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**THE NETWORK ARCHITECTURE OF HUMAN CAPITAL:  
A RELATIONAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Managing constellations of employee relationships is a core competency in knowledge-based organizations. It is timely, then, that human resource management (HRM) scholars and practitioners are adopting an increasingly relational view of HR. Whereas this burgeoning stream of research predominantly positions relationships as pathways for the transmission of resources, we shift attention by spotlighting that the interplay between HR practices and informal relationships perforate deeper than resource flows; they also influence how individuals view and define themselves in the context of their dyadic and collective relationships. Moreover, because HR practices routinely involve human capital movement into, within, and out of the organization, these practices have implications for the network architecture of organizations. We integrate the social network perspective (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011) with the theory of relational identity (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) to present a relational theory of HRM that informs how modifications to internal social structures stimulated by HR practices can influence individual outcomes by transforming individuals' self-concepts as relationships are gained, altered, and lost.

**Keywords:** Workplace relationships; social networks; human resource management; relational identity; job performance; perceptions of HR practices

## **THE NETWORK ARCHITECTURE OF HUMAN CAPITAL: A RELATIONAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE**

Traditionally, human resource management (HRM) scholars and practitioners have emphasized managing human capital, or the stock of individuals' knowledge, skills, and abilities in an organization (Nyberg, Moliterno, Hale, & Lepak, 2014), to generate an "ideal" composition of employees that creates value (Becker & Huselid, 1998; Delery & Shaw, 2001). Yet, the changing competitive landscape, sweeping adoption of virtual interaction platforms, and the transition to an information-based economy suggest that competing on employees' knowledge, skills, and expertise is no longer sufficient for competitive advantage. Indeed, Brass (1995: 40) contends that focusing "on the individual in isolation, to search in perpetuity for the elusive personality or demographic characteristic that defines the successful employee is, at best, failing to see the entire picture." In response, HR scholars are expanding focus to consider the value of social capital—a set of resources inherent in, accessible through, and derived from networks of informal relationships (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Krebs, 2000; Leana & Van Buren, 1999).

The social capital perspective underscores that today's knowledge economy operates through systems of connections. Employees are embedded in webs of relationships, including communities of practice, knowledge exchanges, and informal social networks; these connections confer advantages, including access to and mobilization of resources, that translate into enhanced performance (Kaše, Paauwe, & Zupan, 2009; Nahapiet, 2011). To keep pace, researchers are embracing the view that "HR strategy and practices must transcend knowledge, skills, and behaviors alone to also incorporate the development of relationships and exchanges inside and outside the organization" (Snell, Shadur, & Wright, 2000: 7). Thus, burgeoning research positions employee relationships in various forms—including social capital (e.g., Jiang & Liu,

2015; Leana & Van Buren, 1999), social networks (e.g., Collins & Clark, 2003; Evans & Davis, 2005), relational coordination (Gittell, 2000), respectful interacting (Vogus, 2006), and relational climates (Mossholder, Richardson, & Settoon, 2011)—as mechanisms linking HR practices and systems to enhanced performance. Born from this relational view of HR, there is mounting interest in incorporating principles from social network perspectives (Soltis, Brass, & Lepak, in press), and the development of social network analytic methods has accelerated this trend (e.g., Hatala, 2006; Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015). Despite these noteworthy advances, there remain at least two major gaps in the positioning of employee relationships relative to the HR function.

First, a guiding tenet of the social capital perspective is that patterns of interactions and goodwill mobilize the transmission of resources such as information, influence, and solidarity that drive individual and organizational effectiveness (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). However, informal relationships are not only pathways through which resources flow; they also contribute to the formation of individuals' personal, professional, and relational identities (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Kahn, 1998; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Indeed, Sluss and Ashforth (2007: 10) affirm, "self-definition in organizational contexts is predicated at least partly on one's network of interdependent roles." Consider the example of a mentoring relationship. From a social capital perspective, a mentor provides access to valuable resources such as advice, sponsorship, coaching, trust, and psychosocial support (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). However, mentoring relationships are much more than resource generators; they aid in the construction of a professional identity (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Dutton et al., 2010), promote emotionally-laden attachments (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), create complex, dynamic, and often ambivalent loyalties (Oglensky, 2008), and can even invoke over-

identification with the relationship (Dukerich, Kramer, & McLean Parks, 1998). From this example, we can see how interactions among HR activities and informal relationships perforate deeper than resource flows; they also influence how individuals view or define themselves in the context of their dyadic and collective relationships.

Second, formal theory about the HR function's role in stimulating, transforming, and sustaining organizations' portfolios of network relationships has yet to be explicitly developed. HR practices routinely involve human capital movement into (e.g., new hires), within (e.g., role transitions), and out of (e.g., termination) the organization, requiring research to consider "changes to the unit's human capital resources that necessarily occur over time with the addition of employees, and development of others, and the departure of still others" (Nyberg et al., 2014: 329). This dynamic focus is critical because a firm's ability to adjust its portfolio of employee relationships is a core managerial capability (Adner & Helfat, 2003) that can be a source of competitive advantage (Ployhart, Weekley, & Ramsey, 2009; Sirmon, Hitt, Ireland, & Gilbert, 2011). Beyond that, these adjustments necessarily impose modifications to formal *and* informal interaction structures (Mintzberg, 1993; Nadler & Tushman, 1989). While these modifications potentially forge new interaction patterns, they also disrupt the roles individuals have constructed and their views of themselves in relation to those with whom they work (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Burkhardt & Brass, 1990; Kleinbaum & Stuart, 2014). Circling back to our mentoring example, if an HR action results in one's mentor being reassigned, transferred, or terminated, the social capital lens suggests the individual risks losing access to resources provided as a function of the relationship, which would, in turn, impact performance. Our theory emphasizes that the dissolution of a mentoring relationship may also spark a shift in how the individual views him or herself. Losing a mentor could challenge one's sense of meaning and purpose in the relationship

and in the organization. It could also present an opportunity to develop a unique identity or recover from an over-identified relationship (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Thus, understanding organizational functioning requires understanding how HR practices shape the genesis, development, and dissolution of social networks, and the impact of these changes on how individuals enact their roles and define themselves in the context of work relationships.

To provide a new perspective on HR practices and organizational functioning, we integrate the social network perspective (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011) with theory of relational identity (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) to present a relational theory of HRM that informs how network dynamics stimulated by HR practices influence outcomes—not only through modifying access to social capital, but also through transforming individuals’ self-concepts as relationships are gained, altered, and lost. We focus on intra-organizational networks—those that exist within the boundaries of an organization (excluding relationships with clients, external stakeholders, industry competitors, and alumni). In doing so, we intend to make several contributions. First, we upend the traditional focus of HR that is grounded in an industrial-age view of individual competencies by constructing a framework explicitly focused on how HR practices influence employee relationships. This not only helps to align the study of HRM with the interconnected nature of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also responds to criticisms that informal employee networks are “unobservable and ungovernable” (Cross & Prusak, 2002: 105). Our framework highlights how HRM practices impact the composition, configuration, and content of employees’ social networks, and thus how managers can proactively and strategically play a role in generating, anchoring, and sustaining effective organizational networks.

Second, despite the increased attention scholarship is paying to the interplay among HR practices and networks, we still lack a comprehensive theory that explains *why* HR practices,

networks, and outcomes are linked. The majority of existing work emphasizes either the methodological value of taking a networks view of HR (e.g., Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015; Kaše, 2014) or the specific network constructs that may function as mediating mechanisms linking HR and performance (e.g., Evans & Davis, 2005). Our theory emphasizes that HR practices affect employee outcomes not only by modifying social networks and access to social capital, but because changes to these networks transform individuals' relational identities. In doing so, we jointly answer calls to carefully articulate the mechanisms linking HR practices to employee effectiveness (Becker & Huselid, 2006), to devote attention to how social networks shape reactions to work practices (Grant & Parker, 2009), and to “drill down to the micro-foundations” of strategic human capital (Coff & Kryscynski, 2011).

Last, our proposed framework contributes by considering the dynamic impact of HR activities on organizational networks. Scholars lament that, to date, most theories about work relationships “suggest a curiously static” approach and rarely consider relationship changes (Ahuja, Soda, & Zaheer, 2012: 442). Yet, as the workforce is increasingly characterized by non-traditional career trajectories (Kleinbaum, 2012), shorter organizational tenure (Twenge, 2010), irregular work schedules (Presser, 2003), and frequent role transitions (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth & Saks, 1995), employees are constantly navigating a stream of newly hired coworkers, daily fluctuations in shift-based personnel, inter-departmental transfers, promotions, and departures. As a result, individuals experience powerful changes to their identities as they reorient their goals, attitudes, behavioral routines, and informal networks to new or revised roles or sets of role occupants (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007; Ibarra, 1999). These dynamics likely have important implications for how employees navigate their relational identities in an environment where connections to valued colleagues and role-based assignments are fluid.



