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How face threat sensitivity affects proactive negotiation behavior

Edward W. Miles  
*Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA*

Jeff Schatten  
*Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, USA, and*

Elizabeth Chapman  
*Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA*

**Abstract**

**Purpose** – Face threat sensitivity (FTS) has been found to influence objective negotiated outcomes when the threat to face is activated. The purpose of this study is to extend that research by testing whether FTS – which is defined as a propensity to act – is associated with the outcomes of negotiators when the threat has not been specifically activated. Face theory specifies that face threats can cause individuals to take proactive steps to avoid threats before they might occur.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Drawing on face theory and social role theory, the authors conduct a negotiation experiment and use hierarchical regression to test hypotheses concerning the relationship between FTS for sellers and buyers on negotiated outcomes in both distributive and integrative negotiations. The authors also use moderated regression to test if gender moderates the relationship between buyer and seller FTS and negotiation outcomes.

**Findings** – Results show that, when the threat is not activated, high FTS buyers pay more than low FTS buyers. Consistent with face theory and social role theory, this effect is moderated by gender, with the association being stronger for women buyers than for men buyers.

**Originality/value** – This paper exhibits that FTS can influence negotiator behavior even when FTS is not activated. This is valuable to negotiation scholars and practitioners who are interested in the role that individual characteristics play in negotiation behavior.

**Keywords**  Negotiation, Organisational behavior, Face threat sensitivity, Gender and negotiation, Proactive negotiation behaviour

**Paper type** Research paper

**Introduction**

White, Tynan, Galinsky, and Thompson (2004) introduced the concept of face threat sensitivity (FTS) to the negotiation literature. In a series of studies, they found that when FTS is activated, negotiators are more likely to reach an impasse and are more likely to reach agreements that do not optimize created value. White et al. focused on the negotiation
effects of activated FTS – when individuals actually perceive that their face has been threatened in a negotiation. However, these studies analyze one side of the coin – when FTS is actually activated. White et al. describes that when FTS is activated it can produce a negative effect or increased competitiveness, which can result in an impasse in the negotiation, even when an agreement is more desirable. In contrast, from the perspective of the negotiation counterpart, a negotiation can breakdown because it is perceived as being not worth the effort to work with someone who is a difficult counterpart.

FTS is an individual difference that is stable over time (Tynan, 2005). Negotiating is an activity that often does bring together a number of elements that threaten face (Brown, 1968; Mohanty & Mukherjee, 2018; Small, Gelfand, Babcock, & Gettman, 2007; White et al., 2004; Wilson, 1992). As negotiations cover a vast range of potential issues (e.g. real estate, economic sanctions and a fence between neighbors), there will naturally be negotiations for which FTS remains not activated even though individuals vary in their sensitivity to face threat. Without the actual threat being activated by actions of the negotiation counterpart, will individual differences in FTS be associated with differences in negotiated objective outcomes?

Theoretical development

Face theory

Goffman (1967, p. 5) defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [or herself] by the line others assume he [or she] has taken during a particular contact.” As such, the face is not only solely a characteristic of the individual but also a characteristic of the individual’s interaction with others. Because it is not solely controlled within the domain of the individual, it is possible for the individual to “lose face.” Goffman (1967, p. 10) observes that a person’s face is “on loan to him [or her] from society; it will be withdrawn unless he [or she] conducts himself [or herself] in a way that is worthy of it.”

Because the face is a highly prized possession, individuals will go to great lengths to maintain face (Goffman, 1967; Petriglieri, 2011). They will avoid behaviors that are inconsistent with the face they have presented over time. They will also choose to engage in behaviors that uphold the face that they have established, even if such behaviors are not preferred or come at a personal cost, such as paying a high price for a brand that they do not value but view the purchase as integral for face savings efforts (Siu & Kwan, 2016) or by paying directly to preserve their own self-image (Eriksson, Mao, & Villeval, 2017). In any particular social interaction, individuals must be concerned not only for upholding their face in that particular interaction but also for the implications to their face in the broader social context beyond.

Goffman (1967, p. 13) goes as far as to say that “almost all acts involving others are modified [. . .] by considerations of face.” A number of authors (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Carson & Cupach, 2000; Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008; Leavitt & Sluss, 2015) have discussed typologies of these particular modifications (“face work”) that individuals use to maintain face. These writers note that the most obvious strategy – avoidance of the face-threatening act – is the most effective at saving face.

A key conclusion is that a concern for face entices people to engage in proactive behaviors to avoid situations that would cause their faces to be threatened. “In many societies, members know the value of voluntarily making a gracious withdrawal before an anticipated threat to face has had a chance to occur” (Goffman, 1967, p. 15). The strategy of avoidance is a proactive strategy.
Negotiation is an arena that can provide significant threats to face (Brown, 1968; White et al., 2004; Wilson, 1992). Metts (1997) observes that, in part, maintaining face involves others valuing a person’s possessions and opinions. Each of these is often challenged in negotiation. When we are sellers, we assert that our possessions have a certain worth; it is the role of the buyer to challenge our claim. The opinions we use in logical support for our negotiation position are often undermined by the negotiation counterpart who stands to gain advantage from the use of potential face-threatening negotiation techniques.

It should be noted that many of the acts we call face threat are common competitive practices, and part of the “game” for some negotiators. Yet they are intrinsically threatening to face (White et al., 2004, p. 104).

**Face threat sensitivity and negotiation**

FTS has been proposed by Tynan (2005) as an individual difference. Tynan defines FTS as the degree to which an individual is likely to have a negative affective reaction to threats to the face the individual is attempting to project and maintain. By this definition, FTS is a propensity that varies among people.

White et al. (2004) introduced the construct of FTS to the negotiation literature. They conducted a set of studies, which found that, when high FTS individuals feel threatened in a negotiation context, the threat causes them to act in a defensive manner. This defensiveness increases the incidence of impasse and decreases the ability to cooperate to optimize joint gain when the integrative potential exists. White et al. hypothesized and found an effect by the negotiator role. They found that high FTS sellers negotiated agreements that resulted in lower joint gain than low FTS sellers while the level of buyers’ FTS was not significantly linked to joint gain. White et al. explained this dichotomy as being a result of the seller being more invested in the goods/services being negotiated. In one study, the negotiation involved selling a business that the seller had built and operated; the property was an extension of self for the seller but was simply a potential business transaction for the buyer.

In a multi-study investigation, White et al. (2004) chose negotiation scenarios intended to invoke threat to face for the negotiators. One was a scenario, which frequently ends in an impasse and indeed ended in an impasse for 41 per cent of their negotiating dyads. In another of their studies, results indicated that high FTS sellers were rated as more competitive than low FTS sellers, consistent with the hypothesis that they were acting defensively in the presence of a perceived threat.

**Proactive behavior caused by face threat sensitivity**

The work of White et al. (2004) shows that, when FTS is activated, it influences negotiator behavior and negotiator outcomes. In addition to these dimensions of FTS effects, we posit that high FTS also has an effect on people who have not experienced threats in a specific negotiation but are sensitive to the possibility of a threat to face. According to Goffman (1967), people tend to migrate to situations where their faces can be upheld and tend to avoid situations where the potential exists for their faces to be threatened. This avoidance strategy indicates that – even absent a specific threat – people who are concerned about potential threats to face will take proactive measures to prevent the possibility of that threat emerging. By definition, individuals high in FTS are more prone (more “sensitive”) to be concerned about threats to face; it is a propensity to perceive a threat. Therefore, we hold that the level of FTS will influence the degree to which individuals will engage in proactive measures to avoid a potential threat.
Miles (2010) has proposed that individuals high in FTS will be more likely to avoid negotiations altogether. While this pattern seems quite plausible, we also hold that, once individuals have entered a negotiation, they will engage in behaviors within that interaction to avoid the possibility of the threat emerging. Goffman (1967) notes that such behaviors include hedging in making statements; using belittling modesty; and making strong qualifications in expressing statements, opinions or assertions. In general, these individuals are less likely to “stick their neck out.” The underlying logic is that the individual does not want to present an unequivocal face from which retreating would be problematic. Unfortunately, such equivocality can be strategically sub-optimal in negotiating. For example, individuals engaging in a pattern of taking an equivocal face would be less ambitious in stating their desires and the strength of those desires. Because of this pattern of behaviors that are inconsistent with an optimal negotiation strategy, we suggest the following hypotheses:

\( H1a \). There will be a negative relationship between FTS for sellers and negotiated outcomes in a distributive negotiation.

\( H1b \). There will be a negative relationship between FTS for buyers and negotiated outcomes in a distributive negotiation.

**Asymmetrical role effects**

White et al. (2004) predicted asymmetrical role effects in situations where the threat to face was actually activated. Because sellers are more invested in their position (e.g. their goods or services), they will respond more defensively to a threat to face. Based on that same logic, we anticipate an asymmetrical effect – *but not the same effect* – when the threat is not activated. Under conditions of no activated threat, we believe that high FTS buyers will be more proactive than high FTS sellers in engaging in avoidance choices and, therefore, will receive fewer outcomes in distributive negotiation than other buyers. Because the seller is more invested, the buyer will anticipate the greater likelihood of provoking a defensive response from the seller. In a buying/selling context, the seller is typically providing goods or services of an indeterminant (i.e. less objective) value in return for the payment of a determinant value (usually monetary). Conversely, the buyer is providing payment of a determinant value in return for goods or services of an indeterminant value (Neale, Huber, & Northcraft, 1987; Kristensen & Gärling, 1997). In this context, there is more necessity for buyers to “stick their neck out” and declare what determinant value they wish to exchange for the goods or services of indeterminant value they would receive in return. Because the seller is more invested, a declaration from the buyer of the determinant value is more likely to draw a defensive response from the seller than a declaration of determinant value by the seller is to elicit a defensive response from the buyer.

In summary, we anticipate that FTS will be associated with objective negotiated outcomes. However, we anticipate an asymmetrical pattern that the effect will be particularly pronounced in buyers:

\( H2 \). The negative relationship between FTS and negotiated outcomes in a distributive negotiation will be stronger for buyers than sellers.

**Gender as a moderator**

In addition to the asymmetry by role, we also predict that the relationship between FTS and negotiated outcomes will be moderated by gender. This prediction is rooted in social role theory
In part, social roles provide a prescription for how individuals are expected to behave. Any person who violates expected social roles incurs negative consequences for not following the prescription (Carli, 1990; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 1999).

Specifically, with regard to gender, there is a social role expectation that men will act in a pattern that is assertive, rational and competitive. Women will act in a pattern that is passive, relationship-oriented and cooperative. Unfortunately, the pattern expected of men is more consistent with successful distributive negotiation while the pattern expected of women is less consistent with successful distributive negotiating (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007; Kray & Thompson, 2005; Walters, Stuhlmacher, & Meyer, 1998; Watson, 1994; Kugler, Reif, Kaschner, & Brodbeck, 2018). Therefore, violating gender role expectations to negotiate effectively is more likely to be a concern for women, but not for men. As noted by Goffman (1967), in a particular social interaction (e.g. a specific negotiation), individuals must be concerned not only with upholding face in that immediate interaction but also for the implications to their face in the broader social context beyond. Mazei et al. (2015) in a meta-analysis on gender differences in negotiation outcomes and their moderators call for future research into finding new moderators. We answer this call. We posit that violating gender roles to negotiate effectively should elicit concern for the possibility of losing face in the broader social context:

\[ H_{3a}. \] Gender moderates the negative relationship between seller FTS and negotiation outcomes, such that the relationship will be stronger for women than men.

\[ H_{3ab}. \] Gender moderates the negative relationship between buyer FTS and negotiation outcomes, such that the relationship will be stronger for women than men.

Materials and methods

Participants

Study participants were 130 undergraduate students (65 negotiating dyads) at a large state university in the USA. Students were taking principles of management course and received course credit for participating in the study. Two dyads were deleted because of missing data, leaving a sample of 126 participants (63 dyads). Of this final set of respondents, 55 per cent were female; the average age was 24.3, with a standard deviation of 5.8. The age range of participants was 19-47.

Procedure

Students completed a questionnaire prior to negotiating. This questionnaire, a seven-page document, contained several focal measures for the study. After completing the preliminary questionnaire, students negotiated the “Rock and Roll Band Movie” case [1]. Students were randomly assigned to a negotiation role – buyer (movie producer) or seller (band manager) – and randomly assigned to a negotiation counterpart. This negotiation is a one-issue distributive situation based loosely on the actual situation of the Beatles’s manager negotiating the terms of the first Beatles movie. A movie producer is interested in making a movie about a day in the life of a 1960s rock band. As stated in the case, all terms (e.g. dates of filming, location of filming and choice of the director) of the agreement have been settled in previous discussions except for the percentage of the movie profits that will go to the band. The two negotiators (band manager and movie producer) are given the task of negotiating that percentage. The case instructs the movie producers that they may not agree to more than 25 per cent and instructs the band managers that they cannot agree to less than 10 per cent. This information sets up a one-issue distributive negotiation with a bargaining zone (i.e. the range of possible agreements that are
acceptable to both negotiators) of 10-25 per cent. Upon arriving at an agreement, students completed an agreement form, which recorded additional study variables.

**Measures**

**Seller and buyer.** In this case, the band manager meets the criteria of the seller and the movie producer meets the criteria of the buyer (Neale et al., 1987; Kristensen & Garling, 1997). The band manager is providing services of indeterminant value while the movie producer is providing monetary payment of determinant value. Therefore, the band manager will be referred to as the *seller* and the movie producer will be referred to as the *buyer*.

**Face threat sensitivity.** One instrument in the questionnaire was the FTS measure. Tynan and colleagues have used two different measures of FTS in published research – a three-item measure (White et al., 2004) and a five-item measure (Tynan, 2005). The same format was used in both measures – each item was a nine-point semantic differential format with “1” anchored as “not at all characteristic of me” and “9” anchored as “very characteristic of me.” One item (“I don’t respond well to direct criticism”) was common to both measures. For our measure of FTS, we combined all items from both measures; however, we deleted an item (“I am pretty thin-skinned”) that was used in the White et al. (2004) measure. In the Tynan (2005, p. 234) measure, this item was deleted because, in the validation process, “several participants were unsure of what the [item] meant and asked for clarification.” This combination resulted in a six-item scale. Four of the items were reversed so that higher scores represented greater FTS. Items were averaged to obtain the FTS score. The six-item scale was sufficiently reliable in this sample with a coefficient alpha of 0.80.

