Gender Differences in Professional Networking: Implications for Employees' Career Advancement

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Abstract

Substantial research points to the existence of gender differences in professional networking, whereby particularly with regard to the thereby obtained career-related benefits, among which also career sponsorship. In this context, increasing evidence suggests that female employees tend to receive less career sponsorship than men do, which may be traced to their relative lack of powerful, high-status network contacts within organizations. To explain why women generally develop fewer network ties to such individuals occupying high-status positions, previous studies have drawn on divergent theoretical rationales. In an attempt to offer greater conceptual clarity and create a deeper understanding of the multiple facets of this issue, this paper provides a comprehensive review of prior research in this field. Correspondingly, a holistic model synthesizing the mechanisms which lead to such differences in men's and women's formation of high-status ties and, ultimately, to differential access to sponsorship, is presented. In particular, employees' unequal structural accessibility of potential high-status contacts, the latter's differential receptiveness to developing network ties with male and female employees and differences in male and female professional networking behavior prove to represent critical factors. Based on these findings, guidance is offered to organizations seeking to implement practices which reduce respective gender inequalities.

Keywords: gender, networking, career sponsorship, high-status network contacts

List of Contents

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

CEHRM	Center for Human Resource Management
e.g.	for example
i.e.	that is
US	United States
UK	United Kingdom

1. Introduction

A variety of studies increasingly emphasize the considerable relevance of professional networking for individuals' career advancement (e.g., Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Durbin, 2011), which may not least be explained by the fact that the network ties created thereby contribute to the receipt of valuable resources such as work-related advice, knowledge (Wei et al., 2012) and career sponsorship (Seibert et al, 2001). In this regard, particularly the latter tends to be regarded as the most relevant networking benefit in career-related terms (Seibert et al., 2001) considering that, in the context of sponsorship, influential sponsors are in a position to advocate for their protégés in ways directly enabling them to advance in their careers (Helms et al., 2016).

However, it has previously been observed that females, relative to their male counterparts, are generally provided with significantly less career sponsorship and consequently, are not as likely as men to advance or get promoted to higher roles within their organization (Ibarra et al., 2010). Previous research relates women's relative lack of career sponsorship largely to the fact that they do not engage in networking with as many powerful, high-status members of their organization as men do (McGuire, 2000). Correspondingly, network contacts of high standing in particular are viewed as providing increased access to career-enhancing resources (Woehler et al., 2021). The fact that they typically possess great influence and decision-making authority in an organizational context (Brass, 1984) likely puts them in a position to more effectively advocate for their network members' professional advancement. In this regard, to the extent that women, on average, develop fewer network ties to respective individuals than men do, which, in fact, data from several studies suggest (e.g., Gremmen et al., 2013; Brass, 1985), their access to the career-related networking benefit of sponsorship may likely be relatively constrained.

To explain such differences in men's and women's endowment with high-status network contacts, scholars have drawn on different rationales. According to some studies, female employees tend to occupy positions within the organizational structure which generally limit their access to those persons located in influential, high-status positions (McGuire, 2000), thereby suggesting that they primarily face structural barriers in interacting with respective individuals in the first place.

On the other hand, some researchers propose that high-status individuals themselves may generally be relatively less receptive to forming network ties to women on the basis of their perceived lower utility as network members, which, to some extent, may be a consequence of prevalent gender status beliefs (Woehler et al., 2021), according to which women are generally

1

of lower status and competence than men (Ridgeway, 2001). In this context, contacts' receptiveness may be delineated as the degree to which potential contacts in general are open or responsive to the relationship initiation attempts of other people (Woehler et al., 2021), thereby involving a subjective component.

However, a number of studies approach the issue of respective gender differences in high-status network ties from a somewhat different perspective. In this regard, they also point to the existence of intrinsic barriers, partly arising from the prevalence of gender stereotypes, which might in particular prevent females from equally engaging in professional networking behavior, based on which they could, however, increasingly interact and connect with high-status individuals (e.g., Greguletz et al., 2018).

In consideration of the current literature which seems to offer divergent explanations for why women tend to have fewer high-status network contacts who could, however, offer them access to valuable career sponsorship, it is worth providing a comprehensive review of prior research in this field. In this regard, the present paper seeks to establish a holistic model that synthesizes key mechanisms causing female and male employees to not equally develop network relationships with individuals occupying high-status positions in their organization, which thereby gives rise to differences in their access to career-related networking benefits, as in the form of career sponsorship. Especially in light of the fact that recent evidence traces women's relative difficulty in advancing in their careers to their reduced access to career sponsorship (Ibarra, 2019), which, in turn, is considered to result from them not connecting with as many high-status individuals as men do (McGuire, 2000), there is a need to address this issue and develop a deeper understanding of the obstacles which primarily female employees tend to encounter in connecting with respective individuals. Apart from offering greater conceptual clarity, the proposed model should provide a theoretical lens for organizational decision makers to recognize which factors likely shape or impede, respectively, employees' development of network ties to high-status members of their organization. This may facilitate the implementation of effective practices targeted at the reduction of barriers, which notably women tend to face in relation to networking with high-status individuals and thereby gaining access to career sponsorship.