## **THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN HRM AND INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORKS**

Current approaches to classifying HR practices focus on individuals and enhancing their human capital—selecting the right person, training and developing individuals, and so on. For example, scholars have conceptualized HR practices as falling into categories of skill-enhancing, motivation-enhancing, and opportunity-enhancing HR practices that maximize employee performance (Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012); supportive organizational HR practices that signal investment in individual employees and recognition of their contributions (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003); and investment and inducement practices that ensure a high-quality human capital pool and that enhance employee retention (Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1998). Even research focusing on multi-level human capital focuses on how individual human capital ‘emerges’ to create unit or organizational human capital (cf. Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011).

Yet, the economic and competitive landscape has become increasingly interconnected, which begs for a new way of thinking about HR practices—one that upends the traditional focus by considering that who employees are, what they think and feel, and how they behave at work is also a function of their networks of relationships. Some existing work points to the interplay between HR and social networks. HR practices complement, cultivate, and subsidize networks of employee relationships by enhancing relational coordination (Gittell, 2001, 2002; Gittell, Seidner, & Wimbush, 2010); promoting a climate for citizenship behavior (Mossholder et al., 2011) and interpersonal exchange conditions (Kehoe & Collins, 2017); elevating trust and associability (Leana & Van Buren, 1999); presenting the opportunity, motivation, and ability to exchange social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002); generating new and activating existing ties (Parker, Halgin, & Borgatti, 2016); and impacting the size, diversity, and strength of top management team networks (Collins & Clark, 2003). At the same time, patterns of informal

interactions can impact how attributions of HR practices are formed (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008), undercut HR efforts to fulfill psychological contracts (Dabos & Rousseau, 2013), enhance the validity of peer assessments (Luria & Kalish, 2013), and influence efforts to reduce turnover (Ballinger, Cross, & Holtom, 2016; Soltis, Agneessens, Sasovova, & Labianca, 2013). Still, in their review of published articles that conduct social network analysis or meaningfully invoke a social network perspective about an HR-related phenomenon, Soltis and colleagues (in press) conclude that “the networks boom has not yet reached the HR literature” (4), and that “social resources in a workplace need to be acknowledged, understood, and managed in conjunction with human capital in order to achieve the biggest gains” (59).

Scholars have also spotlighted the interplay between formal organizational structures—reporting structures and other nondiscretionary relationships, as well as the fixed set of rules, procedures, and structures for coordinating activities (Mintzberg, 1993)—and informal networks—discretionary relationships that arise spontaneously and are not mandated (e.g., friendship, trust), as well as the norms, values, and beliefs that underlie such interactions (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; McEvily, Soda, & Tortoriello, 2014). Changes to the formal organization prescribed by HR activities, which can range from minor adjustments such as promotions to a full-scale redesign of the firm, often impose modifications to both discretionary and nondiscretionary relationships (Grant & Parker, 2009; Nadler & Tushman, 1989). In turn, new workflow patterns will necessarily be forged (Barley & Kunda, 2001) and connections that become functionally obsolete will dissolve (Kleinbaum & Stuart, 2014). As interactions become recurring patterns of behavior, informal networks evolve across functional and geographic boundaries (Brass, 1984; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). This view highlights that HR practices may have unintended and unobserved effects on informal network structure.

## A FRAMEWORK OF NETWORK-MODIFYING HR PRACTICES AND SOCIAL NETWORK STOCKS AND FLOWS

Whereas previous frameworks have organized practices along functional lines (e.g., Ichniowski, Shaw, & Prennushi, 1997; Posthuma, Campion, Masimova, & Campion, 2013; Wright & Boswell, 2002) or according to association with individual characteristics (e.g. ability, motivation, or opportunity enhancing; Delery, Gupta, & Shaw, 1997; Jiang et al., 2012), we develop a three-dimensional framework of HR practices through the lens of their influence on social networks. Specifically, we synthesize and extend prior work (Collins & Clark, 2003; Evans & Davis, 2005; Kaše et al., 2009) to suggest that a common thread underlying research on the relational implications of HR practices is that these practices fundamentally alter the internal social structure of organizations by fluctuating the pool of human capital (i.e., *composition*), altering employee interaction patterns (i.e., *configuration*), and changing the nature of employee relationships (i.e., *content*). We use as a guide for our framework Posthuma and colleagues' (2013) comprehensive review of HR practices, which organizes 61 specific practices into 9 thematic categories. We review these ideas in Table 1.

-----Insert Table 1 Here-----

It is important to note the distinction between ego (i.e., personal) and organizational (i.e., whole) networks in the context of our theory. Individuals are embedded in ego networks, which index how their local, or direct, connections impact their attitudes and behaviors (in this case, other members of the organization to whom they are directly connected). However, because most individuals are not directly connected to all others in a population (i.e., an organization), it can be useful to go beyond individuals' ego networks—which are subsets of the organizational population—to explore how the extent to which individuals are embedded in more macro

organizational network structures (including their direct *and* indirect connections) impacts their attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, several network characteristics about which we theorize manifest at both the ego and whole network levels (e.g., density, brokerage). As an example, brokerage in ego networks occurs when the focal actor is connected to every other alter, but acts as a “go between” when those alters are not directly connected to each other (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005); in whole networks, a focal actor can bridge two groups but is not directly connected to all others in each group (thus accessing information through indirect connections) (Burt, 1992). Thus, although the dynamics at each network level are distinct, they are also related. We propose that the HR practices in our framework can impact the composition, configuration, and content dimensions of both ego and organizational networks; yet, modifications to individuals’ ego networks will be more salient. In other words, the extent to which a network modification affects an individual—especially in terms of activities related to their task-work—will be interpreted through what happens to their own personal network. Of course, there are some scenarios where HR activities will impact individuals’ indirect connections who are not in their immediate network (and, thus, not immediately observable), but that may influence them nonetheless.

### **Network composition-modifying HR practices**

One critical aspect of the HR function is to adjust the pool of individuals in an organization by enacting practices to attract, hire, and retain qualified employees (Ployhart, Nyberg, Reilly, & Maltarich, 2014; Wright & McMahan, 1992) and remove suboptimal employees in favor of more qualified replacements (O’Reilly & Weitz, 1980). We label as network composition-modifying, those HR practices that “modify the set of actors within a social network either by acquiring or releasing actors into or from this network” (Kaše et al., 2009:

618), including practices such as recruitment, selection, and separation. These practices necessarily impact the composition of individuals' informal networks (i.e., *who* is in their ego network) by determining the consideration set of potential network members for each individual. When individuals' consideration sets change (i.e., network composition changes), existing relationships are potentially modified or terminated, and they are forced to consider new individuals, adjust to the loss of individuals, or reconsider previously existing contacts.

Specifically, network composition-modifying HR practices alter network characteristics including homogeneity and network size. For example, selective hiring and separation practices can foster ego network homogeneity—whereby the demographic characteristics of employees in an organization or unit and, by extension, in a personal network, are similar or uniform—by facilitating the entry of employees similar to incumbents (e.g., demographics, values, functional expertise) and encouraging the termination of employees who are dissimilar (Kleinbaum, Stuart, & Tushman, 2013; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Reagans, 2011; Schneider, 1987). Conversely, diversity and inclusion practices that boost the representation of women and underrepresented minorities in organizations can potentially increase the heterogeneity of individuals' personal networks by providing greater opportunity to interact with dissimilar others. HR practices also change the network's composition by altering network size—that is, the number of people in the network (Brass, 2012)—by expanding or reducing the number of employees who could potentially form relationships with one another. Examples include recruitment practices intended to attract additional human capital during growth periods or downsizing in response to organizational retrenchment (Godart, Shipilov, & Claes, 2014; Mawdsley & Somaya, 2016).