**Agreement (percentage).** Upon arriving at an agreement, the two negotiators completed an agreement form, which recorded the agreed upon percentage of movie profits, between 10 and 25 per cent.

**First offer.** The agreement form also asked the dyad members to record, which individual made the first offer (i.e. offered a specific number before the other party mentioned a specific number). This variable was included as a control variable; evidence (Galinsky & Mussweiler, 2001) indicates that, under some circumstances, making the first offer can influence the end agreement, and we wanted to control that potential effect.

**Satisfaction with process and satisfaction with outcomes.** Also, after arriving at an agreement – and before any debrief information was provided – participants individually responded to two items intended to assess whether FTS had been activated in the process of negotiating. White et al. (2004) applied three criteria to assess whether FTS had been activated. One was whether negotiators reached an impasse rather than an agreement. The other two were satisfaction with the negotiation process and satisfaction with negotiation outcomes. The two questions used in this study were intended to replicate the same satisfaction assessment. Both questions were in the format of a nine-point semantic differential. The first item assessed satisfaction with the negotiation process. It was phrased “how satisfied are you with the negotiation process that resulted in the agreement?” The second item assessed satisfaction with the end agreement: “how satisfied are you with the percentage (the end agreement) you received?” Each measure was scored so that higher scores indicated higher satisfaction.

**Results**

Descriptive statistics and variable inter-correlations are provided in Table 1. A one-sample t-test indicated no significant difference between the mean FTS for the two roles ($t_{(62)} = 0.80, ns$).

In Table 1, the correlation between satisfaction with the negotiation process and FTS was not statistically significant for either buyer or seller. Additionally, the correlation between satisfaction with outcomes and FTS was not statistically significant for either
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>STD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Seller satisfaction with process</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Buyer satisfaction with process</td>
<td>7.53</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Seller satisfaction with outcomes</td>
<td>7.79</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0.73**</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Buyer satisfaction</td>
<td>7.87</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.79**</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>With outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Seller gender</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Buyer gender</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Seller FTS</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Buyer FTS</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.26*</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.34**</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Agreement (percentage)</td>
<td>17.16</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.34**</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-0.45**</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. First Offer</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N = 63; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; gender is coded “1” = male and “0” = female; and first off is coded as “1” = seller and “2” = buyer
buyer or seller. Because neither measure of satisfaction was associated with FTS nor these results suggest that FTS was not activated in this negotiation. Also, supporting that conclusion is the result that no dyads reached an impasse. White et al. (2004) intentionally attempted to activate FTS and selected a negotiation exercise that resulted in a 41 per cent impasse rate in one study. The fact that we have an impasse rate of 0 per cent is consistent with FTS not being activated. Consistent with the criteria of White et al. (2004), the totality of this evidence suggests that FTS was not activated in this negotiation situation.

The ability of FTS to predict the negotiated agreement was tested using hierarchical regression. The results appear in Table 2. The regression weights in Table 2 are standardized. In Model 1, the control variable (party making the first offer) and the four predictor variables were entered. The overall model was statistically significant, and the $R^2$ value was 0.18. As the data from Model 1 did not support the relationship between seller FTS and negotiation outcomes, $H1a$ was not supported. The data from Model 1 did support the relationship between buyer FTS and negotiation outcomes, so $H1b$ is supported. The positive and significant association between FTS and negotiated outcomes for buyers, but not for sellers, supports $H2$.

In Model 2, the interaction of seller gender and seller FTS was entered. The interaction was not significant and the increment in the $R^2$ value was not significant. Therefore, $H3a$ of gender as a moderator of the relationship between FTS and distributive agreement is not supported for the seller role.

In Model 3, the interaction of buyer gender and buyer FTS was added to the variables in Model 1. In Table 2, the interaction effect is statistically significant and the increment in the $R^2$ value is also significant. To better understand this interaction, we graphed the interaction and tested regression models separately by the buyer gender.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control variable</strong></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Model 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party making</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.26*</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First offer</strong></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Model 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictor variables</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Model 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seller gender</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer gender</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seller FTS</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buyer FTS</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.62**</td>
<td>0.63**</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactions</strong></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Model 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seller gender x</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer gender x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FTS</strong></td>
<td>2.59*</td>
<td>2.14***</td>
<td>2.92**</td>
<td>2.94*</td>
<td>1.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.06*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** $N$ (number of dyads) = 63; ***$p < 0.10$; **$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.01$; and $\Delta$ increment to $R^2$ added beyond Model 1
Figure 1 provides the graph of the interaction. To graph this effect, median splits were used to create a high FTS group and a low FTS group for each gender [2]. The visualization in Figure 1 suggests that the significant interaction was caused by the group of higher FTS women buyers. To provide a statistical test for this suggested effect, Table 2 also provides regression models by buyer gender. Model 4 provides the regression results for women buyers; Model 5 provides results for men buyers. As anticipated from the pattern in Figure 1, the FTS of men buyers is not significantly related to distributive agreements. However, Model 4 indicates a very clear relationship. Model 4 has a large $R^2$ value of 0.30, and the overall model is statistically significant. One predictor variable, buyer FTS, is statistically significant. The positive regression weight is consistent with Figure 1 in showing that, for women buyers, greater FTS is associated with paying higher prices.

Discussion

The established literature on FTS and negotiations has centered on the effects of activated FTS. For example, White et al. (2004) suggest that when FTS is activated during a negotiation, counterparts are less likely to reach an agreement and that the negotiated resolution is less Pareto efficient. In this paper, we take a different approach by analyzing the effects of FTS when FTS is not activated. As described by Goffman (1967), those who are high in FTS will draw on avoidance strategies, such that even without experiencing FTS activation, such individuals will take preemptive measures to mitigate the risk of potential threats. In this study, we hypothesized that FTS – as a propensity – is associated with negotiator outcomes even when the FTS is not activated in a particular negotiation situation. We also hypothesized that this effect would be asymmetrical by role – more prominent for buyers than sellers – and would be moderated by negotiator gender. Four conclusions seem warranted.

First, the sum of the evidence supports our hypothesis that FTS is associated with negotiation outcomes even in contexts where the FTS is not activated. This finding is a noteworthy and contrasting extension of the White et al. (2004) results showing that activated FTS influences negotiators. It is also consistent with face theory’s basic tenet (Goffman, 1967) that individuals concerned about avoiding threats to face will engage in an equivocal pattern of behavior; this pattern is inconsistent with optimal negotiation strategy. Thus, we showcase that FTS is a far more powerful and relevant force in negotiations than was previously established – even when it is not activated, it still plays a role in negotiations. We believe that this has significant implications for negotiators. Namely, that those who are higher in FTS might take proactive steps to avoid a threat to face, as they are more likely to be concerned that particular actions of a counterpart are threatening to face. Negotiators higher in FTS should be aware that these preemptive measures to save face might have a negative impact on their negotiation objectives.
Second, we hypothesized and found that the association between FTS and negotiation outcomes is stronger for buyers than for sellers. We had not anticipated that the association would be non-significant for sellers but that finding is consistent with our asymmetry hypothesis. Buyers are suggesting a determinant value (i.e. price) for the goods or services of the seller, and the value of these goods/services is less objective than the suggested price. Therefore, buyers should have greater concern about “sticking their neck out” and suggesting the appropriate determinant value. Findings are consistent with this logic. Of note, we found a significant correlation between buyer FTS and seller satisfaction with outcomes ($r = 0.26$). This seems logical that buyer FTS results in a higher price paid by the buyer so that the seller would be more satisfied with the outcome.

Third, according to the social role theory (Eagly, 1987), there are negative consequences for individuals who step out of their “ascribed” social roles. In contrast to women, men tend to have the social expectation of engaging in a manner that is dominant or aggressive, attributes that the negotiation literature has established as being optimal for distributive negotiations (Bowles et al., 2007; Kugler et al., 2018). Thus, we suggested that those higher in FTS would be less likely to depart from gender roles and that for women, this reluctance would be suboptimal for negotiation outcomes. We hypothesized and found that the association between FTS and negotiated outcomes is moderated by gender; however, this effect was only present for buyers. Women buyers with higher FTS paid more than women buyers with lower FTS. The degree of FTS was not a significant predictor of negotiated outcomes for men. Taken together, these findings support the thesis that women who are higher in FTS will be less likely to act in a way that runs counter to social roles, even though it would be beneficial in a distributive negotiation. This is a significant finding that showcases the relevance of FTS more broadly. A recent study by Pew Research Center (2018) found that while the gender pay gap has improved, women in the USA are still only paid 82 per cent of the salary of men. Some of this discrepancy has been connected to the findings that in contract negotiations women make lower salary requests than men do (Save-Soderbergh, 2019). Our results suggest that one possible explanation for why women make lower salary requests is related to gender differences in non-activated FTS.

Fourth, the results in Figure 1 indicate that women buyers lower in FTS did not pay more than men with lower FTS. This finding suggests that absent higher FTS, women will not differ from men in the amount of negotiated outcomes. We believe that the research question of whether men and women differ in the negotiation outcomes they obtain (Bowles, Babcock, & McGinn, 2005; Bowles et al., 2007; Kray & Thompson, 2005; Miles & LaSalle, 2008; Stuhlmacher & Walters, 1999) would benefit from a closer consideration of FTS and of avoidance behaviors in general.

Limitations and directions for future research
This study tested a single population with a single negotiation situation. Therefore, the ability to generalize broadly is limited. A number of situational factors can influence the degree to which gender differences in negotiated outcomes occur. These include whether the negotiators are negotiating for themselves or representing others (Bowles et al., 2005) and whether the negotiation context is gender-stereotyped (Miles & LaSalle, 2008). Therefore, it may be that under a different set of situational factors, the effects found in the current study could be either more evident or less evident.

As stated previously, a number of writers (Miles, 2010; Small et al., 2007) have researched the issue of the decision of whether to initiate a negotiation. Additionally, Volkema (2009) has written about the concern of sub-optimal initiation in the negotiation process. We believe that tying FTS to these discussions could provide a beneficial link. A basic tenet of
face theory is that avoidance of threats to face is a strong motivator of behavior choices. Also, Goffman (1967) holds that almost all human interactions are modified by considerations of maintaining face for the initiator of the interaction, as well as other participants in the interactions (i.e. negotiators and counterparts in negotiation contexts). As the scope of negotiation research broadens to include the decision of whether to initiate a negotiation, FTS and related concerns of face theory should be a relevant topic in that discussion.

Conclusion
FTS has been proposed as a propensity that may or may not be activated. Previous research has shown that activated FTS influences negotiated outcomes. In this study, we contribute to the negotiation literature by also showing that FTS, which is not activated is associated with negotiation outcomes. This relationship was found for buyers but not for sellers. Also, consistent with gender role theory, this relationship is moderated by gender. Thus, we also shed light on gender differences in negotiation, showing that female buyers who are higher in FTS tend to pay more in negotiations. Furthermore, given the current interest in the pay gap between women and men, our findings could provide one explanation of this gap – women who have a higher FTS accept lower pay (making a greater concession) in an effort to “fit” with their stereotyped gender role of cooperativeness. They do not wish to upset the user by asking for more and avoid the threat altogether, often settling for sub-optimal outcomes. In conclusion, this study provides practical implications for buyers, sellers, women and men through the lens of potential threat to face in negotiations.

Notes
1 Available upon request.

2 The cell sizes created by these median splits (cells of 15-17) suggest that the cells are too small to use for individual tests of differences (e.g., t-tests and ANOVA). However, because the hierarchical regression had found a significant interaction effect, the graphing was helpful, not as a statistical test, but to illustrate the form of the statistically significant interaction.

References


**Corresponding author**
Jeff Schatten can be contacted at: schattenj@wlu.edu
Social network influences on employee responses to organizational withdrawals

Frank Siedlok
University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Paul Hibbert
University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, UK, and

Fiona Whitehurst
Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to develop a more detailed understanding of how embedding in different social networks relates to different types of action that individuals choose in the context of organizational closures, downsizing or relocations. To develop such insights, this paper focuses on three particular types of social networks, namely, intra-organizational; external professional and local community networks. These three types of networks have been frequently related to different types of action in the context of closures and relocations.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper. The authors develop the argument by integrating relevant recent literature on the salience related to embedding in different types of social networks, with a particular focus on responses to organizational closure or relocation.

Findings – The authors argue that at times of industrial decline and closure: embeddedness in intra-organizational networks can favor collective direct action; embeddedness in professional networks is likely to favor individual direct action and embeddedness in community networks can lead to individual indirect action. The authors then add nuance to the argument by considering a range of complicating factors that can constrain or enable the course(s) of action favored by particular combinations of network influences.

Originality/value – On a theoretical level, this paper adds to understandings of the role of network embeddedness in influencing individual and collective responses to such disruptive events; and direct or indirect forms of response. On a practical level, the authors contribute to understandings about how the employment landscape may evolve in regions affected by organizational demise, and how policymakers may study with or through network influences to develop more responsible downsizing approaches.

Keywords Social networks, Employment, Embeddedness, Embedding, Organizational demise, Community

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Closures, downsizing and relocations are a perennial problem affecting both advanced economies and newly industrialized nations (Bentley, Bailey & Ruyter, 2010;
Datta, Guthrie, Basuil & Pandey, 2010; Hassink & Shin, 2005; Minchin, 2009). Besides, such organizational withdrawals are increasingly affecting skilled (professional) as much as unskilled workers (Arntz, Gregory & Zierahn, 2016; Hartley, 2017). Understanding how individuals may respond to these difficult situations, individually or collectively, is important to organizations wishing to undertake “responsible downsizing.” In addition, policymakers need to understand how local networks support alternative employment options, as studies have shown that social networks can influence how individuals choose to act (Delgado-Márquez, Hurtado-Torres, Pedauqa & Cordón-Pozo, 2018; Hayton, Carnabuci & Eisenberger, 2012; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Porac, Thomas & Badden-Fuller, 2011). However, the particular influences of different kinds of networks on individual action, and how these influences may interact, are not clearly conceptualized in the literature. Consequently, in this paper, we focus on developing a conceptual understanding of the relationship between the influence of individual embedding within multiple kinds of network, and the different actions individuals take in the context of organizational demise or relocation.