The paper is organized in the following chapters. The first section is dedicated to the methodology. Secondly, I elaborate on the practice of professional networking and related benefits, whereby I illustrate the relevance of high-status network contacts for the receipt of career sponsorship. It is important to note that, in the present context, I mainly address internal networking which is exhibited with persons who are members of one's organization (Michael

& Yukl, 1993), whereby I specifically focus on the formation of network relationships with individuals of high status. Accordingly, the term status, which refers to someone's position or rank, relative to that of others (Collins, n.d.), in this context relates to the rank which individuals' network contacts occupy within their organization. In a next step, empirical evidence of women's relative lack of high-status network contacts is provided. In the subsequent sections, I then specifically discuss the underlying mechanisms which contribute to this phenomenon, whereby drawing on specific factors, including the structural accessibility of potential high-status contacts, their differential receptiveness to forming network relationships with male and female employees, as well as gender differences in networking behavior. In the end, after a review of the respective literature, the paper provides a conceptual model summarizing the findings, and discusses the latter with respect to their implications for theory, practice, and future research.

2. Methods

The research methodology used for the present thesis is a literature review. I started by searching broadly for scholarly literature. In the context of my comprehensive literature search, I mainly focused on research articles and books examining gender (keywords: gender, men, women, male, female) and the practice of professional networking (keywords: networking, professional, career). Based on the reference sections of respective sources, I identified additional studies relevant for my research. Furthermore, I searched for publications which specifically address the career-related benefits of networking (keywords: network benefits/resources, career sponsorship). In this regard, in the literature, the terms "benefits" and "resources" are largely used interchangeably with regard to networking (e.g., Ibarra, 1993, Rothstein et al., 2001), which is why this also applies for the present paper.

Based on the relevance of individual publications' arguments and findings for my thesis, I primarily included the ones which, broadly defined, report on conceptual or empirical investigation of topics related to my research, among which networking, gender differences observed therein and/or the potential causes of such disparities, whereby almost all of them are published in English, except for one which is in German. My literature review covers articles in a variety of disciplines (e.g., management, psychology, sociology). In the corresponding empirical studies, which I selected for the review, quantitative as well as qualitative research methods were employed.

After thoroughly reading and summarizing different selected sources, I analyzed and conducted a critical assessment of the respective theoretical and empirical studies. In this context, I evaluated the evidence provided and subsequently focused on identifying major theories, themes and relationships which may serve as a basis for the development, respectively refinement, of my conceptual model. Accordingly, I broadly structured the selected sources into categories which reflect the subtopics that I intend to elaborate on as part of my thesis. Correspondingly, the following sections are organized by respective subtopics, which, in conjunction with one another, contribute to a comprehensive understanding of my research topic and the individual connections between the examined factors in the model.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Professional Networking in Organizations

3.1.1 Different Conceptions of Networking

To date, there have been various attempts to clarify the concept of networking. Nevertheless, a generally accepted and consistent definition of the term has not yet emerged from the literature (Gibson et al., 2014). As stated by some scholars, networking can be conceptualized as activities aimed at the development of informal interpersonal relationships with individuals inside and outside of an organization (Michael & Yukl, 1993). In this regard, the informality aspect implies voluntary interpersonal ties, whereby individuals interact with each other on the grounds of work-related matters and/ or for the purpose of socializing (Ibarra, 1993). A broader perspective has been adopted by Wolff et al. (2008) who suggest that the relationships created through networking are not only limited to informal connections but could as well be of a formal nature. The latter type of ties relates to a formally specified structure and is established between individuals who are obligated to interact with each other to fulfill organizationally defined assignments (Ibarra, 1993). Despite the differences in the exact meaning and aspects of networking, there is consensus that it represents a set of purpose-driven and goal-oriented practices (Huang, 2016; Wolff et al., 2008).

In this regard, in order to develop an understanding of networking, it is important to consider its purpose and the respective type of ties established from an expressive and an instrumental perspective. As part of expressive networking, individuals tend to develop relationships which mainly provide them with access to social resources, meaning that they, for instance, create friendships and offer each other emotional support (Woehler et al., 2021). Typically, such ties are less dependent on formal structures and related job roles which stems from the fact that people have greater flexibility in choosing who they make friends with (Ibarra, 1993). On the other hand, if individuals are guided by instrumental motives, they primarily engage in networking with the aim of enhancing their job performance or career development (Wolff et al., 2018). The established instrumental ties are followingly characterized by an exchange of work- or career-related resources (Woehler et al., 2021).

Correspondingly, in the literature, the term "networking" has been frequently conceptualized with respect to its instrumental nature. As suggested by Wolff et al. (2008), the key component of networking is followingly to create ties that can positively contribute to one's job performance and/or career advancement. In a similar vein, according to a definition provided by Forret and Dougherty (2004, p. 420), the term generally encompasses "individuals' attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their

work or career". Along the same lines, Casciaro et al. (2014) center particularly on professional networking, whereby defining the concept as the purposeful development of social ties in support of work- or career-related objectives. Considering that I intend to investigate professional networking as an instrumental practice targeted at the receipt of those benefits which directly foster individuals' career advancement, and that I primarily focus on the development of network ties, I use the definition of Casciaro et al. (2014) as the basis for the present paper.

3.1.2 Access to Career Sponsorship Via High-Status Network Contacts

Several studies increasingly discuss the advantageous effects which networking has on the career development of individuals (Cross & Thomas, 2011; Wang, 2009). In this context, it is important to consider that its valuable impact cannot least be attributed to the fact that networking contributes to an increased accumulation of social capital (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Wang, 2009). Whereas some researchers regard social capital as the diverse features of social structures that facilitate the execution of certain activities (Coleman, 1988), others increasingly state that it mainly refers to the resources accessed through networks (Lin, 1999). Similarly, according to Durbin (2011), social capital can be viewed as an investment in social relationships enabling individuals to access or borrow the resources which others possess.

