



Upward contacts in everyday life: Benefits of reaching hierarchical relations in ego-centered networks

Yang-chih Fu^{a,*}, Thijs A. Velema^{b,1}, Jing-Shiang Hwang^c

^a Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, 128 Academia Rd. Sec. 2, Nankang 115, Taipei, Taiwan

^b Department of Business Management, National Sun Yat-sen University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan

^c Institute of Statistical Science, Academia Sinica, 128 Academia Rd. Sec. 2, Nankang 115, Taipei, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have inspired inquiries about what circumstances allow people to gain from interactions with those who rank higher than themselves in the social hierarchy. We examine how self-reported benefits of such upward contacts vary by tie strength and network structures in everyday life. Data were drawn from contact diaries that 137 individuals recorded over seven months in 2014; these diaries captured unique features of 94,353 one-on-one contacts that 137 diary keepers made, along with the estimated tie strength and the extent of embeddedness among network members. Multilevel models with interaction terms show that diary keepers benefit from contacts with people who play higher hierarchical roles and that the benefits become more substantial when the higher-ranked others are weakly tied to the diary keepers and connected with fewer fellow network members. The paper extends contact diary studies to estimate alter-alter ties that help construct comprehensive structures in egocentric networks.

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1. Introduction

A central thesis in social resource theory argues that individuals benefit directly from relations with those occupying higher positions in the social hierarchy (Lin, 2001). Such upward connections help people attain instrumental goals, because the ties facilitate easier access to diverse and valuable information or resources that higher-ranked people tend to have at their disposal (Lin, 1999, 2001). The argument for upward social connections has found the most empirical support in the context of labor markets (Granovetter, 1988). In particular, reaching up along the occupational hierarchy helps individuals find employment, increase salary levels, and gain access to more prestigious jobs (Barbulescu, 2015; Castilla, 2005; Lin and Erickson, 2008).

Not all upward connections are beneficial, however, as recent studies have indicated. Even though those who rank high in social status might have relevant and valuable information, they do not necessarily share this information with others (Marin, 2012; Trimble O'Connor, 2013). For one thing, higher-ranked people may be unaware of how useful a particular piece of information might be

for others. Moreover, they may be reluctant to share information, because their reputation would suffer if the information were to fall into the wrong person's hands. In other words, individuals whose social positions are higher do not necessarily realize or appreciate opportunities for sharing information and resources. Even if they do, some may not be willing to share information and resources with those who rank lower in their networks. As a result, higher-ranked people may be more likely to share information with those in similar ranks, who are normally tied to them more strongly, while they may be reluctant to pass on information toward the lower-ranked, who tend to be weakly tied to them (Marin, 2013). When one does have a chance to socialize with such higher-ranked people, the interaction can become a source of subjective relative deprivation that is closely associated with depressive symptoms (Lee and Kawachi, 2017; Mishra and Carleton, 2015).

To better understand upward contacts, it is thus essential to take into account the perspectives of both parties involved in social interactions. Most higher-ranked people may be unaware of the value of the information they share with others. For those who have the opportunity to interact with them, however, the same piece of information may turn out to be so critical that they assess the upward contact in a contrasting fashion (cf. Su and Lin, 2013). In other words, it is plausible that even though higher-ranked people are reluctant to share unsolicited information, those who rank lower may still perceive benefits from reaching up along the social hierarchy.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: fuyc@sinica.edu.tw (Y.-c. Fu), thijs.velema@mail.nsysu.edu.tw (T.A. Velema), jshwang@stat.sinica.edu.tw (J.-S. Hwang).

¹ These authors contributed equally to this work.

Whereas it would be more comprehensive to investigate upward contacts from both parties' perspectives, it remains unexplored or unclear under what circumstances upward contacts bring about more benefits for lower-ranked individuals. Such beneficial effects remain uncertain mainly because the surrounding social contexts could be so complex that the outcomes of interactions may vary from contact to contact. In addition to various features unique to each specific contact, the perceived benefits also may depend upon two circumstantial factors: the strength of tie between the focal person (ego) and the target of contact (alter), and the network structures surrounding all of these targets. Because most empirical studies have examined the perceived benefits with survey data, it has been difficult to clarify how an ego experiences different benefits from a series of contacts with the same alter. Nor have researchers identified what kinds of network structures help explain variations at the contact level.

In the current study, we aim to explore the interactional and structural factors of upward social contacts by integrating insights and arguments about social exchange and network embeddedness into social resource theory (cf. Burt, 1992; Homans, 1974). Instead of relying on survey data that provide a large sample of observations at the individual and tie levels, we draw data from 137 seven-month contact diaries to analyze how the benefits of social interactions vary contact by contact within each specific interpersonal tie, as well as within each egocentric network. The detailed data structure of individuals, ego-alter ties, and contacts highlights the major advantages of using contact diaries that capture the multilevel dynamics of one-on-one interpersonal contacts in everyday life. Taking advantage of an extended version of contact diaries, we add information about alter-alter ties, yet another critical feature that allows us to estimate the extent to which an alter is embedded in the social connections with all other alters within ego's contact network. As a result, the additional information about alter-alter ties enables us to better examine whether upward contact in everyday life may be beneficial when one reaches into structural holes in ego-centered networks.