The concept of embeddedness helps to explain how actors, both individuals and organizations, are socially situated within an array of interpersonal and professional ties (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2018; Moran, 2005; Provan, Huang & Milward, 2009; Smith & Stevens, 2010), which, in turn, can provide access to a range of resources of a financial, informational, emotional or political nature (Batjargal, 2003; Berends, van Burg & van Raaij, 2010; Biniari, 2012; Hayton, Carnabuci & Eisenberger, 2012; Kistruck & Beamish, 2010). The literature clearly demonstrates that access to such resources, and the support that embedding in different networks offers, can enable or constrain different forms of action (Batjargal, 2003; Jack & Anderson, 2002; Uzzi, 1997) and influence career choices of individuals (Anteby, Chan & DiBenigno, 2016; Avnimelech & Feldman, 2010; Dany, Louvel & Valette, 2011). These influences are especially significant in the context of organizational instability and, in particular, closure or relocation decisions that often affect a large number of individuals, as they can provide resources for responsive action. For example, the literature suggests that individuals: might draw on the resources offered by local social networks to engage in a range of entrepreneurial activities (Bennworth, 2004); they might mobilize the resources offered by the organizational network and attempt to preserve the organization (Jaumier, 2016); or leveraging their professional networks, they might pursue potential job opportunities elsewhere (Leppäaho, Chetty & Dimitratos, 2018; Villadsen, 2011). Furthermore, reports and news coverage suggest that at times of closures or when relocation decisions are made, employees refuse to relocate with the company or might reject job opportunities elsewhere and instead are more likely to seek to create job opportunities locally (Whitehurst, Siedlok, & Race, 2008; Whitehurst & Siedlok, 2006).

Yet, despite the mounting evidence that actions in response to industrial demise and relocations are affected by the different kinds of opportunities and influences afforded by particular network connections (Davis, Renzulli, & Aldrich, 2006; Gardiner, Stuart, MacKenzie, Greenwood, & Perrett, 2009; Porac, Thomas & Badden-Fuller, 2011; Strangleman, 2001), the literature has paid significantly less attention to the distinctive characteristics of different kinds of networks and how these relate to their enabling and constraining effects (Batjargal, 2003; Kalantaridis & Bika, 2006). Similarly, there has been little attention to the relative salience and influence of different networks (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010; Tasselli, 2015) on both individuals and groups and how such influences operate when they may “pull” in different directions. For example, Frenkel (2003) questions whether the multiple allegiances of workers to an organization, professional associations and trade unions benefit or damage organizations, while Tasselli’s (2015) study on the dynamics of
knowledge transfer in healthcare suggests that multiple allegiances impact on individuals' opportunities for decision-making and action.

Thus, to develop more detailed insights into the influence of social networks on individuals and their contexts, it is important to, first, acknowledge that individuals are simultaneously embedded within a range of networks (Granovetter, 1985; Hess, 2004; Jack & Anderson, 2002), second, to consider how different types of network context can have subtly different influences and, third, to consider the interaction of these effects. Indeed, as Roos (2018) infers from her work on gender and entrepreneurship, understanding embeddedness in social networks helps us to understand how different contexts interact, providing a more nuanced explanation of the interplay of individual decisions and the networks that an actor is a part of.

To develop such insights, this paper focuses on network types that are well-characterized in the literature, in contextual settings that have the potential to make their influences amplified and clearer to observe. Consequently, in this paper, we consider three kinds of well-characterized social networks, namely, intra-organizational; external professional; and local community networks. These three types of networks have been frequently related to different types of action in the context of closures and relocations (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2018; Hayton, Carnabuci & Eisenberger, 2012; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Porac, Thomas & Badden-Fuller, 2011). We focus on these kinds of networks in the context of organizational closures, downsizing or relocations as these kinds of withdrawal have significant effects on individuals and the networks they are embedded in. Furthermore, this context is itself an important practical problem for which our theoretical insights can both be developed and may be useful. In particular, the argument developed in the paper can help organizations and policymakers in developing interventions to industrial decline and closure that are aligned with the particular context and utilizing the multiple embeddedness of those affected. Indeed, this can help to develop more responsible downsizing approaches.

Accordingly, the remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a definition and an overview of embeddedness, by selecting and integrating relevant recent literature that addresses variations in different kinds of social networks, with a particular focus on responses to organizational closure or relocation. Based on these insights we go on to develop our literature-grounded argument to show how at times of industrial decline and organizational closure: embeddedness in intra-organizational networks can favor collective direct action; embeddedness in professional networks is likely to favor individual direct action and embeddedness in community networks can lead to individual indirect action. We then consider the interactions and relative “strength” of these influences, before going on to consider complicating factors that can constrain or enable the course (s) of action favored by particular combinations of network influences. We bring our argument together in a concluding section that includes a summary of the theoretical and practical contributions of the paper. On a practical level, we contribute to understandings about how the employment landscape may evolve in regions affected by organizational demise, and how policymakers may work with or through network influences. On a theoretical level, this article adds to understandings of the role of network embeddedness in influencing individual and collective responses to such disruptive events; and direct or indirect forms of response.

Embeddedness in social networks: influential ties
Social networks are distinct from the other two main forms of economic organization (Kilduff & Brass, 2010; Powell, 1990), namely, markets, organized through transactions and hierarchies, organized through command structures. Networks are instead organized through embedded relationships. Embeddedness is a multidimensional concept describing
social relationships, which has been treated in various ways in the literature. The key four dimensions of embedded relationships can be summarized as follows:

1. They develop, and gain their strength, from the frequency of interactions, which result in;
2. Pro-social behaviors leading to;
3. Resource sharing and expectations of reciprocity; and so
4. They constitute an array of interpersonal ties, which provide the structure of social networks, that “close the loop” by influencing actors’ behaviors, decisions and ability to act.

The first aspect of embedded relationships, frequency of interaction, has been directly associated with the strength of social networks (Moran, 2005; Provan et al., 2009; Smith & Stevens, 2010). This is because greater embeddedness is frequently associated with the development of strong ties, which arise through frequent interaction (Kilduff & Brass, 2010).

However, the literature also opens up the mechanisms behind the formation and strength of embedded relationships through a focus on the second aspect, the pro-social behaviors, which support the development of relationships in networks such as friendship, advice, discussion and trust (Kilduff & Brass, 2010; Tasselli, 2015). These pro-social behaviors lead to durable relationship ties through the third aspect – an expectation of reciprocity (Kilduff & Brass, 2010; Tasselli, 2015) and access to resources. These resources can be of great importance to individuals and can be informational, cognitive, cultural, political or emotional (Batjargal, 2003; Berends, van Burg & van Raaij, 2010; Biniari, 2012; Hayton, Carnabuci & Eisenberger, 2012; Kistruck & Beamish, 2010).

The formation of an array of ties leads to the fourth aspect, in which the individual’s behaviors and decisions are shaped by the these relationship (Chajewski, 2007; Kilduff & Brass, 2010; Roos, 2018) while, at the same time, these behaviors shape the networks within which they are embedded (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Tasselli, 2015). The influences on the individual received in this way affect the possible course (s) of action that they may consider to be appropriate (Akkerman, Born & Torenvlied, 2013; Sydow, Lindkvist & DeFillippi, 2004, p. 1479). Thus, embeddedness, overall, describes the more-or-less durable and situated nature of the relationships, which constitute social networks.

Embedded relationships, developed as described above, can vary in strength over time, sometimes leading to unexpected positive benefits. For example, weak or dormant ties can provide access to important resources. As Granovetter (1973, p. 1372) notes: “It is remarkable that people receive crucial information from individuals whose very existence they have forgotten.” However, the effects of embedding can be constraining and enabling. For example, embeddedness and the processes of embedding can lead to high levels of association (over-association) with a given group and/or tensions arising from multiple affiliations (Husted & Michailova, 2010; Tasselli, 2015). Therefore, embeddedness illuminates how constraining and enabling influences are provided by social networks and may shed light on the apparently non-rational economic behaviors that individuals take to remain within their networks (Roos, 2018; Tasselli, 2015). However, while the nature of embedding and its constraining and enabling effects – in general – are well-characterized, there is a need for further attention to the influence of social networks on individuals concerning their decisions and actions.
To provide a revealing view on the dynamics of social network influence, we focus on a context in which individuals might otherwise be presumed likely to act in their personal economic interest, namely, organizational closures and relocations affecting a workforce. As we outlined in the introduction, there are three types of networks have been well-characterized in the literature and can be related to different types of action in the context of closures and relocations, namely, *intra-organizational; professional;* and *local community* networks (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2018; Hayton, Carnabuci & Eisenberger, 2012; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Porac, Thomas & Badden-Fuller, 2011). We review the key arguments in the extant literature on the effects of embedding in each of the three kinds of networks below. However, we do acknowledge that the boundaries might sometimes be blurred (for example, Gardiner et al., 2009; MacKenzie, Stuart, Forde, Greenwood, Gardiner & Perrett, 2006).

**Embedding in internal, intra-organizational social networks**

The embedding of individuals in social networks within organizations is argued to have significant effects, namely, it increases perceptions of organizational support, boosts social attachment and lessens the likelihood of individuals seeking alternative employment, even when job insecurity is perceived to be high (Crossley, Bennett, Jex & Burnfield, 2007; Felps, Mitchell, Hekman, Lee, Holton & Harman, 2009; Hayton, Carnabuci & Eisenberger, 2012; Murphy, Burton, Henagan & Briscoe, 2013). Employees, thus, find security through embedding within a stable organizational setting. Partly for those reasons, embeddedness in intra-organizational networks is associated with the development of trust and camaraderie; this, in turn, supports individual career progress and provides informal support for organizational aims at the same time (Burby, 2003; Lee & Kim, 2011).

In addition to the impact on individual capabilities for career progression, internal social networks support important organizational capabilities (Kilduff & Brass, 2010). In particular, social networks “make the social fabric of organizations more (or less) effective in creating and transferring knowledge” (Levin & Cross, 2004, p. 1487), impacting the processes of knowledge “transfer” and “creation” (Hsiao, Tsai & Lee, 2006; Manning, 2010). Furthermore, embeddedness in intra-organizational networks has been associated with allegiance-related tensions when individuals are exposed to external partners or networks (Clark, 2004; Husted & Michailova, 2010). Such tensions can arise between internal and external connections because the organizational setting is recognized as providing important structure and meaning for employees (Clark, 2004; Davis, 2003; Parry, 2003). However, such tensions are not necessarily entirely negative. Both Akkerman, Born & Torenvlied (2013) and Mohrman Tenkasi and Mohrman (2003) show that social networks are important as both influencers and outputs of organizational change processes, whether in moderating participation in collective action or whether members will conform to the intended designs or will pursue more creative and more effective actions (Mohrman Tenkasi & Mohrman, 2003, p. 321) through leveraging resources connected to external networks. Similarly, the trust underpinned by embedded social networks allows change agents to have an impact within organizations; for example, Biniari (2012) found that intra-organizational envy of corporate entrepreneurs is lessened in contexts of high social embeddedness, which means they are more likely to act. Indeed, intra-organizational networks are generally considered to be enablers of (internal) entrepreneurial action (Kelley, Peters & O’Connor, 2009).

Summarizing the discussion above, it is clear that the embeddedness of individuals within intra-organizational social networks is important in three ways. First, this embeddedness facilitates individual progress within an organization. Second, it provides support for certain organizational capabilities, including performance, collaboration,
learning and innovation implementation. Third, it influences the organization’s deliberate and emergent patterns of change over time, which can be related to the entrepreneurial activities of individuals. This means that the embedding of individuals within intra-organizational networks will also enable particular responses in times of decline and closure. While the most obvious is a collective action such as strikes, to preserve the status quo (Akkerman, Born & Torenvlied, 2013), in other cases strong intra-organizational embedding can lead to a more positive type of action. It can be argued that, at times of organizational turnover, there is a window of opportunity in which the capabilities and influence of a tight-knit intra-organizational network, leveraging their potential as change agents and internal entrepreneurs (Akkerman, Born & Torenvlied, 2013; Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Jaumier, 2016) might potentiate cooperation in direct action such as employee or management buyouts or attempts at restructuring undertaken by the majority of the organization (given access to suitable funding resources, support and capabilities – as we will discuss in more detail later).

Furthermore, indirect evidence suggests that managers of internal buyouts treat their workers rather differently than managers from external acquirers. Specifically, there is evidence of a positive attitude toward members of the (former) organization in Bacon Wright and Demina (2004) study, which found that in times of turbulence, organizations formed through internal management buyouts focused on the abilities of organization members (and invested in these) to aid survival, rather than relying on cost-cutting through reducing the workforce. While Wright, Hoskisson and Busenitz (2001, p. 118) point out that some managers, rather than leaving to start a venture, preferred to remain until an opportunity for a buyout emerged, Jaumier (2016) shows that such buy-outs are often characterized by high levels of sacrifice and commitment from both employees and management. This is important as management buyouts are believed to enable innovation and growth of otherwise ineffective (parts of) organizations, but the commitment of managers to these new organizations has been argued to be essential to the realization of such expectations (Whitehurst, Siedlok, & Race, 2008). Such patterns of trust in the development of human capital are consistent with the existence of underlying social networks in these contexts (Felps et al., 2009; Hayton, Carnabuci & Eisenberger, 2012); by supporting trust, these social networks also provide an appealing context for the entrepreneurial orientation and proactivity of some members (Benneworth, 2004; Parry, 2003). Thus, overall, the influence of intra-organizational social networks can help to explain the likely formation of management buyouts and their potential to endure, especially in difficult conditions.

However, it may be the case that there is no access to funding and support for a buyout or the business proposition may be unviable due to exogenous factors. In such cases, network members will be motivated toward collective resistance and lobbying. This kind of outcome is exemplified by collective action to raise worker visibility such as protests and battles against closure decisions (Akkerman, Born & Torenvlied, 2013; Savage, 2004) or internal coalitions of management opposing such changes (Clark, 2004).