As suggested by Lin (2001), there are different channels through which such resources embedded in networks may beneficially affect individuals' career. The author maintains that cultivating respective ties with network contacts, who occupy specific positions in the organizational hierarchy and possibly have privileged access to useful information, may enable individuals to become better notified about certain opportunities at work. As an illustration: Through their social ties, well-connected persons are likely to be provided with a greater number of job offerings and more detailed information on vacant positions (Mouw, 2003; Obukhova & Lan, 2013). It is also conceivable that, apart from facilitating the flow of information, network contacts may provide career-related assistance by, for instance, directly affecting the hiring process of individuals and explicitly vouching for them (Collischon & Eberl, 2021), thereby influencing the decision makers involved in relevant recruitment practices (Lin, 2001).

In this context, however, Ibarra (1993) states that the extent to which network connections might offer access to career-related benefits is primarily dependent upon the characteristics of individuals' respective network contacts. The scholar asserts that this may be explained by the fact that, depending on the types of people with whom one engages in a network relationship,

the nature and scope of available opportunities may be different. In a similar vein, Aten et al. (2017) highlight the importance of taking into account the quality of ties established, thereby implying that ties with different types of contacts may offer differential value. Accordingly, prior research suggests that, in a career-related context, the hierarchical position or status of individuals' network contacts represents a substantially important variable to consider (McGuire, 2000; Wang, 2009). Individuals at hierarchically high positions generally have a greater command over resources (Lin, 2001) and, due to their formal decision-making responsibility, are better able to influence the specific allocation thereof within the company, as opposed to those individuals occupying lower-level positions with limited authority (Seibert et al., 2001). Reaching out to specifically those high-ranking individuals is viewed as being particularly beneficial with regard to career-related objectives (Lin, 1999), which may not least be attributable to the fact that respective network contacts possess greater formal power, influence (Seibert et al., 2001) and decision-making authority (Brass, 1984) which they can use to the advantage of their network members' careers.

As suggested above, notably contacts in positions of high standing may offer career-related support by, for instance, assisting their network members in obtaining a desirable position (Mouw, 2003). By taking on the role of a powerful career sponsor in this context, contacts at upper organizational levels can likely use their influence to advocate on someone's behalf and their promotion to the respective role (Forret, 2006).

In particular, previous research emphasizes the value of high-status network contacts in the context of career sponsorship (Perriton, 2006), which, as a career-related networking benefit (Seibert et al., 2001), is regarded as a launching factor for workers striving for career advancement (Helms et al., 2016). Career sponsorship can generally be defined as advocacy for someone's career advancement, whereby a particular person, the sponsor, advocates for another, the protégé, in ways that directly benefit the latter person's career (Helms et al., 2016). As stated by Ang (2018), sponsors thereby invest time and provide resources to their protégés in order to prepare them for advanced positions in the organization. Furthermore, the researcher explains that sponsors make efforts to call increased attention to their protégés' value, professional skills, and leadership potential. By promoting them and giving them increased exposure, whereby particularly with influential executives, they ensure that their protégés are considered as candidates for promising opportunities and challenging tasks (Ibarra et al., 2010). Thus, on the one hand, individuals providing sponsorship encourage their protégés to take on new challenges, while, on the other hand, they also make efforts to convince those in positions of power to recognize the protégés' abilities (Helms et al., 2016).

In this context, a number of studies have established that network contacts with higher organizational rank, compared to those at lower levels, typically provide significantly greater career sponsorship in the form of career guidance, coaching, and specific opportunities to heighten one's visibility at work (Seibert et al., 2001) and increase one's status (Lin, 1999). Some researchers even assert that sponsorship is exclusively provided by high-level leaders, considering that such individuals, due to their enhanced power, are in a position to exert influence on managerial decision-making in the first place, especially regarding how and to whom certain roles and opportunities are assigned (Ang, 2018). Along the same lines, Ibarra et al. (2010) argue that sponsorship is generally provided by senior managers who have influence and may use it with other executives to support a certain individual. In a similar vein, Helms et al. (2016) propose that career sponsorship is highly likely accessed via influential high-level managers, who may introduce their protégés to other highly positioned individuals who, in turn, could further assist them in their professional advancement. It is thus conceivable that the extent to which sponsors are able to help the protégé establish such connections with other high-level contacts (Hewlett, 2013) is, in fact, likely greater if they themselves occupy a higher position in the organizational hierarchy.

In light of the evidence presented above, it is conceivable that the extent to which male and female employees are provided with career-related networking benefits, whereby specifically in the form of career sponsorship, is highly dependent upon whether and how many network ties they have established with individuals of high status in their organization. Considering that such contacts located at upper hierarchical levels are given greater formal power (Seibert et al., 2001) and influence (Brass, 1984) as part of their professional standing, it is likely that, by using these assets, they in particular are able to advocate for their protégés and drive career decisions in their favor. It is thus plausible that the more individuals connect with specifically this group of people, the more career sponsorship they are able to access. In fact, empirical proof of this positive relationship has likewise been demonstrated. Using a sample of 448 workers in a range of professions and organizations, Seibert et al. (2001) show that the more network connections individuals develop with especially such high-ranking contacts in their company, the more career sponsorship they receive.

