Nicholas Christakis was awarded a Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement in 2024. In this video, Margaret Chisolm of Johns Hopkins University interviews Dr. Christakis about the vast scope of positive social behaviors we rely upon but mostly take for granted, and the importance of defending the university's knowledge-seeking mission from the attacks of both the Right and Left.

Margaret Chisolm, Johns Hopkins University

Nicholas, I am so delighted to be here with you today. This is Nicholas A. Christakis, a winner of the 2024 Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement and a sociologist and physician. He's the Sterling Professor of Social and Natural Science at Yale University and author of several acclaimed and best-selling books, including *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives; Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society;* and most recently, *Apollo's Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way We Live*.

Nicholas, one of the things I love about your work, besides your deft use of colons in your book titles, is how you bring together methods from so many different fields—evolutionary biology, behavioral genetics, sociology, epidemiology, computer science, and more—to study how social networks form and how these networks influence our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and ultimately, our health. I'm a psychiatrist, so those are all of interest to me. You've referred to these two phenomena of interest of yours as *connection* and *contagion*. I'm wondering if you can share some underappreciated ways that your work contributes to human understanding and well-being.

Nicholas Christakis, Yale University

I'm characterologically optimistic as a person. I like to think well of people and well of the world, and I find that a more convivial way to live. I find that a more convivial way to be a practicing scientist. I'd rather feel hope and optimism about our capacity to perceive the world, to feel joy and curiosity in the work that we do, and then to be optimistic about that. I'm optimistic or have a positive bent regarding the *content* of the science we do. I'm characterologically positive, I'm methodologically positive, and I'm conceptually focused on the positive. For too long, many branches of the sciences have focused on the dark parts of human nature, our propensity for tribalism and selfishness and mendacity and violence and evil.

There's no doubt that as human beings we are capable of those things, but we are also capable of love and kindness and affection and cooperation and friendship and teaching. We also have all these wonderful qualities. I believe that those positive qualities must have necessarily outweighed the negative qualities in our ancestral past, because if every time I came near you, you lied to me and filled me with misinformation about the world, or you stole from me, or you injured me, or you killed me, we would be better off living atomistically. But we don't, we live socially. We live not just socially in amorphous groups, but in very specific network groups. We have particular friends and so on. The benefits of a connected life have necessarily outweighed the costs, and those benefits have not gotten their due. My focus has been on that, on the origins and role of phenomena like friendship and love and cooperation and teaching and so on. That would be at least one underappreciated way that my work has contributed to an understanding of human well-being. Not as many people are looking at the good side of human nature as at the bad side.

Chisolm

As somebody who directs a program for flourishing, I'm totally in line with that. So much of psychiatry is focused on the challenges when mental life goes awry. But we can really lift up our lives through so many of our actions and our thoughts, and focusing on that might bear much more fruit for the public health.

Christakis

I think it's fruitful. It's also a nice shift as a scientist. I've always been, for reasons I can't explain, severely affected when I have a stuffy nose. I can tolerate a sore throat. I can tolerate itching. There are lots of symptoms I can tolerate. I don't like them, but I can tolerate them. Over multiple episodes of periodically having a stuffy nose, I would say to myself, when this stuffy nose goes away, I'm going to appreciate being able to breathe seamlessly. And then I would forget. I just take it for granted that I can breathe through my nose and mouth. It's happened to me enough times in my life that now I pause to appreciate the fact that I'm breathing normally and everything is terrific.

The reason I say this is, when our brains stop working well, due to psychiatric or organic illnesses, we focus on it. We pay attention, as we should. I'm not saying we need to ignore it, but it's very easy to lose sight of how miraculous it is that our brains work, most of the time. We are blessed to be conscious, rational beings. We are creative beings. We can feel joy. I wonder how much of psychiatry, for example, since you mentioned it, is focused on the normal functioning of our brains. I'm not saying we shouldn't tend to people who are sick and have mental illness. Forty years ago, my wife was a mental health worker at the famous Mass Mental in Boston. This was after Semrad. At that time, it was very popular to send all the psychiatric patients for psychometric testing. Invariably the testing would come back showing some problems. The attending physician would say, why can't we be like other branches of medicine where we perform a test and it comes back saying this guy is normal? Why is there always some problem? So, I think it's important to focus on, to pause, to see the good parts of human nature and not just the bad parts.