Overall, other things being equal, the strong embedding of employees in intra-organizational networks is likely to support collective direct action of some form to preserve or attempt to preserve (at least some part of) the organization when a closure is imminent. By collective action, we mean action that is undertaken by the existing network, or part of it, in an attempt to preserve the social structure of embedded relationships for those individuals. For the organization’s management (if they are responsibly-oriented) and policymakers the crucial task is to ensure that access to needed resources and the development of relevant capabilities is supported (Whitehurst, Siedlok, & Race, 2008) to encourage collective action beyond resistance. Relevant resources and capabilities might be
provided through access to finance and exposure to relevant entrepreneurial skills and role models to encourage management or employee buy-out.

**Embedding in external professional social networks**

External professional social networks are important in relation to individual career potential and organizational arrangements in two chief ways. First, relational connections between individuals can provide access to resources, which, in turn, can increase individuals’ professional mobility (Anteby, Chan & DiBenigno, 2016; Lin, Ensel & Vaughn, 1981; van Rijnsoever, Hessels & Vandeberg, 2008), even when these connections remain dormant (Granovetter, 1973). Indeed, allowing connections to become dormant and then re-connecting is efficient, and provides access to knowledge and experience (Levin et al., 2011). Moreover:

 [...] when people reconnect, they still have feelings of trust and a shared perspective – which are critical for receiving valuable knowledge from someone – and our research shows that these feelings do not fade much, if at all (p. 47).

Thus, extra-organizational professional connections may be strategically useful for individuals (Batjargal, 2003; Manning, 2010); but the information provided through these channels may also be valuable to organizations (Berends, van Burg & van Raaij, 2010; Engeström, 2006; c.f. Granovetter, 1985).

Second, the innovative potential and competencies of organizations are enhanced by individuals’ participation in professional social networks (Ciabuschi, Dellestrand & Martín, 2011; Collinson & Wang, 2012), as individuals have better access to knowledge in this way. Such access to knowledge arises because collaborative participation in professional social networks leads to opportunities for learning and:

 [...] highly embedded participants experience exposure to more knowledge and can accumulate knowledge faster. Furthermore, variations in the quality of the knowledge exchanged can be expected to vary with the level of embeddedness so that well-embedded participants will have access to higher-quality knowledge. (Andersen, 2013, p. 146; see also Geletkanycz & Boyd, 2011).

Better sources of knowledge may enable organizations, through embedded key individuals, to act as “institutional entrepreneurs” (Lawrence, Hardy & Phillips, 2002), who can use “global pipelines” to find and act on emerging opportunities elsewhere (Bathelt, Malmberg & Maskell, 2004). Thus, “networked knowledge” also has the spin-off benefit of providing some influence on the evolution of fields and regional centers. However, Parrilli (2009) has identified traditions of collective association that pre-date professional arrangements, which, perhaps, explains why the decisions of highly embedded professionals may not only shape their local context but also be influenced by long-established extra-organizational professional networks (Villadsen, 2011). In the increasingly professionalized world, it is often professional rather than organizational affiliations that can provide a stronger steer to individual career choices (von Nordenflycht, 2010).

The relationship between professional network embeddedness and career mobility is, however, often not straightforward, as there are countervailing effects. That is, an individual’s position in a professional network is often closely tied to membership in a particular organization. Furthermore, once an individual has become embedded in professional social networks that provide them with a sense of supportive solidarity (Zhang, 2010) – in the institutional and societal context in which their work is recognized – their independence is constrained at the same time as their influence and impact is enabled (Battilana, 2006; Kilduff & Brass, 2010). These enabling-and-constraining embedding...
effects, therefore, somewhat link individuals to a particular local context and a less geographically-bounded professional network (Clark, 2004).

In general, the embedding of individuals within professional social networks supports the exploitation of connections in times of need such as instances of organizational turbulence, decline and closure. Such professional networks can provide individuals with new opportunities for finding employment, as employees are likely to be known to professional or occupational peers and managers of other firms (Antebey, Chan & DiBenigno, 2016; Granovetter, 1985). In this kind of situation, it is expected that a troubled region will experience an exodus of professionals, who may be willing to take advantage of opportunities wherever they may be found.

However, whether this direct action involves exit from the region or alternative local entrepreneurship (leveraging professional network resources more directly), is dependent on the sense of connection to a local community. Professional networks may provide the necessary resources, contacts and, in some cases, become contractual templates (Berends, van Burg & van Raaij, 2010; Leppääho et al., 2018; Nyström, 2018), but this may only be a more attractive option when family factors and embedded ties to local community are at risk of being affected. Indeed, there is a mounting evidence that family and community networks can produce tensions for individuals seeking professional advancement within and across geographical boundaries (Feldman & Ng, 2007; Valette & Culié, 2015) as individuals often consider how their career decisions might affect their family and friends (Fletcher & Bailyn, 1996; Howes & Goodman-Delahunt, 2014; Ituma & Simpson, 2009).

Local community and family ties can, therefore, influence how individuals are (or become) embedded in both their professions and their geographical contexts (Feldman & Ng, 2007; Rodrigues, Guest & Budjanovcanin, 2016; Valette & Culié, 2015) and are enabled and constrained in their choices of employment action by these influences. This is consistent with Hochner and Granrose’s (1985) study, which found that some belief in collective ideals was associated with entrepreneurial intentions among workers in times of redundancy. We discuss the effects of embedding in local community networks in the next section.

Overall, other things being equal, strong embedding in external professional networks is likely to support individual direct action; individuals are likely to leverage network resources, either to access new employment opportunities within the network or to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

External, local community networks
Beyond organizational and professional networks, individuals are embedded in family and community social networks, which may include or encompass members of voluntary organizations, local communities, interest groups, churches or schools (Bailey et al., 2012; Boschma and Lambooy, 1999; Mitchell et al., 2001; Ng & Feldman, 2012). Extra-organizational networks of these kinds can provide considerable social and personal fulfillment, support and the necessary structure and new routines, which individuals feel the need for during and after the loss of organizational structures (MacKenzie et al., 2006; Parry, 2003; Strangleman, 2001). This is because local community networks can provide support during the unsettling times of closures (MacKenzie et al., 2006) by providing opportunities to replace the lost routines in individuals’ lives with regular patterns of social interactions in non-organizational contexts (Strangleman, 2001). Thus, local community embeddedness is often found to be more salient during decisions related to career-upsetting events (Whitaker, 1986; Whitehurst, Siedlok, & Race, 2008). More generally, as Parry (2003, p. 237) argues, extra-organizational local networks can provide considerable social and personal fulfillment after the loss of organizational structures and networks.
There is also evidence that community social networks have professional effects. For example, embeddedness in local community networks has been identified as a component of general job embeddedness (Bailey, Chapain & de Ruyter, 2012; Clark, 2004; Felps et al., 2009). As such, it has been identified as an important factor in limiting employee turnover, and thus, indirectly facilitating skills development through the retention of experienced employees who can guide informal projects and provide mentoring (Lowe, Hagan & Iskander, 2010). Furthermore, social settings and groups can help individuals to connect with communities to access local information about professional opportunities, which might be off-limits otherwise (Jack & Anderson, 2002).

Other, more specific employment influences and effects can also be identified. In particular, during closures when changing employment is involuntary, Tomaney et al. (1999) report that embedding in local community networks is the primary factor influencing self-employment. However, where these social networks are very “tight-knit” the embeddedness can be constraining and limit the scope of business developments; entrepreneurial endeavors become focused on small-scale, highly localized employment rather than maximizing the growth potential of new organizations (Wang & Altinay, 2012).

More generally, in situations of closure where individuals are embedded within community social networks but no other networks, a shift in meaningful activity from work to community interests can be envisaged. Individuals will take (or create) any work that may be available – but only within their particular locality – given that it provides the means for them to continue engagement with their community interest(s) (Gardiner et al., 2009; Strangleman, 2001). Importantly, a local focus need not mean that individuals will be uninterested in progression in alternative employment. This is because the rewards of career success can be invested in their community network interests. It does mean, however, that they will be unlikely to invest in this work as a meaningful profession. Instead, in the absence of any sense of a collective that provides the resources or mutual support to enable action, they are likely to be forced to consider a diverse range of alternative (un)employment options that may arise through external policy interventions or growth in alternative sectors. This often means acceptance of less meaningful employment options, which fail to use individuals’ skills and experience, which over time leads to a lack of energetic entrepreneurial activity and a reduction in up-to-date and focused skills in the region – and thus, a lack of dynamism, which prevents the (re-)development of organizations in an industry affected by cyclic decline (Avnimelech & Feldman, 2010; Benneworth, 2004). Moreover, policy interventions that try to stimulate bottom-up action in underused communities, without paying attention to the nature and history of existing collectivities in a locality, are not likely to be successful (Vollan, 2012). Overall, community social networks tend to drive individuals to act independently in relation to their employment choices and to favor differences in a form (e.g. entrepreneurial, locally limited self-starts) and/or focus (e.g. alternative industries or activities) in their employment-seeking approach.

Hence, embedding in local/community social networks can have a powerful moderating effect on individual action during organizational decline and demise and, consequently, leads individual indirect action to preserve non-economic sources of meaning and value that are more salient to individuals in these networks.

The salience of embedding in different networks during the industrial demise

There are two levels of preliminary theoretical implications that can be derived from the preceding discussion of the effects of embedding in different kinds of social networks. First, the typology of different kinds of a social network in which individuals may be embedded, and the characterization of the different influences that they bring to bear on and through
individuals and collectives have not hitherto been explicitly developed. Furthermore, through building on the insights of Ng and Feldman (2012) and Lo, Wong, Yam and Whitfield (2012), it can be argued that it is important not to rigidly partition intra-organizational social networks from other kinds of network that may have equal (or greater) salience to individuals (Berends, van Burg & van Raaij, 2010; Rodrigues, Guest & Budjanovcanin, 2016). Thus, both clarity concerning the distinctiveness and overlap of different kinds of social networks are important in our preceding argument.

Second and most importantly, the preceding section of the paper has shown how different network embedding patterns may lead to different possibilities and choices regarding the nature and location of future work at times of organizational instability, crisis and closure. We have argued that other things being equal, in times of decline and closure, the influence of network embeddedness on work-seeking and creating activities play out in these ways as follows:

- Embeddedness in intra-organizational networks is likely to favor collective direct action, in the form of management buy-outs or mass resistance;
- Embeddedness in professional networks is likely to favor individual direct action, which can either mean an exodus of professional staff or, with appropriate support, entrepreneurial dynamism within a region; and
- Embeddedness in community networks is likely to favor individual indirect action as local interests displace organizational life as a matter of greatest importance, leading to a relatively non-dynamic landscape in the absence of robust policy interventions.

These insights provide a different contribution to the majority of research in this area, which largely focuses on social network effects on the commitment and mobility of individual employees (Felps et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2001; Stam, 2007). Before going further in outlining our more detailed implications related to the dynamic nature and interaction of embedding in different types of social networks, we briefly discuss the main moderating and confounding factors that can enable or constrain these influences.

**Moderating factors**
The previous discussion highlighted the potential salience of the three types of social networks, in relation to individual or collective action, in the context of industrial withdrawal. However, the literature suggests other factors that also need to be considered alongside the effects of network embedding. In particular, these are access to necessary resources, experience, skills, education, age and current family status (Nyström, 2018). All of these have been associated with an individual or collective action and can have effects on the salience of the three types of networks.

Most significantly, the isolated influences of patterns of embedding are all *ceteris paribus* conclusions based on the availability of adequate resources, which may have a profound moderating effect on the influence of patterns of networking and thus on potential outcomes (Andrews, Boyne, Meier, O’Toole & Walker, 2011; Lepak, Smith & Taylor, 2007, p. 182). For example, entrepreneurial action, including management buyouts (Whitehurst, Siedlok, & Race, 2008), may not be possible in the absence of access to capital (Kim, Aldrich & Keister, 2006), appropriate guidance (Murray, Baldwin, Ridgway & Winder, 2005) and the right mix of education and experience (Davis, 2003; Zissimopoulos & Karoly, 2007). Similarly, some less “business savvy” employees might depend on local role models and mentors (Avnimelech & Feldman, 2010; Benneworth, 2004), which constrains their scope for (mobile) individual action.
Importantly, these resources are often available across all three types of networks that individuals are embedded in Davis et al. (2006), but may differ in scale and scope.

The availability of resources does, however, need to be considered in the context of an evaluation of what the most salient needs for particular individuals are. For individuals with familial ties, the employment status of a spouse and a family context, which includes dependents have also been observed to impact the type of action they might engage in Rodrigues, Guest and Budjanovcanin (2016), Valcour, Bailyn & Quijada (2007). In times of closure and financial hardship, the more salient the family’s needs become, the less important professional ties might become, thus, favoring direct or indirect collective action. Similarly, networks do not offer only positive externalities. Labianca and Brass (2006) have indicated that a small number of negative relationships may exist in social networks within organizations and have disruptive effects. Similarly, Staber (2011) has shown that external social networks are home to competitive and collaborative motivations; through influence levels in the network, they provide mechanisms for individual competition (Andrews, Boyne, Meier, O’Toole & Walker, 2011). Thus, embedding in social networks may also expose individuals to negative experiences; experiences that make exit from these collective structures a desirable outcome, hindering the potential for collective direct action and favoring mobility or sector shifts.

**Interaction effects and tensions**

Furthermore, there are complex interaction effects and possible overlaps between the different kinds of social networks that we have explored here. At the simplest level, it will be apparent that there may often be a high degree of overlap between intra-organizational social networks and community social networks, in terms of their membership. However, Ng and Feldman (2012) found that their “results suggest that increases in perceptions of organizational and community embeddedness are associated with increases in work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict over time.” Thus, it is important to recognize the discrete existence of these two kinds of networks even if these overlap, as they can “pull” in different directions. Lo et al. (2012) added a further degree of complexity when considering expatriate workers; they found complex interactions between the effects of embedding in their organizations and both local and home communities. Both Ng and Feldman’s (2012) and Lo et al.’s (2012) work point to potential impacts on an individual’s perceived job mobility, which could be especially important at times of industrial decline and closure.

