

## EXPLORING THE SOCIAL LEDGER: NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND NEGATIVE ASYMMETRY IN SOCIAL NETWORKS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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We explore the role of negative relationships in the context of social networks in work organizations. Whereas network researchers have emphasized the benefits and opportunities derived from positive interpersonal relationships, we examine the social liabilities that can result from negative relationships in order to flesh out the entire “social ledger.” Deriving our argument from theory and research on negative asymmetry, we propose that these negative relationships may have greater power than positive relationships to explain workplace outcomes.

A man’s stature is determined by his enemies, not his friends (Al Pacino, *City Hall*).

Employees in organizations are embedded in social networks that can provide opportunities and benefits, such as job attainment, job satisfaction, enhanced performance, salary, power, and promotions (e.g., Brass, 1984, 1985; Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Seidel, Polzer, & Stewart, 2000; Sparrowe, Liden, Wayne, & Kraimer, 2001). Although early social exchange theorists and network researchers considered both the positive and negative aspects of relationships (e.g., Homans, 1961; Tagiuri, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; White, 1961), over the past two decades scholars have focused so intensively on the positive aspects of network relationships that social network research has become equated with research on social capital. Social capital refers to the idea that individuals’ social contacts convey benefits that create opportunities for competitive success for them and for the groups in which they are members (i.e., Burt, 1992, 1997; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Seibert, Kramer, & Liden,

2001).<sup>1</sup> We do not dispute the beneficial aspects of social networks, but we feel that the overemphasis on researching the positive aspects of networks comes at the expense of fleshing out what we term the *social ledger*—both the potential benefits and the potential liabilities of social relationships. Just as a financial ledger records financial assets and liabilities, the social ledger is an accounting of social assets—or social capital—derived from positive relationships and social liabilities derived from negative relationships.

To understand the complete social ledger, we address the role of negative relationships in organizations—ongoing and recurring relationships within the context of a work organization in which at least one person dislikes another. For example, just as an employee’s friends and acquaintances may help the employee get promoted by providing such things as critical information, mentoring, and good references, negative relationships with others may prevent promotion if these people withhold critical infor-

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<sup>1</sup> *Social capital* is a broad, multilevel term. It has been described as an attribute of nations and geographic regions (Fukuyama, 1995), communities (Putnam, 1995), and organizations (Leana & Van Buren, 1999). Our definition focuses on individuals’ positions within a social network and their potential ability to improve their own outcomes, as well as those of their group, because of their social contacts (Burt, 1992, 1997; Coleman, 1988, 1990).

mation or provide bad references. Likewise, positive relationships may facilitate knowledge transfer that improves group or organizational performance (Hansen, 1999; Tsai, 2001), whereas negative relationships may impede the exchange of performance-enhancing information. Thus, it is important to consider the negative side of the social ledger—social liabilities as well as the frequently researched social capital.<sup>2</sup>

Negative relationships are of particular importance when we consider the concept of negative asymmetry: the hypothesis that, in certain circumstances, negative relationships may have greater explanatory power than positive relationships. Negative stimuli have been found to have greater explanatory power than positive or neutral stimuli in a diverse range of situations, including person perception and social judgment (see Taylor, 1991, for a review). In this paper we extend that concept of negative asymmetry to explore social relationships in organizations. We propose that negative relationships in organizations may have a greater effect on socioemotional (e.g., organizational attachment) and task outcomes (e.g., job performance) than positive relationships.

We begin by looking at negative relationships in more detail and reviewing theoretical explanations and empirical support for a generalized negative asymmetry. We then present evidence of negative asymmetry in social relationships in work organizations. Finally, we develop a preliminary framework for analyzing negative relationships in organizations.

<sup>2</sup>Other researchers have described the “dark side” of social capital as “opportunity costs” (e.g., Gargiulo & Benassi, 1999; Leana & Van Buren, 1999). It is important to note that we focus on the social liabilities created by negative relationships, rather than the opportunity costs of building positive relationships or social capital. As Granovetter (1985) notes, the obligations and expectations of strong, positive, long-lasting relationships may prevent a person from realizing greater economic opportunities by constraining the search for and development of new trading partners. Thus, there may be opportunity costs and tradeoffs associated with building positive relationships and social capital. We focus, instead, on recurring negative relationships. These do not represent lost opportunities, the indirect cost of acquiring social capital by having some positive relationships rather than other positive relationships, or pursuing weak ties rather than strong ties. Rather, they are the potential liabilities or hindrances that result from negative relationships.

## NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

All relationships have both positive and negative aspects. Negative encounters, cognitions, or behaviors can occur on occasion in any relationship. People consider the various punishments and rewards that arise from their interactions with others and sever or continue ties on the basis of these judgments (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Although people may intend to be rational and calculative, their judgments are often affective as well as cognitive and might appear “irrational” to an observer.

People form global “like” and “dislike” judgments of and overall feelings toward others (Berscheid & Walster, 1969; Newcomb, 1961; Tagiuri, 1958). Over time, these judgments, along with the complex emotions and perceptions associated with them, lead people to form person schemas about those with whom they interact—sets of cognitions and feelings that determine how they will approach future interactions (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). *Negative relationships represent an enduring, recurring set of negative judgments, feelings, and behavioral intentions toward another person—a negative person schema.* At least one person in the relationship has adopted a relatively stable pattern of dislike for the other, and possibly an intention to behave so as to disrupt the other’s outcomes.

Usually, relationships in the workplace are “friendly,” “positive,” or at least “neutral.” Although occasional dislikes may arise, creating temporary discomfort or animosity, or even interrupting the attainment of individual or organizational goals, on the whole, the overall rewards of the positive working relationships overshadow the rough spots (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Thus, people may have negative encounters without having negative relationships form. Conversely, one person may dislike another person without any observable or latent conflict. Although conflict may be a precursor to and a possible residual of negative relationships, we do not equate negative relationships with conflict encounters.

