

Informal Network in Organizations: Influence on Women's Opportunities and Career Success

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Abstract: Gender differences in career outcomes are a key area of examination and discussion within the domain of occupational studies. The reasons for and the mechanisms behind the disadvantages of women in the workplace received much attention. Ever since the emergence of network study, an increasing number of scholars started to realize the importance of social ties, which reflect social capital and the associated resources, regarding the success in careers of females and males. An informal network, which is embedded in formal structures of organizations, can provide individuals with resources and support besides their structural relations. This paper draws on existing literature on the informal network and tries to find the mechanism of gender differences in the workplace from a network perspective. Through the analysis of the understanding that females tend to engage less in informal networks hence resulting in disadvantaged career outcomes, this paper links the preface to a deeper organizational and structural context of gender norms and power that perpetuate in interpersonal relations through informal networks.

Keywords: Informal social networks, gender, occupation

1. Introduction

In recent decades, some scholars have sought to address issues around informal networks that are embedded in formal organizational structures, some aimed at the formation of informal networks and their influences on culture, norms and operation effectiveness in formal organizational structures, while a few utilized a framework of gender and focused on the role of informal network on women's experiences in engaging in and gaining from the informal network. Although gender preference difference is often brought up as the main driver of gendered outcomes, more research extends to address the structural context that impacts individuals' choice. It is argued that an informal network facilitates the integration of institutional and social contexts in the organizational level of interpersonal relations. Drawing on existing literature, this paper specifically focuses on the role of informal networks in gender issues within organizations, by reviewing the existing literature and seeking the reasons behind gender inequalities in career success. In specific, the present study starts with an introduction to informal network and their influences on individuals, then moves further to explain the role of homophily in gender differences in network engagement and explore the structural context that influence the lack of availability of instrumental informal network to females, intending to explain gender differences in informal network engagement and career outcomes.

2. Introduction to informal network

An informal network is a social network that is constructed under a hierarchical formal structure within organizations. The social network is formed by socializing behaviors and interpersonal relations. As such, a network is often theorized as a way to interpret the relationships among individuals, which are also called actors or nodes [1]. The concept of social capital refers to a reciprocal relation between each two actors within a society. As such, the amount of social capital implies the potential amount of resources that individuals can gain from those they know [2]. A tie refers to a relationship between two actors, of a variety of natures and types, including married couples, friends, co-workers, etc. Differences in the nature of ties raise discussions over the type of ties that could influence individual actors differently. Granovetter proposed a categorization of social ties with their strong or weak nature. It is suggested that strong ties share a lot of similarities, while the weak ones are constructed by people who meet occasionally. As homogeneous people tend to form strong networks but also share similar experiences or knowledge, weak ties often contribute to source of information from people within different cliques and share a lot of differences [3]. To further address the theory of social capital, Putnam suggested two types of capital, bridging and bonding capitals [4]. Bonding capitals are formed by strong ties that share similarities and strong relational roles such as kinship, while bridging capital refers to connections with people outside of inter-related cliques. When individuals link two different cliques, they are serving a bridging function, that fills the structural hole and enable a flow of information between two identical networks [5]. In terms of the categorization of social ties, research on informal network in organizations often suggest two types of them, one consists of expressive support that is formed by people with much similarity and emotional attachment, and the other is more instrumental, formed by people exchanging knowledge and information [6]. As such, the informal network could help people obtain different types of support according to the specific kinds of ties they have. As different types of ties serve different functions for individuals, research on the informal network often attempt to distinguish between expressive functions that allow mutual support, and instrumental functions that facilitate career development.

Scholars have addressed the issue of informal networks about organizational culture and individual value [7-9] and have shed light on the result of a strong informal network on marginalization and exclusion [10, 11]. Besides the direct organizational impact of informal networks, scholars pointed out that informal networks should be analyzed in a more complex way with formal structure which they are embedded [12, 13]. For example, consistency in formal and informal relationships with co-workers leads to a greater individual sense of attachment [12]; better organizational performance and efficiency could have resulted from an alignment in a better fit in formal and informal networks regarding their overall connectivity, the convenience of interaction, homophily within the network, as well as individual presentation of connectivity [13].

