CORRECTION

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Correction for “A network’s gender composition and communication pattern predict women’s leadership success,” by Yang Yang, Nitesh V. Chawla, and Brian Uzzi, which was first published February 5, 2019; 10.1073/pnas.1721438116 (Proc Natl Acad Sci USA 116:2033–2038).

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A network’s gender composition and communication pattern predict women’s leadership success

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Many leaders today do not rise through the ranks but are recruited directly out of graduate programs into leadership positions. We use a quasi-experiment and instrumental-variable regression to understand the link between students’ graduate school social networks and placement into leadership positions of varying levels of authority. Our data measure students’ personal characteristics and academic performance, as well as their social network information drawn from 4.5 million email correspondences among hundreds of students who were placed directly into leadership positions. After controlling for students’ personal characteristics, work experience, and academic performance, we find that students’ social networks strongly predict placement into leadership positions. For males, the higher a male student’s centrality in the school-wide network, the higher his leadership-job placement will be. Men with network centrality in the top quartile have an expected job placement level that is 1.5 times greater than men in the bottom quartile of centrality. While centrality also predicts women’s placement, high-placing women students have one thing more: an inner circle of predominantly female contacts who are connected to many nonoverlapping third-party contacts. Women with a network centrality in the top quartile and a female-dominated inner circle have an expected job placement level that is 2.5 times greater than women with low centrality and a male-dominated inner circle. Women who have networks that resemble those of high-placing men are low-placing, despite having leadership qualifications comparable to high-placing women.

Significance

Graduate programs increasingly place women directly into leadership positions. For men, centrality in the school-wide student network predicts job-rank placement. Women’s placement is also predicted by centrality and the presence of a distinctive inner circle of women in their network. The inner circle of high-placing women displays an unusual network duality: The network has cliquish ties among women, but each woman is connected to a separate set of third-party contacts. This dual connectivity of strong and weak ties appears to provide simultaneous access to gender-related tacit information important for women’s success as well as diverse job-market data needed for successful job search and negotiations.

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along by strong ties (“close friends”) who socially support each other and can interpret and trust one another’s information (29, 30, 32).

To study the link between the graduate-school network and leadership attainment, we collected data from a top-rated graduate program. The program, and others like it, trains men and women to be equally attractive technically and managerially for leadership positions. The sample included all n = 728 graduates, 542 men (74.5%) and 186 women (25.5%). Students’ social and communication networks were constructed from all 4.55 million anonymized, content-free emails sent among all students in the 2006 and 2007 classes. At this time, students used their school’s email service almost exclusively for their email correspondences. Students’ official transcripts provided data on gender, entrance-exam scores, grade point average (GPA), years of work experience, undergraduate major, nationality, class year, and sociability (34) (SI Appendix, section 2). Our modeling triangulates multiple methods. First, we use fixed-effects regressions to find correlations between job attainment and student human capital and network characteristics. Second, we use instrumental variable (IV) regression and coarsened exact matching (CEM) within the context of a quasi-experiment to conduct causal inference tests (35, 36).

Variables in our analyses are defined as follows. The dependent variable is women and men’s “ranked job placement in leadership positions.” All graduates took leadership-level positions. Because actual job-title data violate privacy guidelines, the institution provided a ranked percentile score [0.0–100] for each position based on the position’s normalized industry and region-specific salary (37). We followed standard practice and converted each job rank to a corresponding Z score, which is interpreted like the original ranked-percentile score (38).

Three variables—centrality, communication equality, and gender homophily—measured different aspects of a student’s network. For all network measures, nodes i and j were defined as connected if her or his email was reciprocal and greater than expected by chance (39–42) (group emails were omitted). Centrality in the school-wide network was measured by using Pagerank. Centrality scores were logged and standardized. Consistent with research, students displayed a median number of contacts of 12 (95%, CI = 11–13) (41, 42). Persons with the same centrality often have different network communication patterns and gender compositions (31). For example, students can email their network contacts relatively equally or unequally. Communication equality was measured by using Shannon entropy (43). When communication equality is low, a subset of i’s alters receive an incommensurate share of i’s email and stand out as relatively “strong” network ties (30, 39). When communication equality is high, i’s alters receive roughly equivalent shares of i’s email (all j’s are relatively “weak” ties). Communication equality is normally distributed (mean = 1.93, SD = 0.65). Gender homophily was measured as a student’s proportion of same-sex contacts compared with what was expected by chance using a Z score (44) (mean = 0.91, SD = 1.54). Compositionally, 76.2% of students had mixed-gender networks, 22.3% had all-male networks, and 1.3% had all-female networks (SI Appendix, Table S1). Detailed definitions of network variables can be found in SI Appendix, section 2.