The relationships we examine are relatively rare, with recent empirical studies suggesting that they make up only 1 to 8 percent of the total number of relationships in an organization (e.g., Baldwin, Bedell, & Johnson, 1997; Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000; Kane & Labianca, 2005; Labianca, Brass, & Gray, 1998). Yet their rarity

belies their importance. Negative relationships develop when two people in an organization maintain some kind of working relationship with each other and when one (or both) of those people, for whatever reason, dislikes the other. The dislike may be mild or severe, based on personal associations, prejudices, or whims, or on specific objections to the other's social or professional behavior or performance. The relationship may occur across any vertical or horizontal organizational division and within any organizational group, and it may involve any number of status and power differentials. The object of the dislike may return it with more or less fervor, and not necessarily for the same reasons; the two people may work closely with each other, or interact only occasionally. Others in the organization (including the object of dislike) may or may not be aware that the negative relationship exists and may or may not respond to it; moreover, the two who are actually in that relationship may not be fully aware of its negative nature.

Whatever the source of the negative feelings, and however they are manifested or concealed, the negative relationship we describe is one that is enduring, intrinsic to the organization's workflow, and, we argue, harmful in some way to the participants.<sup>3</sup> Negative relationships create social liabilities because they adversely affect individual outcomes, such as organizational attachment, and they adversely affect the ability of individuals to coordinate activities and cooperate to achieve organizational goals. For example, Jehn's (1995) study of people involved in "relationship conflict" indicated that relationship conflict in groups was consistently related to lower organizational attachment for the group members. She also found that

the members in the conflicts choose to avoid working with those with whom they experience conflict. Some group members attempted to redesign their work area or job in the group so that they no longer would have to interact with the others involved in the conflict, sometimes by

moving to another desk or getting needed information from another source (1995: 276).

Although we do not equate negative relationships with conflict episodes, we argue that negative relationships may lead to such behaviors as avoidance efforts and job redesigns and will have negative repercussions for the individuals involved.

## CHARACTERIZING NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Four interplaying characteristics determine the extent to which negative relationships result in liabilities for the employees in an organization. First, the relationship's *strength* refers to the intensity of dislike. Although social network researchers have often investigated the strength of positive relationships (based on Granovetter's [1973] distinction between strong ties as friends and weak ties as acquaintances), we extend strength of ties to include negative relationships. For example, when the relationship involves mild dislike, workers may be able to ignore the negative relationship dynamics to act in a "professional manner" by focusing on goal accomplishment. The result may be only mild discomfort and slightly lower job satisfaction. However, as intensity increases, workers may find it increasingly difficult to focus on interdependent goals. Thus, strong dislike should exacerbate negative behaviors and the social liabilities of negative relationships. The strength of the negative relationship may be affected by its history. For example, a once-positive relationship involving a great degree of trust and vulnerability might have been violated, creating an extremely negative affective and behavioral response (cf. Jones & Burdette, 1994; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). This type of normative violation of the friendship bond increases the strength of the negative relationship, because the degree of punishment inflicted (hurt, anger, sadness about the loss of a friendship, or the ego threat from rejection or disloyalty) can be severe when one member is extremely vulnerable.

Second, *reciprocity* refers to whether an individual is the object or source of dislike, or if the dislike is reciprocated (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). The greatest social liability occurs when both parties dislike each other, but dislike does not have to be reciprocated in order for it to be a liability. For example, even if you like a person

<sup>3</sup> Social exchange theorists (e.g., Emerson, 1972) define negative ties differently. They view a negative tie from a resource dependence perspective: if person A occupies a position that person B can easily bypass to get a needed resource, then person A has a negative tie with person B. Our definition of negative ties, however, incorporates an affective judgment of another person, without regard to the relative dependence of that person on another for resources.

who dislikes you, that person may make it more difficult for you to accomplish your tasks by withholding important information, by failing to provide a reference for you when needed, or by spreading negative gossip about you. Negative outcomes also exist when you dislike someone who likes you. This may be annoying or burdensome; working with people you dislike can lead to dissatisfaction and turnover. In extreme cases (e.g., stalking), you may end up feeling persecuted, frustrated, and victimized. Although negative outcomes are attached to each, we expect the negative impact of these relationships to increase as one goes from being the source of dislike to being the object, and then to the dislike being reciprocated.

The third characteristic, *cognition*, refers to whether the person knows the other person dislikes him or her. Although cognition is not necessary for harm to occur, high cognition will cause more discomfort than a lack of cognition and is more likely to lead to reciprocated feelings of dislike and negative behavior toward the other person (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). We acknowledge that cognition might lead to attempts to improve the relationship, but there is no guarantee that the other party will also seek to improve the relationship. Even in the case where cognition leads to avoiding the other person, such avoidance does not guarantee that the other person might not cause harm. Thus, cognition generally results in greater liability than noncognition.

For the final characteristic, we go beyond the dyad to add a network characteristic—*social distance*. Social distance refers to whether the negative tie is direct (you are part of the dyad with a negative relationship) or indirect (you are connected to a person who has a negative relationship with another person). The distance between one person and another is the length of the shortest path between them (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). We expect that direct involvement in a negative relationship will result in increased social liabilities, but we do not ignore the possibility that indirect relationships may also produce social liabilities. For example, being a friend of a person who is disliked may be a liability because you are associated with the disliked person and treated similarly (Sparrowe & Liden, 1999).

These four characteristics combine to determine the extent of the social liability. We define

*the social liability of an individual's social network as the linear combination of strength, reciprocity, cognition, and social distance of each negative tie, summed across all negative ties.*<sup>4</sup> The relative weight of each characteristic is an empirical question that needs to be resolved through future research and that currently goes beyond the scope of our theory. Although our focus is on social liabilities, we can conversely suggest that the "asset" side of the social ledger is a combination of strength, reciprocity, cognition, and social distance of each positive tie, summed across all positive ties.

### NEGATIVE ASYMMETRY

While a great deal of research has been conducted on friendship formation, interpersonal attraction, and the evolution of friendships (see Berscheid & Walster, 1978, and Hays, 1988, for reviews), little has been conducted on the formation and development of negative relationships (Wiseman & Duck, 1995). The evolution of negative relationships may be very different from positive relationships. Friendship development is viewed as a gradual process. According to social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), friendship development proceeds from superficial interaction in narrow areas of exchange to increasingly deeper interaction in broader areas. Perceptions of the rewards and costs of interacting with a potential friend drive this progression—if you feel that the rewards from a relationship outweigh the costs, you will continue to progress toward closer friendship.