Therefore, I propose that, a higher number of high-status network contacts in one's organization implies an enhanced access to the career-related networking benefit of career sponsorship.

3.2 Women's Relative Lack of High-Status Network Contacts

Despite the fact that previous research suggests that network relations with contacts of high rank in an organization provide increased access to career-related networking benefits (Woehler et al., 2021), as in the form of career sponsorship (Seibert et al., 2001), there is increasing evidence suggesting that women, relative to their male counterparts, typically indicate fewer ties to such individuals (e.g., Brass, 1985; Gremmen et al., 2013). Accordingly, Noe (1988) reports that, compared to males, females tend to have fewer network connections with respective individuals occupying positions of power in their organization. In the same vein, Woehler et al. (2021) propose that men's networks consist of more high-status contacts than those of women. However, based on the above considerations regarding the relevance of influential high-status network contacts for the receipt of career sponsorship, it is likely that, to the extent that female employees develop relatively fewer network relationships with persons of high organizational rank, they may not be given equivalent access to this career-benefitting resource. In fact, researchers such as McGuire (2000) suggest that, by having fewer high-status network members, women likely miss out on important sponsorship opportunities.

In order to shed light on possible reasons for respective gender differences, there is a need to investigate the factors which might affect the degree to which employees develop network relationships with individuals of high standing in the first place. In this regard, the existing literature offers a variety of theoretical rationales which may clarify why women in particular are likely to form relatively fewer ties with high-status individuals who could provide them with respective career-related support.

Correspondingly, in the following sections, I elaborate on these explanations. On the one hand, I draw on the role of factors which, from the perspective of employees aiming to establish ties with high-status individuals, are of an extrinsic nature. These include the structural accessibility of potential high-status contacts in organizations and their personal receptiveness to developing network relationships. In this regard, I illustrate why and how these factors might differ for male and female workers either on the basis of their structural position within the organizational hierarchy or their gender.

In a next step, I discuss selected professional networking behaviors from a gender perspective in an attempt to explain in what ways intrinsic factors may as well influence the extent to which male and female employees engage in respective behaviors, based on which, they may likely be provided with opportunities to increasingly interact and form network ties to high-status individuals of their organization.

3.3. Role of Employees' Structural Position in the Organizational Hierarchy

3.3.1 Implications for the Structural Accessibility of Potential High-Status Network Contacts

Considering women's and men's unequal endowment with high-status network contacts from a structural perspective, which primarily draws on situational and organizational factors to explain differences in social connections and behaviors (Rothstein et al., 2001), might contribute to a greater understanding of why such disparities occur. According to this view, exclusion from powerful networks may be due to reasons that are structural in nature, i.e., could be a consequence of the distribution of formal positions in organizations (McGuire, 2000). In this context, existing research increasingly demonstrates how the largely hierarchical structures of most organizations may impose constraints on the chances of certain employees to develop network connections with high-status others (McGuire, 2000). This may be explained by the fact that, based on the position which individuals occupy within respective structures, different opportunities or constraints, respectively, may arise with respect to the formation of network ties (Moore, 1990).

In general, employees tend to develop network relationships with others who work close to them (Brass, 1985). Correspondingly, there is evidence suggesting that occupying a position with higher organizational rank likely facilitates the development of network connections with high-status persons, considering that individuals located in such hierarchical positions typically interact with other high-status members of their organization (Lincoln & Miller, 1979), not least because their work environments may likely be structurally separated from those at lower levels. As an illustration: If, for instance, the offices of executives in an organization are situated at the top of the firm's building where there is rather little lower-level employee traffic, or if such executives have an own entrance to the building and are given an own dining hall, it is conceivable that individuals with higher standing have more opportunities than those with relatively lower rank to engage in interactions with other persons of high status (McGuire, 2000).

Thus, if someone occupies a higher position in the hierarchical structure, the accessibility of potential high-status contacts may be relatively higher, thereby providing increased opportunities to interact and form network ties with specifically this group of individuals. Correspondingly, if individuals' demographic work environments, based on the hierarchical positions which they occupy within their organization, compose of more higher-level employees, their prospects of spending time with such persons of high status are likely enhanced (McGuire, 2000), thereby facilitating the development of network connections.

Thus, in order to analyze potential structural constraints on the development of high-status network ties from a gender perspective, it is important to consider the extent to which employees, particularly female ones, are represented in selected organizational contexts, especially in positions at higher levels of corporate hierarchies (Ibarra, 1993). In this regard, a number of studies address the general issue of women's relative underrepresentation in high-ranking positions (Durbin, 2011; Seo et al., 2017). In a comprehensive review of network-based gender differences in career success, Woehler et al. (2021) report that men are disproportionately represented at upper levels of organizational hierarchies, which causes the respective work environments to be characterized by a certain gender imbalance. Likewise, other studies increasingly point to the relative dominance of male employees in high-level positions in firms (Reskin & Bielby, 2005), which, as they suggest, may have differential implications for males' and females' opportunities to participate in network relations with high-status individuals (Brass, 1985). In the same vein, Woehler et al. (2021) argue that, due to the disproportionate representation of male and female workers at different organizational levels, men and women are likely given divergent chances to form connections at upper levels.