Results

Fig. 1 presents the coefficients and standard errors of a regression of students’ ranked leadership-job placement on social-network characteristics and controls for student characteristics and performance, an industry-category dummy variable (SI Appendix, section 2), and an interaction between the dummy variable and all of the network variables.

Examining the associations between person-level variables and placement, Fig. 1 indicates that examination scores, GPA, work experience, and sociability show no statistically significant relationships with leadership-job placement. An explanation for the fact that employers do not seem to differentiate students on their personal traits is that graduate programs, unlike undergraduate programs, select relatively small numbers of students of nearly equivalent qualifications. Also noteworthy is the finding that patterns of leadership attainment do not appear to differ in STEM and non-STEM jobs (P = 0.943 and P = 0.993 for men and women) or display any significant variation across industries (see expanded table in SI Appendix, Table S2). This finding suggests that research that has speculated that STEM leadership positions are unique (20, 45) may nonetheless be able to draw on insights about women leaders found in non-STEM fields.

Controlling for other factors, we observe that students’ networks strongly predict the placement level for both women and men. For men, only centrality is significantly related to job attainment. Roughly, a 10% increase in centrality on average for a man corresponds to an ~29% unit increase in ranked job placement. Beyond centrality, neither communication patterns nor gender homophily predicts placement level for men. This finding suggests that male students who equally or unequally distribute their communications among their contacts have no difference in placement rank. Similarly, for men, an underrepresentation or overrepresentation of same-gender contacts is uncorrelated with placement level. Together, these patterns suggest that men’s networks relate to placement level principally via network centrality, which conceivably increases their access to diverse, publicly available job-market information in the school-wide network (21).

For women, centrality positively correlates with placement level. A 10% increase in centrality corresponds to an ~59% unit increase in ranked job placement, suggesting that wide access to public information about the job market is also essential for women. The regression also indicates that communication patterns and gender compositions significantly predict women’s
job-rank placement. Fig. 2 A and B presents the margin plots with 95% CI of women's and men's predicted placement level (Z-score) for the interaction between communication equality and gender homophily based on a split at the median level of the gender homophily. The figures indicate that communication patterns and gender compositions significantly predict women's placement level, but not men's, although we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the corresponding coefficients are similar for both groups (SI Appendix, section 5.1.1). For women, the significant interaction indicates that women place higher the more women-dominated their network is (solid line) and the more they communicate relatively evenly with their contacts.

Fig. 2C further indicates that high-placing women have relatively stronger relationships with the women in their network than do low-placing women. Seventy-seven percent of high-placing women have an inner circle of strong ties to two or three women who communicate intensely with one another. By contrast, low-placing women have a male-dominated network and relatively weak ties with the women in their network. The regression estimate of the impact of these network differences for women's placement implies that woman with a network centrality in the top quartile and a female-dominated inner circle have an expected job placement level that is 2.5 times greater than a woman with low centrality and a male-dominated inner circle. The positive link for high-placing women between their inner circle and leadership attainment is striking. Cliquish, homogeneous networks normally hurt job-search and promotion opportunities (29, 33, 46). In this context, how does an inner circle of strong ties benefit high-placing women? One possible account is that while the inner circle is made up of a small cluster of tightly interlinked women, each woman simultaneously has nonoverlapping third-party contacts; the former provide gender-specific private information and support, while the latter provide job-market information scattered among separate contacts in the larger school network. To explore this hypothesis, we counted the number of uniquely new contacts added with each inner-circle contact at the time the relationship formed (Fig. 3 A and B). Consistent with our hypothesis, Fig. 3C demonstrates that each new inner-circle contact of a high-placing woman, although cliquishly connected, provides connections to an unusually large number of new contacts that were unreachable through her previous contacts. By contrast, the strong-contacts of low-performing women and all men lack this network duality—they provide redundant paths to contacts already reachable via their current network connections. Specifically, each inner-circle contact of high-placing women puts them in reach of (i.e., fewer hops away from) nearly twice as many new contacts as that of either low-placing women or all men (P < 0.01).