### **Network configuration-modifying HR practices**

HR practices such as work design, training and development, compensation schemes, and promotions systematically assign and reassign people to roles (e.g., employee, team member, supervisor). These prescriptions effectively alter the configuration of ties within a network (i.e., *how* people are connected) by facilitating or constraining informal patterns of interaction among employees (Kleinbaum et al., 2013; McEvily et al., 2014). Thus, network configuration-modifying HR practices alter “the arrangement of relations among actors within a firm’s social network” (Kaše et al., 2009: 618); specifically, they modify network characteristics including density, equivalence, and brokerage. For example, workspace design, group training exercises, and team-based compensation promote network density—the proportion of possible ties that actually exist (Scott, 2012)—by creating opportunities for spontaneous interaction between colleagues, building a foundation for awareness of and access to others’ expertise, and motivating team members to interact with each other, respectively (Coff & Kryscynski, 2011; Cross & Sproull, 2004; Gerhart, Rynes, & Fulmer, 2009; Kaše et al., 2009; Monge & Contractor, 2003). As another example, formally assigning employees to roles (e.g., manager) could drive them into equivalent positions to others in the informal organizational network; even if they are not directly connected to each other, equivalent individuals are likely to develop similar network profiles by relating in the same way to others (e.g., exchanges of advice and feedback among supervisors, peers, and subordinates) in the network (Lorraine & White, 1971; Sailer, 1978) and crafting comparable social environments.<sup>1</sup> As a final example, cross-training and job rotation set the stage for brokerage connections, whereby individuals act as a bridge connecting otherwise

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<sup>1</sup>*Structural equivalence* occurs when two actors have the same relationships to all other alters, such that the actors are exactly substitutable for each other (e.g., two supervisors who have the same informal relationships with their set of direct reports). *Regular equivalence* occurs when two actors are equally related to equivalent others, such that they have similar patterns of connections with unique alters (e.g., two supervisors in different departments who share the same patterns of ties to their own unique direct reports).

disconnected people and departments by learning diverse skills and collaborating informally across units (Burt, 2005; Kleinbaum, 2012).

### **Network content-modifying HR practices**

HR practices such as performance management, communication, employee relations, and incentive compensation influence the nature of employee interactions and the properties characterizing a relationship (i.e., *what* defines the network; Ibarra, 1993; Krackhardt, 1992). HR activities can impact tie content directly, by inspiring the nature of a relationship in an ego network (e.g., a mentoring program that lays the groundwork for developmental relationships toward specific coworkers; Kaše et al., 2009; Murphy & Kram, 2014), and indirectly, by signaling that a particular type of relationship, such as cooperation (Gittell et al., 2010; Mossholder et al., 2011), competition (Ingram & Roberts, 2000), or friendship (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002) is encouraged. Specifically, content-modifying HR practices modify network characteristics including valence, multiplexity, and tie strength. For example, peer performance appraisals, individual versus group-based incentives, and information sharing programs can determine the valence (positive, negative, or ambivalent; Frijda, 1986; Methot, Melwani, & Rothman, 2017) of a relationship (Huselid, 1995; Mossholder et al., 2011) by setting the stage for friendly and cooperative or adversarial and competitive relationships. Further, employee relations practices (e.g., social and family events, team-building opportunities) and team-based performance appraisals can promote multiplexity—whereby individuals share different roles that overlap in relationships, such as co-workers who are also friends (Kuwabara, Luo, & Sheldon, 2010)—by encouraging informal socializing and self-disclosure (Staw & Epstein, 2000) and rewarding collegiality (Kleinbaum & Stuart, 2014; Kram & Isabella, 1985). Another aspect of tie content is strength—the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services

characterizing the relationship (Granovetter, 1973)—which can be influenced by HR practices such as work designs that generate high-quality relationships through an emphasis on trust, frequency of interaction, and communication transparency (Gittell, 2003; Kahn, 1998).

Although it is beyond the scope of our theorizing to delineate an exhaustive list of ways HR practices modify social networks, our framework lends itself to the development of several illustrative associations, which we have curated in Table 2. Taken together, we theorize that because HR practices modify social networks, they have ripple effects by impacting how individuals define themselves in the context of their dyadic and collective relationships. We propose a relational identity perspective recognizing how changes to informal networks influence individuals' role enactment in relation to others.

-----Insert Table 2 Here-----

### **A RELATIONAL IDENTITY VIEW OF NETWORK-MODIFYING HR PRACTICES**

Roles are fundamental building blocks of organizations, and can be conceived as patterned and appropriate social behaviors, identities internalized by social participants, and scripts or expectations that are adhered to by role occupants (Biddle, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978). This view, which has been influential in HRM scholarship, emphasizes how employees' assigned roles enact organizationally desired role behaviors depending on the efficacy of various HR practices (Wright & McMahan, 1992). For instance, employees can be placed in leadership roles, managerial roles, or operational (non-supervisory) roles, and each is associated with a different set of behaviors (Schuler, 1992). Roles involve sets of expectations associated with positions in a social structure (Ebaugh, 1988), and the purpose and meaning of a role depends on the network of complementary roles in which it is embedded (Biddle, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978). For example, employees in managerial roles perform their tasks, and make sense of their place in the



organization, in relation to employees who occupy subordinate roles, such that allocating work and providing feedback is inherently relational. In this way, the meaning of a “supervisor” role is brought to life through “the shared experiences and sensemaking of unique but situated and interdependent individuals” (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007: 12). Thus, we propose that a relational identity perspective offers an ideal bridge to link the traditional HR focus on individual roles with the relationship-based approach of social networks.

Relational identity refers to how role occupants enact their respective roles in relation to each other, such as manager-subordinate or coworker-coworker (i.e., what is the nature of the relationship), and is arranged in a cognitive hierarchy ranging from particularized to generalized schemas (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Particularized relational identities are idiosyncratic, and reference norms and expectations associated with a role-relationship to a specific individual (e.g., Bonnie the team member of Bob and Kim, or the manager of Steve). Generalized identities exist when individuals identify generically with their role-relationship (e.g., Bonnie the supervisor of subordinates). Thus, a person can experience relational identity as a particularized perceived oneness with a specific role-relationship (e.g., Bonnie defines herself, in part, in relation to her coworker Kim), or as a generalized oneness with the broad role-relationship (e.g., Bonnie defines herself with the role of manager apart from any particular coworker).

Because personal relationships play a formative and sensemaking role in shaping individuals’ experiences with their organization and their jobs (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008), we propose that changes to organizational networks can have profound impact on individuals’ sense of ‘self’. Individuals are compelled to construct and enact positive identities (Dutton et al., 2010), and do so in the context of roles they fulfill in relation to others (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), so changes to their connections can reinforce or disrupt the

“worlds” they craft. As individuals experience changes to their work environments, they must navigate the transition between who they were and who they are becoming (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Thus, identities in general, and relational identities specifically, are complex and oft-changing representations of self-knowledge and self-understanding (Dutton et al., 2010).

We believe adopting a relational identity perspective of HRM buoys our contention that HR practices that affect an organization’s formal structure and human capital send shock waves through informal social networks, both by generating new opportunities for role-based identities and by threatening individuals’ existing identities and associated self-concepts. In the next sections, we describe how network modifying HR practices are likely to impact relational identities and, ultimately, employee job performance. We theorize that the link between network-modifying HR practices and performance functions through relational identity disruption, then describe boundary conditions of these links. We illustrate our proposed associations in Figure 1.

-----Insert Figure 1 Here-----

## **THE IMPACT OF NETWORK MODIFYING HR PRACTICES ON RELATIONAL IDENTITY DISRUPTION AND JOB PERFORMANCE**

Individual behavior can be understood as a fundamental endeavor to confirm an identity (Mead, 1934). Self-esteem is rooted in the recognition and reinforcement of individuals’ identit(ies) (Homans, 1961); individuals seek validation of their identities from relational partners (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Swann & Read, 1981) and strive to enact behaviors that sustain their identities across work experiences (Ibarra, 1999). Yet, Klapp (1969: 5) acquiesces that identity is “a fragile mechanism whose equilibrium needs constant maintenance and support from the proper environment, and it is quite easy for something to go wrong with it.” Relational identities in organizations can be especially volatile and subject to disruption, as they are under

pressure by dynamic situational factors (e.g., mergers, downsizing) that spark changes in relational expectations and behavior (Sluss, van Dick, & Thompson, 2010). Specifically, we define *relational identity disruption* as a disturbance to or interruption of how individuals define and enact their respective roles relative to one another. Given that individuals are constantly organizing, managing, and activating a host of different relational identities as they navigate their work, we theorize that *network modifying HR practices can disrupt individuals' established relational identities as a function of modifications to the composition, configuration, and content of employees' informal networks.*

Moreover, an additional key point of our theorizing is *that HR practices that modify network composition, configuration, and content can impact individual performance, in part, through disruptions to individuals' relational identities.* Ultimately, these performance implications are varied and complex as employees' numerous workplace relational identities evolve. Consider the prior example of a change that moves one's mentor out of their network. Performance implications depend a great deal on my initial relational identity and the ways in which this change alters or severs my generalized relational identity as a protégé and my particularized relational identity as being connected to this particular mentor. If my identity as a protégé was vital to how I defined my place in the organization, this change could harm my performance; however, if the change enables me to identify more strongly as a leader in my relations with others, it could benefit my performance. Or consider a change from individual- to team-based compensation; this should encourage me to define my role relationships more strongly and in multifaceted ways with my team members as our fates become more intertwined. In a high functioning team, such a change may facilitate my individual performance. However, if I find myself identifying with a team of struggling performers, I may invest in assisting others to

the extent that I harm my own performance.