Considering that women, compared to their male counterparts, generally occupy fewer positions at higher levels in companies (Ammerman & Groysberg, 2021), it is plausible that their opportunities to engage in high-level interactions with powerful others in the first place, are relatively restricted (Brass, 1985), as such individuals are likely structurally less accessible to them. Due to more often being located in relatively lower positions within the organizational structure (Ibarra, 1992), there is a possibility that women, more likely than men, experience difficulty in accessing potential contacts at upper organizational levels which, consequently, implies a relatively lower frequency of contact with respective high-status members of the organization.

In this regard, McGuire (2000) provides empirical evidence showing that, in fact, employees' structural position affects the extent to which they are able to access network contacts of high status in their organization. Using survey data from 1150 workers employed by a large company in the financial services industry, the researcher shows that women are less likely than men to occupy positions that would facilitate access to and put them into contact with employees of high status. In a similar vein, Forret and Dougherty (2004) suggest that females generally have reduced access to members of dominant power structures in organizations. Accordingly, this may also serve as a possible explanation for the finding of previous studies proposing that women's network contacts within organizations thereby more frequently exhibit "lower levels of status and power" (Rothstein et al., 2001, p. 4) than those of men.

Women's relatively reduced number of ties with high-level colleagues may thus partly be a consequence of the lower structural accessibility of such high-status individuals. Considering that women, in comparison to men, are more often located in relatively lower hierarchical positions (Woehler et al., 2021), it is plausible that they, in general, more likely than men primarily face structural barriers in interacting with individuals of high status, who are often structurally separated from those at lower levels (McGuire, 2000).

Therefore, I propose that employees who occupy a higher structural position in the organizational hierarchy may, based on their respective work environments, be given an increased structural accessibility of high-status members of the organization. This may followingly facilitate engaging in interaction with these individuals in the first place, thereby providing opportunities to develop network ties. Therefore, as also suggested by Woehler and colleagues (2021), due to the fact that female employees occupy relatively more lower ranks in organizations, there is a likelihood that, on average, they have fewer chances to interact and establish network ties with as many high-status individuals as male employees do.

3.3.2 Implications for Contacts' Receptiveness to Network Relationship Development

At the same time, it is conceivable that employees' position within the hierarchical structure of an organization not only determines the extent to which high-status individuals are structurally accessible as potential network contacts but may as well have implications for how receptive such individuals are to the development of network ties in the first place.

In the literature, the practice of networking is typically considered to be based on reciprocity, which means that an individual offers and receives some form of assistance at the same time, or provides some kind of support with the expectation of receiving something in return in the future (Kaplan, 1984). In some studies, the term networking itself is even conceptualized as the balance of reciprocal giving and taking (e.g., Greguletz et al., 2018). Particularly from an instrumental viewpoint, individuals' desire to engage in an exchange relationship is typically regarded as being dependent upon the perceived benefits that the other party may offer (Flynn & Brockner, 2003). In an organizational context, previous research asserts that, due to the fact that employees' position in the hierarchical structure in particular shapes their ability to offer and reciprocate resources, it may represent a key factor affecting the extent to which potential contacts are willing to assist them as network members (McGuire, 2002). In this regard, it is conceivable that also high-status individuals likely assess the utility of other employees as potential network partners based upon their position within the organizational hierarchy.

As suggested above, in classical formal organizations, individuals at higher levels typically have greater formal power, increased control over resources as well as the ability to exhibit greater influence as part of the occupied hierarchical position (Seibert et al., 2001), which likely makes them desirable exchange partners for other contacts. In this regard, it is particularly likely that if higher-status individuals engage in networking, and trade with the valuable resources they possess, they may be more inclined to establish connections with those people who can reciprocate the network benefits which they provide. In fact, prior research shows that high-status contacts have an incentive to engage in interactions with employees who have an increased command over resources, as such workers are assumed to have the potential to offer something that may be of value to them (Blau, 1964). Thus, considering that employees with an enhanced control of resources are better able to attract potential high-status network members (McGuire, 2000), and that such employees are typically found at higher organizational levels (Seibert et al., 2001), high-status individuals can be expected to be more receptive to forming network relationships with employees occupying higher positions in the organizational structure.

In this context, due to the fact that men are more likely than women to occupy positions higher up in the corporate hierarchy (Reskin & Bielby, 2005), there is a likelihood that potential high-status contacts may, on average, show a greater receptiveness to relationship initiation attempts from men, who, compared to women, might often represent more valuable network contacts in that they are expected to be able to exchange mutually advantageous resources (Woehler et al., 2021) as part of the structural position which they occupy. In the same vein, a number of studies report that, in the context of networking, female employees are likely to be regarded as less attractive exchange partners (Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2010), which may be due to the fact that they, relative to their male counterparts, tend to be located in relatively lower, less influential organizational positions with fewer resources to offer others (Brass, 1985).

Considering that those employees who occupy a higher hierarchical position generally control greater resources (Seibert et al., 2001) with which they can trade, it is conceivable that potential high-status contacts, based upon reciprocity considerations, may show a greater receptiveness to developing network ties with individuals at higher levels in particular. However, as males are more likely than females to be located in higher-ranking positions within organizations (Reskin & Bielby, 2005), there is a possibility that they frequently constitute the more attractive network partners, on the basis of their occupied structural position.

Therefore, I propose that, in addition to female employees' relatively reduced structural accessibility of potential high-status contacts, the latter themselves may also subjectively be more receptive to developing network relationships with employees located in higher hierarchical positions. These individuals, in turn, disproportionately happen to be male (Woehler et al., 2021). In fact, taking into account that the resources reached through women as network contacts, on average, are thereby considered to be relatively poor (Ibarra, 1992), high-status individuals may generally show a reduced receptiveness to forming network relationships with female workers, which may, consequently, contribute to women developing fewer ties to high-status contacts than their male counterparts do.

