The Role of Negative Ties in Understanding the Link Between Social Networks and Organizational Creativity

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to develop propositions for determining the relationship between negative ties of social networks and organizational creativity and to examine the effects of organizational networks on organizational creativity from an interpretative research perspective by considering negative bonds. Firstly, the basic information in the literature on organizational change and organizational networks was examined. Then, propositions were developed for determining the relationship between social networks and organizational creativity by considering the negative ties. To be competitive, organizations must also be innovative, making organizational creativity a crucial capability. Accordingly, the past decade has seen increasing attention among scholars in the field of creativity. Most of the organizational network studies focus on positive ties and relations obtained through ties that reflect relational forces and they ignore the differential factors that arise as a result of negative ties. In this context, the importance of negative ties was discussed. The interpretative approach tries to find answers to research questions with theoretical explanations in cases where there is not much information about the concept for the first time to reveal the theoretical relationship of the concepts specified in the current literature.

Keywords: Social networks, Organizational networks, Negative ties, Organizational Creativity

Introduction

As globalization becomes ever more ubiquitous, the need for creative responses increases dramatically. Multinational companies, start-ups, local SMEs, and even individuals need to be creative to survive. Creativity is emerging as a crucial resource for firms to act globally. The creativity embedded in an organization is so-called organizational creativity, as it arises through individuals working together in a complex social system, influenced by individual and group creativity and the organizational setting (Borghini, 2005). Organizational creativity is defined as the purposeful creation, application, and implementation of novel ideas within a job role, team, or organization
to achieve the best results for that organization (West, 1989). To increase the organizational creativity information sharing, innovation, creative work environment, team motivation, change, and flexibility are important. For having sufficient organizational creativity organizations better analyze their location in their social network.

In this research, propositions were developed according to organizations’ central and peripheral locations. Centrality is the number of direct ties an actor has in the network (Burt, 2004). Gaining a central position for the organization is seen as beneficial to receive diverse information and exercise influence over other agents, i.e., a central position defines an information broker who accesses and integrates information through social links. This notion has wide implications on status, roles, and leadership in organizations (Yan, Liu, Liu, Cai, Su and ZheYanng, 2018). In this research, negative organizational ties were discussed. In their study Moerbeek and Need’s (2003) study specifically examines the effects of negative ties in work environments, providing an alternate conceptualization of negative workplace relationships and they define negative relationships in the context of social capital rather than in terms of the interactions between individuals. Moerbeek and Need (2003), term relationships that have a negative effect ‘sour social capital’; besides this in his research Burt (2004, 2005) states the power of weak ties.

When organizational network studies are examined, it is seen that most network researches focus on the results obtained through ties that reflect relational forces, ignoring the discriminating factors that arise as a result of negative ties (EverettandBorgatti, 2014). In other words, researchers often analyze ties in such a way that the fact that they are negative doesn’t matter. However, the results that emerge as a result of network relationships based on positive relationships may not occur in networks with negative relationships. For this reason, the results of negative ties in network relations should also be examined. In accordance with the purpose of the study, first of all, the basic information in the literature about organizational creativity and organizational networks was examined and suggestions were developed to determine the relationship between these two subjects by considering the negative ties.

**Theoretical Background**

**Social Network**

The networking approach is rooted in various disciplines such as social psychology, sociology, economics, mathematics, anthropology, and political science (Katz, Lazer, Arrow and Contractor; 2004). In the field of social psychology, the most important current in the study of networks; studies on inter organizational networks, which are within the scope of social network theory and based on social network analysis; focus on structures, relationships, and outcomes (Dhanaraj and Parkhe; 2006). Social network analysis determines the positions of organizations in the network. Therefore, it focuses on the internal dynamics and determining the future development of the system by examining the network structure at a given time (Grandori and Soda, 1995). The ties
between organizations and the dimensions of social relations can be analyzed with the 'network mechanism' approach. The network mechanisms perspective is embedded in the network mechanisms of economic action of social relations. Network mechanisms consist of individuals and organizations, and these organizations and individuals are connected to each other by social relations (such as friendship, resource transfers, and overlapping memberships) (Gulati, Dildin and Wang, 2002). While network mechanisms theory shows the effect of individuals' resilience on their behaviors, the same discussion is made for organizations (Gulati 1998, Gulati 1999, Burt 1982). Organizations, each of which forms a separate network mechanism, are in connection with other organizations in a social and economic context. Linked relationships consist of suppliers, commercial associations, resource transfers, overlapping board memberships, individual relations of employees and previously established alliances (Gulati et al., 2002: 281).

