Direct and indirect negative ties and individual performance

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ABSTRACT

We argue and find that negative ties are not always liabilities to workplace performance. Instead, negative ties can be beneficial depending on how socially distant they are from the person (i.e., whether they are direct or indirect negative ties), and how those ties are embedded with other ties. Results from a field study at a large life sciences company show that an employee's number of direct negative ties is related to poorer performance, as rated by that individual's supervisor. However, indirect negative ties can either be beneficial or liabilities to performance, depending on whether they are embedded in "open" or "closed" triadic structures.

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Research in the social network tradition argues that individuals' social relationships, or ties, provide them both opportunities and constraints in accessing valuable resources such as trust, knowledge, information, power, and social and political support (Borgatti and Foster, 2003; Borgatti et al., 2009; Brass, 1984; Brass et al., 2004). Of increasing interest in relating social network benefits and liabilities to outcomes has been the importance of *negative ties* – relationships in which at least one person has enduring, recurring negative feelings and/or behavioral intentions toward another (Labianca and Brass, 2006; Labianca, 2014). Negative tie research has largely focused on individuals' direct, dyadic experience with negative relationships, including dealing with extended relationship conflict, negative gossip, social exclusion, and interpersonal dislike (Duffy et al., 2002; Ellwardt et al., 2011; Labianca and Brass, 2006). Directly experiencing negative ties has been linked to a broad range of behavioral, physical, and psychological strains such as depression, life dissatisfaction, and reduced psychological well-being (e.g., Hirsch and Rapkin, 1986; Pagel et al., 1987; Rook, 1984). Negative relationships are also related to organizationally relevant outcomes such as lower individual performance, decreased satisfaction with one's group, and lower organizational attachment (e.g., Baldwin et al., 1997; Sparrowe et al., 2001; Venkataramani et al., 2013). The predominant theme of this research is that negative ties relate to a diverse set of liabilities for individuals. Yet most of this empirical research has focused on the situation where someone is directly involved in a negative tie with another person. What

is lacking is a perspective emphasizing that negative relationships can sometimes create positive externalities for other people in the network who are not directly involved in the negative relationship – that is, that *indirect* negative ties can sometimes be beneficial for individuals.

We draw on balance theory (Cartwright and Harary, 1956; Heider, 1958) and power-dependence exchange theory (e.g., Cook et al., 1983; Emerson, 1972b) to examine when indirect negative ties are related to benefits or liabilities in terms of supervisor-rated performance in a workplace setting. We argue that some network positions, such as "closed triads," can create performance liabilities for a focal individual (ego). We define closed triads as where three persons each have a tie to others in the triad (i.e., they are transitive). We specifically consider two special cases of closed triads which contain either direct or indirect negative ties from the perspective of the focal individual. First, we consider triads where ego has two positive ties (alters) who are themselves involved in a negative tie; this places ego in the difficult position of being stuck in between two opposing alters (see Fig. 1A), which can be a source of psychological and relational liabilities (Coser, 1956; Newcomb, 1968; Simmel, 1950, 1955; Zajonc, 1960). Second, we consider triads where ego has two negative tie alters who are themselves positively tied (see Fig. 1B), placing ego in a position of having allied adversaries, which is a source of liability for ego.

We further argue, however, that where ego is embedded in "open triads," that is, where there is no direct positive tie between the third individual and the ego (see Fig. 1C), ego will experience performance *benefits*. We argue that this structural position creates a dependence situation that ego can either intentionally or unintentionally exploit to ego's benefit. Finally, we move beyond

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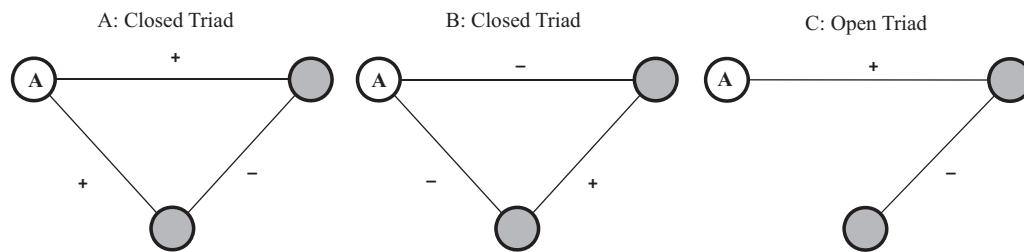E-mail address: joshua.marineau@ndsu.edu (J.E. Marineau).

Fig. 1. Examples of how the focal actor (A) can be embedded in an open or closed triad. Focal person "A" is two links removed along the shorted path from the negative tie in both triads (i.e., A is at a social distance of two from the negative tie). What differs is whether A has a positive relationship with one or both of the individuals involved in the negative tie. *Note*: Circles or nodes are people; "+" refers to a positive relationship; "−" refers to a negative relationship.

the triadic level to consider ego's position within the whole network of positive and negative ties. We use ego's Bonacich power centrality (Bonacich and Lloyd, 2004) to test whether underlying structural balance theory tenets, such as whether the individual's direct positive and negative ties are to people who are themselves popular or unpopular, have any discernible difference on ego's performance at work.

