Identities in flux: Cognitive network activation in times of change

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ABSTRACT

Using a dynamic cognitive model, we experimentally test two competing hypotheses that link identity and cognitive network activation during times of change. On one hand, affirming people's sense of power might give them confidence to think beyond the densest subsections of their social networks. Alternatively, if such power affirmations conflict with people's more stable status characteristics, this could create tension, deterring people from considering their networks' diversity. We test these competing hypotheses experimentally by priming people at varying levels of status with power (high/low) and asking them to report their social networks. We show that confirming identity—not affirming power—cognitively prepares people to broaden their social networks when the world is changing around them. The emotional signature of having a confirmed identity is feeling comfortable and in control, which mediates network activation. We suggest that stable, confirmed identities are the foundation from which people can exhibit greater network responsiveness.

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1. Introduction

According to White (2008: p. 1), "Identities spring up out of efforts at control in turbulent context[s]." This paper provides evidence of a reverse causal process whereby people's images of their social worlds can also spring from their sense of self. Specifically, we propose that people's identities—i.e., their schematic knowledge about who they are (Markus, 1977)—both emerge from social relations (see Fuchs, 2001; Podolny, 1993; Bothner et al., 2010; Smith, 2011) and affect people's perceptions of who they are connected to. As people's identity states shift (Smith, 2013; Benoit-Smullyan, 1944; Marks, 1977; McAdam, 1982) so too does their mental representation of their social networks.

We argue that people's identities affect whether they envision their social networks as broad (i.e. sparse and relationally heterogeneous) or narrow (i.e. dense and redundant), independent of the size and density of their actual or *potential* social networks. This paper thus marks an exploration of the psychological antecedents that allow people to explore the diversity of their networks. Like White, turbulent contexts, and social change specifically, play an important role in our analysis. While change creates an impetus to search for new information (Cyert and March, 1963; Stinchcombe, 1990; Weick, 1995, cited in Greve and Taylor, 2000), perhaps triggering people to dynamically activate diverse subsections of their networks, people must also feel comfortable enough to embrace the resulting diversity. If they do not, they might instead respond to change by retreating to the densest, most homogeneous subsections of their networks.

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We do not seek to fully adjudicate between the benefits of dense vs. expansive networks (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 1980). While dense social cliques can offer safety and support, people may also benefit by exploring their surroundings and seeking out new sources of information. The latter behavior is particularly important, though not necessarily automatic, when navigating social change (Cyert and March, 1963; Stinchcombe, 1990; Weick, 1995; Greve and Taylor, 2000; Levinthal and March, 1993). Thus, using the condition of social change as a backdrop, our principal argument is that people must feel psychologically comfortable to engage the diversity that accompanies expanded search (Lawler, 2001). This tradeoff between comfort and search presents a problem, however: if people feel uncomfortable, they might respond to change by retreating to the densest subsection of their social networks, thereby eliminating opportunities for exploration at the very moment that exploration may prove most beneficial. Building on this premise, we test two competing hypotheses on the links between power, identity, and social network perceptions.

On one hand, it is possible that affirming one's power and agency would give people the confidence to network broadly. Indeed, many policy initiatives are constructed according to this view. To make the lives of the weakest members of society better, it seems intuitive that initiatives designed to empower those people would have positive consequences (Chakravarti, 2006). The Government of India, for example, declared 2001 the empowerment of women year, and passed a national policy around it (http://www.wcd.nic.in/empwomen.htm). Similar programs from community organizations in the US also rely on affirming those without power and encouraging them to believe that they have the ability to change their situations (McAdam, 1982). Accordingly, it is plausible that people who feel powerful should be more likely to "activate," or call to mind, broad social networks.

On the other hand, having a stable sense of identity may be important for fostering the sorts of emotions—e.g., comfort and control—that are necessary to network broadly. Whereas power affirmations will produce such feelings for some people, people who are not used to feeling powerful (e.g., people with low socioeconomic status) might find it discomforting to imagine having power and exercising it (Ibarra, 1999; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989). Thus, an alternative to the power affirmation hypothesis suggested above is this: confirming one's identity (see Polzer et al., 2002; Milton and Westphal, 2005; Swann, 1983) promotes feelings of comfort and control that are necessary precursors to activating broad, diverse networks. It is not power, per se, but rather consistency between the temporary feeling of power and the more stable sense of self that prepares people to engage diversity in the world around them.

2. Cognitive networks and social network activation

Rather than focusing on network properties as an objective external reality, cognitive approaches to studying networks focus on how people mentally represent network properties (Carley, 1986; Kilduff et al., 2006; Krackhardt, 1987; Michaelson and Contractor, 1992; Johnson and Orbach, 2002). Recent cognitive networks research additionally links people's representations of their networks to situational cues and psychological states (Smith et al., 2012) to illuminate the dynamic processes by which people's perceptions of their networks can shift on a moment-to-moment basis. The present paper builds on arguments proposed in Smith, Menon, and Thompson, (2012) by (a) exploring identity shifts as a source of these dynamic cognitions about social networks, and (b) showing how psychological states (e.g. comfort) mediate between specific identity states and network perceptions. How people see the self at a given moment directly impacts the way they feel and how they envision the social networks around them (Menon and Blount, 2003; Menon et al., 2006).

To develop our hypotheses, we draw on the tri-partite, nested representation of social networks proposed in Smith et al. (2012):

(1) *Potential network.* People's full set of contacts. The potential network represents people's budget constraint—all the contacts who they might access are included in the potential network.
(2) *Activated network.* The core concern of the present paper is the activated network, or the cognitive representation of people's networks. As a subset of the potential network, which is an objective structure, the activated network is a subjective, cognitive structure (cf., Carley, 1986; Krackhardt, 1987). Cognitive activation occurs when a concept is primed and becomes mentally available and accessible to perceivers (Higgins and Kruglanski, 1996). When applied to network research, cognitive activation implies that situational priming can shape how network knowledge comes to mind (Smith et al., 2012).
(3) *Mobilized network.* This is the subset of the activated network from which people draw when they solicit resources. In comparison to the activated network, which results from a private, mental activity, mobilization is a public, social activity through which people call on contacts and seek resources (McCarthy and Zald, 2001; Smith, 2005).

While the present research was not designed to definitively test the links between activation and mobilization, psychological evidence does indicate that cognitive activation often facilitates behavioral responses. While activated knowledge structures (e.g. primes, activated network contacts) could seem like mere fleeting suggestions, they can operate as goals that can endure until they are satiated or acted upon. Research has established the considerable endurance of primes (e.g. Woltz and Was, 2007 found no decrease in priming effects after 36 Stroop trials; Was (2010) found that priming effects persisted after 24 h delays). One of the longest priming effects ever documented indicated that a single exposure to the American flag shifted support to Republicanism up to 8 months later (Carter et al., 2011). As it pertains to our paper, we simply suggest that