We also recognize that multiple-network effects can be interlinked in complex and path-dependent ways. These kinds of complex interactions can be inferred, for example, in studies of the closure of the British Gas Engineering Research Station in the North-East of England (Whitehurst, Siedlok, & Race, 2008). These studies did not focus on social networks, but there is an implicit suggestion that organizational embeddedness led employees to attempt a management buy-out in the first instance. When this failed, we infer that some combination of embeddedness in both external professional (pipeline engineering) and the local community networks (the studies reported significant commitment to local, voluntary restoration projects) encouraged later entrepreneurial action and connection to university partners – while discouraging relocation to a new research facility in another region, established by the departing organization. Hence, all three networks were at play here, with different levels of salience at different times.

Besides, different individuals formerly within the closed organization may have different levels of embedding in various networks. The likely situation of various categories of staff – manual workers, technical specialists, managers, etc – could be particularly different. Furthermore, where the loss of an organization is associated with a move to a new region
rather than a collapse, groups of staff may be deliberately relocated, regardless of particular network influences (Maertz & Griffeth, 2004). Alternatively, former organization members may be associated with several social network “neighborhoods,” based on characteristics such as ethnicity and duration of employment (Lawrence, 2011; see also Wang and Altinay, 2012 for particular insights on ethnic community networks), adding a further layer of complexity. Thus, some individuals may be relatively isolated, either through the extraction of groups of colleagues by managerial fiat or because of local cultural or social distinctiveness.

Summary of key theoretical points
We summarize our argument so far in Table 1 below, illustrating the relationship between embedding in the different network(s) and the preferred mode of action (direct or indirect) and preferred unit of action (individual or collective) that contribute to the shape of responses to organizational turbulence and closure. The two dimensions help to understand how the range of possible responses is influenced by embedding in particular networks and their relative salience, aspects, which have also

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred unit of action</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Preferred mode of action</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favor by:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Salient embedding in the professional network (s)</td>
<td>Favor by:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative relationships, tensions, individual isolation</td>
<td>Salient embedding in the local community network (s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to local/extra-local networks of support (e.g. capital)</td>
<td>Negative relationships, tensions, individual isolation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Countervailing influences:</td>
<td>Lacking in access to necessary resources for direct action</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dependency on organizational status for network position</td>
<td>Countervailing influences:</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Salient embedding in the local community network (s)</td>
<td>Family needs and other financial pressures and priorities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Salient embedding in Intra-Organizational network</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective</td>
<td></td>
<td>Indirect collective actions are not conceptually plausible, as indirect actions are based on individual willingness to consider multiple satisfying outcomes. A collective sense of purpose or goal is, therefore, extremely unlikely</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Favor by:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Salient embedding in the intra-organizational network (s)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Available capital, experience and education to support entrepreneurial options</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Further reinforced by salient embedding in local community networks</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Countervailing influences:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Family needs and financial pressures and priorities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Corporate talent relocation programs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Salient embedding in/identification with the professional network</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.
Embedding and other influences on the action in times of organizational closure
been largely neglected the literature so far (for example, see Ng & Feldman, 2012; Nyström, 2018).

Furthermore, the framework captures how certain factors can have a moderating or confounding effect on the main network influences that we have described above. The existence of negative relationship effects, tensions between members of different networks or individual isolation (relatively weak embedding in comparison to peers) all work in favor of independent action over collective action. Appropriate education and experience, and a suitable supply of capital, all work in favor of direct as opposed to indirect action. Thus, we suggest that the influence of social networks on regional industrial employment and renewal is moderated by three kinds of factors – individual characteristics (education, experience and atypical isolation); dyadic tensions (negative relationships); and economic factors (availability of capital) – in the ways that we have elaborated above.

As such, our contribution adds nuance to the claims that having a more qualified, and, perhaps, professionally connected, the workforce can offset large-scale closures (Nyström, 2018) by highlighting the dynamic relationship between embedding in the three types of networks, which complicates the effects of multiple factors within a regional context. Therefore, we argue that although in-depth insights based on individual attributes or single (types of) network influence are useful, it is important to consider how the salience of multiple networks and moderating factors interrelate. As we have shown, such an approach adds the potential to integrate insights, generated through a focus on one type of network or a smaller set of factors (Hane-Weijman, Eriksson & Henning, 2017; Rodrigues, Guest & Budjanovcanin, 2016; Uzzi, 1997).

**Practical implications**

In addition to the theoretical implications, there are some potential implications for policy and practice. First, there is a need for policymakers to consider how the multiple influences of networks may enable or constraint supportive interventions or lead to particular individual or collective response. For example, there would be little virtue in seeking non-targeted foreign direct investment, if the affected workforce in the region was professionally networked in a field where the demand for employees was stable or rising in other regions. In such circumstances, individuals are likely to be aware and well-connected to be able to take advantage of non-local opportunities that maximize the value of their professional experience. In contrast, programs to support skills development to encourage workforce mobility will not work as effectively as they might, if affected regions are characterized by the strong embedding of individuals in local community networks. Indeed, supporting local entrepreneurial action might be a better option.

Second, our argument can support organizations seeking to downsize responsibly. Potential investments in (potentiating) the social networks of their employees before downsizing may lead to more positive outcomes for individuals and their families, either through stimulating entrepreneurship or enhancing mobility. Where direct employment-enabling network support actions are not easy to conceive, responsibly downsizing organizations may alternatively seek to support or seed local community network developments that maintain the quality of life and meaningful sense of purpose (s) in a locality. By helping communities to remain cohesive, the affected locality might also be assisted in presenting an attractive prospect to external investors looking for a stable workforce likely to offer long-term commitment.

For those affected by closures and layoffs, this paper reinforces the considerable body of literature that emphasizes the importance and utility of social networks at such times – and therefore, the need to invest in those networks’ development. In contemporary turbulent
economic times, this, perhaps, includes investing in local community networks as sources of meaning and purpose in any case, as the stability of employment cannot ever be fully guaranteed. However, it also means being aware of the need to invest in professional networks to potentially provide alternative options. We summarize the main policy implications in Table 2. It is, however, important to note, that these suggestions require some levels of criticality and reflection to be effectively implemented. Our intention here is not to provide a panacea or prescription for each kind of possible intervention. Instead, we seek to provide a supportive framework that can help to inform policymaking and encourage responsible management and corporate interventions at times of downsizing and closures.

**Limitations, further research and conclusions**

The contribution of this paper – as discussed in the preceding section – has been carefully articulated at the level of broad insights. However, as with any paper, there are necessary limitations to the theoretical breadth that can be encompassed. Thus, while embeddedness as a phenomenon has connections to a range of theoretical concepts – in particular trust, social capital and relationality – entertaining a detailed discussion of any of these topics would expand the argument well beyond the limitations of a single, focused paper. For similar reasons (as well as current theoretical and practical interest), we have focused on one particular kind of conceptual context – industrial closure – while explaining that network influences are present before such crises make them apparent and possibly increase their salience. Thus, while such theoretical topics and alternative contexts have been “bracketed” in the present paper, this presents a range of opportunities for future studies (of a conceptual or empirical nature) that could build on our conceptual work in this paper. We foresee three particular kinds of studies that could usefully be developed.

First, future studies might investigate the relationship between a selected theoretical concept – such as social capital – and effects on individuals’ preferred mode of action and preferred unit of action in times of industrial crisis and closure. This could be achieved by focusing on a single type of network embedding to “bracket” some of the possible

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy objective</th>
<th>Social network interventions</th>
<th>Additional conditions/ interventions</th>
<th>Risks and limitations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing professional mobility on a national level, to move skills and experience to a growth region/sector</td>
<td>Collaboration with professionals and learned societies to support network activities and communication</td>
<td>Investments in localities in growth areas, to promote their cultural/community attractiveness</td>
<td>Enhancing the mobility of skilled professionals may enable global movements, and lead to a skills drain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining community cohesion, supporting a stable local workforce that is attractive to inward investors</td>
<td>Identification of the salient local community networks and collaboration to support their activities/profile</td>
<td>Determining if local community networks are meant for a sufficient proportion of the workforce</td>
<td>Local community networks can be centered on various interests and so may not support overall cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energizing latent entrepreneurial potential in the region, to develop employment opportunities</td>
<td>Working with exiting employers to encourage intra-organizational networks focused on a specific location</td>
<td>Mobilization of venture capital, local incentives and the development of mentoring programs</td>
<td>Buyouts/new ventures significantly smaller than the exiting organization. Growth may involve the relocation of operations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2.* Policy implications arising from embedding in different types of social networks
complexity at that level, and so allow extensive investigative scope for empirical studies taking a precise focus on the selected concept.

Second, there is scope for empirical research that considers the existence and interaction of social network influences in situations where there is no (obvious) organizational crisis. Researchers might ask how these interaction effects influence vertical and horizontal employment and career shifts in stable times, building on earlier studies, which have tended to focus purely on individual network influences in such conditions.

Third, further empirical research to support the development of the characterization and influence of network types could be considered. We are confident in our characterization of three network types, but further nuances in these characterizations could be important. For example, questions of scale could be considered such as: how does influence vary between national versus international professional networks? Alternatively, more detailed contextual differences may be relevant such as whether local community networks exist in a homogenous or more cosmopolitan regional context (and where, therefore, numbers of self-identified communities and levels of cohesion, may vary).

In conclusion, this paper has developed a theoretical argument for the role of embedding, in different kinds of social networks, as influences on the potential employment-seeking or employment-creating actions of individuals and groups at times of industrial decline and closure. The conclusions drawn are that other things being equal, in such times, namely, embeddedness in intra-organizational networks is likely to favor collective direct action; embeddedness in professional networks is likely to favor individual direct action and embeddedness in community networks is likely to favor individual indirect action. This also contributes to theoretical insights on embedding by identifying how these influences shape the preferred unit of response and mode of response at such times. The discussion has also shown how resource availability, intra- and inter-network tensions and dislocation from (some) networks can have moderating effects on the likely outcomes of network embedding influences. The practical consequences of all of these influences – that may help to shape government policy targeting depressed regions and guide organizations seeking to downsize responsibly – have also been briefly considered. We also argue, as elaborated above, that the natural constraints appropriate to the development of our focused paper can be addressed through further opportunities for research examining varied theoretical foci, contextual settings or characterizations of social networks.

References


Corresponding author
Frank Siedlok can be contacted at: f.siedlok@auckland.ac.nz

Social network influences on employee
In spite of technology: a failure in student project ownership

Pauline Stamp
Department of Business Administration and Accounting, Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York, USA

Theodore Peters
Department of Management and International Business, The University of Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland, USA, and

Andrew Gorycki
Department of Management and International Business, Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York, USA

Abstract

Purpose – Students often complain about doing group work, which may lead them to be less engaged as a group and to seek shortcuts in developing their presentations. The purpose of this essay is to identify and preferentially rectify student behavioral errors arising from placing too much trust in technology that can lead to too little personal interaction and engagement. The authors present their viewpoint on the classroom presentation outcome of a student group that used Google Docs to “prepare” for their presentation.

Design/methodology/approach – In a recent organizational behavior course, the authors had one such group arrive for their in-class presentation, only to discover that one group member was absent. The group had used Google Docs to share their research, yet no member read what the others had submitted. As a result, none of the group members could present the missing student’s material, with the obvious negative grading and finger-pointing outcomes.

Findings – The authors recognized that students needed more management direction than simply being proficient with technology. They lacked engagement behaviors leading to project responsibility. Engagement behaviors would include voice/face-to-face communication and content-related discussions questioning assumptions while strategically planning and operationalizing their topic of presentation.

Originality/value – The educational implications suggest an expanded role for the instructor to emphasize the role of student engagement behavior and the over-reliance on technology. Practical implications suggest making stronger connections to workplace expectations, making the student experience more transferable to their incipient workplaces and promoting the concept of team over group in terms of responsibility and conscientiousness and ultimately justifying their participation in providing value for their employer.

Keywords Collaboration, Teamwork, Groups, Face-to-face, Google docs

Paper type Research paper
Introduction

Groups, work groups, teams and their associated face-to-face communication are central tenets of organizational behavior pedagogy (and andragogy) and are created to enhance student learning (Burke, 2011; Davidson, Major, & Michaelsen, 2014; Fink, 2004; McShane & Von Glinow, 2015; Robbins & Judge, 2016). Group/team projects in academe are designed to afford management students the opportunity to integrate theoretical and research-derived content with experiential application in preparation for future work settings that put a premium on a person’s ability to function as a member of a high-performing group/team. Roughly 90 per cent of organizations have reported that they use team-based structures in some way (Aggarwal & O’Brien, 2008; Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Hansen, 2006; Kagan, 2011). Indeed, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2015) highlighted communication and teamwork/collaboration as the second and third necessary competencies, respectively, most desired by employers, following critical thinking as their number one competency. The authors believe that teamwork and collaboration cultivate ownership behavior.

Yet, when describing a required group project at the beginning of a course, who among us has not witnessed aggrieved looks (with accompanying sounds of dismay) from many of the enrolled students? Despite extensive use of group projects in business classes, many students foster an attitude of group-hate emanating from “a sincere dislike for any group activity in the academic setting” (Sorensen, 1981). Nearly 40 years later, the literature continues to support the concept that college students “hate” group projects, with articles entitled “I hate group work!”: addressing students’ concerns about small-group learning (Allan, 2016, p. 81), “A psychologist finally explains why you hate teamwork so much” (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2017) and “7 reasons why every college student hates group assignments” (Senthilathiban, 2018). (Authors’ note: other, more “colorful,” titles were reviewed in www.reddit.com.) Clearly, the inarticulate concept of group-hate continues to reflect a pervasive attitude among many students that group work is more trouble than it is worth.

Therefore, although much of management education anticipates the benefits of group activities, students often seek to minimize their group involvement by contributing the bare minimum to their groups, even when using technology, e.g. Google Docs, that was developed and intended to support group collaboration (Mansor, 2012). Students who rely on the new document-sharing technology may consciously or inadvertently develop less, not more, overall ownership in their group projects. The result is that students struggle with taking ownership of their (intended) collaborative group projects.