It is beyond the scope of our current theorizing to attempt to describe the myriad ways that changes to network structure and associated relational identities could influence individual performance. However, we propose that whereas HR practices will disrupt one's established understanding of how to interact with other members of the organization, these relational identity disruptions are not necessarily positive or negative for performance. Rather, there are some instances when these disruptions may be detrimental to performance (by agitating established, predictable, and effective performance routines and sapping energy that would otherwise be dedicated to performance), and others when they may be generative (by facilitating adaptability, flexibility, and the consideration of diverse and alternative perspectives that aid performance).

As employees experience modifications to the composition, configuration, and/or content of their networks, they undergo a process of identity reconstruction in which they must cope with the loss of their old role-relationship identities (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ebaugh, 1988), negotiate how they will coherently incorporate their new relational identities into their existing self-concept (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), and may ultimately develop a new identity in which they have reconciled the loss of their former role identities with the acquisition of new role identities (Ashforth, 2001; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). This transition and adaptation process for individuals is characterized by periods of liminality (the condition of being betwixt and between; Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014) and discontinuity, which can significantly impact the effectiveness by which they demonstrate their competencies and enact their roles in relation to those with whom they are connected (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; Jonczyk, Lee, Galunic, & Bensaou, 2016). Indeed, modifications to individuals' social networks potentially impair "taken for granted roles and routines, causing those in the organization to

question fundamental assumptions about how they should act” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014: 77). Therefore, individuals engage in an adaptation process where they attempt to bridge the gap between what was and what is (Louis, 1980; Petriglieri, 2011) through efforts that are jointly psychological, requiring identity formation or reorientation (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; Ibarra, 1999), and behavioral, involving changes in relationships (Jonczyk et al., 2016).

### **Network Composition-Modifying HR Practices, Identity Disruption, and Performance**

Revisiting our framework of HR practices, network-composition modifying HR practices alter the homogeneity and size of employees’ informal networks. Extending this logic, we propose that changes to network homogeneity and size impact the stability of individuals’ relational identities; in other words, these alterations can disrupt or reinforce their definition of how to enact their roles in relation to others. Compositional changes determine the pool of individuals with whom one can form discretionary relationships by presenting or constraining opportunities for interaction. Individuals are more likely to form relationships if they are assigned to the same business unit, job function, or floor in an office building (Brass, 1995; Grant & Parker, 2009), as well as if they share similar formal and informal work contacts (Dahlander & McFarland, 2013). Yet, individuals also have some discretion over with whom they interact. Indeed, within the consideration sets of accessible partners, the compositional factors homogeneity and network size guide the generation and reinforcement of relational identities. For example, social homogeneity creates a strong baseline homophily in informal networks (McPherson et al., 2001), such that individuals have greater opportunity to establish idiosyncratic, or particularized, relationships with others whom they perceive as similar (e.g., I understand how to enact my coworker role with my colleague, Jane, since we are both conscientious women). Moreover, employees are less constrained in forming discretionary

relationships when the pool of individuals is larger (Kleinbaum et al., 2013).

HR practices that increase network homogeneity can help to affirm individuals' relational identities, whereas practices that increase heterogeneity will potentially be disruptive. For instance, referral-based hiring practices can perpetuate more homogenous social networks because "who you know" often mirrors "what you look like" (Merluzzi & Sterling, 2017), thereby exposing individuals to others who verify their view of themselves and allowing them to position new individuals into pre-defined networks of interrelated tasks and responsibilities. Conversely, diversity management programs geared toward recruiting and hiring diverse talent expose individuals to connections who vary on a host of visible and invisible characteristics; because diversity necessarily refers to a heterogeneous set of individuals (Cascio, 1998), employees may engage in interactions that impugn their definition of 'self' and require efforts to preserve or reconstruct their identity.

In terms of network size, the more people who are exposed to an individual enacting a given role-relationship, the less the identity will be disrupted. Relational identities rely on relational incumbents to give them meaning, so a relational identity is likely to be reinforced as a greater number of people are attached to a given identity, or who know the individual in the context of a given role relationship (Sluss et al., 2010). Further, the number of particularized relational identities attached to a role has implications for the stability of the generalized identity. Specifically, the fewer particularized relationships one has, the greater the impact of a given relationship on an individuals' generalized identity (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). As the generalized identity becomes grounded in a greater number of particularized experiences, it becomes more resistant to disconfirmation (Ashforth, 2001). We can follow this line of reasoning when theorizing about decreasing network size, as well. Specifically, removing contacts from one's

existing network of relationships would be more likely to spark relational identity disruptions because it compromises the integrity of the network by severing defined and relied-upon links.

*Proposition 1: Network composition-modifying HR practices that (a) increase heterogeneity or (b) decrease size of employees' informal networks are positively associated with relational identity disruption.*

Individuals whose networks experience continuity, with relatively few or minor changes in membership, tend to develop habitual interaction routines (Gersick & Hackman, 1990) that pre-specify and clarify expectations for behavior in the relationship and create a successful equilibrium of work performance (Arrow & McGrath, 1995). Moreover, as one's relational identity becomes grounded in a series of particularized interpersonal experiences, it tends to become more stable and resistant to disconfirmation (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007: 14). Changing a network's composition is chaotic because it increases variability and uncertainty with respect to how an individual is expected to behave toward others (Arrow & McGrath, 1995); habitual interaction routines are interrupted, which disrupts the manner in which individuals enact role-relationships, affecting member performance as they work to recover equilibrium. During this process, individuals grapple with how to continue to perform work responsibilities without those upon whom they previously relied and in relation to new individuals with whom they must interact. For example, individuals in homogenous networks generally benefit from ease of communication, predictability of behavior, trust and reciprocity (Brass, 1995), and their identities are reinforced and stabilized (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When the homogeneity of an established network is destabilized—say, through ongoing practices geared toward diversifying the workforce—the coordinated activity that contributed to individuals' performance may be interrupted as they navigate and adapt to enacting their roles with new and dissimilar

individuals.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as one's network decreases in size (e.g., turnover), the relative importance of any given connection increases (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000), complicating individuals' ability to adapt their performance behaviors because of fewer available connections.

*Proposition 2: Network composition-modifying HR practices that (a) increase network heterogeneity or (b) decrease network size will be negatively associated with performance through relational identity disruption.*

### **Network Configuration-Modifying HR Practices, Identity Disruption, and Performance**

Extending our assertion that network configuration-modifying HR practices alter the density, equivalence, and brokerage of employees' social networks, we propose that these network modifications can disrupt individuals' relational identities in two overarching ways: changing one's formal position in a manner that impacts a work role-based relational identity (e.g., manager), or changing one's informal network position in a manner that impacts their network-based relational identity (broker; member of a densely-connected team). With respect to formal role-relationship identities, an individual who clearly enacts the generalized relationship of "colleague" may display helping behaviors towards, gossip with, and tell jokes to his coworkers; if this individual is promoted to a managerial position, his expectations of "normal" behaviors are no longer appropriate for a supervisor to enact toward subordinates, and he may struggle with developing a new generalized relational identity that demonstrates behavior consistent with performance of the new managerial role (Biddle, 1986; Jonczyk et al., 2016), such as offering advice, delivering feedback, and interacting professionally.

