



Women Alone in the Middle: Gender Differences in the Occupation and Leverage of Social Network Brokerage Roles

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Introduction

For decades, researchers have known that professional networks that are characterized by *brokerage*—connections to otherwise unconnected subnetworks within the organization—provide important advantages. Brokerage refers to the situation in which an individual serves as an intermediary or, *broker*, between individuals who have no direct relationship with each other but who do each have a direct relationship with the broker (Gould & Fernandez, 1989; Simmel, 1950). People who occupy the powerful brokerage role reap significant career rewards, including faster rates of promotion, larger bonuses, more involvement in innovation, and greater likelihood of being identified as top talent (Halevy et al., 2019). In one study of brokers in a financial institution, brokers—with

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the same level of education and experience—were 40% more likely than non-brokers to be promoted (Burt & Ronchi, 2007). In fact, more than half of the predicted differences in career success were explained by the extent to which a person was a broker, far exceeding the impact of any other predictor. However, mounting evidence suggests that women are less likely than men to occupy the brokerage position and, even when they do occupy it, are less likely to leverage it for career success (Fang et al., 2020; Woehler et al., 2021).

The brokerage principle, as it has been called (Burt, 2000), is derived from structural hole theory which states that individuals in organizations naturally tend to form relationships with similar others, especially around functional areas, and that this natural tendency eventually causes the whole network to become marked with disconnected others whose (non) relationship constitutes a structural hole. By providing access to otherwise disconnected individuals, brokerage confers information, control, and referral advantages (Burt, 1992).

Information advantages arise as a result of access to more and more diverse information. Compared to everyone else in the network, brokers get the latest organizational “news” faster. They are among the first to hear about recent opportunities, organizational events, and political actions. At the same time, they are exposed to more diverse information because the brokerage position usually lies between clusters of interwoven relationships among similar others, within which people hold a similar worldview based on shared personal, professional, and educational experiences. By virtue of being exposed to more worldviews, brokers gain a “vision advantage” which contributes to their tendency to be more likely to come up with new ideas, less likely to have their ideas rejected by others, and more likely to have their ideas evaluated as valuable (Burt, 2004). Brokers, for example, are better-positioned to understand the potential impact of an organizational initiative on different areas within the organization which may be why managers responsible for initiating and attempting to implement change initiatives were significantly more likely to successfully implement major change initiatives when they were brokers (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012).

Control benefits arise from the broker's ability to control the flow of information between clusters by hoarding or selectively distributing it to their own advantage. For example, a broker might share valuable information held by one party with another party, thereby increasing their social capital. Conversely, they could withhold valuable information to increase the "payment" others must pay for their brokering services. They could even use their position to play parties off one another in a bidding war, although this form of brokering risks negative reputational outcomes.

Lastly, referral advantages arise from the fact that brokers can benefit when they connect formerly unconnected individuals, as long as it adds value to both parties when they do so. Forming or strengthening relationships in this way increases the broker's social capital, resulting in greater trust and status (Halevy et al., 2020). Making these connections does not necessarily diminish the broker's structural position. Instead, because brokers tend to continually refresh their networks by occupying new structural holes (Sasovova et al., 2010), they can retain their brokerage position while still brokering connections between otherwise unconnected individuals.

While brokerage offers potential advantage, the full benefit of the position only emerges when that brokerage is leveraged to realize that advantage. *Brokering* behaviors capture the actions individuals take to influence, manage, or facilitate others' interactions and relationships (Obstfeld et al., 2014). Brokering involves a wide range of activities, including introducing two people to each other, sharing gossip gleaned from one person with another, and mediating a conflict between two people. Yet, individuals differ in their willingness and ability to engage in brokering behavior. For example, an individual may occupy a brokerage role but be unwilling to activate diverse connections or refer previously unconnected people to each other (cf. Greguletz et al., 2019). Similarly, brokers may lack the ability to broker. Likely interpersonal skills needed to broker include forming and managing positive relationships, building trust, translating information, cultivating competition, facilitating coordination, and managing conflict (Halevy et al., 2019). A broker who can

interpret information and translate to others, for example, can leverage this ability to bridge the worldviews of different clusters and connect ideas across clusters in such a way that even complex knowledge becomes meaningful and acceptable to others (Boari & Riboldazzi, 2014). Differences in individual willingness and ability to broker may explain why “there is wide variance in the extent to which individuals benefit from bridging structural holes” (Burt, 2012, p. 587).

Women and Brokerage

While the benefits of brokerage clearly accrue to men, they may not accrue equally to women (Burt, 1998; Fang et al., 2020; Woehler et al., 2021). In some sense, this is a puzzling situation. Women are often assumed to be “relational experts” (Gottman & Carrere, 1994), to prioritize relationships, have greater emotional intelligence (Joseph & Newman, 2010), and, more generally, to display highly developed interpersonal skills such as listening, empathizing, building intimacy, and fostering collaboration. Brokerage requires the willingness and ability to form relationships with members of multiple groups, an ability that has been associated with higher levels of social skills (Wölfer et al., 2012). So why are there gender differences in occupying and leveraging the brokerage and why do those differences favor men?

