In light of the growing interest and importance of network science and network research to the Penn State Research community, the Office of the Senior Vice President for Research and the Penn State Institutes are sponsoring this series. Prominent national experts are scheduled to present talks on campus throughout the academic year. The goal is to clarify the underlying principles in this intrinsically interdisciplinary research area and to bring the diverse community of Penn State researchers together around common themes to explore how their research might benefit from intellectual cross-fertilization.

“Do We Choose Our Friends? Selection Mechanisms behind Social Network Structure”

David Schaefer, School of Social and Family Dynamics, Arizona State University

Thursday, December 10, 2009
4:00 p.m. – 5:15 p.m.
108 Wartik Building

Abstract: Most sociological theory and research treats social structure as an exogenous factor that affects individual outcomes. In contrast, I investigate how social structures, in the form of social networks, come into being. I present research addressing two main questions. First, how do individuals “select” their network ties? What are the roles of endogenous network processes (i.e., reciprocity, transitivity), substructural foci (i.e., activities) and, of course, homophily? Second, what are the mechanisms responsible for the homophily that characterizes most relationships? Is it simply a preference for similar others or might homophily be an unintended outcome (emerging through an “avoidance” process) or a spurious product of other processes? In addressing these questions, my research examines processes at the individual, dyadic, and structural level using both cross-sectional (e.g., ERGM) and longitudinal (e.g., SIENA) network models. I consider networks in the natural world and the laboratory, different points in the life course (preschool and adolescence), and the effects of several individual attributes such as sociodemographic characteristics, health, and delinquency.

Biography: David Schaefer is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social and Family Dynamics at Arizona State University. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Arizona in 2006. His research focuses on understanding influence and selection processes within social networks and on theoretical extensions of social exchange theory. Current projects investigate how health affects social network structure, the origins of race and gender homophily, the structure of juvenile co-offending networks, and reconciling social exchange and social network theory. Dr. Schaefer’s recent research appears in American Sociological Review, Social Psychology Quarterly, and Social Networks. His ongoing research is sponsored by the National Science Foundation, National Institute of Health, and the William T. Grant Foundation.