However, Wiseman and Duck's (1995) qualitative work indicates that negative relationship development is a much faster process, tending to lead to the other person's being included in coarse-grained categories, such as "rival" or "enemy." In contrast, fine-grained ranking distinctions are created for friends as they move through a relationship progression from casual acquaintances to close friends. Thus, the forma-

<sup>4</sup> The social liability function is as follows:

$$L_i = \sum_{i \neq j} (\alpha_1 s_{ij} + \alpha_2 s_{ji} + \beta_1 r_{ij} + \beta_2 r_{ji} + \gamma_1 c_{ij} + \gamma_2 c_{ji} - \delta d_{ij})$$

where  $L$  is the individual's social liability,  $s$  is negative tie strength,  $r$  is reciprocity,  $c$  is cognition, and  $d$  is social distance (shortest path) between individuals  $i$  and  $j$ .

tion of negative relationships is not the mere opposite of the way positive relationships form.

Not only is there evidence that negative relationships form differently, but there is also evidence that they may have greater power in explaining some socioemotional and task outcomes in organizations than positive relationships. We develop our argument that negative relationships are more important than positive ones on the basis of previous research demonstrating the relative salience of negative events and social relationships. We then summarize the theoretical arguments that have been offered to explain this negative asymmetry phenomenon.

### Negative Event Asymmetry

Taylor (1991) summarizes evidence that indicates that negative events elicit greater physiological, affective, cognitive, and behavioral activity and lead to more cognitive analysis than neutral or positive events. For example, studies have shown that subjects experience stronger physiological arousal when presented with opinions that contradict their own compared to opinions that support theirs or are neutral. Stronger arousal occurs when people are interacting with persons they dislike, rather than those they like or are neutral toward (e.g., Burdick & Burnes, 1958; Clore & Gormly, 1974; Dickson & McGinnies, 1966; Gormly, 1971, 1974; Steiner, 1966). Taylor (1991) also argues that negative events are stronger determinants of mood and affect than positive events. For example, research indicates that negative events are more strongly associated with distress and predict depression better than positive events predict positive emotions (e.g., Myers, Lindenthal, Pepper, & Ostrander, 1972; Paykel, 1974; Vinokur & Selzer, 1975).

Additional research has shown that negative affective states lead people to narrow and focus their attention (e.g., Broadbent, 1971; Easterbrook, 1959; Eysenck, 1976), particularly onto the negative information that seems to have caused that negative affective state (Schwarz, 1990). Positive events and information do not seem to have the same effect on cognitive processing (see Kanouse & Hanson, 1972, and Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). Negative stimuli also lead to more cognitive work and produce more complex cognitive representations than positive stimuli

(Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). Research has shown that people assign greater importance to negative information, including social information, than to positive information (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; for reviews, see Czapinski & Peeters, 1990, Peeters & Czapinski, 1990, and Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Likewise, studies in impression formation, person perception, and morality judgments have shown that negative information outweighs positive information in social judgments (for reviews, see Fiske & Taylor, 1984, 1991, and Kanouse & Hanson, 1972).

### Negative Asymmetry in Social Relationships

In addition to negative events, negative interactions have been found to have a disproportionately greater effect on such variables as life satisfaction, mood, illness, and stress than positive interactions (e.g., Finch, Okun, Barrera, Zautra, & Reich, 1989; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1986; Rook, 1984, 1990; Stephens, Kinney, Norris, & Ritchie, 1987). For example, Rook (1984) found negative aspects of social relationships to be more strongly related to psychological well-being than positive aspects. In a longitudinal study of people caring for a spouse with Alzheimer's disease, Pagel, Erdly, and Becker (1987) found that negative aspects of the caretaker's network were strongly associated with increased depression over a ten-month period but that positive aspects did not lessen the caretaker's depression.

In a network study of social relationships at work, Burt and Knez (1995, 1996) found that if an individual was already inclined to trust another party, positive third-party gossip amplified that trust. However, this amplification effect was stronger for negative gossip than for positive gossip, with negative gossip amplifying distrust more greatly. In an earlier study (Labianca, Brass, & Gray, 1998), we found that negative interpersonal relationships between members of different organizational groups were related to perceptions of intergroup conflict but that strong friendship ties had no relationship to perceptions of intergroup conflict. Strong positive relationships did not dampen or counterbalance the effects of negative relationships, indicating that a negative asymmetry existed. Finally, Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002) found that social undermining behaviors in the workplace were related to counterproductive behaviors

such as taking extended breaks, while social support behaviors were not related.

### Theoretical Explanations of Negative Asymmetry

Why do negative events and relationships have a stronger impact than positive events and relationships? Evolutionary psychologists explain negative asymmetry by noting that those who respond quickly to negative events increase their chances of survival (e.g., Cannon, 1932; see LeDoux, 1996, for a more recent neurobiological perspective). Developmental psychologists suggest that children discriminate and evaluate negative events earlier than positive events because negative events are more likely to interrupt action. Children learn the rules governing negative behavior first and, thus, become punishment oriented (cf. Piaget, 1932). Nature and nurture combine to make humans risk averse (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984).

Skowronski and Carlston (1989) summarize a number of theories that attempt to explain this negative asymmetry bias. These theories fall into two broad categories: discrepancy and ambiguity. Discrepancy theorists (e.g., Fiske, 1980; Helson, 1964; Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & McGillis, 1976; Sherif & Sherif, 1967) argue that negative events dominate social judgment because they contrast sharply with the positive events that people typically experience and expect. Positive or neutral responses are subject to strong social desirability norms. These positive expectations have been found consistently and are called "The Pollyanna Principle" (e.g., Matlin & Stang, 1978). They are an example of a broader positivity bias in expectations (e.g., Blanz, Mummendey, & Otten, 1995; see Markus & Zajonc, 1985, for a discussion of positivity biases). Interactions tend to be polite, and continued interaction tends to breed friendship (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950)—people rarely intend to make enemies. Because people expect positive information, negative information stands out and weighs more heavily in impression formation. Recent research (e.g., Baldwin et al., 1997; Gersick et al., 2000; Kane & Labianca, 2005; Labianca, et al., 1998) has shown that negative relationships are indeed rare and unexpected, involving only a small percentage of the possible relationships in a network. Ironically, the relative *rarity* of negative events and rela-

tionships may be the very force behind the greater relative *impact* of that negativity on individuals.