There have been several mechanisms proposed to account for gender differences in brokerage, most of which broadly fall into one of two categories: *structural constraints* and *gender role expectations*. A third category, *socio-emotional experience*, may also explain gender differences. These categories are conceptually distinct but, in practice, mutually constitutive. Socio-cultural forces shape and constrain the structures in which women are located, often reinforcing gender role expectations. Conforming (or not) to gender role expectations influences women’s socio-emotional experiences which, in turn, reinforces gender role expectations and the structuring of organizational spaces and networks.

Structural Constraints

Structural constraints arise from socio-cultural norms that result in (a) a disproportionately low percentage of women occupying senior-level positions in organizational hierarchies, (b) the clustering of women in so-called “pink-collar” jobs and industries, and (c) greater non-work demands on women’s time and focus.

The disproportionately higher number of men at higher levels in organizations means that men are more likely than women to be appealing as relationship partners because they have higher status and greater access to valued resources, such as insider information. In other words, the relationship opportunity structure is different for women (Ibarra, 1993). This situation is exacerbated by the well-known tendency to prefer relationships with similar others (Ibarra, 1992). This tendency, also referred to as *homophily*, is one of the strongest and most enduring findings in the social sciences (McPherson et al., 2001). Homogenous relationships increase the ease of communication and ensure the predictability of behavior and can thereby encourage reciprocity. Both men and women are more likely to form same-gender relationships than they are to form relationships across gender lines, although men are even more likely than women to do so (Woehler et al., 2021).

When men form relationships, the opportunity structure favors the formation of relationships with relatively higher status individuals. In contrast, women are more likely to be low status themselves, to form relationships with other women who have similar low status, and to preferentially seek help and support from other women (Ibarra, 1992, 1993). As a result, when men occupy brokerage positions, their networks are more likely than women’s networks to include critical work-related resources, such as jobs, budget, references, and high-visibility projects whereas women who occupy the brokerage position are less likely to have access to these valued resources, reducing their information, control, and referral advantages (Ibarra, 1992, 1993). Thus, even if they try to leverage their brokerage position, women may not reap the same benefits as men.

When women are able to successfully leverage their networks, their networks tend to have contacts who are relatively higher in status than those in men’s successfully leveraged networks (Woehler et al., 2021),

suggesting women may need to have more influential contacts than men do in order to access the same brokerage-related outcomes. In short, simply eliminating gender differences in number or proportion of high-status contacts may not benefit women because gender parity seems to be a necessary yet insufficient condition for providing men and women with equal opportunities to develop and leverage brokerage positions.

Women are also more likely than men to be concentrated in so-called “pink-collar” jobs that are in gendered industries and occupations. Pink-collar jobs include teachers, nurses, administrative assistants, and social workers. Men, in contrast, are more likely to be concentrated in construction trades, transportation, and manufacturing professions (Das & Kotikula, 2019). Pink-collar jobs tend to be paid less than other fields that require similar levels of education and training (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Levanon et al., 2009). The gender segregation of occupations means that women are more likely than men to be in lower status positions or in functions that are not core to the business, such as legal services, human resources, public relations, and communications (Levanon et al., 2009). Women enter these support functions as a result of subtle career tracking, more women-friendly policies (e.g., flex time), lack of sponsorship, and negative recruitment experiences (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017). In contrast, men predominate in positions that have profit-and-loss responsibility or are focused on core operations such as finance and operations (Helfat et al., 2006). These jobs are closer to the core of the business, giving these individuals greater access to tangible resources such as staff and budget, and greater visibility to senior leadership. Not surprisingly, a higher percentage of C-suite executives come from core business functions (Helfat et al., 2006).

Lastly, fewer women than men have the time to participate in relationship-building activities that occur outside of work (e.g., networking events, client dinners) because women are more likely than men to have competing demands for their time to be spent on home and childcare duties, reducing the time they have available for work-related socializing (Thompson & Walker, 1991). A 2017 study (Women in the Workplace, 2017) found that 54% of women (as compared to 22% of men) report doing all or most of the household work, reducing the time they have available for outside-of-work socializing. The same study

found that women with a partner and child are 5.5 times more likely than their male counterparts to do all or most of the household work, a trend that has been exacerbated by the covid pandemic (Hamel & Salganicoff, 2020). Men do not shoulder the majority of these unpaid responsibilities, freeing them up mentally and physically to engage in social interactions. Extra-work *networking* activities are also less likely to appeal to women's interests (e.g., sports-focused) and *more likely to be organized around male schedules* that, typically, allow more flexibility for after-work and weekend socializing.