3. Informal network and gender inequalities

Social capital theory and concepts of informal network suggest that people can gain support from their social network, either emotional support or sharing of information. Individuals' ability to engage in informal networks as well as their positions within the network determines who they know and the amount of resources they could gain. Further, Brass suggested that when individuals have a higher level of centrality within the networks, they are more likely to be perceived as influential by their supervisors [14]. An informal network could be key to the career success of employees and has gained attention from recent research on gender inequalities in career outcomes.

When studying informal network from a gendered perspective, homophily commonly becomes the center of attention and is used to address the perception that similarity of actors can give rise to probability of a link between them [15]. Hendrick suggested that people tend to communicate and interact with persons of their gender, hence resulting in difficulties in communication between people of different genders [16]. It is also found that male managers tend to feel uncomfortable communicating with women [17]. As such, informal networks are more likely to be formed by people of the same gender. Furthermore, it is proposed that multiple types of relationships can be produced between two actors, when there are various types of relationships that serve different functions [18]. For example, the colleague can serve both roles of offering emotional support as well as providing information for career development. In this case, homophily is reproduced and enhanced with multiplexity, with more things in common and stronger connections [15]. In this way, social ties become stronger when they serve more than one function, and different abilities to establish such social ties may result in differences in gaining support accordingly.

4. Gender differences in preferences

Regarding gender differences in engagement in informal networks, it is often suggested that females and males differ in the preference for engaging in informal networks. Males prefer homophily for both affiliation and information sharing, while females establish friendships with other females and look for instrumental access through males [6]. This gendered preference is a source of gender difference in their positions within different informal networks, whether instrumental or supportive, hence resulting in different career outcomes. Moreover, Hanson found that women's network tends to be smaller and community-focused [19]. It is also agreed that females are in favour of psychological benefits from their network than support on career [20]. At the same time, research on collaboration in academia claimed a limited level of homophily is found within gender groups, with an explanation that higher education or status is associated with a lower difference between females and males, hence resulting in decreased significance in homophily [15]. In the workplace, when certain people provide emotional support as well as instrumental help, they serve multiple functions with a coincidence of two or more roles. As such, under the presumption of gendered preference on the establishment of networks, males are more likely to establish ties that are both advising as well as communicative [6]. Therefore, females' preference for interpersonal relations brings obstacles to their career success with uniplex ties that are clearly distinguished between the function of expressive support from females and instrumental access from males.

However, it is argued that the so-called gender preference could be a result of organizational and social structures that perpetuate interpersonal interactions [21-22, 14]. Greguletz et al. tried to explain gender preference based on social exchange theory [21]. By interviewing high-profile female leaders, they revealed that females tend to struggle with relational morality. It was uncovered that females tend to doubt their ability to adhere to the norm of reciprocity, especially when there is a compromise between work and family, some females worry about being unable to spend sufficient time working and concerned about not fulfilling an ideal role as employees. Furthermore, females are more likely to be self-critical in their value in the job market and are lack self-confidence than their male counterparts. The gendered modesty makes them less comfortable expressing themselves or attending important networking event. In this case, work-family conflict as well as the structural norm that influences individual females' self-critique leads to a perceived inclination not to attend networking events or engage in informal networks. As such, relational morality and gendered modesty become a source of hesitation in front of engaging in informal networks that could instrumentally offer them more opportunities for success in career. Similarly, research on women senior managers revealed that the "preferred networks" is simply a reflection of existing social structures [22]. It is a socialized spiral of gendered knowledge that perpetuate in networking and resulting in women less likely to

establish instrumental ties with other females. It is noticeable that Brass found that women are more adept than men to engage in informal networks, especially when women interact with other women [14]. This is inconsistent with former argument that females are less willing or likely to engage in informal network. To explain this, the author stressed the importance of considering organization structure and pointed out that the survey used a sample of balanced number of female and male respondents rather than a male-dominated sample. As such, informal interactions are influenced by formal structural positions. It is further argued that females' formal position in an integrated network with a mix of genders is considered more important than that of males as well as that in all-female networks. This means that women in an integrated network tend to be in a more critical position within the organizational structure. Therefore, taking part in, especially be in the central position of the departmental, men's and dominant coalition network is necessary for a female to be influential in workplace, being promoted and succeeding in her career. In this way, gender differences in networking outcomes are argued to be a result of formal hierarchical structure of organizations rather than gendered preference.

