



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdpPersonal goal pursuit as an antecedent to social network structure [☆]Catherine T. Shea ^{a,*}, Gráinne M. Fitzsimons ^b^a Odette School of Business, University of Windsor, Canada^b Fuqua School of Business, Duke University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 October 2014

Revised 20 June 2016

Accepted 13 July 2016

Keywords:

Social networks

Goal pursuit

Workplace advancement

ABSTRACT

Three studies using diverse methods examine the effects of goals on instrumental mindsets and social network activation. We hypothesize that individual advancement and interpersonal affiliation goals evoke distinct patterns of interpersonal perception and motivation, which lead to the activation of sparser and denser social networks, respectively. Study 1, an experiment, found that triggering individual advancement goals (vs. affiliation goals) within a workplace domain led to the activation of sparser networks. Study 2, an experiment, found evidence of an indirect pathway, through which individual advancement goals increased the tendency to view social network contacts in an instrumental fashion, which in turn predicted the activation of sparser networks. Study 3, a longitudinal field study, found that individuals entering a new social network with strong career goals (individual-advancement goals) reported sparser networks and more central network positions; some evidence suggested that these effects may extend beyond activated networks to mobilized networks.

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1. Introduction

Jane wants to earn a promotion at work. Lisa wants to develop a stronger relationship with her work team. Jane is pursuing her own advancement, while Lisa is pursuing connection with others. How do goals like these shape the way Jane and Lisa view their social networks? Who would be likelier to bring to mind and reach out to new and disconnected members of their networks? The current research explores these issues, addressing a novel research question: How do personal goals affect social networks? Although most research on goals emphasizes individual mechanisms for goal advancement, we suggest that goal pursuers also turn to their social environments to help them achieve their goals. In particular, we propose that goals shape the way individuals view their social networks as a mechanism to advance important goals. This

research builds on goal and network theories and a burgeoning literature on the interpersonal nature of goal pursuit.

2. Interpersonal strategies in goal pursuit

Goals are cognitive representations of desired end-states (Austin & Vancouver, 1996), such as “to be promoted to manager this year” or “to make some friends in the office.” In psychological theories of goal pursuit, goals—once set (Locke & Latham, 1990)—are theorized to then drive action to reduce the distance between the individual's current and desired states (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Lewin, 1935). Goals can directly shape outcomes by increasing attention, effort, and persistence, and can also indirectly do so by mobilizing new strategies, especially when tasks are complex and span time (Latham & Locke, 2007; Locke & Latham, 1990).

In the everyday organizational environment, people must employ strategies to pursue their complex long-term goals, like those to advance their careers or to make friends at work. Importantly, we suggest that goal strategies can extend beyond the *intrapersonal* to the *interpersonal*. Although psychological accounts of goal pursuit have largely ignored interpersonal processes, viewing the actor in isolation from the social world (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), the role of interpersonal dynamics has been acknowledged by several theories (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Lewin, 1935; Rusbult, Finkel, &

^{*} This research was completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree of the first author. It was supervised by the second author and Sim Sitkin. This dissertation received the 2013 American Psychological Association (Div 49) best dissertation award. Financial support was received from the Kellogg Team and Group Research Center. The authors thank Jeanne Brett, Jonathon Cummings, Eli Finkel, Francesca Gino, Rick Hoyle, Rick Larrick, Tanya Menon, Jim Moody, Leigh Thompson, and the three anonymous reviewers for their feedback. The authors thank Aaron Kay, Rick Larrick, and Jack Soll for their assistance in obtaining the social network data for Study 3.

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Kumashiro, 2009) and has earned burgeoning experimental support.

For example, experimental psychological research has found that goals lead individuals to feel closer to useful members of the social environment, and to feel less close to others who are not useful (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008). Similarly, goals lead individuals to create categories of others, seeing useful others as more similar to each other, and more dissimilar to others who are not useful for the goal (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2009). Research on networking behavior and social capital finds that career seekers and those who desire to move upwards in an organization explicitly seek relationships with others, like mentors, who can provide access to useful resources (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kram, 1985). The use of these and related interpersonal strategies, in which the social environment is modified to facilitate goal attainment, appears to promote better goal outcomes (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Rusbut et al., 2009).

Thus, research provides some evidence for the use of interpersonal strategies in goal pursuit. In the current manuscript, we extend these initial efforts by turning beyond dyadic relationships. In particular, we propose that goal pursuers may implicitly view their social networks in such a way as to facilitate the attainment of their important goals. Following Smith, Menon, and Thompson (2012), we focus on how people bring network contacts to mind, or what Smith et al. (2012) call “network activation.” Network activation is the “mental activity of constructing a social network at a given point in time” and is contrasted with network mobilization, the “process of putting the network to use” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 67).