Gender Role Expectations

Perhaps the most commonly referenced mechanism to explain gender differences in the occupation and ability to successfully leverage the brokerage position is derived from *gender role theory* (Eagly, 1987). Gender role theory posits that boys and girls are socialized in different ways and that these predispositions have enduring effects throughout the life course. These different socialization processes produce gendered role expectations in which men are expected to be agentic, assertive, achievement-oriented, and competitive whereas women are expected to be communal, relationship-oriented, other-centered, and collaborative. A recent meta-analysis found consistent empirical support for gender differences in agency and communion (Hsu et al., 2021). For example, compared to men, women are more likely to place a higher value on emotional connections (Ryan et al., 2005), experience themselves more relationally (Cyranowski et al., 2000), focus more on relationships than rules (Gilligan, 1982), be more attuned to the needs of others and feel responsible for meeting those needs (Miller, 1976), have higher expectations of communality in relationships (Hall, 2011) and, more generally, seek to form intimate, interdependent, and closely knit connections with others (Cross & Madson, 1997; Eagly, 1987; Hall, 2011).

Through socialization, gender roles become internalized and incorporated into gender identity, along with descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive cultural beliefs about men and women (e.g., that women are nurturing, that they should be even more nurturing, and that they

must not neglect opportunities to nurture). Gender roles then become a way to manage one's own behavior and to engage with the gendered expectations of others (Wood & Eagly, 2009). Note that gender roles do not necessarily align with individual personality traits or characteristics, or with assigned sex. But when they do, and when others perceive that they are acting in ways that are gender role-consistent, individuals tend to feel more positive affect, such as positive emotions and higher self-esteem (Bem, 1981). Gender normative behavior is further enforced by the approval or disapproval of others, as well as through cultural rituals, stories, and symbols, such as the media portrayal of men and women.

Within the workplace, the penalty for gender role inconsistency can be high, as violators may be perceived as threatening the existing social order (Rudman et al., 2012). Women, especially White women, who display dominant, aggressive, or agentic behavior are more likely to experience career penalties such as being judged as less competent, unworthy for promotion, and less desirable as job candidates (Livingston et al., 2012; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rudman et al., 2012; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Social sanctions are equally costly. Women who do not adhere to gender role norms tend to be evaluated less favorably than men demonstrating the same behaviors by both men *and* women (Rudman et al., 2012; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Likability is not merely a predictor of social status, it also has direct career consequences. A person must be seen as likable as well as skilled to be hired or promoted; competence alone is insufficient (Fuchs et al., 2004). For example, compared to other individuals, well-liked individuals receive higher performance evaluations (Ahuja et al., 2003; Brass, 1984).

In male-dominated industries and occupations, gender may be particularly salient, increasing the pressure on women to adhere to gender norms. Not surprisingly, women tend to be more distressed than men when confronted with ambiguous or conflicting role expectations and the possibility of experiencing social disapproval or even rejection by failing to meet these role expectations (Thoits, 2010). In short, women have a strong incentive to avoid violating social norms. They can achieve this through displays of warmth, communality, and non-dominance, and by avoiding explicit displays of social dominance, competitiveness, aggression, or agency (Williams & Tiedens, 2016).

As a result of gender role expectations, women may be less willing to occupy and leverage their brokerage role because doing so may be perceived as gender role-inconsistent. While focusing on and managing relationships is gender role-consistent for women, the perception that one is doing so for personal gains is not and could result in backlash. *Occupying* a brokerage role often requires proactively initiating professional relationships in order to combat relational tendencies toward homophily and subsequent clustering (Goodreau et al., 2009; McPherson et al., 2001). Women who purposefully build professional networks are more likely to be perceived as acting primarily out of gender role-inconsistent selfish interests and not out of a gender role-consistent interest in the welfare of the other person. Professional women who are perceived as having a deficit in socially sensitive communal attributes are rated as less likable and are more likely to be the target of interpersonal hostility (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). In contrast, when men network, they are perceived to be sincere (Flynn et al., n.d.). Purposefully occupying a brokerage role, therefore, violates gender norms which dictate that men, but not women, can take self-interested (versus communally oriented) action. Not surprisingly, women who are perceived as occupying a brokerage role are rated as less warm than women who are perceived as occupying a more interconnected network (Brands & Kilduff, 2014). In this way, gender role expectations regarding agency may lead to men feeling social approval and acceptance in brokerage positions, whereas women who occupy brokerage positions may feel anxious, undermining their successful performance of brokering behaviors and their performance on work-related tasks (Brands & Mehra, 2019).

Of course, simply occupying the brokerage position is not enough. Successfully *leveraging* the brokerage role requires that the broker engage in purposeful *brokering* activities. Again, taking purposeful relational action may lead to being perceived as valuing agency over communality, potentially sparking backlash against women who seek to leverage their brokerage role.

Brokering activities are of two main types: separating and joining (Kwon et al., 2020; Obstfeld et al., 2014). A broker who separates keeps

unconnected people unconnected by either controlling the flow of information from one person to another (e.g., by offering a solution found by one person to a problem facing another person) or by mediating the flow of information and serving as a conduit (e.g., by facilitating the transfer of information for one source to another). The key aspect of separating brokering is that the unconnected people stay unconnected. In contrast, joining brokering activities involve introducing or otherwise facilitating a relationship between two previously unconnected parties. Joining brokering is an essentially collaborative strategy, a strategy that is gender role-consistent for women.