3.4 Gender Status Beliefs

3.4.1 Implications for Contacts' Receptiveness to Network Relationship Development

As suggested above, potential contacts' receptiveness to forming network ties with other individuals tends to be shaped by expectations regarding the utility of males and females as network associates (Woehler et al., 2021). In this regard, due to generally occupying more high-ranking positions and carrying greater career-related resources based upon their structural position, men may, in fact, frequently represent more valuable contacts than women (Aten et al., 2017). However, prior research suggests that, to the extent that generalizations about the worth of certain groups of individuals are made, it may well be a matter of status value beliefs (McGuire, 2002).

According to the status characteristics theory (Berger et al., 1972), individuals can be expected to typically engage in processes of socio-cognitive stereotyping, whereby they tend to categorize others according to personal characteristics, among which is also gender. In this context, Ridgeway (1991) asserts that a respective characteristic may gain status value when widely held cultural beliefs suggest that individuals who have one state of the characteristic (e.g., being male) are generally considered more worthy or superior to those displaying another state of such a characteristic (e.g., being female). Previous studies have postulated that, in our society, gender in particular has established status value as a characteristic (Ridgeway, 1991), whereby it is shaped by prevalent socially-constructed, gender-stereotypical beliefs (Seo et al., 2017). Consequently, people tend to be differentiated and treated differently on the basis of their status, i.e., depending on whether they are male or female (McDonald, 2011).

In this regard, there is consensus among scholars that, in general, men are regarded as being of higher status than females (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Ridgeway, 1997; Roth, 2004). Previous research points to structural conditions such as resource differences (Ridgeway & Erickson,

2000) as a crucial factor contributing to the creation and maintenance of such status value beliefs, noting that they shape the context in which interaction takes place and thereby produce experiences which induce individuals to develop differential status-related expectations for each other (Ridgeway, 1991). Considering that women are structurally more often located in lower-status positions (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999) and men numerically dominate positions of power and authority (Ibarra, 1997) with greater control of resources, gender-based status beliefs casting men as being generally of higher status tend to be perpetuated. Specifically, the fact that men in society more frequently occupy high-status professional roles than women (Brown, 1979), causes the respective category for males, relative to that of females, to encompass more attributes associated with high status (Wood & Karten, 1986).

As noted by Ridgeway (1991), as part of respective status value beliefs, individuals create competence expectations about others, whereby here the term "competence" refers to beliefs about someone's ability to make events turn out in an intended way. The researcher suggests that individuals' degree of perceived competence is strongly connected to the resources which they are expected to possess, especially in relation to power. Therefore, as stated by the scholar, to the extent that certain people are typically considered to have resources enabling them to control events in a particular situation, they may likely generally cultivate an impression of competence. Accordingly, it has thereby been argued that those who show more valued states of a characteristic, are, in general, also assumed to possess greater overall competence (Ridgeway, 1991). This, in turn, causes men, who, in comparison to women, are more often found in resource-advantaged positions (Ridgeway, 1997) to be widely judged as more capable than their female counterparts (Abraham, 2020; Roth, 2004), even if no innate differences in ability exist (Ridgeway, 1991).

The fact that respective status processes give rise to differential perceptions of male and female competence has likewise been demonstrated empirically. Using experimental data from 72 male and 72 female psychology students, Wood and Karten (1986) show that women, in comparison to men, are evaluated as being less competent, whereby the scholars assert that this can be viewed as a result of the gender-based categorization processes in which men are typically assigned higher status. In a similar vein, Roth (2004) analyzes qualitative data from the career histories of 76 Wall Street professionals and demonstrates that gender-based status expectations commonly cause females, in comparison to their male counterparts, to receive fewer opportunities to perform at work due to the thereby implied assumptions of women's relatively lower competence.

In the context of networking, the status characteristics theory thus proposes that individuals may consider the gender of their potential network contacts irrespective of the structural position which these people occupy in the organization (McGuire, 2002). As previous studies have established that network contacts may more willingly want to form ties with individuals characterized by higher status, which may not least serve as a signal of one's competence to reciprocate resources (Woehler et al., 2021), there is a likelihood that men, due to their relatively higher gender-based status ordering, may inherently be perceived as more attractive network partners. Considering the fact that individuals with higher estimated competence are equally regarded as having greater capacity to contribute to a shared goal in interactions with others (Ridgeway, 1991), it is plausible that potential contacts might be more inclined to engage in networking with males due to the greater perceived utility of respective connections.

In fact, McGuire (2002) provides empirical evidence of the fact that employees categorize and rank contacts on the basis of their gender. Using survey data from more than 1000 financial services employees, she shows that contacts are less likely to devote their resources to females than to males as a consequence of existing cultural status beliefs according to which women are ranked below their male counterparts: In this context, the researcher explains that even in situations where the women of their study occupied positions in which they as well controlled resources, there was a strong likelihood of others assessing them as relatively poor or risky network investments. As stated by McGuire (2002), male respondents, who were more likely perceived as having the potential to be of value, on the other hand received considerably more assistance from respective contacts. In a similar vein, McDonald (2011) suggests that dominant group members, such as individuals of relatively higher gender-based status, are more likely granted privileged access to valuable network resources based on widespread perceptions of their relatively enhanced competence.