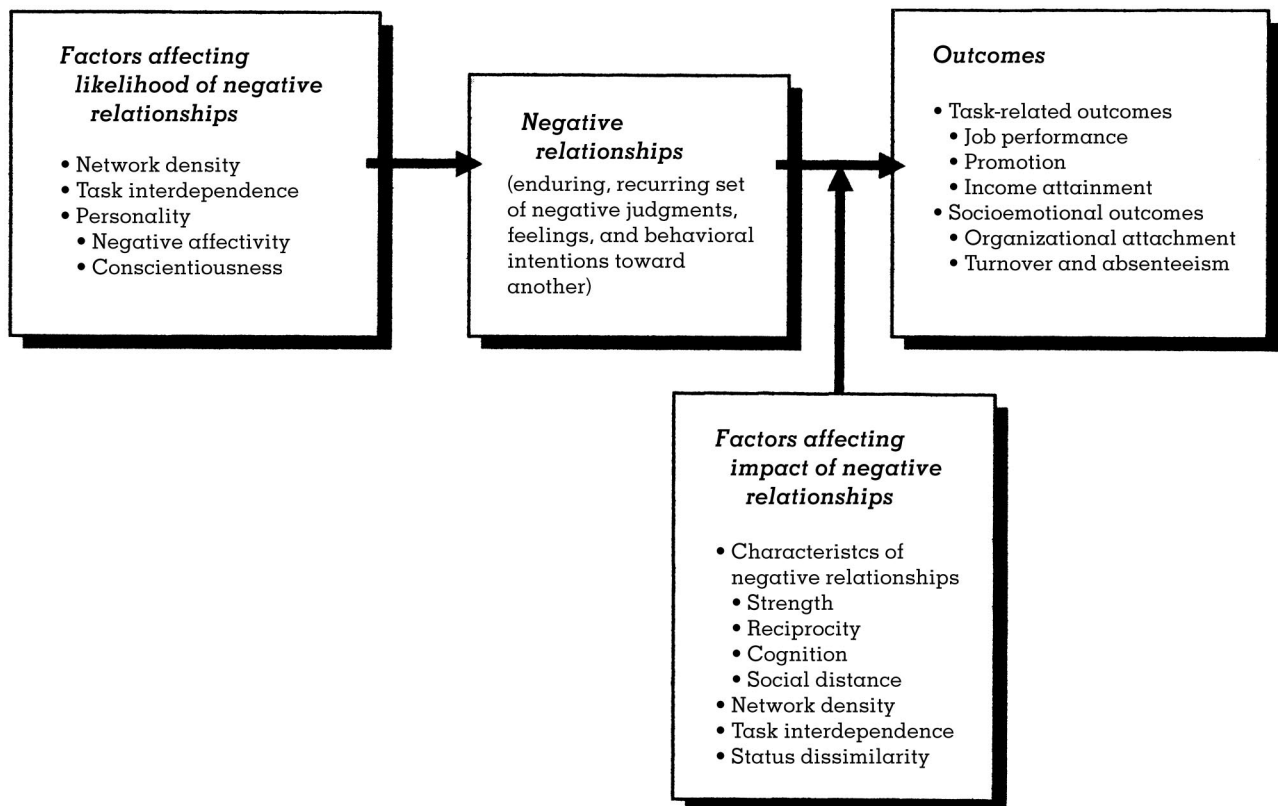
Ambiguity theorists (e.g., Birnbaum, 1972; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989; Wyer, 1973, 1974) argue that negative information is more closely attended to because it is less ambiguous than positive information. Because negative information cannot be discounted as a socially desirable response, it allows people to make social judgments more easily. Several studies have shown that negative behavioral cues are perceived as less ambiguous than positive cues (e.g., Birnbaum, 1972; Reeder, Henderson, & Sullivan, 1982; Reeder & Spores, 1983; Wyer, 1974).

Whether the negative asymmetry bias is driven by the discrepancy between the expected behavioral norms in organizations and a person's actual behaviors, or because a person's negative behaviors are attributed to being an unambiguous window into what he or she is like as a person, the broader point is that the negative side of the social ledger is different from the positive side of the ledger. In addition, people may be paying more attention to the negative side of the ledger than network researchers have acknowledged to date.

### CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

We now turn to a discussion of the social liabilities or consequences of negative relationships for individuals in organizations. As a number of organizational scholars have noted (e.g., Kabanoff, 1991; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Polley, 1987), individuals in organizations face two fundamental issues: achieving task-related outcomes (e.g., job performance) and achieving socioemotional outcomes that maintain cohesiveness and commitment to the organization (e.g., organizational attachment). Thus, we need to consider both issues in relation to the possible consequences of negative relationships. We argue that *negative relationships will be more strongly related to both task-related and socioemotional outcomes than will positive relationships*. As noted above, the greater the strength, reciprocity, and cognition and the shorter the social distance of the negative relationship, the stronger the long-term social liability will be to the individual. Our model is presented in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Negative Relationships in Organizations**



### Task-Related Outcomes

Negative relationships differ from conflicts about tasks and how to accomplish those tasks ("task conflict," which may be beneficial to an organization) because they are laden with negative emotion and have hardened into enduring negative person schemas. Negative relationships may also result in covert and overt behavior, such as attempts to harm the other party (Pondy, 1967; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), that is disruptive to the task performance of the parties.

Behaviors relating to negative relationships can adversely affect actual and perceived job performance for one or both members of the dyad, potentially denying a person timely access to the most relevant information or referral. Someone withholding helpful information may hinder actual performance. Perceived performance may be hindered by dislike for a coworker that results in negative evaluations of work performance and that negatively colors that individual's reputation in the organization.