There are different classifications of network mechanisms in the literature. Those types that explain the structural configurations of bonds are weak and strong bonds (Baker, 1990; Granovetter, 1973; Granovetter, 1983; Granovetter 1985; Uzzi 1996). Strong ties support trust and reciprocity and enable the transfer of proprietary information and critical resources. Granovetter (1973) explained weak and strong ties in his study of 'strength of weak ties'. Granovetter (1973) defined strong ties as a function of three factors: 1. relationship frequency, 2. reciprocity, relationship-based obligations and favors, 3. friendship and intimacy. As the interaction between individuals increases, friendship ties are established and a psychological bond is formed between them. This psychological attachment disappears as the bonds weaken (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties are not bridging ties. For weak ties, the sparseness of the relationship is decisive. Negative ties have the same effect like weak ties both for individuals and organizations. Granovetter (1973) argues that weak ties that create distance in relationships in the network mechanism are beneficial in providing individual benefits and integrating individuals into societies. Individuals or organizations with weak ties can reach more individuals or small groups and allow innovations to spread (Granovetter, 1973: 1367,1376). In addition, the mobility provided by weak ties helps the individual in the workplace to access information that they do not have (Granovetter, 1983: 205). Burt (1997), supporting Granovetter's thoughts, states that inter-organizational solidarity is formed as a result of weak ties. Burt (2005a, 2005b) describes the weak links of organizations in the network mechanism as gaps and these structural gaps provide organizations with a competitive advantage. The actors in the network setup have enough information to fill in the structural gaps, thus keeping the control of the network communication. Adler and Kwon (2002) draw attention to the fact that with the bridges created by weak ties in social networks, organizations become stronger in society and that these organizations have different information compared to others. Uzzi (1999) defined instantaneous, weak ties as relationships at arm's length. Relationships at arm's length happen without the need for any social connection.

Baum, Calabrese, and Silverman (2000) state in their work that network assemblies consist of vertical and horizontal ties. In vertical network setups, the relationship
structure is hierarchical, predefined, and information flow is unidirectional from top to bottom. In vertical relationships, communication takes place with clear rules and social connections are not much. The biggest problem among actors in horizontal network mechanisms, in other words, competitors, arises from opportunistic behaviors (Gulati and Singh, 1998). Direct and indirect ties play different roles in the innovation process of organizations. Direct links are the essence of accessing resources and information; indirect links are the main source of access to information. Both direct and indirect ties have a positive effect on the output of the innovation, but the effect of indirect ties is determined by the number of direct ties of the organization (Ahuja, 2000).

The final classification to be examined in the network level approach is the ties arising from the central and peripheral locations. The centrality of the actor in the organizational network mechanism is explained by his/her close relations. In other words, centrality is the number of direct ties an actor has in the network (Burt, 2004). The actor with a large number of ties is in an advantageous position. The degree of centrality enables the actor to learn and obtain information (Gulati et al., 2002). Galaskiewicz (1979) also emphasized the importance of centrality and argued that centrality is the direct control of resources. According to Sargut (2006:6), since the actor in the center has easy access to information and resources, the dependency of the actors in the periphery on those in the center will increase. The centrality of an organization, on the other hand, is the extent of the organization's relations and how it has widespread relations with other actors on the network through direct or indirect ties (Gulati, 1999). Burt (2004) states that the actors in the center become even more central when the actors in the periphery communicate with the other actors with whom they communicate. Therefore, as the communication of other actors increases, the centrality degrees of the central actors will also become stronger. In social network mechanisms with a high degree of centrality, actors are deficient in decision-making mechanisms and in completing their insufficient knowledge, so there are differences between the actors in the center and periphery of the network. Peripheral actors take advantage of 'structural holes', as Burt (2005) argues, and explain their ideas by filling in the gaps. For this reason, they become more effective in decision-making by sharing information with the central actors.