Quasi-experimental Causal Inferences. The above results demonstrate robust correlations between a student’s graduate-school social network and his or her ranked leadership-job placement. In observational data, unobserved individual differences could account for both variations in students’ social networks and ranked placement. An experiment could account for unobserved differences; however, an experiment is impossible because students’ careers may be unintentionally harmed (23). As an alternative, we used a quasi-experimental design (QED) that implemented IV regression and CEM to test for causal inference. Both methods support a causal inference between social networks and ranked job placement.

Our QED exploits exogenous variation in students’ chances of forming inner circles to implement an IV estimator for our inner circle. The QED had the following design based on prior studies conducted in similar educational settings (47, 48). Before classes began, all incoming students were randomly assigned to one of nine roughly equivalently sized “home sections.” Randomized assignment to a home section equalized student characteristics across home sections on all observable characteristics, including gender, nationality, entrance-examination scores, years of work experience, GPA, and industry background. For example, if women made up 25% of the entire incoming class, each home section had ~25% women students in it, who were drawn randomly from the full set of women in the incoming class. SI Appendix, Fig. S1 verifies that home sections had no observable differences per the randomization.

Because students take their first-quarter classes exclusively with their home-section-mates, most students initially form a network that includes contacts predominantly from their home section rather than from their nonhome sections. Beginning with second-quarter classes, students are differentially exposed, depending on the classes to which they are assigned, to male
High-placing women have distinctive networks. High-placing women tend to have an inner circle of contacts who are cliquish in terms of gender, yet diverse in terms of having contacts whose contacts are nonoverlapping. IV regression and CEM analysis further support the causal inference that high-placing women have a high clustering among their same-gender contacts and high diversity of third-party contacts. High clustering is more likely when a student is put into classes that have relatively high numbers of same-gender classmates. High diversity is more likely if those same-gender contacts have nonoverlapping connections. While we cannot directly test the exclusion restriction that our instrument is unrelated to the dependent variable through a channel other than our explanatory variable (i.e., the inner circle), we stress that our IV derives from a quasi-random assignment procedure that is beyond a student’s control.

Fig. 4 presents the results of the two-stage least-squares (2SLS) regression analysis. The results support our regression findings (Fig. 1). Looking at the link between a student’s exposure level to same-gender contacts from other sections and having an inner circle, Fig. 4 indicates a significant first-stage relationship between our IV and explanatory variable for both women ($P = 0.002$) and men ($P = 0.004$), a finding consistent with expectations. Fig. 4 reports the link between job placement and a student’s inner circle based on the first-stage fitted values of the inner circle. These 2SLS estimates indicate that having an inner circle strongly and positively predicts women’s ranked job placement ($P = 0.026$). By contrast, the 2SLS estimates indicate that an inner circle has a null effect on men’s ranked job placement ($P = 0.670$). A CEM also confirmed the IV regression results (49, 50) (see SI Appendix, section 4 for details).

**Discussion**

Leadership positions are increasingly filled by graduates of programs that prepare leaders with the skills needed to be directly hired into positions of leadership. Our study used a quasi-experiment to isolate and test for causal inference in leadership attainment based on human and social capital variables. We found that a graduate-school network predicts placement in leadership positions for male and female students alike, but high-placing women have distinctive networks. High-placing women tend to have an inner circle of contacts who are cliquish in terms of gender, yet diverse in terms of having contacts whose contacts are nonoverlapping. IV regression and CEM analysis further support the causal inference that high-placing women have a high clustering among their same-gender contacts and high diversity of third-party contacts.

**Panel A: 2SLS Estimate of Ranked Job Placement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2SLS (Women)</th>
<th>2SLS (Men)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner Circle</td>
<td>0.241*</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Communication Equality $\times$ Gender Homophily)</td>
<td>(0.108)</td>
<td>(0.189)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Panel B: First-stage Regressions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OLS (Women)</th>
<th>OLS (Men)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% exposure to the same gender classmate from different sections (Instrumental Variable)</td>
<td>36.997**</td>
<td>6.646**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Instrumental Variable)</td>
<td>(11.676)</td>
<td>(2.234)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-stage $F$ statistic</td>
<td>10.04</td>
<td>8.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Observations</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>542</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$*, ** P < 0.05$; $*** P < 0.001$; NS, not significant.