Recent work suggests that the impact of brokering on individual-level performance may only be realized through separating activity (Soda et al., 2018). Joining brokering may have only an indirect effect on performance. Collaboration can be time-consuming for the broker and invisible to people evaluating performance/contribution, potentially reducing the value of the brokerage position (Burt, 1992). For example, while joining brokering has the potential to facilitate the integration and implementation of new and diverse ideas in teams and organizations (Lingo & O'Mahony, 2010), which may translate to better overall team—or organizational-level outcomes (e.g., more innovative products), it does not necessarily accrue individual performance benefits to the broker. In short, it may be that women who enact a gender role-consistent tendency toward collaboration undercut the performance advantages of brokering activities that rely upon a more competitive or individualistic brokering strategy, such as exploiting gaps between connections and controlling the flow of resources across those gaps (Soda et al., 2018).

Gender role inconsistency may also affect the willingness of others to provide resources to women brokers, further reducing the returns to their brokering activities. This explains the finding that even in networks in which men and women are equally likely to occupy brokerage positions, men are more likely than women to reap the performance benefits of being a broker (Woehler et al., 2021). Women in male-dominated industries or in professional roles that are gender-inconsistent may even

rely upon others to “legitimize” them and choose instead to form strong connections with influential others rather than occupy a brokerage role (Burt, 1998). Over time, the need to signal legitimacy may become a self-reinforcing loop as the embedding strategies that helped women cope at lower levels of the organization (or when first entering an organization) may lead them to continue applying such strategies, despite having moved to positions with higher autonomy in the organization, where the negative consequences of network closure are apparent (Gargiulo et al., 2009).

Relatedly, women are less likely than men to provide help to so-called “weak” ties—acquaintances and work colleagues with whom they do not have a strong relationship—either by helping them form new relationships or through helping repair strained relationships (Halvey & Kalish, 2022). Research shows that both kinds of helpful brokering increase brokers’ social capital, resulting in greater trust and status (Halevy et al., 2020). This may be because gender role expectations call for women to invest highly in strong, intimate relationships (Hall, 2011) which could arguably be interpreted as requiring less investment in more distant or “weak” relationships. It may also be spurred by gender differences in self-construal as it relates to a relational versus a collective orientation toward interdependence (Halevy & Kalish, 2022; see also, below). Because ties to otherwise unconnected parties are more likely to be weak—or, put another way, less likely to be strong—men may more be more likely to realize value from their brokerage position.

To summarize, both occupying and leveraging the brokerage role require demonstrations of agency and rejection of communality, qualities that fit gender role expectations for men but violate them for women. Gender thus transforms the meaning and value of the brokerage position (Stewart & McDermott, 2004). To avoid backlash in the form of social disapproval or rejection, gender role theory suggests that women in the workplace have a strong incentive to avoid occupying or leveraging the brokerage role.

Gendered Socio-Emotional Experience

While less explored, a gendered socio-emotional experience of the brokerage role may also contribute to systematic disadvantage for women. Individuals who occupy brokerage positions may pay psychological costs (Burt, 2005; Dekker et al., 2000, 2004; Friedman & Podolny, 1992). Situated as they are between different social groups, brokers may face conflicting sets of preferences (Podolny & Baron, 1997), different languages or perspectives (Carlile & Rebentisch, 2003), unclear expectations (Dekker et al., 2000), and multiple demands on their time and energy (Burt, 2005). People who feel relatively powerless—as women often do in workplace settings—may be even less willing to engage in brokering behaviors because they perceive brokerage “not as opportunities but as signs of discord to be avoided” (Landis et al., 2018, p. 935).

Managing the tensions associated with brokerage poses a number of challenges to brokers, placing them at risk for higher levels of stress and lower life quality (Dekker et al., 2004). For example, adolescents who occupied brokerage positions reported higher levels of social stress and lower self-esteem compared to adolescents embedded in clusters; this was true even when the brokers were generally well-liked (Borowski et al., 2016). In contrast, individuals who are embedded in a tightly connected group of friends tend to experience fewer stress reactions and lower anxiety levels, perhaps as a result of clear and consistent expectations for behavior (Haines et al., 2002; Kadushin, 1982; Totterdell et al., 2004). There is some evidence that, compared to men brokers, women brokers may have a more negative emotional experience. For example, compared to adolescent boys, adolescent girls in a brokerage position tend to report lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of social stress (Carboni & Gilman, 2012) as well as more suicidal ideation (Bearman & Moody, 2004). Women may experience the brokerage position as especially distressing for several reasons.