Your initial question had to do with the underappreciated implications or features of the work that we do. In sociology, we study the difference between structure and agency; how much does a person's fate and their life depend on their own choices and actions, their agency, and how much is instead shaped and guided and determined by the structure around them? This raises all kinds of moral questions, of course: are you poor because you're deficient and you're not working or are you poor because society has never given you a break? You didn't get the education that you had a claim to get and so on.

This is an old and interesting philosophical and sociological and scientific question, but there's an interesting way that it also intersects with old philosophical and even religious ideas about free will. To what extent do we have free will and to what extent am I morally responsible for things that I do? A lot of our work on social contagion that you alluded to at the beginning suggests that people do things because their friends are doing things. The classic example of this is Durkheim's work on suicide. Something that's seemingly so personal and so important, namely whether you take your own life, seems to be socially determined. The rate of suicide is consistent within religions and across time in France, which suggests that people come and go, but this seemingly personal thing is determined by these exogenous factors. So, suicide may depend on structure, your probability of having suicidal ideation

may depend on whether your friends have suicidal ideation, whether you're depressed depends on whether your friends and your friend's friends are depressed, your body size may depend on whether your friends and your friend's friends are gaining weight.

We've done a ton of experiments recently; we just did a huge study in Honduras of 24,000 people in 176 villages where we showed we could induce cascades in breastfeeding behavior, for example. If we teach you to breastfeed your baby, does that influence your friend's and your friend's friend's probability of breastfeeding their baby? Breastfeeding behavior, again, a very personal kind of behavior, is determined by, experimentally, what's happening in others. If that's true, and I think it is true, it means that we have much less free will than we thought. We're all creatures of the social world. That's another underappreciated aspect, the way in which our work, for example, on social structure and social contagion, rightly would influence our moral understanding of human behavior.

Chisolm

That's important too and very relevant to some of the problems that we're facing today. Speaking of today, what do you see today as the most important challenges for maintaining high intellectual standards in your field or fields?

Christakis

It's impossible in 2025 to answer that question without recognizing the assault on science that's coming at the moment, mostly from the right wing politically. We have in power a set of people who are very aggressively attacking science in a way that evokes classic authoritarianism. This is not to say the left politically is not also responsible for a number of egregious assaults on science. But at the moment, it's the defunding: the halfing of the budget at NIH, the halfing of the budget at NASA, the halfing of the budget at NSF. A decline in national commitment to science funding, if it were to pass Congress, is quite a serious threat.

People need to understand that the American dominance of the world and our ability to project not just military might, but also to project soft power, to capture the hearts and minds of people around the world, has depended since the Second World War on a tripartite collaboration between the US government, private industry, and universities. The government takes tax dollars and gives them to universities to do the kind of research with a 20- or 30-year horizon that no private industry could do: basic discoveries regarding cancer chemotherapy or basic discoveries regarding nanofabrication of things that we use to ensheathe our jets. The horizon for the exploration of those things is so long that no private sector company could do that. Those things take many trials. Government says, please do this research. The government says, okay, thank you. We'll support scientists who do. Those scientists typically earn less money than they would if they worked in the private sector. Those discoveries flow to the private sector ehich then develops useful products that advance our health, wealth, and security. This has been the post–Second World War order, and that's under assault right now. So, that's one of the most important challenges facing my field at the moment, which I see as science more broadly.

Then, of course, there's a loss of confidence in the sciences. Here, the blame falls a bit more on the left politically, but also on the right. There are prohibited topics both on the right and on the left. On the left, the ones that most people know have to do with race or gender. There are permissible and impermissible questions you can ask or answers you can offer to a whole range of topics, which doesn't help. On the

right, historically, there've been concerns about stem cell science, evolutionary biology, gun research. For a long time, the US government wouldn't support research on the epidemiology of gun violence. This is putting your head in the sand. Guns are a leading killer in our society. I'm not saying simply that to investigate the role of guns and the determinants of gun violence is doing science; it's not a political activity. The political activity might follow what we do with that knowledge. We might say there are a lot of deaths, but we're still going to allow private ownership of weapons, or we might revisit that topic, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't do the science.

Those kinds of threats are ongoing, a squelching of an openness of scientific investigation that originates from both political extremes, originates from within universities, originates from within government, originates from within journals. Some scientific journals have come out and said, whether we publish your work will not only depend on its scientific validity. In other words, in addition to whether your claims are true or false and supported by your analysis, we'll also decide whether to publish your work based on how it affects marginalized communities. That's not, in my judgment, a proper basis for deciding whether to publish something scientific.