Changing one's informal network position also elicits identity disruptions and

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<sup>2</sup> Importantly, we do not intend to suggest that increases in network heterogeneity (or decreases in homogeneity) are universally disruptive. As one anonymous reviewer pointed out, it may be the case that an employee is a member of a very diverse team whose members all enjoy and thrive off of this diversity and have developed relational identities around valuing their differences. In this case, promoting homogeneity might threaten their relational identities. Though we acknowledge these exceptions, our propositions capture the most generalizable experiences.



reevaluations. For example, training programs that include coworkers from within and outside one's work area and that allot time for establishing relationships can increase network density by creating new opportunities to form connections (Kaše et al., 2009). As the density of a network increases, individuals have a heightened sense of embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985), solidarity (Moody & White, 2003), inclusion and assimilation (Morrison, 2002), which reinforces their relational identities by conveying consistent social cues (Ibarra, 1995; Podolny & Baron, 1997) that define one's self-concept and expectations for interacting with others (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Moreover, densely connected networks are subject to inertial forces that protect against relational identity disruptions; specifically, dense network structures are rigid and resistant to change because of obligations toward reciprocation and stigma against severing ties (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000). Conversely, HR practices that decrease network density, such as job redesign that shifts an employee toward virtual or offsite work, make the individuals in the social structure more susceptible to inconsistent (or a lack of) social cues and incompatible role expectations (Ashforth, 2001), which breeds relational identity disruptions (Ahuja et al., 2012).

As another example, a key characteristic of equivalent actors—those who share similar patterns of network contacts—is that they are considered substitutable for one another in the network (Burt, 1976; Lorraine & White, 1971). Thus, when an employee is assigned a new role, they may look to equivalent others for cues to determine what behaviors should be enacted (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 1999; Shah, 1998). Establishing equivalence between actors in a network, and its associated cues, can influence both generalized and particularized relational identities. For example, when an employee is re-assigned from a subordinate role during a promotion to manager, the novice manager can observe established managers of other units (i.e., regular equivalence) to gather information about generalized norms and role expectations to

negotiate which cues to incorporate into her managerial actions and self-concept (Ibarra, 1999). Similarly, this manager can observe her co-supervisor in a shared unit to formulate particularized relational identities that aid in determining how to appropriately and idiosyncratically manage direct reports Bob, Karen, and Sue. Therefore, increases in equivalence among actors is generative for relational identities. Extending this logic, a reduction in equivalence may result in a disruption of relational identities as an individual revises an identity that incorporates their occupation of a previous role (e.g., former subordinate; Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). To the extent that an employee identified with equivalent actors in a former role, residue from the previous role may be incorporated into the narrative of an employee’s identity (Jonczyk et al., 2016), making it difficult to re-conceptualize relational identities with new members.

Further, despite being considered more powerful than their disconnected partners (because they have access to, and can control the flow of, non-redundant information in informal networks; Burt, 2005), actors who increasingly hold brokerage positions in their networks are more likely to experience disruption to their relational identities. Specifically, brokers “span homogenous enclaves of interwoven actors” (McFarland & Pals, 2005: 292), such that they have non-overlapping group memberships that entail different sets of relationships with distinct experiences and competing social pressures (Krackhardt, 1999). Therefore, compared to individuals who are not situated between different sets of actors, individuals who bridge different social worlds are likely to experience identity disruption by encountering inconsistent norms and demands. HR practices that promote unconventional career paths, such as frequent lateral moves between business functions, can instigate a greater degree of network brokerage (Kleinbaum, 2012) and greater relational identity disruptions as the focal actor attempts to navigate various competing group goals and norms; conversely, an HR initiative such as widespread cross-

training may close structural holes between previously disconnected people (Kaše et al., 2009) and can alleviate these competing and disruptive relational identities.

*Proposition 3: Network configuration-modifying HR practices that (a) decrease density (b) decrease equivalence, or (c) increase brokerage in employees' informal networks are positively associated with relational identity disruption.*

The configuration of individuals' social networks can affect their ability to adapt to a significant change in role interdependencies (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000). In the case of network density, whereas we proposed that increases in density can protect against relational identity disruptions (or, that decreases in density provoke identity disruptions), we further propose the absence of disruption can be a liability that hinders performance (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Specifically, cohesive social bonds jeopardize individuals' flexibility because an individual embedded in a dense network "has little autonomy to negotiate his role vis-à-vis his contacts" (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000: 184; Krackhardt, 1999). In turn, individuals experience "structural arthritis," making it harder to adapt to changes in interdependencies needed for task coordination (Burt, 1999: 225). In terms of equivalence, ensuring employees have a vantage point to observe those with whom they identify can reduce uncertainty, determine how they enact their roles, and "help provide the confidence for exploration" (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007: 21). Individuals who are shifted out of equivalent positions to others no longer have a point of reference to make social comparisons; this ambiguity may spark efforts to protect themselves by following well-learned routines rather than making goal-oriented adjustments (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981) and isolating themselves from social interactions and cues that inform effective performance behaviors (Leary & Atherton, 1986; Parker et al., 2016). Last, brokerage positions are "difficult to build, costly to maintain, and vulnerable to decay" (Sasovova, Mehra, Borgatti, & Schippers, 2010: 640), so increases in brokerage subject individuals to a precarious and unpredictable

environment that requires relentless monitoring and effort to maintain (Sasovova et al., 2010).

This sparks the expenditure of energy and attention that could deplete the individual and threaten performance benefits they would otherwise reap from these bridging positions (Ahuja, 2000).

*Proposition 4(a): Network configuration-modifying HR practices that decrease density will be positively associated with performance through relational identity disruption.*

*Proposition 4(b) and (c): Network configuration-modifying HR practices that decrease equivalence or increase brokerage will be negatively associated with performance through relational identity disruption.*

### **Network Content-Modifying HR Practices, Identity Disruption, and Performance**

Network content-modifying HR practices alter the valence, multiplexity, and strength of the ties in employees' social networks. We propose that these modifications disrupt individuals' relational identities because they need to develop new ways of relating to their partners. For example, a subordinate who has a positively-valenced, high-quality relationship with her supervisor may be energized when interacting with him during meetings and display enthusiasm and loyalty when describing her supervisor to others. But, the implementation of a forced ranking performance appraisal system under which the supervisor forces the subordinate's evaluation into a lower category can create a negative turning point that counteracts the positive valence of the relationship (Hess, Omdahl, & Fritz, 2006). This change disrupts how the subordinate typically interacts, and the degree to which she identifies, with her supervisor (i.e., I thought Bob cared about me), such that "the rules for future exchanges are quickly, dramatically, and durably changed" (Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010: 374).

Whereas positive relationships are considered flexible and resilient (Eby & Allen, 2012), individuals in negative relationships have an enduring and recurring set of negative feelings and intentions toward each other (Labianca & Brass, 2006) and have interactions characterized by conflict, criticism, jealousy, rejection, and interference that are generally detrimental to

constructing clearly defined relational identities (Brooks & Dunkel Schetter, 2011). Somewhat uniquely, we expect that ambivalent relationships (simultaneously positive and negative, such as a manager who provides valuable resources and support but is verbally abusive; Sluss et al., 2007) may reinforce, rather than disrupt, individuals' relational identities. Ambivalent relationships are pervasive in organizations (Methot et al., 2017) and can occur at the generalized (e.g., customers; Pratt & Doucet, 2000) or particularized (e.g., my supervisor, Karen) levels. Research suggests that as relationships become more ambivalent, individuals feel a "sense of disequilibrium, confusion, apprehension, and loss of control," and employ temporal splitting responses in which they "alternate between love and hate by viewing the relationship target totally positively today, but totally negatively tomorrow" (Pratt & Doucet, 2000: 219). Interestingly, this vacillation in feelings toward an ambivalent partner can be healthy and productive because it triggers a constructive renegotiation of the role-relationship (Thompson & Holmes, 1996; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) and includes compromising through an ongoing process of mutually accommodating both positive and negative orientations (Pratt & Pradies, 2011).

Additionally, because relationships characterized by multiplexity involve multiple bases of interaction with a specific partner (e.g., friendship with a coworker), they require individuals to adjust to norms of interaction associated with each role, action, or affiliation simultaneously. HR practices such as corporate sponsored social events allow a relationship between coworkers to broaden to incorporate additional components. Multiplex relationships are qualitatively distinct from purely social or task-based interactions in that they are characterized by complex role-relationships and wide boundaries, so the process by which a one-dimensional relationship becomes multidimensional urges the reevaluation of an individual's relational identity. Indeed, as compared to one-dimensional relationships, multiplex relationships are likely to contribute

more significantly to individuals' identities through their deeper and more encompassing affiliation patterns (Kuwabara et al., 2010). However, thinning the content of the multiplex relationship (e.g., transferring one's partner to a different unit severs their instrumental interactions involving informal task-based knowledge and feedback exchanges, leaving a unitary dimension such as friendship) may compromise its integrity, forcing a redefinition of behavioral schemas and interaction patterns.