In time, we expect that the individual's other task-related outcomes, such as promotions and income attainment, will be negatively affected as well. For example, one negative reference may effectively stop a promotion or limit salary increases.

Numerous social network studies have been conducted on the importance of social capital in job seeking and status and income attainment (Boxman, DeGraaf, & Flap, 1991; Bridges & Villemez, 1986; Campbell, Marsden, & Hurlbert, 1988; DeGraaf & Flap, 1988; Granovetter, 1973, 1974; Lin & Dumin, 1986; Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981; Lin, Vaughn, & Ensel, 1981; Marsden & Hurlbert, 1988; Requena, 1991; Wegener, 1991). Only positive and neutral ties have been investigated, and the results have been mixed concerning the benefits of weak and strong positive ties. We argue for the inclusion of negative relationships in this research. As noted, higher numbers of strong, reciprocated, cognitive, and short social distance negative relationships will create the

greatest social liability for the individual's task-related outcomes, such as performance, promotions, and income attainment.

*Proposition 1a: An employee's social liabilities will be negatively related to actual and perceived job performance and subsequent promotions and income attainment.*

In keeping with our negative asymmetry hypothesis, we further argue that negative relationships will have a disproportionately stronger effect on the individual's actual and perceived performance, promotions, and income attainment than will positive relationships.

*Proposition 1b: An employee's social liabilities will be more strongly related to his or her actual and perceived job performance and subsequent promotions and income attainment than the employee's positive relationships (social assets).*

### Socioemotional Outcomes

An organization's second fundamental issue is achieving socioemotional outcomes that maintain employees' commitment to their jobs and the organization. Organizational attachment/withdrawal is the general construct that has been developed to define these socioemotional outcomes (e.g., Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Organizational attachment is theorized to have an attitudinal and a behavioral component. Job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment capture attitudinal attachment to one's job and one's organization, respectively, whereas absenteeism and turnover are considered behavioral manifestations of organizational withdrawal.

The quality of one's interpersonal relationships at work is an important factor in job satisfaction (e.g., Crosby, 1982) and affective organizational commitment (e.g., Kanter, 1968; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990) and is considered one of the basic needs that is fulfilled through work (e.g., Maslow, 1943). Thus, an employee with greater social liabilities will tend to be less attached to the organization than an employee with fewer social liabilities. The lowest organizational attachment will be associated with having numerous strong, reciprocated, cogni-

tive, and short social distance negative relationships.

*Proposition 2a: An employee's social liabilities will be negatively related to organizational attachment.*

While self-report assessments of organizational attachment, such as the Job Descriptive Index (Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969), ask respondents to assess their overall satisfaction with their social relationships (e.g., coworkers and supervisors), they do not separate out the effects of negative and positive relationships. This approach may obscure the fine-grained connection between social relationships and organizational attachment. Negative relationships may have a disproportionately greater effect on organizational attachment than positive relationships in much the same way that they've been found to have a greater effect on overall life satisfaction (e.g., Brenner, Norvell, & Limacher, 1989; Rook, 1984). Particularly in the workplace, where interactions often cannot be avoided and where the stakes can be very high (e.g., loss of income and social status), negative relationships may have a more profound effect on a person's organizational attachment than positive relationships.

The failure to investigate negative relationships along with positive or neutral relationships may also explain the contradictory findings of social network researchers who have attempted to relate one's network position in an organization with organizational attachment. Early laboratory studies of small groups showed that central actors were more satisfied than peripheral actors (see Shaw, 1964, for a review). However, Brass (1981) found no relationship between being central to an organization's workflow network and job satisfaction, and Kilduff and Krackhardt (1994) found that centrality in a friendship network was negatively related to job satisfaction.

Investigating both negative and positive relationships might help resolve these contradictory findings. For example, if being highly central in a network also increases the number of negative relationships an employee accumulates, these negative relationships may spark a greater decrease in that employee's satisfaction that is not offset by an increasing number of positive relationships. If our negative asymmetry argument holds true, this would explain the inconsistent findings on network centrality and job satisfac-

tion. Without an accounting of both the negative and positive entries in an employee's social ledger, it will be difficult to have a clear understanding of how that employee's relationships at work relate to his or her organizational attachment.

*Proposition 2b: An employee's social liabilities will be more strongly related to his or her organizational attachment than his or her positive relationships (social assets).*

Social psychological research has generally established that there is a weak relationship between attitudes and individuals' subsequent behaviors (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, for a review). However, various attitude qualities, such as attitude strength, certainty, clarity, and extremity, as well as the degree of threat to the individual's outcomes and self-interest, have been shown to increase the magnitude of the attitude-behavior relationship significantly (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995; Petty & Krosnick, 1993; Raden, 1985). Thus, we expect that negative interpersonal attitudes and relationships, because they are extreme, unambiguous, and threatening to the individual, will be more strongly related to that individual's subsequent organizational withdrawal behaviors, such as turnover and absenteeism, than positive relationships. This relationship becomes even stronger, and the individual more likely to be absent from or leave the organization, if the individual's negative relationships are strong, reciprocated, cognitive, and of short social distance.

*Proposition 3: An employee's social liabilities will have a greater impact on the magnitude of the relationship between the employee's affective organizational attachment and subsequent withdrawal behaviors than will his or her positive relationships (social assets).*

#### **FACTORS AFFECTING THE FORMATION AND RELATIVE IMPACT OF NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN ORGANIZATIONS**

The general psychological principle underlying interpersonal attraction and repulsion is the principle of reinforcement: we develop positive

affect toward people who reward us and negative affect toward those who punish us (Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Byrne & Clore, 1970). We use the concepts of rewards and punishments in a very general sense. For example, a relationship that offers the opportunity for mutual growth and development can be considered rewarding, as can one that offers work-related advice. As noted previously, this assessment is affective as well as cognitive and might not appear rational to an observer.

