The Impact of a Sponsor's Goal: How Gender and Goals Influence Cognitive Network Activation for Sponsorship

Elizabeth Campbell
UC San Diego, ecampbell@ucsd.edu

Catherine T. Shea
Carnegie Mellon University, ctshea@andrew.cmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgg

The Impact of a Sponsor's Goal: How Gender and Goals Influence Cognitive Network

Activation for Sponsorship

Sponsorship—professional advocacy in which senior colleagues (sponsors) mobilize resources in their social and professional networks to facilitate junior colleagues' career advancement—is posited to be a key process for increasing the prominence of women and under-represented minorities in organizations (Hewlett, 2013; Ibarra et al., 2010; Kanter, 1977). Sponsorship provided by female leaders for junior women is argued to be crucial to diversifying the upper echelons of organizational leadership. But women are disadvantaged when accessing and mobilizing the resources embedded in their networks (Woehler et al., 2021), which is vital to providing sponsorship that will successfully facilitate junior employees' career advancement. To that point, there is initial evidence suggesting female sponsors are less likely to be associated with successful sponsorship relationships compared to male sponsors (Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

To better understand why gender differences in sponsorship exist, we examine how male and female sponsors consider using their social networks when facilitating junior employees' career advancement. We build on prior work concerning structural barriers that hinder women's ability to construct resource-rich networks (Brass, 1985; Ibarra, 1992) and focus on differences in the networks that men and women cognitively activate (Brands, 2013; Krackhardt, 1987). We combine survey and experimental evidence to answer the following questions: Do men and women have different goals when thinking about how to activate the resources in their networks to provide sponsorship? And, do these differences impact the characteristics of the network that they cognitively activate?

In Study 1, 215 full-time employed U.S. citizens from Amazon Mechanical Turk were surveyed about their goals when providing sponsorship (54.1% male, 80.9% White/Caucasian, age

m=35.9 years). Participants were provided with the definition of a goal and asked to imagine they had the opportunity to facilitate the career advancement of a high-potential junior employee in their workplace. Analyses of the number and content of the goals that participants recorded reveal that female participants spontaneously generated more goals than male participants when asked to consider how they would sponsor a junior employee. Coding of the goal statements suggests these differences are not explained by the specificity of the recorded goals (i.e., women are *not* reporting a greater number of more specific goals). This finding extends prior work on women's tendency to have more career goals than men by showing these gender differences in workplace goals also emerge as individuals think about using the resources in their networks (Gino et al., 2015).

Study 2 recruited 519 full-time employed U.S. citizens working in supervisory positions from MTurk (*53.5% male, 75.3% White/Caucasian, age m=36.1 years*) and experimentally manipulated the types of goals that participants were asked to focus on when deciding if/how to provide sponsorship (3 conditions: control with no goal statement, single goal of facilitating the junior employee's advancement, and dual goals of balancing maintaining one's own reputation with facilitating the junior employee's advancement). Participants were then asked to identify up to 10 individuals they could reach out to and foster a connection that would benefit the junior employee's career. Analyses of these cognitively activated networks show that women activate denser networks than men when asked to balance maintaining their own reputation with facilitating the junior employee's advancement (dual goals condition). In contrast, men activated sparse networks regardless of goal condition. Higher density networks are associated with poorer informational and career outcomes than lower density networks (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973), making this a suboptimal network activation outcome for women. This finding is consistent with work showing individuals primed to feel threat cognitively activate fewer network contacts and a

smaller proportion of weak tie contacts (Shea et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2016). However, supplemental experiments show that our findings are not explained by gender differences in psychological threat, rejection sensitivity, endorsement of positive reciprocity norms, or willingness to help others.

In summary, we find evidence for differences in how men and women approach sponsorship. Female sponsors have more goals than male sponsors, and this prompts women to cognitively activate networks that are less conducive to accessing a diverse selection of individuals and resources, which is crucial for effective sponsorship. These findings have important implications for understanding the microfoundations of inequality in organizations because how leaders decide to provide sponsorship impacts who ultimately ascends the organizational hierarchy. Notably, our findings highlight the link between sponsors' goals and mobilization of network-based resources, which lays the groundwork for identifying goal-based interventions aimed at eliminating gender inequality in sponsorship. Thus, these findings are consequential to understanding how bias is perpetuated or can be dismantled in organizations.

Word count: 748 / 750

References

Brands, R. A. (2013). Cognitive social structures in social network research: A review. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *34*, 82–103. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1890

Brass, D. J. (1985). Men's and women's networks: A study of interaction patterns and influence in an organization. *Academy of Management Journal*, *28*(2), 327–343. https://doi.org/10.2307/256204

Burt, R. S. (1992). *Structural holes: The social structure of competition*. Harvard University Press.

Gino, F., Wilmuth, C. A., & Brooks, A. W. (2015). Compared to men, women view professional advancement as equally attainable, but less desirable. *PNAS*, *112*(40), 12354–12359.

Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(6), 1360–1380.

Hewlett, S. A. (2013). *Forget a mentor, find a sponsor: A new way to fast-track your career*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Ibarra, H. (1992). Homophily and differential returns: Sex differences in network structure and access in an advertising firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *37*(3), 422–447.

Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. (2010). Why men still get more promotions than women. *Harvard Business Review*, *September*.

Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation*. Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group.

Krackhardt, D. (1987). Cognitive social structures. *Social Networks*, *9*, 109–134.

Ragins, B. R., & Cotton, J. L. (1999). Mentor functions and outcomes: A comparison of men and women in formal and informal mentoring relationships. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *84*, 529–550.

Shea, C. T., Lee, J., Menon, T., & Im, D.-K. (2019). Cheater's hide and seek: Strategic cognitive network activation during ethical decision making. *Social Networks*, *58*, 143–155.

Smith, E. B., Menon, T., & Thompson, L. (2016). Status differences in the cognitive activation of social networks. *Organization Science*, *23*(1), Online first.

Woehler, M. L., Cullen-Lester, K. L., Porter, C. M., & Frear, K. A. (2021). Whether, how, and why networks influence men's and women's careers: Review and research agenda. *Journal of Management*, *47*(1), 207–236. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206320960529