In Google Docs’ favor, however, it is important to note that Google Docs enhances interpersonal collaboration by removing the barriers of distance and time, which facilitates concurrent online editing that has been shown to work well in academia (Dekeyser & Watson, 2006). The intent of Google Docs is to enhance existing technology for collaboration, not to replace the in-person, face-to-face communication that occurs in a team meeting. Such meetings facilitate overall student engagement and project ownership. Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks (2001, p. 299) explained that “the core of psychological ownership is the feeling of possessiveness and of being psychologically tied to an object.” Thus, digital collaboration is a means of document communication, but it is not the same as ownership. This technology makes it easy for students to collaborate without really connecting, which leaves students neither taking ownership of their project nor understanding the learning objectives of the project as a whole.
Student collaboration vs ownership in group projects

As part of a semester-long group project in an organizational behavior course, sophomore business students were assigned a final project that included a final presentation that accounted for 30 per cent of each student’s course grade. At the appointed hour for the presentation, one group stepped up to discuss their presentation slides and written documentation, only to realize that one of the group members was absent. Group conflict ensued. The conversation escalated: “I wasn’t responsible for that part,” “I don’t know those slides, they’re not mine” and “I did my piece”.

Even after retrieving the missing group member’s materials from the software, the remaining team members struggled to compensate for the missing student. The team’s classroom presentation lacked flow, as it became evident that each individual was conversant only with the material directly related to his or her contribution to the project. Digital collaboration had, in fact, undermined the students’ collective ownership and understanding of the project.

This group did not improve their poor communication skills; instead, they created a false sense of security (and learning) by using Google Docs technology exclusively as a means to facilitate communication when, in fact, both communication and ownership were lost. The students had relied solely on Google Docs to create the individual parts of their presentation but never met in person. Despite being proficient with multiple applications (e.g. e-mail, Instagram, Skype, texting and Twitter), this group of students had avoided face-to-face collaboration in preparing for their presentation. In such circumstances, electronic media proficiency can interfere with the interpersonal collaboration, team ownership and learning objectives that organizational behavior instructors typically design as important learning outcomes. Inadvertently, however, this technology-enabled electronic collaboration software influenced the students to minimize their exercise of project responsibility and ownership. They relied on technology as a surrogate for communication – communication that necessitated active involvement leading to project ownership. They chose not to hold face-to-face meetings, which cost them the forum where they could have gained a strategic understanding of the interrelationships of the individual aspects of the project. As a consequence of their lack of ownership, the four individuals failed to coalesce as a team, much less an effective team, to understand the project’s overarching scope and purpose.

Discussion

Google Docs cannot simply replace interpersonal engagement. Instead, its power resides in its capability to offer users a means to further and deepen their person-to-person communication through the collaboration of document sharing (Mansor, 2012). These online tools provide an asynchronous collaborative context that can also allow millennials to multi-task to meet the competing responsibilities that they face in their over-committed and over-scheduled lives.

It is important to note that, in certain contexts, groups can collaborate without communicating in person with their collaborators. For example, Wikipedia allows many individuals to contribute to and edit millions of articles without ever needing to communicate directly with each other (Samuel, 2015). The collaborative effort to create and expand Wikipedia, however, does not involve communication to outline vision, objectives and guidelines to unify the efforts of all the collaborators involved in a Wikipedia article. On the contrary, having a shared vision of the objectives and guidelines governing the creation of a student presentation is essential for developing student’s ownership of the project as a whole. The absence of these elements compromises student learning.
The literature leads one to believe that students’ aversion to direct communication with other group members is because of their often-stated dislike of working in a group or team environment. Such dislike has its roots in the prevailing attitude of group-hate, the term given to students’ negative attitudes toward group work (Allan, 2016; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2017; Senthilathiban, 2018; Sorensen, 1981). However, the concept of group-hate may be overblown and may not accurately capture students’ perceptions and behaviors. Students may not actively resist group activity as would seem to be implied by the term group-hate because, when pushed, they will contribute to the group but only by mildly engaging in the group.

Instead of characterizing students’ attitude as one of group-hate, it should be considered that students’ negative attitudes toward group projects may originate from other factors. Specifically, some articulation of “group wariness” may be based on students’ previous negative experiences, in which group work was characterized by minimal peer engagement and a subsequent lack of group ownership that left individual students having to worry about group grades, interpersonal considerations, poor outcomes and other group organization factors (Sorensen, 1981). Such experiences would potentially provoke a more accurately described sense of “group-wariness” instead of “group-hate”.

Left unchecked, the lack of engagement, ownership and group participation that defines many group projects will persist and reinforce group-wariness. Furthermore, while technology such as Google Docs may provide a cover for individuals in the group to claim that they are part of a group (although clearly not a team), the absence of real collaboration, communication and ownership narrows the margin for success. Any factor or event that introduces unanticipated pressure (e.g. audio-visual or other technical problems and especially a missing presenter) disrupts their collective approach but not their individual responsibility and ability to effectively present their individual piece of a coherent group product.

To alleviate some of these issues, faculty need to reinforce the importance of students taking ownership of their group projects and explain the difference between completion of a project and ownership of it. Clearly, student learning outcomes and their ability to effectively function in future organizations will come up short if they rely on technology in lieu of face-to-face meetings. E-mail and texting as substitutes for face-to-face communication are the least valuable forms of communication (Pentland, 2012). The most valuable form of communication is face-to-face, and the communication impact increases with the number of face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face interactions build stronger, more meaningful social and professional relationships. They create “the sense of presence” (Nardi & Whittaker, 2020) which helps students “read” each other and provide greater social interaction (Pentland, 2012). Other research indicates that eight out of ten executives prefer in-person contact to virtual contact (Koyen, 2009). Koyen (2009) shared that many respondents expressed concern that attendees did not give their full attention to virtual meetings, as 58 per cent admitted they frequently surfed the Web, checked their e-mail, read unrelated materials and handled other ancillary work during virtual meetings. These surprisingly honest answers certainly mirror behaviors that the authors have observed when students are not focused on the task at hand and even more so when students are not working face-to-face.

In addition to discouraging student engagement, remote meetings also fail to meet other expectations related to morale, recognition and trust (Koyen, 2009). To address these issues, Marissa Mayer, former Chief Executive Officer of Yahoo, ended the company’s extensive work-from-home policies and required employees to show up at the office to promote communication and collaboration (Pepitone, 2013). Clearly, Mayer and other executives perceived drawbacks of using technology as a substitute for direct human interaction when seeking ownership of important business decisions.
Conclusion and suggestions for future research

Thus, it would appear that there is a reason to be concerned that students who use Google Docs in lieu of team meetings and interactions may be setting themselves up for failure, both in the classroom and in life. Instructors need to directly address student attitudes when group projects are first introduced. They should lay out guidelines (or ground rules) about their expectations for what constitutes effective group behavior, including the benefits of document-sharing technology and the benefits of combining the technology with face-to-face group meetings. One method of promoting these meetings is to require students to submit minutes from their meetings. These minutes will provide a quick reference for the instructor to assess how the group is proceeding and how they are addressing their collaborative communication. The minutes can then be graded as one component of their overall group project grade.

Students are also responsible for understanding the learning objectives of the project and their expected behaviors to successfully accomplish these objectives. These behaviors include face-to-face interactions among group members, regardless of their use of technology. In addition, “group-wariness” needs to be directly addressed to emphasize the positive outcomes stemming from project collaboration and each student assuming ownership of the group project.

There is reason to believe that students’ feelings of group-wariness may diminish if group members receive proper instruction about working in groups and, as a result, form realistic expectations of group work (Burke, 2011). But how will students make the behavioral changes required to assume ownership of their projects? Can having students articulate their project process and product expectations improve student ownership? Are grades and perceived satisfaction enough incentive to induce students to invest in — and own — their projects?

To answer these questions and to better understand the barriers to student ownership, further research is needed. Moreover, research is needed to help educators to understand the diminished attention, morale, recognition and trust (Koyen, 2009) that may be associated with technology, regardless of intent. Furthermore, research is needed to explore students’ definitions and perceptions of ownership to effectively teach students how to use technology and face-to-face meetings responsibly as they prepare presentations for group projects, so that their learning is enhanced through engaged ownership.

Additional investigations can lead to an increased faculty focus on student awareness of the pitfalls and barriers that must be overcome if authentic project ownership and learning are to be developed. Student ownership is the key.

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About the authors
Pauline Stamp is an Assistant Professor of Business Administration at Hartwick College in Oneonta, NY, USA. She holds a PhD in Organizational Learning from Fielding Institute. She teaches a variety of management courses, including human resource management, organizational behavior and introduction to business. Prior to her academic career, she gained 20 years of management experience in several non-profit and for-profit organizations.

Theodore Peters joined the Department of Management and International Business in the Merrick School of Business at The University of Baltimore in August 2016, where he teaches courses in human resource management and organizational behavior. He previously taught at Seattle University, the University of New Hampshire, the United States Coast Guard Academy and other liberal arts colleges. He holds his doctorate and MBA degrees in management from University at Albany (New York) and his bachelor's in government from Bowdoin College. Theodore Peters is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: tdpeters1@yahoo.com

Andrew Gorycki truly enjoys leading teams and getting others to share his passion toward a common goal. Writing this paper has allowed him a chance to self-reflect and understand that every member of a team is unique. His biggest takeaway from this experience is that every single person is motivated in different ways and why that can be a strength for a collaborative project. Andrew would like to thank his parents and Jillian for their support and guidance.

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Do you pass it on? An examination of the consequences of perceived cyber incivility

Kimberly McCarthy
San Marcos College of Business Administration, California State University, San Marcos, California, USA

Jone L. Pearce and John Morton
University of California Irvine, Irvine, California, USA, and

Sarah Lyon
University of San Diego, San Diego, California, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The emerging literature on computer-mediated communication at the study lacks depth in terms of elucidating the consequences of the effects of incivility on employees. This study aims to compare face-to-face incivility with incivility encountered via e-mail on both task performance and performance evaluation.

Design/methodology/approach – In two experimental studies, the authors test whether exposure to incivility via e-mail reduces individual task performance beyond that of face-to-face incivility and weather exposure to that incivility results in lower performance evaluations for third-parties.

Findings – The authors show that being exposed to cyber incivility does decrease performance on a subsequent task. The authors also find that exposure to rudeness, both face-to-face and via e-mail, is contagious and results in lower performance evaluation scores for an uninvolved third party.

Originality/value – This research comprises an empirically grounded study of incivility in the context of e-mail at study, highlights distinctions between it and face-to-face rudeness and reveals the potential risks that cyber incivility poses for employees.

Keywords Email, Performance evaluation, Incivility, Workplace communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The context of social interactions in the workplace has evolved dramatically over the past few decades, from an era dominated mostly by face-to-face interaction to the current organizational landscape, where technology-mediated communication reigns. Despite the changing circumstances and context of our workplace interactions, there is limited knowledge of how message medium influences employee communication. The pertinent question then, is how much of what we understand about face-to-face social interaction can be applied to electronic interactions? In the present study, we contribute to the emerging
literature on computer-mediated communication by comparing the effects of incivility experienced face-to-face with incivility encountered via e-mail on both task performance and performance evaluation. The well-known negative effects of workplace incivility, coupled with the frequency of employee interaction through electronic channels at work, make gaining a more complete understanding of the impact of electronic incivility an important research objective.

An emerging field within workplace misbehavior is cyber incivility (Lim & Teo, 2009). Cyber incivility is e-mail behavior perceived by the e-mail recipient as insensitive, disrespectful and a violation of norms for mutual respect within an organization (Porath & Erez, 2007; Lim & Teo, 2009). Research has shown that cyber incivility is a daily stressor for many employees. In a recent study, when employees experienced cyber incivility, they reported higher affective and physical distress at the end of the workday, which leads to higher distress the next morning (Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2015). Additionally, participants in another study responded with more incivility when they had high workloads and us under stress, indicating that high-pressure jobs and insurmountable expectations are likely to perpetuate this type of bad behavior (Francis, Holmval, & O’Brein, 2015). Thus, the negative effects of cyber incivility are known to be insidious and powerful (Krishnan, 2016; Sguera, Bagozzi, Huy, Boss, & Boss, 2016; Geldart, Langlois, Shannon, Cortina, Griffith, & Haines, 2018) and electronic forms of communication such as social media, e-mail, video conferencing and direct messaging applications are unavoidable in our daily work lives, such that their specific features and influence warrant further exploration.

Taken together, existing research provides evidence that face-to-face incivility threatens the well-being of organizations and carries with it serious negative consequences (Giacalone, Riordan, & Rosenfeld, 1997; Griffin, O’Leary-Kelly, & Collins, 1998; O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996; Rosen, Koopman, Gabriel, & Johnson, 2016). Research also suggests that important differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated interaction exist, and it has begun to introduce new forms of rude behavior such as cyber and vicarious incivility (Burgoon, Alvaro, Grandpre, & Voloudakis, 2002; Lim & Teo, 2009; Giumetti, McKibben, Hatfield, & Schroeder, 2012; Williams & Loughlin, 2016). However, despite this recent surge of interest in this topic, our knowledge of the specific consequences of computer-mediated forms of incivility remains limited and needs to be further explored.

This study examines the effect of message medium (face-to-face or e-mail) and message content (rude or neutral tone) on task performance and the performance evaluations of others. Building on prior research, we show that being exposed to rude e-mail behavior decreases one’s performance on a subsequent task. Further, we show that exposure to a rude e-mail has a greater negative impact on subsequent task performance than being exposed to rude behavior face-to-face. Finally, we find that exposure to rudeness, both face-to-face and via e-mail, is contagious and results in lower performance evaluation scores for an uninvolved third party. This research contributes to the multidisciplinary theoretical framework of social interactions and builds on our knowledge of face-to-face rudeness to better understand the consequences of e-mail rudeness at work.