3. Individual agency within social networks

For social networks to hold strategic potential for goal pursuers, they should be reliably linked to positive goal outcomes. Indeed, according to social network theory and a large body of empirical research, social networks (i.e., the configuration of social connections surrounding an actor) provide and constrain opportunities for achievement (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Burt, 1992; Cross & Cummings, 2004; Granovetter, 1973; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993). For example, individuals who belong to networks with many structural holes (missing links between people) have better performance outcomes, such as more frequent promotions, higher salary, and greater career mobility (Burt, 1992; Burt, Hogarth, & Michaud, 2000; Podolny & Baron, 1997; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). Individuals who possess certain favorable positions in networks, such as those who are centrally located, also have better performance outcomes, such as more frequent promotions and higher performance ratings (Brass, 1984; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001; Sparrowe, Liden, Wayne, & Kraimer, 2001). According to network theory, these positive results emerge because network structure and position affect access to unique and diverse information and resources, which can facilitate job performance (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973). Thus, network position and structure are both positively related to individual advancement towards professional goals.

For social networks to hold strategic potential, though, the fact that they are related to good outcomes is only part of what is needed by goal pursuers. A second requirement is that social networks can be shaped by individual actors. Network researchers have historically tended to emphasize the causal effects of network variables on individual outcomes, and have under-emphasized and sometimes denied causal effects of the individual on networks (Burt, 1984; Wellman, 1988). Indeed, Kilduff and colleagues described network research as depicting actors as

“underpsychologized” (Kilduff, Tsai, & Hanke, 2006). For example, Burt (1986) discounted the entrepreneurial “personality,” asserting that entrepreneurs are nothing more than the product of their structural position within the network. However, recent empirical work has shown that individual variance can predict network outcomes (Burt, 2010). For example, high self-monitors—individuals who present themselves differently in different situations to fit in with others (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1979)—tend to have contacts in multiple unconnected groups. As a result, they form networks rich with structural holes – the sparse regions that lie between dense regions of networks – and serve as boundary spanners between otherwise unconnected individuals (Mehra et al., 2001; Oh & Kilduff, 2008; Sasovova, Mehra, Borgatti, & Schippers, 2010). Recent papers have shown that other individual differences, such as neuroticism, need for cognition, and network personality, also affect networks (Anderson, 2008; Burt, 2012; Klein, Lim, Saltz, & Mayer, 2004).

Complementing the evidence that stable individual differences affect networks, other studies have demonstrated the effects of more temporary psychological states on social networks. For example, Smith et al. (2012) found that a job threat manipulation affected people’s activation of their networks. Specifically, they found that low status individuals facing job threat reported more constrained networks than did high status individuals. Social network activation also shifts in response to other psychological states such as identity conflicts (Menon & Smith, 2014), psychological safety (Schulte, Cohen, & Klein, 2012), and emotions (Shea, Menon, Smith, & Emich, 2015). Given the utility of networks for goals, and the fact that individual psychological influences—both chronic and temporary—can shape the way that people view (and thus, ultimately, interact with) their social networks, we suggest that goals may drive changes in how people cognitively activate social networks.

4. Goals in context: individual advancement and interpersonal affiliation

To examine the link between goals and social networks, we contextualized goals within the everyday career context, focusing on career goals related to individual advancement, such as Jane’s goal to earn a promotion, and contrasting those goals to social goals related to interpersonal affiliation, such as Lisa’s goal to befriend her teammates. We use individual advancement and social career goals because they give distinct examples of how goals can shape social networks and also because they can both be considered sub-goals in the hierarchy of a broader career goal (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Kruglanski et al., 2002). In part, this pragmatic approach also reflects the state of research on goal content. There are models of goal orientations and of underlying needs (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), but these orientations and needs cut across domains of goals. On the topic of goal content, theory is minimal. Indeed, “there is no set of content domains into which motive units can be classified in the same way that the Big Five domains serve as a classificatory taxonomy for trait terms” (Roberts & Robins, 2000, p. 1285). Instead, research tends to categorize goals by domains, like health, family, finances, etc. (e.g., Kaiser & Ozer, 1997; Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Husemann, 2009). It is possible that individually-oriented and interpersonally-oriented goals can be at different levels of an individual’s goal hierarchy or network (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Kruglanski et al., 2002) and thus are not necessarily independent; we will address this issue empirically (Study 3) and in our Discussion.

Despite the area’s lack of theoretical grounding, many researchers draw a distinction between individually-oriented and interpersonally-oriented goals, making this the field’s most

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