Also, practices such as team-building and team-based performance appraisals involve an ongoing process that helps member relationships strengthen; they learn to share expectations for accomplishing group tasks together, trust and support one another, and respect each other's differences (Tannenbaum, Beard, & Salas, 1992). As mutual expectations are met over time and they become more familiarized, they can develop a more nuanced and reliable relationship. This generates reciprocal, sustained, and intimate relationships and sets the stage for particularized ways to enact their roles relative to one another. In contrast, relationships can become weaker in strength when individuals have a lower frequency of contact and involvement (e.g., job mobility), causing the affective intensity, depth, and exchange associated with the relationship to subside (Case & Maner, 2014; Granovetter, 1973). As relationships weaken, they are more likely to 'come and go' and exist on the periphery of one's network (Morgan, Neal, & Carder, 1997), experiencing constant disruption and requiring frequent re-acquaintance and redefinition.

*Proposition 5: Network content-modifying HR practices that (a) promote negative tie valence, (b) decrease multiplexity, or (c) weaken tie strength are positively associated with relational identity disruption.*

The content of relationships inform the identities employees form, claim, and express at work (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003); influence growth, development, and thriving that facilitate individual performance (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005); and promote

proactive seeking of performance feedback (Ashford, Blatt, & Van de Walle, 2003). For example, positively-valenced relationships create a heightened sense of self-efficacy and identity enhancement; enable individuals to discover their strengths and competence and be intellectually and emotionally available at work (Roberts, 2007); and provide a secure base for learning and experimentation (Edmondson, 1999). Similarly, ambivalent relationships can have functional performance outcomes—ambivalence fosters cognitive flexibility and the ability to attend to divergent perspectives, allowing individuals to be better able to collaborate, cope with competition, improve information exchange, and display higher job performance (Ingram & Roberts, 2000; Zou & Ingram, 2013). A change to a positive or ambivalent relationship to trend toward a negative relationship can generate feelings of disconnection (Steele, 1988), which narrows individuals' attention and compromises their ability to learn, show initiative, and take risks (Jackson & Dutton, 1988); breeds rigidity in their self-concepts and role-relationships (Crocker & Park, 2004); and impairs the quality of their work (Roberts, 2007).

Moreover, individuals in multiplex relationships hold a relational identity that involves dedicating physical, emotional, and cognitive energy to their partner (Methot, LePine, Podsakoff, & Christian, 2016). Evidence suggests these role-relationship characteristics facilitate performance, in part, because individuals are able to speak the same language (Casciaro & Lobo, 2005) and mutually engage in problem-solving, allowing them to attend to and process information more thoroughly, retrieve ideas from memory, and make connections in a way that generates new insights (Baker, Cross, & Wooten, 2003). As multiplex relationships thin to become one-dimensional and their associated relational identity becomes redefined, individuals are less likely to dedicate their full selves to the relationship, and thus are less likely to invest in probing and follow-ups during communication, ultimately limiting the generation of ideas and

solutions (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Last, whereas strong ties are valuable and supportive, their strength also hinders the ability to adapt one's relational identity to benefit performance in two ways. First, strong ties can result in path dependence (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972) and relational inertia (Dahlander & McFarland, 2013); the ease of cooperating with close partners and the uncertainty of learning how to interact with new ties raises the cost of investing in new relationships, making established relationships extremely resilient (Kleinbaum & Stuart, 2014) and preventing exposure to new relationships. In turn, strong ties persist despite losses in their instrumental value and the availability of potentially better relational matches that would improve performance (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000). Second, strong ties serve as a filter for information and perspectives that reach individuals, effectively blinding them, or cognitively locking them in (Grabher, 1993; Uzzi, 1997) to potential adaptive processes and alternative information (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000). Therefore, whereas we proposed that the weakening of ties provokes relational identity disruptions, these disruptions are constructive for performance.

*Proposition 6(a) and (b): Network content-modifying HR practices that promote negative tie valence or decrease multiplexity will be negatively associated with performance through relational identity disruption.*

*Proposition 6(c): Network content-modifying HR practices that weaken tie strength will be positively associated with performance through relational identity disruption.*

### **Role Clarity as a Boundary Condition of the Relational Identity-Performance Link**

Recognizing the complex ways in which HR-induced relational identity disruptions can influence performance, there are likely boundary conditions that contextualize the likelihood of these disruptions inhibiting or facilitating performance. In general, individual characteristics that facilitate rapid adjustment and adaptation to disrupted relational identities and contextual factors that provide guidance and structure to role relationships even in time of liminality may dampen



the effects of relational identity disruptions on performance. Given the importance of role relationships to our theorizing, and its established connection to relational identity (Sluss et al., 2010), we propose that *role clarity* functions as one boundary condition that influences the manner in which periods of identity reconstruction may be more or less disruptive to performance. Role clarity refers to whether an individual has certainty regarding the expectations associated with their work role (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964) and the extent to which information for role performance is communicated and understood (Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1974). Although role clarity can be influenced by HR practices, we focus here on the possibility that role clarity will mitigate effects of relational identity disruption on performance.

According to role theory, every position in a formal organizational structure needs a clear set of responsibilities (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Employees with a clear understanding of responsibilities are more likely to succeed because they “know what to do, how to do it, and how they are evaluated” (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007: 333). Thus, role clarity provides a strong, unambiguous situation (Mischel, 1977: 347) that leads individuals “to construe particular events in the same way and induce uniform expectancies.” In the process of reconstructing relational identities, employees benefit from clear cues that inform knowing how to perform their own in-role behavior, as well as understanding how their behavior relates to that of their coworkers (Bray & Brawley, 2002). We propose that, under conditions of role clarity where behavioral expectations are clear and unambiguous, the effects of relational identity disruption will be less critical in shaping performance behavior. In contrast, in weaker situations characterized by role ambiguity, individual performance will be more susceptible to relational identity disruption. Individuals with access to clear cues that inform action and appropriate behavior will find it easier to reconstruct functional relational identities in the face of disruption,

such that they learn how to perform their tasks in relation to various work partners because there are strong cues about the expected behaviors and criteria for evaluation.

*Proposition 7: Role clarity moderates the association between relational identity disruption and performance such that higher role clarity dampens the association.*

## **DISCUSSION**

In light of changes to the nature of work that increase reliance on systems of employee connections, managing intra-organizational social networks is a core competency in knowledge-based organizations (Krebs, 2000; Snell, Shadur, & Wright, 2001). In turn, scholars have adopted an increasingly relational view of HR, including the incorporation of principles and methods associated with social network analysis (Evans & Davis, 2005; Hatala, 2006; Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015). Whereas the bulk of this literature is focused on social network connections as pipes that transmit resources (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), in our view, this perspective does not sufficiently capture the meaningfulness and complexity of the interplay among HR practices and organizational network dynamics. Embedding a more comprehensive view of social networks within a relational identity framework (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), our theoretical model expands consideration of how HR practices and systems modify organizational networks, how these modifications impact individuals' relational identities, and why these processes affect performance. Our theory highlights that managing organizational networks can complement traditional HR tools to develop individuals' skills and competencies to aid performance and breed shared perceptions of the work environment. Thus, formal workflow and hierarchies need not function "despite" the existence of networks, but can coexist with informal networks (McEvily et al., 2014).

### **Theoretical Implications**

In viewing the interplay of HR and social networks through the lens of relational identity,

we expand upon the predominant social capital perspective to incorporate the ways social networks contribute to the formation and reconstruction of individuals' relational identities. By focusing attention on the interplay among HR practices, social networks, and individuals' identities in the context of their dyadic and collective relationships, we provide greater nuance to the effects of HR practices as they alter relationships. Terminating a poor performer, creating a cross-functional team, or instituting pay-for-performance should not be expected to be unequivocally positive or negative for organizational functioning; understanding these idiosyncratic effects requires considering the impact on the relational identities that constitute the network. Indeed, Sluss and Ashforth (2007: 10) express, "the identities and identifications flowing from role-relationships may provide a much-needed cognitive and affective glue for organic organizations." This approach advances dialogue on the value of exposing HRM scholars to social networks research and theory (Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015; Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2003), and vice versa (Kaše, King, & Minbaeva, 2013).

We also acknowledge that the effects of relational identity disruption on performance likely stabilize over time. Specifically, although a network modification may disrupt an individual's definition of how to enact their role with a new colleague, interactions between individuals become more personalized over time. The relationship is likely to evolve to develop familiarity, empathy, and trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996); the role of surface level characteristics (demographics) are subsumed by deep level characteristics (attitudes, values) (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998); and generalized and particularized relational identities are mutually reinforcing over time (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). This familiarity helps to redefine the interactions and expectations of the relationship, constructing a well-defined relational identity that can contribute to performance. Therefore, relational identity disruptions are likely most pronounced in the short

term (days, weeks, months) and weaken over the longer term (years).