**Face-to-face incivility**

In organizational research, face-to-face rudeness is defined as “insensitive or disrespectful workplace behavior displayed by a person who shows an absence of regard for others” (Porath & Erez, 2007, p. 1181). It is a low-intensity anti-social behavior lacking the intent of the instigator to harm the target (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), while still violating social norms and injuring others (Cortina, 2008). Rude acts are perceived to be offensive by the target and consistent with prior conceptualizations of incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999;
Lim & Cortina, 2005). Exposure to rude behavior for both instigators and targets can create negative psychological consequences, including brooding and worry (Porath & Pearson, 2010), increased levels of psychological distress (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), withdrawal and isolation (Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001) and anxiety (Chen & Spector, 1991; Fox & Spector, 1999; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001). Such effects occur because rudeness violates expectations of civility in social settings, disrupts the social equilibrium and is a violation of the person’s dignity.

There are also known behavioral consequences of incivility, including retaliation (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), counterproductive workplace behavior (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2005), aggression (Tyler & Blader, 2000) and anti-social behavior (Lim & Cortina, 2005). Further, Porath and Erez (2007) found that rude face-to-face behavior negatively affects employee task performance. Similar to face-to-face communication, individuals are likely to try to reduce uncertainty in electronic communication by making exaggerated attributions based on limited information (Walther, 1996). Building on the results of Porath and Erez (2007), we hypothesize that individuals who receive a rude e-mail will perform worse on a task than individuals who receive an e-mail, that is, neutral in tone.

\[ H1 \] Individuals who receive a rude e-mail will perform worse on a task than individuals who receive the same information in an e-mail with a neutral tone.

**E-mail vs face-to-face incivility**

Many of the differences between e-mail and face-to-face communication relate to differences in “richness” between these two mediums of communication. According to media richness theory, all communication mediums vary in their ability to enable users to communicate and to change understanding – “richness” refers to the degree of this ability. Media that can efficiently overcome different frames of reference and clarify ambiguous issues are considered to be richer; communication media that require more time to convey understanding are considered less rich (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

While the general population has become more e-mail savvy, the unique characteristics of e-mail reduce the likelihood of effective communication. For example, e-mail is asynchronous, meaning there is a time gap between when an e-mail is sent and when it is received or read. The e-mail also lacks paralinguistic cues, such as the ability to convey facial expressions, hand gestures, tone, rate of speech and body language. It also lacks back-channeling cues or signals intended to convey that the message is being understood, including head nods and hand motions. In face-to-face communication, back-channeling cues complement a message by providing a wealth of additional information to aid in the interpretation of its meaning (Clark, 1996; Price, Ostendorf, Shattuck-Hufnagel, & Fong, 1991).

There is also increased normative ambiguity through the use of e-mail, as less consensus exists about what constitutes acceptable behavior compared to face-to-face communication. For example, there is less unwritten agreement about what constitutes an acceptable response timeframe and whether a formal salutation is always necessary (McCarthy, 2016). Further, communicating electronically is not private, rather it is public and permanent. Ironically, however, prior studies have shown that communicating via e-mail provides a false sense of privacy, invisibility and minimal authority. This increases the likelihood that employees interacting via e-mail will behave in unethical, deviant and uninhibited ways, and engage in lying, manipulating, cheating, stealing and deception, accompanied by the belief that these types of behavior are acceptable (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Naquin, Kurtzberg, & Belkin, 2010). Finally, the distinct physical features of the e-mail including word choice,
font color and style and punctuation, tend to be scrutinized and given meaning, which may or may not be indications of the sender’s actual intentions.

Together, the unique characteristics of e-mail create a communication environment where there are more ambiguity and a higher degree of uncertainty from the receiver than in face-to-face communication (Cramton & Webber, 2005). In addition, e-mail may also create an environment where rumination, the repeated focus on the meaning, causes and consequences of an incident (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1993, 1995) is pervasive. Face-to-face interactions happen rapidly often leading to later rumination, but the asynchronicity of e-mail allows for real-time rumination before responding.

In addition, prior studies have shown that e-mail receivers tend to assume a less optimistic interpretation of message content and e-mail senders are overconfident in their ability to effectively convey their message. For example, Byron (2008) shows that e-mail messages, which the sender intended to be perceived positively in tone were consistently interpreted as neutral, whereas e-mail that was intended to be perceived as neutral, was perceived to be negative. Kruger, Epley, Parker, and Ng (2005) find that participants were much worse at conveying their intended emotional tone and interpreting other’s intended emotional tones through e-mail than the senders believed. This overconfidence bias of e-mail senders, in combination with the systematically more negative interpretation of receivers, suggests that rude e-mail may be perceived as ruder than rude face-to-face communication, producing more anger, frustration and stress for the recipient.

A final reason to suspect that e-mail rudeness may lead to lower individual task performance than face-to-face rudeness is because of the increased psychological distance or feeling of abstractness, between electronic message sender and receiver (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Specifically, the greater psychological distance between e-mail senders and receivers compared to that of individuals who communicate in-person could make retaliation by withholding effort on a task more likely. For example, one of the primary differences between face-to-face interaction and e-mail interaction is a lack of social presence or the feeling that other actors are jointly involved (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Social presence theory suggests that a communication medium has a low social presence if the degree of awareness of the others in a communication interaction is low (Sallnas, Rassmus-Grohn, & Sjostrom, 2000). E-mail is characteristically low in social presence because of its lack of nonverbal and back-channeling cues, which help to generate a shared orientation and mutual understanding of the meaning (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). Further, this lack of social presence corresponds to an increase in psychological distance or the salience of the others in a conversation (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

Thus, we predict that the differences in the richness of e-mail and face-to-face communication make rude behavior experienced via e-mail more ambiguous, uncertain and frustrating, which will have a stronger negative effect on task performance than face-to-face rudeness:

\[ H2. \] Individuals who receive a rude e-mail will perform worse on a subsequent task than individuals that receive the same rude communication face-to-face.

Social transmission: e-mail vs face-to-face

The idea of the contagion of rudeness is very similar to the notion of emotional contagion, where one person’s emotions and behaviors activate similar emotions and behaviors in other people (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). A similar idea, vicarious incivility, has also recently been proposed based on Andersson and Pearson’s (1999) seminal conceptualization of the spiral of incivility. More recent research suggests that incivility may have both direct
and indirect social consequences through subsequent spirals of incivility spawned by the initial uncivil incident (Reich and Hershcovis, 2015; Totterdell, Hershcovis, Niven, Reich, & Stride, 2012). This suggests that rude behavior may be socially transmitted to other employees and serve as a social signal to other employees who, in turn, are more likely to treat subsequent people negatively (Porath & Erez, 2007; Polansky, Lippitt, and Redl, 1950; Levy and Nail, 1993).

Several studies provide evidence supporting the social transmission of face-to-face rudeness to third parties. For example, Foulk Woolum, & Erez (2016), found that face-to-face rudeness is socially transferred to a subsequent negotiation partner through the contagion effect, with recipients of face-to-face rudeness being more likely to act rudely toward a new partner in a similar interaction. Porath and Erez (2007) argue that targets of workplace mistreatment displace their aggression, acting aggressively toward individuals unrelated to the initial abuser. In addition, other studies show that experiencing disrespectful behavior can lead to displaced aggression (Denson, Pederson, & Miller, 2006; Hoobler and Brass, 2006), where an individual’s behavioral response to a provoking situation can be delayed or transferred to another person (Zillmann, 1979). Further, a robust link has been established between perceived wrongdoing and subsequent aggressive action (Bies and Tripp, 1995, 1996, 2001, 2002; Felson and Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977; Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Youngs, 1986; Foulk, Woolum, & Erez, 2016). Andersson and Pearson (1999) propose theoretically that face-to-face incivility could spread or spiral to others.

As an extension of these ideas of the social transmission of incivility, individuals that are the recipients of rude communication might be more likely to negatively evaluate the third-party. Existing research in the area of performance appraisal indicates that people are highly socialized to provide positive feedback when required to evaluate the performance of others (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). This tendency represents a strong norm and a mutual expectation for giving and receiving affirmative feedback, as well as avoiding giving others unfavorable or critical feedback. However, when exposed to rude communication, individuals might not follow the norm for giving and receiving affirmative feedback and this could manifest in more negative evaluations of others. To the extent that individuals are exposed to rudeness, such incivility might be socially transmitted to others in the form of negative appraisals. We build on prior research that examined the contagion of face-to-face rudeness and predicts that exposure to rudeness obstructs the norm for giving and receiving affirmative feedback, resulting in a more negative evaluation of others. Specifically, we expect that exposure to rude communication will result in a lower performance rating for an uninvolved third-party:

H3. Individuals who receive rude communication, both face-to-face and e-mail, will evaluate an uninvolved third-party’s performance more negatively than will those who receive the same communication in a neutral tone.

The social transmission of rudeness: e-mail vs face-to-face
Given the differences in the medium between e-mail and face-to-face communication, the effects of rudeness might differ as a function of communication medium. That is, to say, rudeness via e-mail might have a stronger effect on the evaluation of a third-party’s performance than face-to-face rudeness. We draw on ego depletion and social presence theory to help explain this effect. Ego depletion is the idea that an individual’s ability to exert self-control and willpower draws upon a limited pool of mental resources that can be used up. When individuals experience incivility, they are more likely to experience lowered self-control and might act aggressively or rudely toward a third-party. For example, DeWall,
Baumeister, Stillman, and Gailliot (2007) found that when people are insulted, their self-control weakens and they are more likely to express an intention to act aggressively toward a third-party. Similarly, Rosen et al. (2016) found that experiencing incivility earlier in the day reduced levels of self-control, resulting in increased instigated incivility later in the day. In the unique context of electronic communication, a rude message in an e-mail is permanent, which means that it can be easily revisited and re-experienced by the receiver. This creates an environment where the insult may be magnified and the receiver might experience increased ego depletion.

Adding to this argument, the social presence theory suggests that a communication medium has a low social presence if the degree of awareness of others in a communication interaction is low (Sallnas et al., 2000). E-mail is lower in social presence than face-to-face communication because of its perceived invisibility and lack of nonverbal and back-channeling cues, both of which help to generate a shared orientation and mutual understanding of meaning in face-to-face communication (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). This lack of social presence corresponds to an increase in psychological distance and a sense of having less in common with others (Trope and Liberman, 2010). This could negatively impact evaluations of others, especially with regard to electronic communication with its lowered social presence and increased psychological distance.

Based on the unique features of e-mail communication, we propose that recipients of the rude e-mail will evaluate the performance of third-parties more negatively than will recipients of face-to-face rudeness. We believe that rude e-mail will foster a distancing from those being evaluated, undercutting the normative bias toward positive performance evaluations (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). This will be because of greater ego depletion experienced by recipients of rude e-mail versus recipients of face-to-face rudeness:

\[ H4. \] Individuals who receive a rude e-mail will evaluate a third party’s performance more negatively than individuals that receive the same rude communication face-to-face.

**Method: Study 1**

*Participants and experimental design*

Undergraduate students (\( n = 254 \)) from a large university in the western USA participated in Study 1. Students received extra credit in one of their social science courses in exchange for their participation. The participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on a 2 (message content: rude tone vs neutral tone) \( \times 2 \) (message medium: face-to-face vs e-mail) between-subjects design.

*Procedure*

The experimental design and manipulation used in this study closely paralleled prior studies of in-person rudeness (Porath & Erez, 2007, Study 1), with one difference discussed below related to the confederate-participant. Participants were told that they were participating in an on-going research study about the connection between communication style and a person’s approach to problem-solving. The experimenter explained that they would be sent two e-mails – the first with a link to a brief assessment of communication style (the assessment was used as a filler to provide the confederate with enough time to ask a question) and the second e-mail with a link to a timed problem-solving activity.

After the overview, the experimenter said:
Because the questionnaires are all online, and we will be emailing you the links to both activities at the times they need to be completed, please have your email open and read all email that comes from me immediately when you receive it. Finally, to minimize distractions to your peers and enable everyone to do their best work, please email me (at an email address written on the board) with any questions that arise during the study instead of raising your hand for help.

The experimenter emphasized it was important to read and follow the directions. The experimenter then returned to a table at the back of the room and e-mailed the communication style assessment to the group.

While participants were completing the communication style assessment, a confederate asked a clarifying question about the directions. Specifically, the confederate asked, “on questions 21-25, does a ‘1’ mean not at all agree or completely agree?” The experimenter then replied to the confederate and the class. The experimenter’s response to the question served as the rudeness manipulation (see below). The manipulation, in this study, was prompted by a confederate-participant who had a question about the directions. This was a change to the experimental design used in Porath and Erez (2007), where the manipulation was prompted by a late confederate. However, the change was necessary as a question about the directions could be asked both face-to-face and via e-mail, whereas a late confederate would not prompt the experimenter’s e-mails.

After the manipulation, the experimenter sent a second e-mail containing the link to the problem-solving activity, a challenging word scramble used in past research (Erez & Isen, 2002), as the measure of task performance. After 10 min on the problem-solving activity, participants automatically advanced to a final set of questions, which contained study measures and the manipulation check. Participants were then debriefed, thanked and excused.

**Manipulations: message content**

The message content manipulation was adapted from Porath and Erez (2007). In the neutral tone condition, the experimenter answered the confederate’s question with, “may I have your attention, I was just asked a question about the directions […] a ‘1’ means not at all agree on questions 21-25.” In the rude tone condition, the experimenter answered the confederate’s question with:

May I have your attention; I was just asked a question about the directions. Is this really that tough? Yes, a ‘1’ means not at all agree on every question. I would think (name of university) students could follow these simple directions. I run this study on high school students and they have never had a problem […] what is with this group?

The display of rudeness was purposively general and abstract, and therefore, not specifically directed toward the participant. In addition, the rude statement was delivered indirectly, as the experimenter used a normal voice level and did not look directly at the participant.

**Manipulations: message medium**

In the face-to-face medium, the confederate turned to the experimenter (seated at a desk in the back of the room) and loudly asked the clarifying question about the directions. The experimenter then stood up and addressed the class with the answer to the confederate’s question (with either the rude or neutral response above). In the e-mail condition, the confederate e-mailed the question to the experimenter, the experimenter replied to the confederate and CC’d all other participants in the room with either the neutral or rude response above.
Dependent measure

Task performance, a common dependent variable in micro organizational behavior research, typically examines the speed or quality with which a participant is able to accomplish a work-related segment of a job. It is a significant piece of information because the speed and quality with which employees are able to accomplish workplace tasks are tied to overall organization performance. Theoretically, increasing or improving task performance should result in an increase in productivity, therefore, it is an important factor to be studied.