5. Gender differences in availability to informal networks

Besides gendered preference for networking, another scope of analysis is the availability of informal networks for females, which linked gender differences to organizational and social structures. Research on the technology industry uncovered the significance of geek culture, which played a role in reproducing gender inequality and making females less welcomed by the dominant community [23]. It is suggested that the term "Geek" often refers to White, Asian, males who have computer-related hobbies. Embracing a geek way of acting as a symbolic capital of being a programmer, software engineer, or technical expert leads to a stereotypical view of people who work in the industry. In this way, a collective celebration of certain culture or attributes within an organization help create an "inequality regime", in which gender inequalities in the workplace is produced through daily practices under the influence of surrounding society [24]. Within the context of a geek culture, a race and gender-neutral style of behaving can help hide the femineity and help workers become "insiders" within the male-dominated network. It was found that LGBTQ whites and Asians who are perceived to have gender fluidity are free from microaggressions [23]. They cultivate a style of communication and dress similar to males, so that they can secure respect and belonging. Greguletz et al. concluded that homophily is a barrier against the possibility of females engaging in informal networks [21]. It was revealed from interviews that female employees tend to perceive that they were working in a boys' club, with a male-dominated power network. The subtle sign of exclusion is produced through network activities that align with stereotypical male interests, including table soccer and after-work beers. In this way, being subtly excluded from networking activities leads to exclusion from informal networks, hence placing females in a disadvantaged position with a lack of alignment in formal working relationships and informal social ties. Similarly, Williams et al. found that when females working in organizations dominated by males sometimes attend the social events held by employers to let women communicate with each other [25]. However, almost all events end up in talking about family issues, or a successful icon sharing her story that is unique while overlooking those who are suffering. During the events or chats in these scenarios, females have few opportunities to establish instrumental relationships, and nothing was brought up to challenge their structural deficit. Besides official networking events, some females tried to organize small meetings for informal networking, but soon been criticized as a "ladies' boondoggle" [25]. Accordingly, under the influence of structural norms and stereotypical social roles of females, they have limited availability to informal networks, either through official networking events or by organizing small-scale events.

Although it is suggested that the exclusion due to homophily could be mediated by differences in background characteristics, such as employees' position, rank and department [6], Durbin argued that

informal networks and barriers to females reflect a structural form of power with hierarchical positions and resources that held by males [22]. It was found that females who work in a formal structure with an integrated workgroup where there are mix of genders can benefit from the structure: an organization structure with balanced gender positions facilitates females to engage in an all-male network, or even become central in the network [14]. Research on policy-making in organizations further revealed that an inclusive informal network could in turn impact the legislative process. It was found that companies are more likely to adopt an approach that celebrates diversity; for example, through promotion or recruiting process, when there are informal networks that are inclusive to minorities [26]. Therefore, females' availability of informal networks should be interpreted with formal structures of organizations and their positions within them. Although there is a lack of research systematically addressing the interplay of the informal and formal networks from a gendered perspective, informal networks could reproduce the deficit position of females within organizations by further excluding them from the male-dominated network.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, social capital theory suggests that interpersonal relationships could be resources of help, affirmation, and information. Although it is generally believed that weak ties could be more helpful for individuals' career achievement regarding the provision of information, research on informal networks and their role in individuals' career development tends to focus on the concepts of homophily and multiplexity. It is suggested that people tend to establish relationships with people who share similarities, regardless of the aim or function of the ties. However, concerning studies on gendered preference, it was revealed that females tend to establish instrumental ties that can be helpful for their career success with males rather than people of the same gender. Explanation for this preference extends beyond individual-level preference, to an organizational and social level of gendered deficit regarding their positions within the hierarchical structure of organizations. It was suggested that preferring to connect with males was because of a lack of useful ties that can celebrate homophily as well as offering them possibilities for career development. Besides, it is found that females are less likely to engage in networking events than their male counterparts. Gendered modesty and a lack of self-confidence especially under the situation of a need for work-family balance can help explain it. Further, females are facing a lack of availability to instrumental networks, which are mainly male-dominated. In this case, structural norms associated with certain job roles could perpetuate through informal networks and result in females being excluded from the all-male clubs and unable to form a supportive females' network that can generate resources for career development. It is noticeable that research about gender inequalities in the workplace tend to focus either on the informal or formal networks, while overlooking the interplay of these two. As such, future research on gender issues in informal networks could consider their formal positions and systematically address the interplay from a perspective of gender inequality in career development.

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