

For professional women, having high-status connections can backfire, reveals study

February 15 2024, by Carnegie Mellon University



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Women working in organizations are frequently encouraged to cultivate connections to high-status individuals based on a prominent social network theory. But new research conducted in China and the United

States suggests that having high-status connections can backfire for women.

The study, by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Michigan, [appears](#) in *Organization Science*.

"Our findings reveal a social-network dilemma for women that is contrary to a widely accepted belief that women should build their network with high-status individuals," said Catherine Shea, Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior and Theory at Carnegie Mellon's Tepper School of Business, who co-authored the study. "High-status network contacts may be necessary for success, but they create an extra social perceptual hurdle for women to overcome."

Women working in organizations are, on average, less successful than men: They are proportionally under-represented in management, receive less credit for their contributions, and are not as valued for their expertise. A common recommendation for women to gain prominence in organizations is to forge connections with high-status others, by seeking advice from them or obtaining mentorship or sponsorship from high-status people. By having these networks, it is assumed, women can close the status gap with their male counterparts.

Social networks are valuable for two reasons. First, high-status connections can provide valuable information and resources, which can help women achieve. Second, individuals' networks may also shape how they are perceived and evaluated by people around them. In this way, having a network with many high-status contacts should ostensibly enhance individuals' status (e.g., respect, admiration, influence). But this is where things do not work as planned for women: women with high-status contacts actually lose status.

This is a surprising finding given that there's an established scientific

literature showing that high-status networks positively shape the status of the individual. However, a closer look at this research shows that most studies demonstrating this effect have been of [male participants](#), and have simply assumed that the same effects accrue to women.

In this work, researchers examined the gender-differentiated perceptions of observers as they evaluated an individual's network. In doing so, they sought to form a more complete picture of how women's network ties affected their attainment of status in groups.

They conducted five studies (three in China and two in the United States) with a total of nearly 2,800 individuals. Participants included employees of firms in Eastern China and an engineering college in Northern China, undergraduates at an engineering school in Eastern China, and U.S. adults recruited from a crowdsourcing marketplace.

The studies concluded that compared to women with ties to lower-status contacts, women with ties to high-status contacts had less respect and admiration from other group members. Women who made ties to higher-status people were seen as being higher in dominance.

Women who are dominant are subject to social penalties. This is because dominant women are seen as violating gender norms of communality (an individual's focus on others' needs over self-interests). The findings clarify the important yet underdeveloped aspect of how social perceptions of networks combine with gender roles in predicting the effects of networks at the interpersonal level.

"By revealing an unfortunate obstacle that women may face—the natural tendency of people to socially penalize women with high-status contacts—our research increases awareness of this bias so organizations can work against it and eradicate this form of gender inequality," explained Shea.

Managers should strive for greater structural changes to organizations (e.g., by promoting formal mentor programs, initiating sensitivity training to reduce biases) to help women harness the benefits of high-status contacts while reducing the status costs, Shea said.

One bright side was that women who explicitly demonstrated that they were forming high-status ties for the sake of the group were spared the social backlash. This means that women and organizations can take tangible steps to reframe network building activities to protect the status perception of women building their networks. For instance, reframing network events to "lunch and learn" events could ease the social pressures off of agentic women.

The authors of the research note that their research took an audience-centric approach by focusing on how observers interpreted individuals' network contacts. They did not consider how [women](#) feel and act when they have different kinds of contacts.

More information: Siyu Yu et al, The Company She Seeks: How the Prismatic Effects of Ties to High-Status Network Contacts Can Reduce Status for Women in Groups, *Organization Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1287/orsc.2020.14640](#)

Provided by Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University

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