In sum, we break down ties into contacts in daily life to examine how the features of ties, their positions in social networks, and the circumstances surrounding each contact are related to the benefits people experience from their contacts with those in different hierarchical positions. More specifically, we follow previous studies and add the strength of ties as a potential factor that may affect the gains from interacting with those who rank higher (Marin, 2012; Trimble O'Connor, 2013). To contribute to the literature further, we examine how the benefits of reaching upward also vary by whether such upward contacts involve weak ties and whether they lead people into structural holes within their personal networks (Brass, 2009; Burt, 2009; Galunic et al., 2012). The background and research insights of the current study, therefore, come from not just social resource and social exchange theories that focus on hierarchical relations, but also arguments about how tie strength and network embeddedness may facilitate favorable social outcomes.

2. Resources from hierarchical relations, tie strength, and network embeddedness

Social resource theory generally asserts that contacts with people occupying higher positions in the social hierarchy tend to improve the returns of contacts and enrich one's social capital (Lin, 1999, 2001). Lin (2001: 61) articulated three reasons why contacts with those who rank higher improve one's chances of such gains. First, people who rank higher in social status typically command more resources and may provide better information, which often benefits those in contact with them. Second, interactions with higher-ranked alters with good social credentials might help raise

one's social standing or status, making it easier to achieve certain instrumental goals (cf. Podolny, 2005). Finally, interacting with higher-ranked alters may boost one's confidence and self-esteem, which in turn helps ego accomplish goals in future actions. Following these arguments, an increasing body of work has shown that people reaching up the social hierarchy are more successful in achieving instrumental goals than those who do not (cf. Barbulescu, 2015; Castilla, 2005; Lin and Erickson, 2008).

In addition to hierarchical relations, the relative strength of ties also plays a crucial role in social interactions. Social resource theory, in particular, suggests that the benefits of reaching up in the social hierarchy may be contingent on the strength of ego-alter ties (Lin, 1999, 2001). On the one hand, ego may perceive interactions with better-connected friends and acquaintances who rank higher to be more beneficial, because strong ties often lead to more trust (Coleman, 1990). As a result, strong ties enable people to be more aware of what kind of information and resources those who rank lower actually need, which helps reduce anxieties about potential damage to actors' reputation when they share valuable resources and information (Bian, 1997; Marin, 2012, 2013; Trimble O'Connor, 2013). Weak ties, on the other hand, could also be valuable, because they often generate better access to novel and non-redundant information (Granovetter, 1973). Along with more information and resources, such novel and non-redundant information would further help people when they interact with those weakly tied acquaintances who rank higher in social positions, especially because such information is unavailable elsewhere in ego's network.

Not only is such novel and non-redundant information linked to weak ties, but it also results from sparse network structures, or when network members are less connected with one another. Like tie strength, then, the degree of network embeddedness serves to mediate the contact benefits of reaching upward along the social hierarchy (Lin, 2001). By definition, an alter tends to be more embedded when he or she is familiar with more fellow members in an egocentric network, while a lower level of embeddedness signals that an alter knows fewer other alters in the same network (Galunic et al., 2012). In this sense, higher levels of embeddedness indicate network closure, while lower levels of embeddedness suggest that more structural holes and accompanying brokerage opportunities may exist (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973).

Taking the possible effects of tie strength into account, the degree of "network embeddedness" may mediate the benefits flowing from contacts with higher-ranked alters in two contrasting ways (Brass, 2009). On the one hand, because information and resources usually flow more easily through trusted ties embedded in denser areas of an egocentric network, or within network closure, contacts with better-embedded, higher-ranked alters could be more beneficial (Brass, 2009; Burt, 2009). On the other hand, however, social connections with higher-ranked alters should be more helpful when these alters are less embedded, or when they span structural holes. When such "network non-embeddedness" generates favorable opportunities, upward contacts tend to benefit by means of scarce, non-redundant novel information and resources from higher-ranked alters who are well embedded in the same egocentric network (Galunic et al., 2012). Like tie strength, therefore, the degree of network embeddedness represents a crucial structural factor in bringing about contrasting outcomes to contacts.

While social resource theory and relevant literature focus on social hierarchy, tie strength, and network embeddedness, other features at both tie and contact levels may also help explain why some contacts are more beneficial than others. Social exchange theory, for example, suggests that who initiates the contact mediates how one gains from contacts with people in higher social positions (Homans, 1974: 313–315). Even though, in general, people benefit more when they themselves initiate a contact (Obukhova and

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