to contain 60% and 80% of the original 224 nodes once (it could be applied multiple times to generate repeat sampling events and facilitate

statistical comparisons). Finally, the third R function calculated the precision, accuracy and bias (as
defined above) of metric values in the sub-sampled networks (Table S1).

227 Currently the code is limited to random sub-sampling of nodes, and to tests of the precision, bias and accuracy of centrality metrics. However, it provides a valuable basis for developing 228 229 simulation models to address some of the outstanding issues highlighted above. For example, the 230 ability to have both spatial and modular distribution of the nodes in the network facilitates 231 adjustments to the sampling regime that would easily enable the impact of clustered versus random 232 sampling at different scales to be tested. Similarly, the replacement of the final R function (which 233 currently calculates the precision, accuracy and bias of sampled networks) with an alternative 234 function that fits statistical models (e.g. ERGMs) and compares parameter estimates at different 235 levels of sampling would make it easily possible to determine how sub-sampling nodes affects 236 statistical inference and hypothesis testing.

237 Together these R functions provide a tool to estimate the impact of sub-sampling networks 238 in a whole-range of user-defined biologically realistic network structures. By providing modular code 239 in GNU software I hope to provide a toll that other researchers can use in a system-specific manner 240 according to their needs, thus complementing the java applet provided by Smith et al. (2017) which 241 is predominantly targeted as an easy-to-use and quick guide applicable to general types of network structure. Together, with the developments in that paper, I anticipate that these R functions will 242 243 trigger further work towards addressing some of the outstanding questions about sub-sampling 244 networks highlighted previously.

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246 Conclusions

The publication of Smith *et al.* (2017) advances our understanding of the impact of missing individuals on network analysis, and offers great potential to applied network practitioners outside

249	of the social sciences. However, I advocate the use of approaches that move beyond calculating
250	biases in descriptive network metrics. In particular, a move towards determining how sub-sampling
251	networks in empirical systems affects our power to use statistical models of network structure and
252	individual behaviour will be especially beneficial. This will be facilitated by more modular and
253	adaptable approaches to examining the effects of missingness in network data that can be shared
254	among researchers and will be applicable to networks in a range of fields.

257 Figures

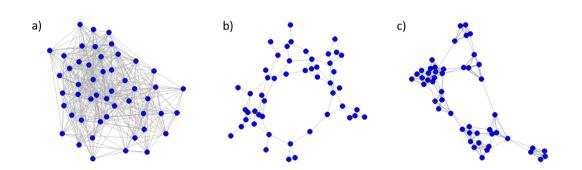




Figure 1. Three networks generated using the network.generator() R function provided in the 260 supplementary material. For a) groups=50, mean.group.size=max.group.size=1, d.eff=2, o.dens=0.7 and i.dens=6 (not that this parameter is used in this case). For b) groups=50, 261 262 mean.group.size=max.group.size=1, d.eff=10, o.dens=0.7 and i.dens=6 (not that this parameter is used in this case). For c) groups=10, mean.group.size=max.group.size=5, d.eff=10, o.dens=1 and 263 264 i.dens=6.

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