In this regard, it is conceivable that respective gender status considerations may affect the extent to which potential high-status contacts are receptive to forming ties with male and female employees in the first place. Considering the fact that individuals generally prefer to interact with others of higher status with the aim of receiving access to valuable resources (Lin, 1982), but also that reciprocity considerations are integral to networking (Kaplan, 1984), particularly those in high-status, resource-rich positions may be inclined to seek out those contacts who are assumed to have increased control over resources. In this context, men's higher culturally prescribed status and the therewith related perception of their enhanced competence, i.e., command over significant resources (Ridgeway, 1991) may thereby additionally place them more positively as exchange partners in the eyes of respective high-ranking contacts. In fact,

previous research suggests that simply being a man is considered to convey status and thereby also value as a network member (Woehler et al., 2021).

In contrast, due to women's typically lower rank in the conventional gender status hierarchy or widespread associations of their gender with low status attributes respectively, female workers could inherently be viewed relatively less favorably by high-status members of the organization. In fact, previous research suggests that women, compared to men, are less likely to develop network relationships with high-status individuals, whereby particularly with white males, as the latter prefer to connect with individuals belonging to the dominant status group (McDonald, 2011).

Therefore, I propose that even if female employees occupy equivalent structural positions and thereby possess comparable resources as male workers in their company, potential contacts occupying high-status positions in the organization may subjectively be more receptive to the relationship initiation attempts from men than those from women. This may likely be due to the latter's relatively lower gender-based status and the therewith related assumptions of their reduced capacity to provide and reciprocate resources, as also suggested by Woehler et al. (2021). This could thereby contribute to women establishing relatively fewer network ties with contacts of high status in the corporate hierarchy than men do.

3.5 Gender Differences in Professional Networking Behavior

In an attempt to develop a holistic understanding of why the number of ties which female and male employees build with high-status, resource-rich individuals may vary, it is essential to also consider the role of individual actors as active shapers of their network relations. Such an active role manifests itself in people's choice to engage in social interactions and purposefully develop connections in the first place (Casciaro et al., 2014). In this context, the question arises as to which extent individuals engage in particular networking behaviors (Wolff & Moser, 2009), not least in those which may enable them to increasingly interact and thereby develop ties with individuals of high status. Correspondingly, scholars have previously shown that involvement in specific types of networking behaviors is related to the number of developed high-status ties (e.g., Gremmen et al., 2013). In addition, as previous research has established that people tend to differ in their likelihood of demonstrating such behaviors (Casciaro et al., 2014), it is particularly worth investigating whether also gender-based differences can be observed therein, and how they contribute to male and female employees' development of network relationships with individuals of high status in their organization.

3.5.1 Dimensions of Networking Behavior

Networking behavior generally delineates the manner in which individuals foster their network relationships (Gremmen et al., 2013). According to existing research, such behavior can manifest itself in a variety of ways. For instance, individuals may request informal advice on work-related issues, engage in professional activities (Wolff et al., 2018), ask a network contact for support when striving for a promotion or a pay rise, or they might also socialize with a co-worker with the intention of deepening their relationship (Gibson et al., 2014). In this regard, however, previous studies have provided differential classifications of such behavior. Whereas some researchers regard it merely from a broad perspective by operationalizing it as a one-dimensional construct (e.g., Orpen, 1996), others increasingly consider it as consisting of multiple dimensions (e.g., Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Michael & Yukl, 1993; Wanigasekara et al., 2022). For instance, Michael and Yukl (1993) differentiate between internal and external networking behavior, i.e., whether the networking occurs within or beyond organizational boundaries. The same distinction is made by Wolff and Moser (2006), who additionally distinguish whether the networking behavior demonstrated relates to building, maintaining, or using contacts. On the other hand, Forret and Dougherty (2001) draw on a more refined, multidimensional measure of networking behavior as they identify five distinct types of it: 1) maintaining contacts, 2) socializing, 3) engaging in professional activities, 4) participating in church and community, and 5) increasing internal visibility. In this context, especially increasing internal visibility and engaging in professional activities prove to be of the greatest career-related relevance (Forret & Dougherty, 2004).

In consideration of the fact that I aim to investigate those types of networking behaviors employed primarily for career-related purposes and which likely assist employees in forming network ties to individuals of high standing in the firm, I followingly place focus on increasing internal visibility and engaging in professional activities and thereby assess, to which extent these behaviors are demonstrated by male and female workers.

3.5.2 Men's and Women's Networking Behavior: Increasing Internal Visibility

In the literature, visibility is generally defined as others' awareness of an individual's capabilities and accomplishments (Wolff et al., 2008). In the present context, the focus is specifically on internal visibility, i.e., individuals' visibility within a particular organization. The importance of being visible at work has been increasingly emphasized by researchers as they point to a range of therewith associated advantages for employees, among which are the receipt of prominent assignments but also the development of critical relationships (Fielding-