One, women who occupy the brokerage position may be more likely than men to experience it as a threat to their self-concept. This proposition builds upon evidence that men and women tend to define

themselves differently in relation to their social world (Cross et al., 2000; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999). Overall, and consistent with gender role expectations, men are more likely to favor an independent self-construal whereas women are more likely to favor an interdependent self-construal (Cross et al., 2000). However, the evidence suggests that men also incorporate some elements of interdependence into their self-concept; more specifically, men tend to define their interdependent self in relation to large-group memberships (e.g., organization) whereas women are more likely to define their interdependent self in terms of dyadic relationships (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997). Relatedly, women tend to value a group based mainly on their attachment to other group members whereas men value groups, partly because of their attachment to other members, but also because of their attachment to the larger group identity (Seeley et al., 2003). As a result, women's self-concept may be more likely than men's to be influenced by the presence or absence of specific dyadic relationships.

Within a personal network characterized by brokerage, the "absent" tie is the one between two parties who are connected to the focal person but are not connected to each other. Compared to men, women may feel pressure to convert the indirect dyadic relationship to a direct dyadic relationship or risk identity threat by not forming the relationship. In contrast, men who tend to identify more strongly with the collective, may be less distressed by the presence or absence of dyadic-level ties. This argument receives some support from studies that have found that adolescent girls in mixed gender settings have more of their friendship ties generated by triadic closure when compared to the friendship ties of adolescent boys (Goodreau et al., 2009; Kirke, 2009) and that their networks tend to be characterized by higher degrees of transitivity (Ko et al., 2015). At least one study has found similar tendencies toward closure among women (Carboni et al., 2022).

Two, women who occupy the broker position may be exposed to more distressing information than male brokers and be more distressed by the information they receive. Brokers, who have access to more information about diverse others as a function of their position in the network, may be more likely than non-brokers to be exposed to a fuller array of network events (cf. Burt, 2005). Given that people are much more likely to seek out women than men as confidants (Kessler & McLeod, 1984),

women brokers may be particularly likely to receive such information. As a result of their tendency to be more relationship-oriented, women may be predisposed to experience a “contagion of stress” when people in their affective networks encounter stressful events (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). For example, women are more likely than men to be affected by the loneliness of their friends and neighbors (Cacioppo et al., 2009).

A third reason why women may experience more distress than men in the brokerage position arises as a function of the fact that brokers are more likely to bridge otherwise unconnected clusters (Granovetter, 1973). Clusters may be disconnected for many reasons, including different foci of activity (Feld, 1983), but, in at least some proportion of cases, clusters will be disconnected because they are in intergroup conflict. In this situation, a broker may be called upon to be a mediator or serve as a messenger between hostile groups. Without careful management of this position and advanced mediation skills, the broker could easily become a target of hostility and be rejected as biased in favor of one side or another. Even when they possess well-developed brokering skills, women may suffer a performance penalty as a result of engaging in collaborative brokering behaviors (Soda et al., 2018). This may contribute to the performance anxiety that some women experience when they believe themselves to occupy a brokerage position (Brands & Mehra, 2019).

Lastly, women may be more likely than men to experience networking as relationally immoral (Greguletz et al., 2019). Both men and women may experience networking as distasteful or “dirty” (Casciaro et al., 2014). Most people share a deep-seated belief, as expressed by the philosopher Kant (1785/2012), that people should not be a means to an end but, instead, should always be an end in themselves. In the purely social realm, it is clear that relationships are pursued for their own ends. However, unlike personal relationships, professional relationships do not carry an expectation of mutuality or symmetry. For example, an individual may turn to another for career advice but not be sought out for advice by the same person. Proactively seeking a relationship may therefore appear self-serving (i.e., a means to a selfish end), even to the individual seeking the relationship. For women, who are socialized

to value communality and the interests of others, proactively seeking—and certainly leveraging—a relationship may feel even more relationally immoral than it does to men (Greguletz et al., 2019).

In summary, as a result of structural constraints, gender role expectations, and socio-emotional experience, women are less likely than men to occupy the powerful brokerage role and, even when they do occupy it, are less likely than men to leverage it to advantage.

Practical Applications

There are several reasons why organizations should care about fostering brokerage and women's brokerage in particular. For one thing, brokerage not only benefits individuals, it benefits the organization as a whole. Like many relational systems, organizational networks tend to be pocked with clusters of like-minded individuals (Burt, 1992). Being embedded within one of these clusters supports feelings of engagement, connection, support, and positive mental health among the individuals within them (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Totterdell et al., 2004). However, embeddedness can also contribute to the formation of echo chambers, the rise of intergroup conflict, challenges in cross-cluster knowledge transfer, and inequities in access to opportunities. Brokers create boundary-spanning bridges between clusters that can reduce these potential negative outcomes. Brokers can use their position to distribute the benefits of diverse perspectives, promote collaboration, transfer knowledge, and provide equitable access to opportunities throughout the organization by leveraging their positive relationships with each cluster, their understanding of how each cluster perceives events, and their own relative neutrality.