This study contributes in a number of ways. We contribute to social network theory (Borgatti et al., 2009; Zajonc and Sherman, 1967) by arguing that positive and negative ties should be studied together. We challenge previous arguments that negative ties are simply liabilities (Labianca and Brass, 2006) and show that we need more nuanced arguments about the relationship between the social distance (i.e., whether a tie is direct or indirect) and the benefits and liabilities that accrue from that relationship. We contribute to power-dependence exchange theory (e.g., Cook et al., 1983) by extending arguments beyond whether a positive relationship exists or not as the basis for benefits to accrue, to instead considering that some relationships regularly involve negative flows and exchanges, creating liabilities for some and benefits for others. Finally, we contribute to structural balance theory (e.g., Cartwright and Harary, 1956; Heider, 1958) by considering the possibility that imbalanced triads create differential liabilities and benefits for each member of the triad.

1. Negative and positive ties in organizations

Social network research has shown that the right social ties provide distinct benefits. For example, individuals who have relatively weak ties to various social cliques can be more successful in searching for jobs (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). Ties to high-status individuals, cross-unit relationships, and dense buy-in networks increase career performance and upward mobility (Bonacich and Lloyd, 2004; Lin and Dumin, 1986; Podolny and Baron, 1997; Seibert et al., 2001). Brokering between unconnected others improves information access and information diversity for individuals in organizations (Ronald Burt, 1992) and being central to an organization's networks of positive social ties increases power (Brass, 1984; Brass and Burkhardt, 1993). Social networks have also been related to individual creativity (Perry-Smith, 2006), organizational commitment (Morrison, 2002), and turnover (Krackhardt and Porter, 1985, 1986), among other outcomes.

Much of this organizational network research has focused on the structure of ties, with the debates focusing on which type of network structure performs best in a given context (e.g., dense vs. sparse networks; cf., Burt, 1987, 1992, 2001; Coleman, 1988). However, there has been less emphasis in understanding the content flows inherent in these network ties (cf, Levin et al., 2011; Mors, 2010; Rodan and Galunic, 2004), particularly with regard to affective content flows. This stands in stark contrast with the early social exchange and network researchers, who explicitly considered both the positive and negative affective content of relationships as being critical in explaining individuals' attitudes,

behaviors and outcomes (Homans, 1961; Sampson, 1969; Tagiuri, 1958; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). Most organizational field research after the 1960s largely concentrated on positive aspects of social networks, specifically on relationships that are positive or neutral, such as friendship or advice-seeking (Cornwell, 2005; Labianca, 2014). This research rarely examines the potential liabilities in personal social networks (e.g., Gargiulo and Benassi, 2000), and has largely failed to consider that some relationships convey negative flows and may be damaging to individuals' outcomes. Much of the network research that continued to examine both positive and negative ties together came from a structural balance theory perspective focused mainly on understanding the pressures being brought to bear in triads and larger social structures straining to either maintain or change the set of relationships within the structure (e.g., Cartwright and Harary, 1956; Davis, 1963; Doreian and Krackhardt, 2001; Heider, 1946; Hummon and Doreian, 2003).

Recent network research has begun to explore the role of negative ties in explaining individual outcomes in organizations in greater depth. In negative-tie relationships, at least one person in a dyad has an enduring negative schema about the other: long-term negative judgments, feelings, and/or behavioral intentions toward another (Casciaro and Lobo, 2008; Labianca and Brass, 2006). This research suggests that negative ties can reduce performance, keep others from helping, reduce trust, and inspire individuals to hinder another's progress (e.g., Venkataramani and Dalal, 2007) or harm the individual directly through negative exchanges (Lyons and Scott, 2012). Individuals with more negative ties are also more likely to have lower social satisfaction in their organization, which leads to lower organizational attachment (Venkataramani et al., 2013). Individuals who dislike someone are unlikely to seek advice from the person they dislike, even if that person is highly competent (Casciaro and Lobo, 2008). Negative relational embeddedness (having negative ties with individuals who are friends with each other) is related to a decrease in cognitive trust received from others (Chua et al., 2008). Individual centrality in a hindrance network, where others hinder an individual from completing their work by withholding valuable resources, results in lower in-role and extra-role performance (Sparrowe et al., 2001). Centrality in a network where individuals have an adversarial or conflictual relationship with others relates to lower satisfaction (Baldwin et al., 1997). All told, evidence is mounting that negative relationship ties can create liabilities for individuals in organizations both because resources are sometimes withheld from them, but also because negative flows are directed toward them. Research further suggests that the impact on outcomes per negative tie appears to be greater than the impact of positive ties (that is, that there is a negative asymmetry; cf., Labianca and Brass, 2006; Venkataramani et al., 2013).

Missing in this research, however, is a consideration that negative ties can also *benefit* individuals. To this end, we identify two primary considerations for understanding the potential benefits (and liabilities) of negative ties: *social distance* and *embeddedness*. *Social distance* refers to whether the negative tie is directly experienced by the person or indirectly experienced through another