Chisolm

Even authors are making those decisions.

Christakis

Yes, and that subverts the purpose of science, which is truth-seeking. Yes, sometimes truth is dangerous. I'm not saying that truth is always only good, but I would never replace truth with lies for anything. So, there are a range of threats to maintaining high intellectual standards: the lack of money, the lack of confidence in the sciences, the assault from various angles. These things are harmful to the scientific enterprise.

Chisolm

Related to that, how would you describe the mission of the university? What should it be? Why is that important? You've alluded to some of these ideas.

Christakis

I can answer that question tersely and very easily. For any serious university—and I leave out universities that have other social missions and religious universities—the optimal mission is the preservation, production, and dissemination of knowledge, period. I don't think universities should have any other mission. They may coincidentally lead to other missions. They may lead to social advancement. They may be engines of upward mobility. They may lead to economic productivity because they're sources of innovation and patentable ideas that contribute wealth to our society or health-care improvements or whatever. But that's not their mission.

The analogy is that the function of the judiciary is the impartial administration of justice. Now, it may be the case that the judiciary, therefore, supports capitalism or trade. If you go to a country that has a functioning and noncorrupt judiciary, it's easier to transact business. But we would not say the purpose of the judiciary is to enhance business. That's a secondary follow-on. It may be the case, and analogously, that the purpose of a university is truth and the enhancement of knowledge. That pursuit of

truth has some other benefits, which is great, but that's not our focus. Many universities in the last 20 years have made themselves into political actors and therefore are becoming political targets. It is to the detriment of what really should be the fundamental objective or mission of a university. There could be other legitimate purposes of universities, and maybe some universities have other purposes. But the hallowed function of a university is the preservation, production, and dissemination of knowledge. There's no other institution in our society devoted to that, and that's what we should be doing.

Chisolm

Because you're an optimist, do you think we'll get back on track?

Christakis

I think we will. We have gone through a difficult period, and we're not through it yet. People like Greg Lukianoff will tell you we're not through it yet. He's the head of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. I just was speaking to him last week at an event, and he was saying he doesn't think we're on the other side of the craziness yet. These things do come and go in cycles; I do think we will see a recommitment. All human activity is inflected with political concerns, but universities should make the effort, to the extent possible, to insulate their mission from politics. That doesn't mean that professors can't be political, can't protest, can't vote, can't give money to candidates. As individuals, every member of a university, of course, is a citizen and has political agendas and rights, but the university itself shouldn't be a political actor. It should keep its eyes, just like the judiciary, on its objective.

Chisolm

This is kind of an off-the-cuff question, it might be a little strange, but do you think that universities might be like people, susceptible to social contagion?

Christakis

Oh, for sure. We've done some work on institutional networks. For example, there's some classic work on venture capitalist networks moving like lemmings. All of a sudden, one set of firms starts investing in a certain area and everyone else copies them, which makes sense, actually. Same with institutional investors and popular stocks and sectors of the economy.

We've done work on hospitals' adoption of new technology and hospitals that are connected to other hospitals, for example through patient transfer networks. So, I'm a hospital and patients are transferred to me from 20 other hospitals, and I transfer patients back to some of those plus some other hospitals. You can map the whole network of hospitals in the United States. We find incidentally that nosocomial infections spread through those networks. So, as patients move, they bring their germs with them. There are outbreaks of C. diff, a bad diarrhea, that relate to the movement of patients. But just like germs can spread through these hospital networks, product adoption can spread. If certain hospitals are adopting MRIs, then all of their other friend hospitals also want to buy expensive MRI equipment. So, institutions, when in networks, obey some of the same principles of social contagion that we might observe in individuals.

Chisolm

So, a few universities that might become leaders in truth-seeking or the truth-seeking mission could potentially influence others.

Christakis

That's optimistic, and I agree with you on that. The time may be turning on that topic. Universities are like battleships. It'll take half a generation, 15 years to really change. But we might. We might change for the better.

Chisolm

On that optimistic note, I want to thank you, Nicholas, for taking time to talk with us today. And again, congratulations on your Barry Prize.

Christakis

Thank you so much, Meg, for having me, and thank you to the Academy, and also to the Barrys for endowing these prizes.