Teams also benefit from brokerage. Project teams in which individuals are tightly connected to each other maximize the relationships that facilitate coordination, information-sharing, and successful implementation of team endeavors but may find themselves isolated from stakeholder input and external resources/expertise resulting in flawed decisions, innovation failures, and misalignment with the organization (Cross & Carboni, 2021). Brokerage helps closely knit teams thrive, because in

addition to the benefits of internal connection, brokers connect them to disparate others, including those that bring in new and diverse information (Reagans et al., 2004). In short, brokerage not only benefits individuals, it benefits the teams and organizations in which they reside. Yet, without intervention, the value that brokers accrue as a result of their brokering “services,” may contribute to gender inequities by falling mainly to men rather than women for all of the reasons mentioned previously.

Organizations invested in the success of women, as well as in the success of their overall enterprise, will benefit when they nurture women’s ability to effectively occupy and leverage the brokerage role. They can do this by taking a three-pronged approach: (1) *raise awareness* about the opportunities and challenges associated with occupying and leveraging the brokerage position, (2) offer individuals specific *action steps* for successfully occupying and leveraging the brokerage role, and (3) provide *structured opportunities* for developing brokerage relationships. While women are the primary target of intervention attempts, both women and the people who work with them could fruitfully participate in all of these organizational activities.

Raise Awareness

Individuals are likely to benefit from increased awareness of (a) the value and power of the brokerage position, (b) the extent to which their personal networks include brokerage, and (c) specific challenges that women face regarding the occupation of the brokerage position. To communicate the value and power of the brokerage position, educators could simply share empirical findings. Many people experience this knowledge as eye-opening. Awareness of the value of occupying and leveraging the brokerage position should be a necessary first step in any education and training program. In general, evidence suggests that professionals who learn the properties of an effective network, achieve greater performance and career advancement (Burt & Ronchi, 2007).

Raising awareness of one’s own network structure offers the opportunity to increase its effectiveness. Women may have a perceptual

advantage in this regard. Theorizing on power relations suggests that those low in power may be more motivated than those high in power to perceive their social world more accurately (Russell & Fiske, 2010). Relatedly, individuals who have lower levels of formal power tend to perceive their organizational network more accurately (Simpson et al., 2011). Given that women are more likely to be in low power positions within their organizations, they may already have a relatively accurate perception of their network structure. In any case, one strategy that organizations can take to raise awareness of existing network structure is to actually present individuals with their network structure, obtained either by extracting personal networks from an organizational network analysis (Schweer et al., 2012) or by asking them to generate their networks via a mapping exercise (e.g., Ibarra, 2002) or online survey. Unfortunately, while people who feel powerless are more likely to perceive opportunities to broker, they may also be less willing to engage in brokering behaviors (Landis et al., 2018). Thus, awareness of one's brokerage position (or lack thereof) is a necessary but not sufficient first step to spurring actual brokering activity.

Individuals should also be made aware of the specific challenges that women face in occupying and leveraging the brokerage position, such as the available opportunity structure, backlash from exhibiting gender role-inconsistent behavior, and socio-emotional discomfort. These challenges are intertwined. For example, the natural tendency to form homophilous relationships means that, without intention, both men and women will naturally drift into relationships with similar others. With increased awareness of structural constraints, women might select their relationship-building opportunities more strategically. Despite a rise in the acceptability of women in agentic roles (Hsu et al., 2021), backlash in the form of being liked less is still more likely to occur when women do not assume nurturing or communally oriented roles (Rudman et al., 2012). Understanding the nature of gender role expectations and backlash can help women anticipate and prepare for responses to their more intentional networking behavior and can also help others examine and shift their own biases to be more supportive of women who behave in role-inconsistent ways. Lastly, understanding that the brokerage role

may be associated with emotional discomfort for women may help them develop targeted coping strategies and provide managers with additional insight into the stress associated with the brokerage role.

Action Steps

Building on awareness-raising efforts, organizations could also provide individuals with action steps designed to support *intentional network development* and *strategies for coping with backlash and distress*.

Intentional Network Development

There are at least three general strategies for occupying a brokerage role: engaging in activities with brokerage potential, proactively forming boundary-spanning relationships, and activating dormant relationships. Activities with brokerage potential are activities in which the following facilitating conditions are met (cf. Allport, 1954): participating individuals represent different professional groups (e.g., different industries, different organizations, different functions), individuals share common goals, individuals must work together to achieve those goals, and the surrounding context (e.g., organization) supports building boundary-spanning relationships. Examples of activities that meet these criteria include industry work committees, board memberships, cross-functional teams, event-planning, and even sports teams. In each case, the activities bring different people together to work toward shared goals, facilitating relationship formation (cf. Feld, 1983). Note that typical networking events usually do not include the need to work together to achieve shared goals which reduces their brokerage potential. Individuals who seek to occupy a brokerage position can do so by strategically choosing to engage in activities with high brokerage potential. Likewise, their managers can support their efforts by offering opportunities to participate in high brokerage potential activities.

