



## Low status rejection: How status hierarchies influence negative tie formation

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### ABSTRACT

Scholarship investigating how social status patterns negative ties has yielded contradictory findings. Three likely sources for these differences are: different measures of social status, measures of negative ties (perceived versus dyadic), and structural factors. This study uses multiple measures of social status, sociometrically-measured negative ties, and multiple analytic approaches – MRQAP to control for structure and within-individual to control for heterogeneity – to help resolve this debate. We find: negative ties travel down status hierarchies and target low status individuals, and a negative tie between two people becomes more likely as their status difference increases. These results suggest a low-status rejection mechanism.

### 1. Introduction

In the engagement party scene of the opera *Margaret Garner* (Morrison, 2005), Caroline Gaines – the daughter of a southern plantation owner – publicly shows deference to her slave, Margaret Garner, who cared for and loved Caroline for her entire life. In response, the shocked party guests – mostly local elites – abruptly leave the Gaines' home. Caroline's father voices his fear about the negative consequences of this event, lamenting, "You have given my neighbors more reason to gossip and despise me" (Morrison, 2005 in Podolny and Lynn, 2009). Podolny and Lynn (2009) use this scene to show how social status is dynamically constructed through relational behaviors such as deference and exchange, and how social status also plays a role in allocating social rewards. This scene offers additional insights about the inter-relationships between status and social ties. One such insight is that status hierarchies may structure the emergence and formation of negative ties. Relational behavior indeed affects status, as Caroline's public deference towards Margaret lowers Caroline's status in the eyes of the party guests, and through Caroline, the status of the whole Gaines family is reduced. But this change in status also prompts a change in the relationships within this social setting: the previously positive ties from the party guests towards Caroline's family become negative as they opt to socially reject the now lower-status Gaines family by promptly leaving the party. This paper examines empirically whether and how social status influences the formation of negative ties.

The *Margaret Garner* scene depicts both positive and negative ties as being fundamentally inter-related with social status, but in different

ways. Positive ties appear to serve as a conduit for the leakage of social status (Podolny, 2005). Caroline's deference to the enslaved Margaret lowers Caroline's status which also lowers the status of her father and family. Negative ties appear to be a tool deployed by the party guests to distance themselves from the Gaines family to avoid the threat of status leakage. The party guests leave the party, likely to gossip about and despise Caroline and her family, possibly in effort to avoid their own status loss via further status leakage. The scene is fictional. Research finds positive empirical evidence supporting Podolny's status leakage hypothesis regarding positive ties (Bothner et al., 2010; Graffin et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2016). What about the relationship between status and negative ties? Is the opera's depiction of negative ties forming to reject lower-status others accurate? Can this low status rejection be observed empirically, or would it be more realistic if the Gaines family also came to view the elites who left more negatively? What is the role of status hierarchies in patterning negative ties?

Social network scholarship is increasingly working to reveal the potentially distinctive dynamics of negative ties (Everett and Borgatti, 2014; Harrigan and Yap, 2017; Labianca and Brass, 2006). Research examining the relationships between social status and negative ties has been particularly active, but has yielded a range of contradictory findings. Some research finds that negative ties and behaviors tend to be directed to lower-status others (Berger and Dijkstra, 2013; DeKlepper et al., 2017; Ellwardt et al., 2012). Other scholars find negative ties tend to be directed towards higher-status others (Faris and Felmlee, 2011, 2014; Fujimoto et al., 2017). This article analyzes and discusses several of these recent contradictory findings. By examining

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the methods, assumptions, and related theories, we offer an explanation for these contradictions and propose an empirical approach for resolving them. The differences in results across studies appear to come from dependencies upon perceived versus direct measures of negative ties, upon specific single measures of social status, and upon statistical approaches that require the anticipation of important structural effects. We perform an empirical analysis of these differences using a large dataset including positive and negative tie network data. Our findings – robustly replicating across three different levels of analysis – are consistent with a *low-status rejection* mechanism for the formation of negative ties. That is, dyadic negative ties (unlike reputational negative ties) tend to be directed down status hierarchies towards the lowest status members. In addition, we show that status measures based on positive ties are distinct from status measures based on negative ties. In doing so, this article contributes both to the understanding of negative ties, and to social status.

## 2. Negative ties and social status

Early social network scholarship examined both positive and negative relations and recognized the importance of both types of ties in constituting social dynamics (Cartwright and Harary, 1956; Heider, 1958; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959; White, 1961). However, modern social network scholarship has been dominated by studies of positive relationships, leaving negative relationships under-explored (Labianca and Brass, 2006). A recent resurgence of scholarly interest and attention to negative ties is working to address this imbalance. Consistent with earlier scholarship, recent network analytic methods show that negative ties are important for partitioning groups whereas positive relations are important for social cohesion within groups (Bruggeman et al., 2012; Harrigan and Yap, 2017; Leskovec et al., 2010a). As the evidence demonstrating the distinctive importance of negative ties continues to grow, the need for understanding the emergence and the formation of these types of relationships grows commensurately.