In the workplace, these rewards and punishments occur in two general arenas: achieving task-related outcomes and achieving socioemotional outcomes that maintain social cohesiveness and commitment (e.g., Kabanoff, 1991; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Polley, 1987). Based on Berscheid and Walster's (1978) factors that influence reinforcement and subsequently affect interpersonal attraction and repulsion, we have identified four factors that positively influence the likelihood that negative relationships in organizations will form and/or that influence the impact of those negative relationships: network density, task interdependence, status dissimilarity, and personality. These represent contextual factors outside the relationship (network density and task interdependence), relational factors about the dyad in the relationship (status dissimilarity), and individual factors about the members of the relationship (personality).

Although the formation of negative relationships may involve factors similar to those involved in the formation of positive relationships, we do not assume that the formation of negative relationships is merely the opposite of friendship formation. Rather, certain factors may be differentially weighted in making a negative interpersonal judgment instead of a positive one. For example, physical attractiveness may play a large role in interpersonal attraction, but it may play a relatively minor role in explaining the formation of negative relationships. While the factors we present below increase or decrease the likelihood negative relationships will form, some of these factors can also increase or decrease the impact of these negative relationships on individuals' outcomes. Thus, in this section we discuss both antecedents of negative relationship formation and moderators of the impact of negative relationships.

### Network Density and Task Interdependence

Negative relationships do not occur in isolation; they occur within a network of relationships. Third parties can serve to either inflame or defuse the negative relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). The number of third parties who can affect the negative relationship increases with increasing network density, density being the ratio of actual ties in a network to the number of possible ties (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

In a high-density network, most actors know and interact with one another; in Berscheid and Walster's (1978) terminology, the actors are socially proximal and reciprocation is high—both conditions that foster interpersonal attraction. The network's high density also allows for easy monitoring. It may be difficult for an employee to engage in self-serving, norm-defying, or opportunistic behavior that might be detrimental or threatening to the other members of the organization, because that person's actions are monitored and sanctioned by the other network members. Similarly, Coleman (1988, 1990) argues that high-density networks (high "closure" networks) encourage three forms of social capital: mutual obligations, trustworthiness, and the existence of norms and sanctions.

*Proposition 4: Negative relationships will be less numerous in a high-density network.*

In networks where the underlying task requires that individuals cooperate and make joint decisions in order to accomplish the task (e.g., reciprocal interdependence), there will be great pressure exerted by third parties to prevent negative relationships from forming and to resolve negative encounters quickly should they occur. This is because of the great potential disruption to the task outcomes of the entire network, which gives each third party a greater stake in minimizing social liabilities. If both parties in a negative relationship have positive relationships with a third party, there is a tendency to balance the triad by minimizing the negative affect between the members of the negative relationship (Heider, 1958). This balancing can take place either because the two parties initiate a de-escalation in order to maintain their positive relationships with the third party or because the third party takes an active role in mediating between the two. We therefore

expect that task interdependence will be negatively associated with the number of negative relationships.

*Proposition 5: Negative relationships will be less numerous when the network has a high level of task interdependence.*

While high-density and highly task interdependent networks will serve to minimize the formation of negative relationships, they might not prevent them entirely. When the social pressures against negative relationships fail, high-density and highly task interdependent networks can, ironically, *magnify* the effects of negative relationships. Third parties can also be drawn into the negative relationship and can further escalate it (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Smith, 1989).

The disliked employee may attempt to seek social support in dealing with the person who dislikes him/her—a situation that occurs for several reasons. First, it increases the stability of the positive relationship between the disliked person and the third party. Friendships grow stronger when there is an increase in the feeling that two people share a common frame of reference, such as a common enemy (Hays, 1988). Identification of common negative feelings toward the same person helps solidify that common frame of reference and strengthen the relationship between those involved. Second, the need may arise for them to create a coalition to oppose the other member of the relationship in the future. Finally, if the employee has a negative relationship with another person, the employee may also form negative judgments about that person's friends (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Smith, 1989). According to balance theory, if you dislike another person, your judgment of that person's friends will tend to be negative as well (e.g., Heider, 1958; Newcomb, 1961).

In contrast, when a network is sparsely connected or has low task interdependence, negative relationships may be more frequent, but when they do occur, they may have little impact on the entire network because there are fewer available third parties to feed an escalation. Thus, we include network density and task interdependence as both factors decreasing the likelihood of negative relationships (Propositions 4 and 5) and as moderators increasing the detrimental relationship between negative rela-

tionships and task and socioemotional outcomes (Proposition 6; also see Figure 1).

*Proposition 6: An employee's social liabilities will have the most negative impact on the employee's task performance and socioemotional outcomes when the network is relatively dense or there is a high level of task interdependence.*

### Status Dissimilarity

We propose that the relative hierarchical position of those to whom individuals are negatively tied will moderate the liabilities of negative relationships on the individuals' task and socioemotional outcomes. We expect that negative relationships with those higher in the formal hierarchy (both direct supervisors and other managers) will destroy organizational attachment and make it more difficult to achieve task-related outcomes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Over time, this should result in reduced chances for promotion and income attainment for those engaged in negative relationships, particularly low-status employees. For example, positive contacts with supervisors have been found to be a major determinant of power and promotion in organizations (Brass, 1984). Higher-level individuals have more power to potentially thwart a promotion or substantially reduce an individual's influence in the organization. We also expect indirect network effects in status differences. For example, one's career success may be hampered when one's immediate supervisor has a negative relationship with a higher-level manager (cf. Sparrowe & Liden, 1999).

*Proposition 7: The relative formal status of those to whom an individual is negatively tied will moderate the relationship between social liabilities and task-related and socioemotional outcomes; the higher the other person's formal status, the greater the social liability for the focal person.*

Besides the formal hierarchy, status can also be derived from the informal relations in a workplace (e.g., Rennie, 1962). There may be benefits from a negative relationship with someone who is highly unpopular for the disliking individual

and that person's friends. Heider's (1958) balance theory points out that the enemy of one's enemy is one's friend. As in the example of the common enemy, sharing a dislike for someone can enhance positive relationships (Hays, 1988), potentially improving organizational attachment for those individuals. It may be beneficial to one's career goals to align with employees who are well liked by others and disassociate from or dislike employees who are disliked by many others (Bonacich & Lloyd, 2004). For example, a negative reference from a person who is generally disliked by many others may do little harm to one's reputation. Whereas being positively connected to someone who is central in the friendship network can be beneficial (Brass, 1984; Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994), being negatively (or at least neutrally) connected to someone who is central in a "disliking" network may be equally beneficial.