Individuals who seek to form boundary-spanning professional relationships may need to actively reach out to others from different professional groups (e.g., different industries, different organizations,

different functions). The key is for individuals to pursue these relationships strategically. Boundary-spanning relationships have the potential to add value to the teams in which the individuals belong (Carboni et al., 2021). Team leaders can therefore support both team performance and the development of the professional networks of individuals within the team by identifying individuals with whom they or other team members should connect. For example, a team lead may seek to build a boundary-spanning relationship by reaching out to another team lead who faces a similar environment or problem but who resides in a different unit or geography. The similarity in role offers obvious points of connection. Discussing successful and unsuccessful attempts to solve common problems enhances the learning of both individuals, making a mutually rewarding relationship more likely which, in turn, increases the brokerage potential for both parties. Relatedly, individuals seeking to occupy a brokerage position can reach out to individuals who hold complementary or adjacent expertise. For example, a person who specializes in content marketing may want to reach out to someone who specializes in social media marketing.

Activating dormant relationships is another strategy for occupying brokerage roles. Dormant relationships are those between two individuals who have not communicated with each other for a long time (Levin et al., 2011). Especially when relationships had once been strong, dormant ties can be valuable sources of knowledge and other resources (Levin et al., 2011). There are at least two types of dormant ties that might be particularly valuable when seeking to occupy a brokerage position. The first type are individuals who already occupy a brokerage position. These individuals can connect the focal individual to people in different professional groups and often greatly enjoy doing so (cf. Gladwell, 2000). The second type are individuals who belong to different professional groups. For example, they may have been former co-workers and now work in a different organization or industry. Women have an advantage over men in this regard because they are more likely than men to maintain strong external networks of relationships, often staying in contact with former co-workers for years after they stop working together (Carboni et al., 2020; Groysberg, 2008).

Women have a particularly difficult time leveraging the brokerage role to their advantage, even when they occupy the role (Fang et al., 2020; cf. Woehler et al., 2021). As suggested earlier, this may be because they tend to enact collaborative brokering strategies which are not associated with higher levels of individual performance, anticipate backlash when taking purposeful brokering activities, be less likely than men to be connected to people with resources and power, and receive less help than men from their network contacts. In addition to raising general awareness about these issues, organizations can help women address some of these challenges by helping them reframe the meaning of brokerage both for themselves and for others.

Women could be encouraged to align their networking motivations with communal values by reframing personal networking as networking for the common good. The “common good” could mean all women, their team, or the organization as a whole. Taking action in support of communal values is gender role-consistent. In conflict negotiations, for example, women are more likely to negotiate their salary if they believe that they are doing so on behalf of all women and are more likely to be perceived positively by others if they evoke that communal value (Kolb & Kickul, 2006). Relatedly, women could be encouraged to perceive themselves as primarily organizational members (versus relational partners), thereby potentially leading them to offer more help and support to work colleagues with whom they do not have a strong relationship. The effect of this self-construal shift could lead to women receiving more benefits from their brokered relationships. At the same time, managers could be instructed to consider if bias might be influencing their perceptions when assessing the activities and performance of brokers. Organizations could also seek to find more ways to recognize and celebrate collaborative brokering activities through, for example, stories, awards, and visible pictures.

Women could also be encouraged to transform apparent broker-related disadvantages into advantages. For example, being more likely to hear about distressing organizational events through network connections can be advantageous when it provides insights into communication

breakdowns, unethical behavior, intraorganizational conflict, and disengagement. These insights can help women access resources more strategically, avoid social liabilities, and become more adept at navigating social interactions (Marineau, 2017). A more wholistic understanding of organizational climate could also benefit women who are involved in change initiatives, turnover reduction, or performance assessment.

Strategies for Coping with Backlash and Distress

Processes to help women who are brokers manage their position successfully, or at the very least to develop personal coping strategies when tensions arise, should be the first step in larger efforts to help women occupy and leverage that powerful position. For example, instead of perceiving the brokerage role as one of disconnection and rejection, women could be urged to view the position as an indicator of the ability to form positive relationships with diverse individuals. Because women are more likely than men to experience networking as relationally immoral (Greguletz et al., 2019), it may also help to reposition brokering as a positive and morally unambiguous opportunity to promote collaboration, integration, the reduction of conflict, and the ability to distribute useful and valuable resources to others. To help them reframe, women might find it useful to identify an actual or historical networking role model who expresses positive networking motivations such as, for example, Lois Weisberg (Gladwell, 2000) or Heidi Roizen (Flynn et al., n.d.).

Women may also benefit from an awareness of gender role-consistent strategies. For example, women could be encouraged to engage in activities that demonstrate the gender role-consistent skills of building relationships and nurturing intimacy. Conveying warmth in their communications might also reduce backlash because it countermands the tendency to perceive women as *either* competent or warm/likable, a dichotomy that is not a gender role expectation for men (Carboni et al., 2020; Cuddy et al., 2011). The development of self-monitoring skills may be particularly useful for women facing potential backlash (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011). Monitoring the socio-emotional context

in order to project situationally appropriate responses is called *self-monitoring* (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Self-monitoring skills may be easier for women to acquire and use than men because being attuned to socio-emotional context is congruent with women's gender role expectations. Women—in contrast to men—are often socialized to be adept at decoding and responding to the emotional expression of others. Self-monitoring may be particularly helpful for women who demonstrate role-incongruent tendencies, such as aggressiveness, assertiveness, or confidence (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011). It may also be especially valuable when occupying and leveraging the brokerage position because high self-monitors—men and women—are more likely to build bridges in their networks than are low self-monitors (Sasovova et al., 2010). Not all women are high self-monitors but those that are may benefit more from it than men who are high self-monitors (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011). Mentors and executive coaches can help women develop all of these gender role-consistent skills.