Organizational Creativity

Creativity refers to one's capabilities of generating creative and practicable ideas (Amabile, 1983) and it is an essential determinant for effective employee and firm performance (Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Researchers and managers have realized the importance of creativity and the necessity to foster it in the workplace. Shalley et al., (2004) defined creativity as; it is the generation of new and useful ideas from an employee or groups of employees working together (Shalley et al., 2004). Organizational creativity which is embedded in an organization arises through individuals working together in a complex social system, influenced by individual and group creativity and the organizational setting (Borghini, 2005). Creativity is about divergent thinking, questioning the understanding and thinking of others, unconventional thought patterns, original connections, unconventional perspectives and views, unorthodox ideas, and the search for unusual answers by new pathways
(Kraft, 2005). Sauto (2022) states that; therefore, creativity implies originality, novelty, unusualness, imagination, spirit of discovery, curiosity, experimentation, risk-taking, mental flexibility, and metaphorical thinking, and also focusing on the creation of value and usefulness.

Impact of Negative Ties to Organizational Creativity and Development of Propositions

Gulati (1998), states that there is a general belief that economic activities are affected by the social context in which the organization is located and that these actions will be affected by the position of the actors within the social network structures. Different locations in a network provide different degrees of access and control to valuable resources (Burt, 1992). For this reason, it is possible to use the position of an actor determined by the center-periphery distinction in the network to explain the behavior of that organization. Centrality can be defined as the degree to which the organization is directly or indirectly linked to other organizations. Central position of an organization in the network will indicate that it has a very important strategic position in the network order (Freeman, 1979). It can be defined as the centrality of an organization, the breadth of its relations, and how it has common relations with other actors on the network through direct and indirect ties (Gulati, 1999). Also, in the central position in the network order, center organizations have the opportunity to control other organizations and resources (Gulati, 1999). Findings that the individual in the central position in the network mechanism will acquire faster and more information than the ones in the environment and that the acquired information will be transmitted to the others faster have been given a lot of attention, and it is stated that it is advantageous to be in the central position in the social network mechanism (Alan, 2017:116). The centralized organization has more power to coordinate other interdependent organizations because of its control over information and physical resources (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). In this context, it can be criticized as that an organization that is at the center of the network will have an impact on the behavior of other organizations with which it is in contact. For having organizational creativity, being a central organization can be seen as an advantage. Centrality provides the organization with more access to up-to-date information on external environmental changes (Ferreira and Armağan, 2011). This means that the organization has an advantage in innovation, change and creativity. Baldwin, Bedell, and Johnson (1997) stated that negative ties that the organization has, will prevent the organization from accessing important information flowing in the network and the social support it will receive from the network. The greater the centrality of individuals, the less they are exposed to negative relationships and ties within the group (Baldwin, et.al, 1997). This situation will have a negative impact on the organization’s work on the above-mentioned innovations, changes and creativity. Based on these considerations, the following proposition can be developed.

**Proposition 1:** It is expected that the organization, which is the center of the network, has less negative ties and will positively affect creativity in terms of that organization.
The central organization can prevent the information flows around the negative link, deliberately distort it or even completely terminate it (Marineau and Labianca, 2021). With the effect of the dynamic nature of networks, the position of the organization in the network is a result of its past relationships and the past relationships of other organizations within the network, and this position may change (Gulati, 1995). In this case, the organization, which is located in the center and has the opportunity to control both the network and all the resources that the network will offer, will want to keep the behavior of the organizations in the periphery under control in order to maintain this advantageous position. The absence of any negative link, such as a competitive relationship, between the actors in the network mechanism will cause the central organization to be content with this static network order as much as it allows. Baum and Ingram (2002) state that, for this reason, an organization within the network can balance the information asymmetry by establishing intermediary relationships with organizations that are not connected to its own network, and it can provide a significant autonomous autonomy against the negativities of others. Based on these considerations, the following proposition can be developed.