Further, our framework offers a more nuanced perspective on the black box between HR practices and outcomes. Much of the research exploring this association has converged on the idea that HR practices influence performance through effects on the ability, motivation, and opportunity of the workforce (Jiang et al., 2012). More recent work acknowledging the role of social networks has predominantly focused on the capability of networks to provide social capital as a resource to be used or exploited, and a handful of scholars have spotlighted the quality, or content, of relationships in promoting effective individual and organizational functioning (Gittell, 2003; Vogus, 2006). We synthesize and expand these perspectives to jointly consider network composition, configuration, and content.

We also contribute formal theory about the HR function's role in stimulating, transforming and sustaining organizations' portfolios of network relationships. Necessarily, HR practices routinely involve employee movement into, within, and out of the organization (Nyberg et al., 2014), and employees continuously form, change, and dissolve relationships with their colleagues (Sasovova et al., 2010). With these dynamics in mind, we specify how HR practices can have intended and unintended effects on network composition, configuration, and content, and the impact of these changes on how individuals enact their roles and define themselves in the context of their work relationships. Doing so provides a unique perspective on organizational functioning that complements and advances existing research focused on human and social capital. It also provides a new perspective on social network antecedents, an area in which there has been a relative dearth of focus (Borgatti & Foster, 2003), and captures the inherently and increasingly dynamic nature of organizational relationships.

### **Theoretical Extensions**

Our theory lends itself to two critical theoretical extensions that demand greater attention.

***Perceptions of HR practices.*** Our theorizing suggests that network-modifying HR practices and their impact on relational identities can influence employees' perceptions of HR practices. A critical issue facing organizational scholars is that individuals experiencing ostensibly similar HR practices and systems may interpret them differently (Liao, Toya, Lepak, & Hong, 2009). Indeed, in order for HR practices and systems "to exert their desired effect on employee attitudes and behaviors, they first have to be perceived and interpreted subjectively by employees" (Nishii et al., 2008: 504). The burgeoning literature on employee perceptions of HR practices calls for identifying how and why employee experiences, attributions, and perceptions of HR practices spread to create a shared interpretation (Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Liao et al., 2009; Nishii et al., 2008). While there is some convergence on the idea that perceptions are partially a function of interactions with coworkers (Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Nishii et al., 2008) and supervisors (Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg, & Croon, 2013; Nishii et al., 2008), the social construction of perceptions of HR practices and systems has received limited attention (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Integrating the relational identity perspective, we encourage scholars to consider how the salience of a given relational identity (Sluss et al., 2010)—"readiness to act out [that] identity" (Stryker & Serpe, 1994: 17)—may explain shared perceptions via contagion and imitation processes as a function of network characteristics such as homogeneity, structural equivalence, and multiplexity. Given the potentially competing expectations attached to various roles, the salience of an identity informs why individuals adopt certain attitudes and beliefs about HR practices. Indeed, salient relational identities are essential to how individuals define themselves and their work environments; they function as a "looking glass" into the organization (Ashforth,

Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Stryker & Burke, 2000) and act as prisms that provide cues through which the qualities of network actors can be inferred (Podolny, 2001). We believe this logic applies to ongoing interaction partners within organizations as they directly share information, and indirectly make inferences, about the nature and quality of HR practices and systems.

*Multi-level phenomena.* Although we largely focused on individual relational identities, our theory lends itself to exploring how HR effects emerge across levels. Theory and research linking HR activities and performance inherently assumes multilevel relationships (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), and both a networks lens and relational identity theory allow for a multilevel exploration of HR's impact on work relationships. Networks, too, are inherently multilevel; they simultaneously have implications at the individual, dyadic, and network levels (Ahuja et al., 2012; Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004). Relational identities act as a psychological bridge across various levels of identification to “knit the network of roles and role incumbents together into a social system” (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007: 11), thus serving as a linchpin among individual, dyadic, and network relationships and individual, unit, and organizational outcomes. Whereas HR practices display top-down processes as they influence network sub-systems and, in turn, individual-level reactions, the enactment of roles by individuals in the context of their relationships demonstrates emergent bottom-up processes by which dyadic, individual, and network-level characteristics can converge to influence various levels of performance (i.e., individual and unit). Indeed, unit-level performance “originates in the cognition, affect, behaviors, or characteristics of individuals, is amplified by their interactions, and manifests as a higher-level phenomenon (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000: 55), highlighting how microfoundations (Abell, Felin, & Foss, 2008) involved with interpersonal relationships and relational identities can function as emergence enabling states—the ‘glue’ that binds unit members together and

allows their interactions to amplify and transform individual-level phenomena into constructs at the unit level (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). Taken together, the process of responding to a network modification is not solely an individual or dyadic one, and is not enacted in social isolation; rather, changes to the manner in which one enacts their role in relation to those in his or her network has implications for the dyadic relationship itself and the larger network of relationships in which it is embedded.

### **Implications for Measurement and Analysis**

Perhaps the most pronounced methodological implication is that, whereas the traditional approach used by HR managers and scholars involves gathering data on individuals' attributes (e.g., knowledge, skills, attitudes), a social network approach directly gathers data on the characteristics (presence/absence, quality) of the relationships among actors. The latter allows for drawing conclusions about performance and perceptions as a function of individuals' relationships, rather than their personal characteristics, and can be implemented through the administration of surveys whereby employees indicate characteristics of their relationships with other organizational members (see Kaše, 2014 for a detailed review).

Moreover, our focus on network dynamics demands research designs that account for temporal patterns of thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relationships. Fortunately, social network analysis effectively captures the network modifications we theorize are impacted by HR practices, and their associations with shifting relational identities, performance behaviors, and perceptions can be analyzed empirically. Specifically, composition modifications can be measured at the dyad level using egocentric longitudinal analyses (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) that present information about ties that are added, lost, and retained over time. This is helpful, for example, in exploring how selection practices facilitate the formation or dissolution

of connections (Kaše, 2014). Configuration modifications are captured using network analysis concepts and techniques focused on structure, in other words, the pattern of ties between individuals. For example, researchers could explore how compensation systems promote or deter coordinated and cohesive activity among unit members. Content modifications can be assessed by asking respondents to indicate the valence and multidimensionality of their relationships. This could be useful when assessing whether a corporate volunteering initiative effectively broadened work-focused relationships to include a social component.

Another promising direction is our integration of three literatures—social networks, HR, and identity—that span multiple levels of analysis. The network view of performance invites the analysis of patterns of relationships as a predictor of performance, rather than simply individual performance in isolation (Brass, 1995); human capital originates from aggregation of individual level KSAOs and is transformed across organizational levels (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011); and juxtaposing the relational level of identity with personal and collective levels enables researchers to make comparisons across levels (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). Usefully, social network data involves data collection, constructs, and analytic techniques that cross the individual, dyadic, and collective levels of analysis. For example, data can be collected around a focal actor, or ego (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). Ego networks offer information about network composition, configuration, and content of localized individuals, and can be used to answer questions relevant to our theorizing, such as what configuration of newcomers' networks is related to enhanced socialization. Data can also be collected on a bounded set of organizational actors to generate a whole network and the connections between them (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Whole network data is inherently multi-level, and can easily be scaled up (to the group or network level) or down (to the dyad or individual level) (Kaše, 2014); it lends itself to questions such as whether



structurally equivalent actors develop shared perceptions of HR practices, and whether perceptions of HR practices diffuse through a dense network. There are also various individual (e.g., centrality), dyad (e.g., homophily), and network level (e.g., density) variables to be computed, and analyses that exist exclusively at the dyad level (multiple regression quadratic assignment procedure, or MRQAP; Borgatti et al., 2002).

### **Practical Implications**

From a practical perspective, our framework provides guidance for managers looking to observe, and potentially govern, employee relationships. For example, managers routinely search for methods to foster inter-unit collaboration and ‘break down silos’. Our theorizing suggests there are myriad options to consider beyond rotating employees or creating cross-functional teams. For instance, fostering dense networks or multiplex ties via through company retreats or company sponsored volunteer service among employees across units may also be effective. Future research could use our framework and propositions in Table 2 to develop theory-based hypotheses to test various HR tactics for influencing social networks. Moreover, employees may benefit from understanding how their personal networks influence role enactment and the meaning they assign to their work environments. Organizations can design training programs that introduce employees to approaches to evaluating, diagnosing, and managing their personal networks using established assessments (e.g., Higgins, 2004; Ibarra, 1996).