Task performance, in this study, was measured following Erez and Isen (2002) and Porath and Erez (2007). We asked participants to complete a complex cognitive task, where performance could be objectively determined. We provided the participants with 10 words where the letters had been scrambled. We asked the participants to unscramble the words and counted the number of anagrams that the participant correctly solved in 10 min. Prior studies have found this task to be moderately difficult. The average number of words unscrambled in this sample of participants was about five ($x = 5.22, SD = 2.23$).

Study 1 results

Manipulation check

A manipulation check is commonly used in experimental research to determine whether the experimental manipulation was successful. In other words, it commonly is a variable, which shows that the study did, in fact, accomplish what it intended to manipulate in terms of the independent variable. For example, if a study tests the effect of hunger on job performance, the manipulation check would confirm that those in the experimental condition were in fact hungry. Alternatively, if a manipulation check is not performed, then doubt could arise in terms of the true cause of the observed difference in behavior. Thus, it is a secondary evaluation performed by the researchers to confirm the difference between conditions, and thus, help establish a causal connection between the independent and dependent variables.

To determine whether the experimental manipulation, in this study, was successful, participants were asked to respond to several questions about whether participants in the rude condition perceived that the experimenter had been ruder than participants in the neutral condition. Participants respond to the following items: “the experimenter was not respectful toward all participants,” “the experimenter was polite,” “the experimenter acted rudely toward participants” and “participants were treated respectfully at all times during this study” adapted from Porath and Erez (2007). The second and fourth items reverse coded, so a low score indicated more perceived rudeness. These manipulation-check items were measured on seven-point scales with point labels that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree and averaged to form the manipulation check measure. The reliability estimate of the perceived rudeness scale was $\alpha = 0.93$, suggesting the participants evaluated the perceived rudeness of the experimenter in a similar manner when responding to all four questions. The results indicated a significant main effect of the message content ($F [1, 253] = 591.16, p = 0.00, \eta^2_p = 0.56$). Participants exposed to either type of rudeness (e-mail rudeness or face-to-face rudeness) perceived their treatment to be significantly ruder than participants exposed to neutral communications (e-mail or face-to-face). Means, standard deviations and correlations among Study 1 variables are reported in Table 1. We used IBM SPSS statistics software for our statistical analysis.

$H1$ predicted that recipients of a rude e-mail would perform worse than individuals that received an e-mail with a neutral tone. We used an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test $H1$ and $H2$. We found a significant difference ($F [1, 253] = 15.10, p = 0.00, \eta^2_p = 0.13$) between the number of words participants unscrambled in the neutral e-mail condition ($-\bar{Y} = 5.90, SD = 2.09$) and the number of words participants unscrambled in the rude e-
mail condition (\( \bar{X} = 4.30, \text{SD} = 2.13 \)). This result supports \( H1 \) and suggests that being exposed to rude e-mail behavior has a significantly negative effect on task performance.

\( H2 \) predicted that recipients of a rude e-mail would perform worse on a task than participants who received the same rude communication face-to-face. We found significantly lower performance in the rude e-mail condition (\( \bar{X} = 4.30, \text{SD} = 2.13 \)) than in the rude face-to-face condition (\( \bar{X} = 5.27, \text{SD} = 2.12 \); \( F [1, 253] = 7.28, p = 0.01, \eta^2_p = 0.05 \)), supporting \( H2 \). See Table 2.

### Study 2 method

**Participants and experimental design**

A new sample of undergraduate students (\( n = 256 \)) from the same university participated in Study 2. Students received extra credit in one of their social science courses in exchange for their participation. The participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on a 2 (message content: rude vs neutral) \( \times \) 2 (message medium: face-to-face vs e-mail) between subjects’ design.

**Procedure**

The procedure used in Study 2 parallels that of Study 1, with one notable difference. Instead of administering a problem-solving task after the manipulation, Study 2 participants completed a performance evaluation of a third-party. Specifically, after participants completed the communication style assessment and received the manipulation, they were shown a short video (5 min 43 s) of a student giving a speech and asked to evaluate her performance.

**Dependent measure**

Participants evaluated the quality of the speech by rating the speaker on two items as follows: “overall, I thought the speaker did well” and “the speaker was better than most I’ve seen” using a seven-point scale with point labels that ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.

### Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. E-mail rudeness</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Perceived rudeness</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Task performance</td>
<td>5.96</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** \( n = 254 \). Reliabilities are on the diagonal in parentheses. Correlations greater than 0.13 are significant at \( p < 0.05 \). Correlations greater than 0.17 are significant at \( p < 0.01 \).

### Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F-stat</th>
<th>( p )-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Message content: rude e-mail vs neutral e-mail</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>67.43</td>
<td>15.10</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message medium: rude e-mail vs rude face-to-face</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32.85</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** \( n = 254 \). \( p \)-values are two-tailed. Our dependent variable is task performance, calculated as the total number of anagrams correctly solved in 10 min.
disagree. The reliability estimate of the two questions related to the quality of the speech was $\alpha = 0.86$, suggesting the participants evaluated the speech in a similar manner when responding to both questions. Means, standard deviations and correlations among Study 2 variables are reported in Table 3.

### Study 2 results

**Manipulation check**

The measures of participants’ perceived rudeness of the experimenter in Study 2 are the same measures used in Study 1, and again we used IBM SPSS statistics software for our statistical analysis. The results of the ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of the message content ($F [1, 255] = 273.34, p = 0.00, \eta^2_p = 0.52$), suggesting that message content (rude vs neutral) in both the face-to-face and rude e-mail manipulations produced the intended effects.

$H3$ predicted that participants exposed to rude behavior would rate the performance of an uninvolved third-party as lower than participants who received the same information in a neutral tone. The results of the ANOVA suggest a significant main effect of the message content ($F [3, 253] = 5.42, p = 0.02, \eta^2_p = 0.02$) and support $H3$. We found that exposure to rudeness is contagious, weakening the normative bias toward positive performance evaluations and resulting in a lower performance rating for an uninvolved third-party.

$H4$ predicted that participants who received a rude e-mail would rate the performance of a third-party more negatively, then participants who experienced the same rude communication face-to-face. We tested $H4$ using a two-way ANOVA of message content and message medium on the performance ratings. However, we found no significant main effect for message medium ($F [3, 253] = 0.64, p = 0.43, \eta^2_p = 0.00$) suggesting that exposure to e-mail rudeness and face-face rudeness resulted in a similar decline in ratings. See Table 4.

### Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. E-mail rudeness</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Perceived rudeness</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Performance evaluation</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** $n = 256$. Reliabilities are on the diagonal in parentheses. Correlations greater than 0.17 are significant at $p < 0.05$. Correlations greater than 0.23 are significant at $p < 0.01$.

### Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<th>MS</th>
<th>F-stat</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Message content: rude e-mail vs neutral e-mail</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message medium: rude e-mail vs rude face-to-face</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message content × message medium</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** $n = 256$. $p$-values are two-tailed. Our dependent variable is the evaluation of the speakers' performance, calculated as the rating of the speakers' performance.
Discussion
In this study, we extend the literature on the consequences of face-to-face rudeness and provide evidence that exposure to e-mail rudeness has a negative effect on individual task performance. We find that e-mail rudeness does not only affect self-reported attitudinal outcomes such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Lim and Teo, 2009) but also detrimental to task performance. Our results also indicate that individuals exposed to e-mail rudeness perform worse on the same task than those exposed to face-to-face rudeness. Although we anticipated this outcome based on existing evidence of the seriousness of the effects of rudeness and cyber incivility (Krishnan, 2016; Francis, Holmavall, & O’Brien, 2015; Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2015; Sguera et al., 2016), when considering the problem intuitively, one might expect face-to-face rudeness to be more distressing. After all, it is uncommon and usually startling to be the victim of rude behavior in-person.

Our finding, however, suggests that e-mail rudeness actually has a more negative effect than face-to-face rudeness, which extends our understanding of the impact of this type of workplace misbehavior. Although we did not test the reasons for this effect, it seems likely that the unique characteristics of e-mail intensify the negative effects of rudeness. Specifically, this may be a result of some of its electronic features such as a-synchronicity, psychological distance, lack of back-channeling cues and decreased social presence (Salinac et al., 2000; Trope & Liberman, 2010). The widespread use of e-mail in workplace communication suggests this area deserves further study.

We also extend the literature on the contagion of rudeness. Prior studies have examined the effect of direct face-to-face incivility on the recipient of the rudeness (Denson, Pederson, & Miller, 2006; Hoobler & Brass, 2006); however, we examine the effect of cyber incivility on uninvolved third-parties. Our findings are consistent with the argument that exposure to rudeness reduces the powerful normative restraint displayed by individuals to provide favorable feedback to others. We show that participants in both the e-mail rudeness and face-to-face rudeness conditions were less inhibited by this norm, giving less favorable evaluations of others after being treated rudely. The results suggest that the negative consequences of exposure to rudeness may damage organizations extensively and that rudeness can facilitate a vicious circle of poor performance and lower evaluation of others’ performance.

The results of these studies highlight the threat that e-mail rudeness poses to employees and their organizations. Like other research on this topic (Bies & Tripp, 1995, 1996, 2001, 2002; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Youngs, 1986), this study raises more questions than it answers. One question is whether e-mail rudeness can negatively influence employees in ways other than task performance. In other words, does it affect the way people assess risk or their ability to concentrate? This topic may have implications for innovation, entrepreneurship, groups and teams and strategic management. For instance, it would be interesting to determine whether and how investors’ decision-making is influenced by exposure to e-mail rudeness or e-mail rudeness contagion.

Limitations and directions for future research
Although we took great care in crafting the design of the study and vigilantly anticipated potential hazards regarding data collection, the study is not without limitations. First, the use of undergraduate students potentially limits the generalizability of the conclusions. It would be interesting to know if the adverse effects of incivility captured here have had the same impact on a more sophisticated sample of managerial-level organizational professionals. There are reasons to believe it might not. Incivility is prevalent within organizations and most mid-career employees are exposed to rude behavior fairly often.
Therefore, the effect of incivility might be mitigated as individuals become more accustomed to this type of treatment. This would be an interesting avenue for future research to explore. Specifically, it would be fascinating to design a longitudinal study of incivility, monitoring its effects on individuals over time and under conditions of varying levels of ambient incivility to flesh out whether the negative effects documented in this study, would be mitigated under different circumstances. Despite this potential limitation, we believe this research demonstrates an important first step in showing the harmful effects of workplace incivility.

Another potential limitation of this study is its focus on task performance as the primary dependent variable of interest. The aim of the study was restricted in its attention to capturing this sole outcome of incivility, which had benefits, as well as limitations. One reason for the restricted number of dependent variables used here was to maintain a methodically “clean” experimental design. For instance, any other dependent variables would have had to be measured immediately after the manipulation, which would have created a gap between when participants received the rude treatment and when they completed the anagram activity (which already took 10 min). The concern was that it could potentially weaken the study’s ability to capture the negative effects of task performance if participants had to wait too long before completing the measure of task performance. Therefore, in this study, we decided to focus this round of data collection on task performance, while holding other interesting dependent variables (i.e. creativity, helpfulness, prosocial behavior, etc.) for subsequent future studies. However, the disadvantage is that the data is somewhat limited in its breadth or the scope of information it provides on the negative effects of incivility. This could be a very fruitful avenue for future incivility research.

While rudeness is known to have adverse consequences, existing research has been dominated by studies of rude behavior in face-to-face encounters at work, despite evidence suggesting that important differences exist between face-to-face and computer-mediated interactions. Another very interesting avenue for future research on this topic is investigating the adverse consequences of cyber incivility on social media. The prevalence of using social media at work is growing exponentially, and it is a medium that is not immune to transmitting rudeness. Therefore, future research should investigate incivility through other forms of communication (i.e. applications such as Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snap chat and so on). There are several reasons to suspect that the consequences of incivility through these social media platforms may even be more devastating than e-mail. Future research should try to flesh out these differences and the impact of such behavior on its users.

In conclusion, our research indicates that e-mail rudeness can detrimentally influence employees by decreasing their task performance and that both face-to-face and e-mail rudeness have harmful consequences for third-parties through their negative influence on performance evaluations. Together, these results contribute to our understanding of e-mail rudeness, highlight important distinctions between it and face-to-face rudeness and possess theoretical implications for the fields of cyber incivility, communication studies and information technology.

References


Kruger, J., Epley, N., Parker, J., & Ng, Z. (2005). Egocentrism over e–mail: can we communicate as well as we think?. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 89(6), 925–936.


**About the authors**

Kim McCarthy is an Assistant Professor of Management in the College of Business Administration at California State University, San Marcos. Her major areas of research interest include workplace communication, incivility and high-performance teams. Prior to joining CSUSM, she received her PhD from the University of California, Irvine and an MBA from Creighton University. Kimberly McCarthy is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: kmccarthy@csusm.edu

Jone L. Pearce is a University of California, Irvine Distinguished Professor of Organization and Management at The Paul Merage School of Business. She conducts research on workplace interpersonal processes such as trust and status, and how these processes may be affected by political structures, economic conditions and organizational policies and practices. Her work has appeared in over 100 scholarly publications such as the *Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly, Journal of Applied Psychology, Organization..."

John Morton is a graduate of the University of Hawaii and currently a graduate candidate working on his PhD from the College of Business Administration at the University of California, Irvine in Organization and Management.

Sarah Lyon joined the faculty at the University of San Diego School of Business in 2014 and teaches courses in accounting. She received an undergraduate degree from UC Davis in Managerial Accounting, a Master’s Degree in Accounting from the University of San Diego and a PhD from the University of California, Irvine. Her current research interests include corporate tax avoidance, earnings quality and corporate social responsibility. Her dissertation examines the relation between aggressive reporting in the firm’s financial statements and aggressive reporting in the firm’s tax returns. She finds the relationship is driven by the measure of aggressive book reporting and resolving the conflicting results of recent studies.
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