**Proposition 2:** It is expected that the negative ties of the organization that is in the center of the network will have a negative effect on creativity in terms of that organization.

As Burt (2005) argues, peripheral actors take advantage of ‘structural holes’, and explain their ideas by filling in the gaps. For this reason, they become more effective in decision-making by sharing information with the central actors. Burt (2005) states that, structural holes are the empty spaces in social structure and a structural hole between two groups need not mean that people are focused on their activities such that they do not attend to the activities in the other group. The value-potential of structural holes is that they separate non-redundant sources of information sources that are more additive than overlapping (Burt, 2005). Everett and Borgatti (2014) mentioned that, negative relationships lead to low in-group cohesion as they are related to the perception of conflict between actors. For this reason, when environmental organizations encounter negative relations with other environmental organizations that are equivalent to them in terms of power and status, they are likely to use the strategy of communicating with intermediaries that can provide communication with others (Stevenson and Greenberg, 2000) and this can affect the organizational creativity. In that context, it can be thought that the negative bond relations between environmental organizations can bring dynamism to these organizations. Based on these considerations, the following proposition can be developed.

**Proposition 3:** The negative ties of the organization, which is in the periphery within the network, with other organizations in the environment, positively affect creativity in terms of that organization.

The actors in the periphery have some disadvantages compared to the powerful actors in the center, there are also thoughts that some actors may consciously choose to stay in the periphery position and use the network strategically in this way (Stevenson and Greenberg, 2000). Sargut (2006) states that since the actors in the central position in the
network can easily access information and similar resources, the dependence of those in
the periphery on those in the center is pleasurable, and therefore, these actors in the
periphery will be in a dependent and powerless position. In a network with negative ties,
the actor in the environment may want to stay in this position in order not to be excluded
and exposed to oppositional movements (Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000). Negative
relations, especially with the central actor, may cause the loss of all opportunities offered
by the network. The organization, which has a central position in the network
mechanism, has the opportunity to control the network mechanism they are in according
to the organizations in the environment. In this case, the peripheral actor, who does not
have an intense relationship with other actors, may face the problem of expanding his
relations within the network. For having organizational creativity information flow and
communication are the dominant factors. In addition, peripheral organizations, which
have a negative relationship with the central organization, do not have the opportunity
to quickly observe the learned reactions of this organization, which has high legitimacy,
in the face of situations, so they may not be able to react to the uncertainty in order not
to be unsuccessful. Based on these considerations, the following proposition can be
developed.

Proposition 4: Negative ties of the organization, which is at the periphery of the
network, with the organizations located at the center negatively affect creativity in terms
of that organization.

Conclusion

In this study, the effects of organizational networks on creativity are discussed by
considering the effect of negative ties. In the study, first of all, the basic information in
the related literature about organizational networks and creativity has been included
and the relationship between these two concepts has been tried to be revealed by
considering the negative ties.

Accordingly, it is expected that the intensity of the negative relations of the central
organizations will have a negative effect on the organizational creativity cause of
information flow, while the intensity of the negative ties of the peripheral organizations
will be directly proportional to the organizational change. As Burt (2005) states, those
negative ties allow organizations to have structural holes and they give strategic
advantage to the organizations so that organizations can be more creative. In addition,
it is expected that the effect of negative relations of environmental organizations on
change will differ according to the fact that they are with central organizations and other
environmental organizations. Both organizations and individuals should accept those
negative relationships are inevitable. Different and opposing views should be allowed
to be expressed and discussions should be seen as a good opportunity. As a result, in
line with the evaluation of the views in the literature and the evaluations that had been
made regarding these views, various proposals have been developed to determine the
effects of organizational networks on organizational change by using a perspective in
which negative ties are taken into account.
In the literature, most studies ignore negative ties. It would be useful to evaluate the effects of negative ties on organizational creativity by reducing them more specifically and by considering frequently used parameters related to organizational networks. For this purpose, evaluations were made by taking the position of the organizations in the network as a reference in the study. The collaborative and interactive nature of social networks facilitates socialization processes among major exchange stakeholders. Therefore, it is better for managers to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of being centralized or periphery as an organization while having organizational creativity.

References