Fig. 4. IV regression of leadership-job placement on women’s and men’s inner circles. B reports estimates of the first-stage regression, where a student’s observed inner circle is regressed on the instrumental variable explained in the text. A reports 2SLS estimates of leadership-job placement on the fitted values of inner circle from the first-stage regression. We observe that leadership-job placement is significantly associated with the inner circle of women only. All regressions include the controls described in Fig. 1. The first-stage $F$ statistic indicates that weak instrument pathologies are unlikely to be a concern (36). OLS, ordinary least squares. $* P < 0.05$; $** P < 0.01$.
distinctive inner-circle network that predicts their placement level in a leadership position.

Theoretically, the association between an inner circle and job placement both supports and challenges current thinking. Research on women in leadership has argued that getting leadership positions on par with men is not dependent on working harder, but working smarter (51). One interpretation of our findings is that working smarter means having a network that addresses the dual concerns of women leaders—simultaneous access to public information and private, gender-specific information (51). We find that the high-placing women have this kind of network duality, but low-placing women have networks that resemble men’s networks—they have high network centrality, but not an inner circle.

Unlike prior work on social networks and job attainment, we find that cliquish networks are not associated with poor job placement. Prior work has found that network relationships based on homophily and high clustering, where friends of friends are friends of each other, work against professional success by putting job seekers in echo chambers that lack the informational breadth and diversity that supports a successful job search. By contrast, we find that women leaders who have an inner circle of high clustering and high diversity, they appear to reconcile the dual employment challenges that women have to face in male-dominated jobs. In male-dominated settings, women need to gain trustworthy, gender-relevant information about job cultures and social support and wide access to diverse public job-market information. For male graduates, placement depends only on their network centrality—which provides a high level of public job information. Thus, the processes identified in this study—a first examination of women’s placement from graduate school directly into leadership positions, reveal patterns that may help women’s and men’s attainment of influential leadership positions in all jobs.

Another implication for network theory posed by our work concerns network formation. Preferential attachment theory argues that strategically oriented persons should connect to the best-connected persons. However, for women’s job attainment in leadership positions, the best choice is not simply to connect to the best-connected person. Such a process is likely to raise a student’s centrality but fail to create an inner circle, which doesn’t focus on contacts who have lots of connections but contacts who have nonoverlapping connections.

Areas of future research concern whether women directly attaining leadership positions out of graduate school continue to develop special networks that benefit the firm, their career success, and the success of the personnel they manage. Studies show that when women work with a higher percentage of female supervisors, they report more gender equality (9); family and organizational support (12); and smaller gender pay gaps (13). Yet some research finds that when women view women leaders as threats to power, the presence of women leaders can backfire, particularly in firms with relatively low proportions of senior women (10). Thus, one hypothesis is that graduate-school networks may increase the proportions of senior women in firms and expose aspiring women leaders to each other, reducing expectations of threat. Another area of future research focuses on two theoretical explanations for the impact of networks on job-search information and social support. In our analysis, unfortunately, we do not have data that allow us to definitively say in what relative proportion social support and information are active in women’s networks or how they possibly interact with one another. While our measures focused on communication volume in our networks, leaning our explanation of the findings toward the role of information in networks, more research is needed on the role of social support.

Susan Finley launched her career at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in 1958. Her career success is partly attributed to an inner circle of women contacts that formed in college, expanded at NASA, and was instrumental in providing information and social support beneficial to her leadership success. Today, she is involved in developing the software that will land the first women and men on Mars.

Materials and Methods

Data. Our data came from a top-ranked business school in the United States. The dataset included all 4.55 million email messages sent by students from two classes. During this time window, the host institution verified that students almost exclusively used the school’s email service rather than personal email accounts to communicate with each other. Individual attribute data on undergraduate major, entrance examination scores, gender, and so on, as well as student performance (GPA, industry placement, and job-ranking placement, etc.) came directly from the programs registrar records and student transcripts. See SI Appendix, sections 1 and 2 for additional details. All data in the study were anonymized by a third party before being analyzed. Northwestern University Institutional Review Board approved this study (no. STU00002048).

Measures. Ranked job-placement and network variables were defined in the text (see SI Appendix, section 2 for details). Control variables for individual student characteristics were collected directly from students’ official transcripts. Detailed information on control variables and interactions among variables can be found in SI Appendix, sections 2 and 5.1.

Methods. To address whether the observed network features could be explained by chance interactions, we constructed 10,000 surrogate networks where the degree centrality sequence (52) of the actual network is preserved and links are placed at random (44, 52) (see SI Appendix, section 3 for details).

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