Similarly, our framework provides guidance for managers considering how to use HR practices to influence organizational outcomes. For example, consider the case of diversity in organizational leadership structures. Many organizations find their hierarchies become less diverse the closer one gets to top leadership levels (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Common approaches to addressing this issue tend to focus on increasing the diversity of the leadership pipeline, for

example, by requiring diverse candidates to be interviewed, or requiring diverse participation in leader development programs. However, network research suggests these measures are potentially ineffective. Scholars have observed the uneven distribution of members of social groups across jobs and ranks in organizations, and argue that homophily tends to subtly reinforce social stratification by providing more benefits to members of majority groups (Ibarra, 1993; Kleinbaum et al., 2013). Thus, leadership networks will naturally tend towards homophily unless practices alter characteristics of social networks. Future research could use our framework to examine the effectiveness of network altering diversity practices on leadership diversity.

More generally, our theory has implications for how employees internalize and respond to modifications to their networks and, in turn, their relational identities. Organizations are often attracted to initiatives that foster positive and multidimensional relationships to improve engagement and retention (Rath, 2006). Yet, because individuals are more likely to internalize relationships that fulfill both task and social needs into their self-concepts (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008), modifications to these relationships can engender resentment and intentions to turnover. Indeed, research concludes that revising one's identity can create feelings of loss and grief (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). Thus, role-relationship identity changes can be risky, controversial, and perhaps irreversible. Managers could benefit from being sensitive to the influence that these changes have on individuals' self-concepts, and offer support programs to help them cope and adjust to a new environment. Moreover, Sluss and Ashforth (2008) demonstrate that individuals' relational identities can generalize to the extent to which they identify with their organization through cognitive, behavioral, and affective processes. Thus, it is likely that modifications to individuals' networks and, in turn, their relational identity, can improve or threaten their organizational identification.

## **CONCLUSION**

Altogether, our framework of network-modifying HR practices advances the burgeoning literature on the interplay between HRM and organizational networks. In particular, we articulate how HR practices can modify the network architecture of an organization, and that these modifications have the potential to disrupt individuals' relational identities. We theorize that these identities are a key driver in how employees construct, enact, and interpret their environment in the context of their relationships. Thus, we offer a unique and meaningful perspective on the utility of workplace relationships with respect to individual performance.

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**TABLE 1**

**Framework of HR Practices and Network Modifications**

<b>Network-Modifying Dimensions</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Network-Modifying HR Practice Examples</b>	<b>Prototypical Network Characteristics</b>
<b>Composition</b>	Modifications to the set of actors within a social network either by acquiring or releasing actors into or from the network, i.e., <i>who</i> is in the network (Kaše et al., 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment</li> <li>• Selection</li> <li>• Separation/Exit Management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homogeneity</li> <li>• Network size</li> </ul>
<b>Configuration</b>	Modifications to the arrangement, or pattern, of relations among actors within a social network, i.e., <i>how</i> actors are connected (Kaše et al., 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job &amp; Org Design</li> <li>• Training and development</li> <li>• Compensation &amp; Benefits</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Promotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Density</li> <li>• Equivalence</li> <li>• Brokerage</li> </ul>
<b>Content</b>	Modifications to the properties characterizing a relationship between two actors, i.e., <i>what</i> defines the relation (Ibarra, 1993; Krackhart, 1992; Mossholder et al., 2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee Relations</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Compensation &amp; Benefits</li> <li>• Performance Management</li> <li>• Job &amp; Org Design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valence</li> <li>• Multiplexity</li> <li>• Tie strength</li> </ul>



**TABLE 2**

**Illustrative Associations between HR Practices and Network Characteristics<sup>a</sup>**

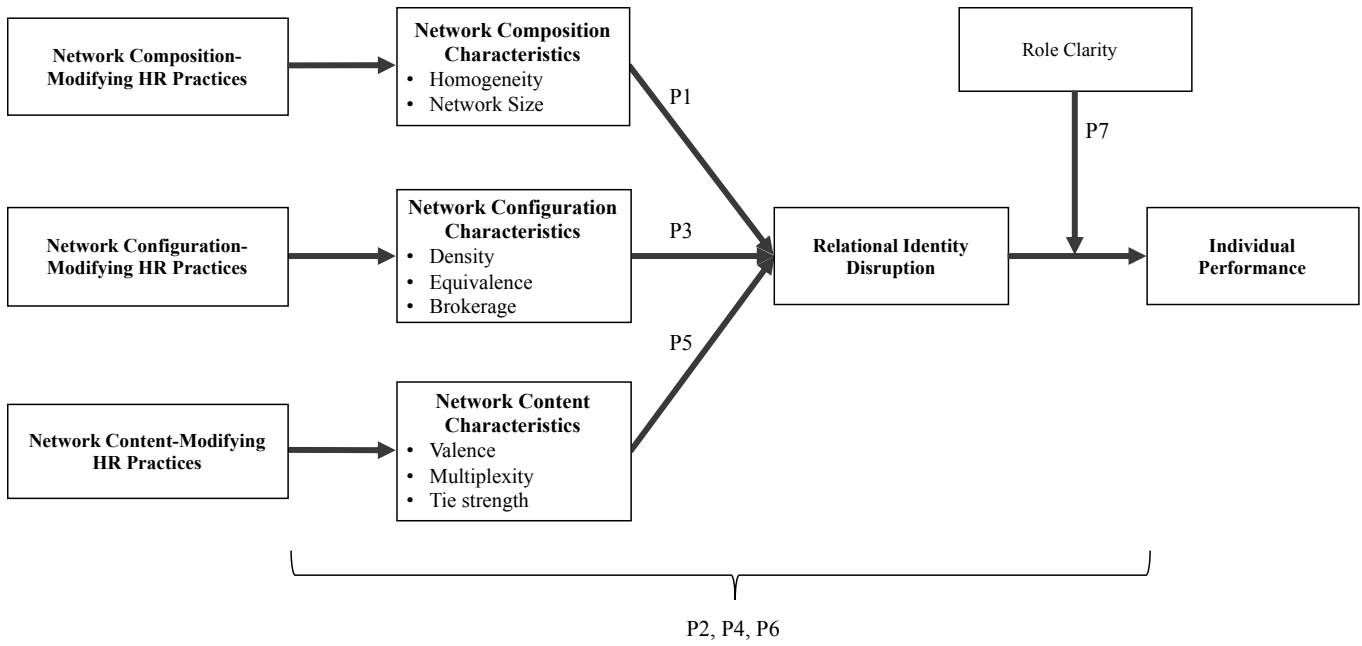
<b>Network Modifying Dimension</b>	<b>HR Practice Category</b>	<b>Illustrative Association</b>
Composition	Selection/Separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selective hiring and separation practices are positively related to network homogeneity.</li> </ul>
	Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity management programs are positively related to network heterogeneity.</li> </ul>
	Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growth recruitment strategies are positively related to network size.</li> </ul>
	Separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Downsizing and retrenchment strategies are negatively related to network size.</li> </ul>
Configuration	Work design/ Training/Compensation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open workspace design, group training exercises, and team-based compensation are positively related to network density.</li> </ul>
	Work design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual and off-site work designs are negatively related to network density.</li> </ul>
	Promotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal job mobility and promotions are positively related to development of equivalent network positions.</li> </ul>
	Training and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-training and job rotation are positively related to brokerage connections</li> </ul>
Content	Performance Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer performance appraisals are positively related to ambivalent relationships.</li> </ul>
	Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge management systems that promote communication and information sharing are positively related to positively-valenced relationships.</li> </ul>
	Employee Relations/Compensation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social and family events, team-building opportunities, and team-based performance appraisals are positively related to multiplex relationships.</li> </ul>
	Work design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work designs such as mentoring and leadership development programs are positively related to tie strength.</li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup> In reality, these HR practice categories are broad and multi-faceted, so the elements of each could likely influence networks in multiple ways. For example, compensation practices emphasizing individual pay-for-performance may alter the content of ego network ties by fostering competition, while group-based incentives may alter network composition or configuration by encouraging new relationships or denser networks, respectively. However, for illustrative purposes, we pair the practices with the network modification dimension that is, conceptually and theoretically, most directly relevant.

**FIGURE 1**

**The Influence of HR Practices and Network Modifications on Relational Identity**

**Disruption and Individual Performance**



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