Our current focus is the relationship between negative ties and social status. Social status is a fundamental and widely-studied construct in social science research (Bourdieu, 1984; Gould, 2002; Kemper and Collins, 1990; Podolny and Lynn, 2009; Ridgeway, 2014). A large body of research has examined the relationships between social status and positive social ties. The relationships are bi-directional. Status influences positive ties and positive ties influence status. The process of preferential attachment (Barabási and Albert, 1999) with high status others is observed for positive social ties (Ball and Newman, 2013; Dijkstra et al., 2013; Moody, 2004). People preferentially form positive ties to similar-status or higher-status others, and avoid forming positive ties with lower-status others. In the other direction, positive ties affect social status through status leakage (Bothner et al., 2010; Graffin et al., 2008). This inter-relationship is so strong that it is not uncommon for the attraction of positive ties (in-degree) to be used as an indicator for informal social status (e.g., Brass and Burkhardt, 1993; De la Haye et al., 2010; Lazega et al., 2012). Although measures based on one can be used as indicators for the other, social status and positive ties are distinct constructs. Network scholars also document the distinctiveness between positive ties and negative ties (Bruggeman et al., 2012; Everett and Borgatti, 2014; Harrigan and Yap, 2017). What then, is the relationship between social status and negative ties?

We enlist the concept of a status hierarchy (e.g., Lin, 1999) to indicate how social status relates to the patterning of negative ties. We investigate whether the occurrence of negative ties – which travel from the person reporting the negative tie to a particular target individual who is the recipient of the negative tie – is patterned with respect to this status hierarchy in ways beyond what would be expected by chance and controlling for other individual characteristics (e.g., group memberships). Specifically, we ask whether negative ties tend to travel up hierarchies, that is from lower status individuals to higher status targets; travel down, that is from higher status individuals to lower status

targets; or even within status strata, occurring among individuals with similar levels of social status? Several recent empirical studies of this and similar questions have yielded inconsistent and contradictory findings. In the following sections, we review these empirical studies, noting the differences causing the contradictory findings. We then develop and apply a framework for resolving the contradictions.

## 3. Contradictory findings and their resolution

Recent literature examining directly the relationship between social status and negative ties shows contradictory findings. We highlight two papers in particular as exemplars of these differences. On the one hand, when Berger and Dijkstra (BD, 2013) examined social networks of elementary school children in Chile, they found evidence for “the snobbism hypothesis” (2013:586). The snobbism hypothesis is that negative ties tend to be directed from high status individuals to low status individuals. These results, however, are also consistent with a somewhat different interpretation – i.e., *low-status rejection*, wherein negative ties distance an individual from status threats. Negative ties directed towards lower status individuals help to guard against harmful status leakage that might otherwise result from a positive tie with a lower status individual.

On the other hand, Fujimoto, Snijders, and Valente (FSV, 2017) show that high status high school students (those identified more frequently by others as being popular) also tend to have higher reputational dislike (identified more frequently by others as being disliked). FSV conclude that negative peer relations tend to travel up social status hierarchies, not down as BD suggest. FSV note three important differences between their study and the BD study. First, FSV measures reputational dislike – who is perceived by the respondent as being generally disliked – not direct dyadic disliking. Second, FSV accounts for more structural effects than does BD. Third, the two studies measured popularity differently. These three differences provide a useful framework for understanding this debate. We take each element in turn: the nature of the tie, the role of structural effects, and measures of status or popularity. Following this examination of relevant theory and evidence for each element, we articulate the features required of a study seeking to help resolve the question of the role of status hierarchies and negative ties.

Other empirical studies have examined how social status influences the formation of negative ties. We use these two exemplary studies because of their well-communicated measures of both negative ties and social status. Conceptually related but less directly applicable studies may examine factors that are not direct measures of social status, outcomes that are specific behavioral expressions of negative ties, or use a collective rather than individual level of analysis.

For example, a couple of recent studies examined negative ties as an outcome among individuals grouped by status-relevant social categories. Boda and Néray (2015) studied negative ties by ethnic group categories in secondary school students, and Merluzzi (2017) studied negative ties by gender categories among professional managers in two separate firms. Both studies reported the surprising finding that negative ties were significantly more likely to be within-group for the lower-status category members (minority ethnic group, and women, respectively), but not more likely to be within-group for the higher-status category members (majority ethnic group, and men, respectively). Doreian and Mrvar, 2014 re-examine some well-studied signed network data involving both students (Newcomb’s dormitory data) and professionals (Sampson’s monastery data), and found evidence for differential dislike – the existence of a group of people who are universally disliked – to be the dominant mechanism for negative ties (in comparison to mutual dislike and structural balance). Although Doreian and Mrvar’s analysis did examine relationships among subgroups, they did not explicitly evaluate negative ties’ relationships with status.

Other scholars have examined how social status plays a role in negative-typed relational behaviors such as targets of gossip among co-

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