*Proposition 8: The informal status (relative popularity) of those to whom an individual is negatively tied will moderate the relationship between negative ties and task and socioemotional outcomes; a negative relationship with someone who is disliked by many others will result in a positive impact on the focal person's outcomes.*

### Personality

Our previous arguments have centered on the role of the characteristics of the dyad or the context in which the relationship is embedded in determining the formation and impact of negative relationships. Here we consider the role of the individual's personality in creating more entries on the liability side of the social ledger. Although the structural perspective in most social network research ignores individual characteristics, personality traits may affect the composition of one's social network and, in turn, one's performance (cf. Kilduff, 1992; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001).

Recent theoretical work on the structure of personality has converged around a five-factor model (Digman, 1990; John, 1989; McCrae & Costa, 1989) that accounts for 85 percent of the personality differences between individuals; we focus on the two most relevant personality factors: negative affectivity (NA) and conscientious-

ness. NA is the most theoretically relevant negative affect-based personality factor that can affect organizational attachment. Conscientiousness is the personality factor that has been shown to be most relevant to task-related outcomes in organizations.

**Negative affectivity.** NA is a mood-dispositional dimension that reflects pervasive individual differences in negative emotionality and self-concept (Watson & Clark, 1984). High-NA individuals tend to be distressed, upset, have a negative view of self, and generally dissatisfied with life, whereas low-NA individuals are content, secure, and generally satisfied with themselves and their lives. High-NA individuals tend to focus on the negative side of others and the world in general.

NA may affect attitudes and emotions (and negative relationships) in two ways (Brief, Butcher, & Roberson, 1995; McCrae & Costa, 1991). First, because high-NA employees tend to dwell on failures and shortcomings, they "may act in ways that alienate their co-workers, resulting in more negative interpersonal interactions" (Brief et al., 1995: 56). Second, high-NA individuals may be more sensitive to negative stimuli and may react with more extreme emotion when experiencing a negative event (Brief et al., 1995; McCrae & Costa, 1991), thus precipitating negative relationships over time.

*Proposition 9: High-NA individuals will have more negative relationships than low-NA individuals.*

**Conscientiousness.** Conscientiousness refers to the extent to which an individual is hardworking, organized, dependable, and persevering. This is the personality factor that has been shown to most consistently relate to job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Salgado, 1997). Individuals low in conscientiousness are considered lazy, disorganized, and unreliable. Because organizations are, in part, goal attainment devices, over time, those individuals that frustrate task goal attainment within an organization will have more negative relationships directed toward them from the other individuals in the organization.

*Proposition 10: Individuals low in conscientiousness will have more negative relationships than individuals high in conscientiousness.*

## DISCUSSION

In this paper we have attempted to move beyond the exclusive consideration of positive relationships and social capital to a consideration of the liability side of the social ledger—negative relationships in organizations. The workplace offers an environment where the degree of threat to an individual from a negative relationship can be greater than in other settings. Negative relationships in the work setting can be a major threat to one's financial livelihood and emotional well-being, and possibly to the productive functioning of the organization as a whole. Unlike nonwork situations, required workflow and hierarchical responsibilities might make it particularly difficult to avoid interacting with disliked others. Even in cases where disliked others can be avoided, the changes in workflow and communication structure can have unintended negative consequences for others in the organization. The relative lack of research on negative relationships, especially from a network perspective, leaves a great deal of work to be done in this area.

### Measuring Negative Relationships and Testing Propositions

Testing our propositions requires capturing negative relationships through surveys or interviews. Our definition of negative relationships is intentionally broad and includes elements of cognition and perception (negative judgments and enduring negative person schemas), affect (feelings), and behavioral intentions. Fully capturing the dimensions of negative relationships would require multi-item measures. However, we also recognize that network researchers often cannot use multi-item measures in networks larger than the size of typical workgroups because of potential respondent fatigue. Thus, we recommend that multi-item measures be used where the focus is on relationships close at hand (e.g., workgroups) and that single-item measures be used to identify negative relationships in larger networks. Where single-item measures are used, we suggest following Fishbein and Azjen's (1975) recommendation of focusing the question on the affective component of the relationship.

We suggest that negative relationships be captured in a whole network, rather than

through egocentric network data, in order to capture aspects of the whole network (e.g., density) and the dyadic relationship (e.g., reciprocity) that we have identified as important to the study of negative relationships. We also advise using rosters of employees to facilitate data collection, rather than using recall, which might not be as reliable in this instance (e.g., Marsden, 1990). Once the data have been collected, the social liability and social asset functions can be created and the researcher can test the propositions we have offered. For example, the negative asymmetry hypotheses could involve testing whether a unit increase in the social liability function creates the same impact (but in the opposite direction) as a unit increase in the social asset function (see Soofi, Retzer, & Yasai-Ardekani, 2000, for a discussion of determining the relative importance of explanatory variables).

Gaining respondent trust to gather negative ties in work organizations is difficult, as noted by White: "Managers in [Company A] were loath explicitly to indicate various kinds of clearly negative feelings for a colleague" (1961: 194). This potential reticence has led some researchers to ask about negative relationships using related terminology, such as "Whom do you prefer to avoid?" (e.g., Labianca et al., 1998). But the validity of this type of measure is more open to interpretation. For example, you may prefer to avoid coworkers that you like a lot because you can't get any work done when they are around. We urge the use of measures with greater face validity, such as "How do you generally feel about this person?" and we urge future researchers not to assume respondent reticence if respondents' confidentiality concerns are properly addressed. For example, when data on interpersonal relationships were collected using five-point Likert-type scales (dislike a lot, dislike slightly, neutral, like slightly, like a lot), over 85 percent of employees in a sample (Labianca, Umphress, & Kaufmann, 2000) rated at least one other employee as a person whom they disliked.