Structured Opportunities

Organizations invested in the success of women can also provide them with structured opportunities for developing brokerage relationships in several ways. One, organizations can implement mentoring and sponsorship programs that include training on brokerage for mentors, sponsors, and protégées (Creary et al., 2021). While women may be “over-mentored and under-sponsored” (Ibarra et al., 2010, p. 82), mentors can play an important role in helping women at all levels (a) understand the significance of occupying and leveraging the brokerage role, and (b) develop specific and tailored plans for action. Mentors who work with managers can also help them understand the important role they have to play in facilitating network development among the women they lead. Too, organizations could consider a “smart mentoring” approach (Carboni et al., 2022). “Smart” mentors are selected through an organizational network analysis as people in the center of organizational networks; they can be thoughtfully paired with women at the edges of

the network, pulling them into the hub of organizational discourse and connecting them to new and different professional groups.

Mentors can also help women develop networking strategies that are appropriate for their career stage. Individuals may become proficient at a networking style that no longer aligns with their career objectives. Women, for example, may be more likely than men to gain “legitimacy” by forming strong connections with a few others (Burt, 1998). Their early successful experience with embedding strategies in coping with their dependence may result in a networking style that leads to a professional network that can’t support their subsequent senior roles in the organization. The persistence of prior successful strategies beyond the situation that allowed for their success is akin to the “competence trap” (Ahuja, 2016). The early success of these strategies may lead individuals to continue applying such strategies, despite having moved to positions with higher autonomy in the organization, where the negative consequences of network closure are apparent. As a result, managers embedded in a closely knit social network are less willing or able to develop new relationships required by the changing nature of their tasks.

In contrast to mentors, who may be external to organizations and functions, or are relatively low level, sponsors—by definition—occupy positions of power. Sponsors can open doors for the people that they sponsor and they can encourage them to walk through them. The data suggest that women are less likely to benefit from formal sponsorship programs than are men (Ibarra et al., 2010). Organizations can change this by providing targeted training for both sponsors and those sponsored to understand expectations and possible challenges (Ibarra et al., 2010). Sponsors could be explicitly advised on how to use their position to create brokering opportunities for women. Similarly, women could lobby for and expect that sponsors would connect them to people with resources, influence, and access to different professional groups. Internal diversity champions, such as Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) could fruitfully both drive and amplify these efforts (Creary et al., 2021). Publicly identifying and celebrating the efforts of internal diversity champions—e.g., through stories, pictures, and visibility in organizational communications—could further support organizational efforts to

promote active and effective sponsorship of women and reduce the backlash that some women brokers experience (cf. Creary et al., 2021).

Two, organizations can provide women with opportunities to build brokerage relationships through interdependent activities with different professional groups. Organizational structures often serve as barriers to connection, due to the clustering of women in non-core and pink-collar jobs, and the likelihood that relatively few women are in senior leadership positions. To break down these barriers, organizations can institute a number of activities. For example, they can match small groups of women with senior executives to work on projects, such as how to facilitate gender equity. Working together on a project toward shared goals not only fosters relationship-building but also offers senior executives an opportunity to see demonstrations of women's talents. Research has shown that when women occupy positions that give them opportunity to interact with high-status employees, they are just as likely as men to include high-status people in their network (McGuire, 2000). Similarly, organizations can more thoughtfully offer opportunities to women to speak at industry events or serve as panel moderators. These events place women in highly visible roles and make it more likely that they will form brokering relationships with others in their industry.

Gig rotations may also help break down structural barriers (Carboni et al., 2022). Internal gig rotations are short-term—sometimes part-time—positions that allow opportunities for individuals to work in other areas of the organization. Gig rotations allow women to build relationships in areas of the organization in which they are particularly sparse (e.g., production). When coupled with support from immediate supervisors and a concurrent relief of some primary role work responsibilities, gig rotations allow women (and men) to build brokerage relationships and showcase their talents.

Conclusion

Professional networks that are characterized by *brokerage*—connections to otherwise unconnected subnetworks within the organization—provide important advantages. However, women are less likely than men

to occupy the brokerage position and, even when they do occupy it, are less likely to leverage it for career success (Fang et al., 2020; Woehler et al., 2021). Several mechanisms have been advanced to explain these findings, including structural constraints caused by systemic discrimination, gender role expectations, and a gendered socio-emotional experience of the brokerage role. Organizations can further the career success of women through training and restructuring activities that raise awareness of the value and challenges associated with the brokerage role, provide concrete tools for strategic network development, and offer structural opportunities for developing brokerage relationships.

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