Measuring negative relationships also requires understanding prior research on attitudes and emotions, which has been torn between continuum (bipolar) and orthogonal (bivariate) conceptualizations of positivity and negativity (see Barrett & Russell, 1998, and Cacioppo, Gardner, & Bernston, 1997, for a discussion). This long-ranging debate is reflected in the

two ways that negative aspects of personal relationships have been measured. Underlying the orthogonal approach is the assumption that every relationship contains both positive and negative aspects, that these aspects are independent, and that they should therefore be measured independently (e.g., Rook, 1984). This approach has been typical of the social support literature cited earlier.

The continuum approach (e.g., Tagiuri, 1958; Newcomb, 1961; Berscheid & Walster, 1969), however, acknowledges that all personal relationships have both positive and negative aspects but adds the assumption that people form a global bipolar judgment of others that can be captured by such terms as *like* and *dislike*, on opposite ends of a continuum. This approach is more typical of early network studies and of research on interpersonal attraction.

In the most recent work in this area, researchers have sought to create a rapprochement between the two sides (Barrett & Russell, 1998; Cacioppo et al., 1997). In recent theorizing scholars have recognized that there are aspects of affect that should be conceptualized and measured in an orthogonal fashion, while there are other aspects that are on a continuum. When one is describing the underlying physical and motivational "paths" of affect, an orthogonal (bivariate) approach is more appropriate. Thus, we expect that negative aspects of persons we meet will be captured differently by our minds than positive aspects of persons. But when it comes to conceptually organizing our thoughts about a person, we tend to default toward a continuum (bipolar) approach. Thus, dichotomies such as *like* and *dislike* are meaningful and appropriate when measuring negative relationships as we have defined them here.

### Future Research

Although our focus has been at the individual level of analysis (individual task performance and socioemotional outcomes), negative relationships may also affect group- and organizational-level performance. Negative relationships may be detrimental to the overall performance of groups or organizations in the long term because they interfere with cooperative behavior (Jehn, 1995, 1997; see Thomas, 1992, and Wall & Callister, 1995, for reviews). In an attempt to deal with a long-term negative rela-

tionship, an individual may revise the workflow and communication patterns in the organization to avoid the other person. If the individual is unable to do that because of workflow requirements, the quality or frequency of the communication in that relationship may deteriorate.

Negative relationships may result in covert and overt behavior, such as attempts to harm the other party (Pondy, 1967; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), which is disruptive to the effective functioning of a group or organization. Over time, such behavior may create suboptimal organizational processes. *Ceteris paribus*, a group or organization with more social liabilities among its members will perform poorly compared to a group or organization with fewer social liabilities. For example, Sparrowe et al. (2001) found that the density of "hindrance" networks ("Does [name] make it difficult to carry out your job responsibilities?") was negatively related to group performance. Future research might fruitfully investigate social liabilities at the group and organizational levels of analysis.

There are many areas of network research that can benefit from a consideration of negative relationships. For example, the practical implications of social network research on individuals' career management have focused, to date, only on positive or neutral ties (social assets) in building larger and more diverse networks (e.g., Baker, 1994; Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Lin & Dumin, 1986; Seibert et al., 2001). Diverse networks rich in structural holes have been shown to be associated with career success (Burt, 1992; Seibert et al., 2001). A structural hole exists when a focal person, ego, is connected to two other people, alters, who are not themselves positively connected. Because of the lack of a positive relationship, or a structural hole between the two alters, ego can control the resource flow between the two and broker one against the other.

However, little attention has been given to the cause of these structural holes. While some holes exist because of alters' ignorance of each other's existence, some structural holes may exist because two alters dislike each other. In the case of a negative relationship between alters, brokering may be easier, or, alternatively, ego may be placed in a stressful mediating role that consumes a lot of time and energy and does not facilitate career success. Future research might fruitfully explore the different causes of struc-

tural holes and the roles and outcomes that may result from such causes as negative relationships.

We urge a greater understanding of the potential career liabilities created by social liabilities, especially those that extend beyond the immediate supervisor-subordinate relationship or the immediate workgroup where a network approach can uniquely add to what has already been researched from a more psychological perspective (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Our logic can also be extended to examining hiring decisions. In job hunting there is an information asymmetry, where the hiring firm usually doesn't know much about the applicant. Therefore, weak positive ties are important in landing a job (e.g., Granovetter, 1973; Petersen, Saporta, & Seidel, 2000). However, if the hiring firm did know about a negative relationship, our negative asymmetry hypothesis argues that this piece of information would be weighted more in the decision to hire than would the positive information coming from a positive tie.

Considering negative relationships in addition to positive and neutral ties may add to our knowledge in research areas such as intraorganizational power (e.g., Brass, 1984). While cognition of positive relationships (assessing the political landscape) has been shown to be related to power (Krackhardt, 1990), cognition of negative relationships between individuals or groups may prove to be just as important a source of power in organizations. Knowing one's enemies may be as important, or more important, than knowing one's friends.

We do not mean to suggest that negative relationships only cause social liabilities. Just as research has shown that conflict can have beneficial outcomes for individuals and organizations (e.g., Jehn, 1995, 1997; Thomas, 1992; Wall & Callister, 1995), when handled in a productive manner, negative relationships may also have positive externalities. For example, negative relationships may result in our becoming aware of a need for personal change, may provide more accurate feedback about how others view us, and may spur us to serve multiple others' conflicting needs in the optimal way. Negative relationships may force us to see other perspectives that lead us to discover original or innovative ways of doing things.

From the perspective of the organization, negative relationships may result from hiring per-

sons who do not fit well with others in the organization. If negative relationships produce social liabilities for these hiring "mismatches," people who do not fit well with others may become dissatisfied and quit. This type of turnover is potentially beneficial to the organization. However, we do feel that, on the whole, more negative relationships will lead to greater liabilities for both individuals and organizations than will fewer negative relationships.

Although we have emphasized the role of negative relationships, we also do not mean to imply that positive relationships are not beneficial or important. Indeed, much of the social network research suggests they are important. However, our review of theory and research suggests that negative relationships are as important as, and may be more important than, positive relationships in explaining various outcomes of interest to organizational researchers. This necessitates looking at both sides of the social ledger—social liabilities as well as social assets.

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