Singh et al., 2018). By increasing their visibility at work through practices such as going to lunch with higher-level individuals (Forret & Dougherty, 2001), taking on highly visible work-related tasks or also actively engaging in highly visible task forces and committees, employees are given the chance to prove what they are capable of (Forret & Dougherty, 2004), not least by further showcasing their abilities and their potential to individuals located in influential, high-status positions. In fact, it is plausible that, as employees attempt to enhance others' awareness of their abilities through respective practices, they are thereby given increased opportunities to engage in interactions with individuals located at higher organizational levels in particular. Correspondingly, based on the practices which previous research classifies as being commonly enacted during the pursuit of visibility, it is likely that employees who engage therein are thereby put into enhanced contact with people characterized by higher status, which heightens their chances to establish network ties to them. For instance, taking on respective high-profile assignments from high-level managers (Castrillon, 2023) might imply that employees have more frequent meetings with these individuals of higher rank, considering that they likely need to inform them or keep them updated, respectively, with regard to the progress made or the individual steps and goals completed while working on such assignments. In the same vein, generally being part of highly visible working groups is associated with increased chances to connect with high-level leaders (Correll & Mackenzie, 2016). Likewise, increasing one's visibility by going to lunch with managers at higher levels (Forret & Dougherty, 2001) thereby puts male and female workers into increased contact with members of the organization who are characterized by higher status. Thus, to the extent that employees show involvement in this type of networking behavior, it is conceivable that they may be provided with opportunities to more frequently communicate with and form network ties to high-status individuals.

In this regard, the act of increasing one's internal visibility has been investigated from a gender perspective by a number of studies. However, partially contradictory empirical findings regarding the extent to which women and men engage in this particular type of networking behavior have emerged. For instance, Forret and Dougherty (2001), using questionnaire data from 418 managers and professionals, find no significant gender differences in the respondents' efforts to increase their internal visibility. In this regard, they suggest that men as well as women demonstrate the respective behavior to a comparable extent. However, in a more recent study, Greguletz et al. (2018) provide opposing results. Based on in-depth interviews with 37 high-profile female leaders working in large German companies, the researchers show that, during networking, women tend to shy away from roles that could provide them with increased

visibility. In a similar vein, based on another interview study of 86 female employees working at a large nonprofit organization in the US, Ballakrishnen et al. (2019) find that women even deliberately remain behind the scenes within their organizations, thereby limiting their visibility. Likewise, Lewis and Simpson (2012) suggest that women might generally be more inclined towards remaining invisible, whereby this tendency could likely manifest itself in the pursuit of low-profile spaces and roles. In this context, to explain such gender-based differences in the pursuit of visibility, scholars largely point to the prevalence of gender role stereotypes (e.g., Ballakrishnen et al., 2019) which may potentially prevent women from actively increasing their visibility at work.

Such gender role stereotypes in general refer to widespread beliefs about gender-appropriate behavior (Noe, 1988). In this regard, according to the gender role theory (Eagly, 1987), males and females are assigned specific behavioral prescriptions based upon their gender. Such gender-based role assignments not only determine what behaviors men and women display but also affect others' perception and evaluation thereof (Smith et al., 2013). Stereotypical beliefs about the personal attributes of men and women that remain prevalent (Abele, 2003; Heilman, 2001), largely constitute social norms (Eagly, 1987), which, in the present context likely specify desirable attributes in each gender. In an analysis of gender differences in social behavior, Eagly (1987) proposes that the majority of widespread gender-stereotypic beliefs about differences between men and women may be portrayed by drawing on two particular dimensions, the communal and the agentic, both of which relate to positive personality characteristics. The communal dimension primarily delineates a concern for the wellbeing of others and thereby encompasses a variety of caring attributes such as affection, helpfulness, and consideration (Eagly, 1987) but also traits such as emotional sensitivity or characteristics of deference, such as obedience or respectfulness (Heilman, 2012). As noted by Eagly (1987), the agentic dimension, on the other hand, describes traits more associated with self-assertion which may, for instance, include aggressiveness or dominance. Furthermore, it denotes autonomy as well as attributes of achievement-orientation among which are competence and ambition (Heilman, 2012).

In this regard, Eagly (1987) addresses the existence of gender-related stereotypes by arguing, that, while women are believed to generally manifest communal tendencies more strongly than their male counterparts, the latter are believed to display agentic personal attributes more intensely than women. These findings are consistent with other studies indicating that existing gender role expectations regarding males and females tend to promote agentic or communal behaviors, respectively (Abele & Wojciszke, 2019; Buchan et al., 2008). According to some

studies, the unequal status of men and women equally acts as a factor contributing to these gender stereotypes regarding communality and agency (Conway et al., 1996). From this perspective, men's higher status may entitle them to engage in a more confident and forceful behavior, whereas women, in contrast, are expected to act in a more interpersonally sensitive way based on their perceived lower status (Conway & Vartanian, 2000).

In the literature, there seems to be consensus about the fact that not only gender-stereotypic beliefs are pervasive (Heilman, 2001), but that men actually tend to exhibit agentic attributes whereas women typically indicate communal characteristics (Rucker et al., 2018). In an experimental study examining current stereotypes of men and women, Hentschel et al. (2019), using a sample of 628 U.S. male and female raters, provide empirical evidence of gender-based differences in agency and communality characterizations. Their results confirm that both male and female respondents generally regard men as being more assertive than women, and consider women to be more friendly and display greater emotional sensitivity and concern for others (Hentschel et al., 2019). Displaying such gender-stereotype consistent behaviors tends to be valued positively (Heilman, 2001), whereas behaviors inconsistent with respective gender roles are often less accepted (Meijs et al., 2015). In fact, deviating from normative gender-based prescriptions in occupational settings is considered to give rise to negative reactions and induce others to show disapproval of one's respective actions (Heilman, 2001). Consequently, there is a possibility that this might as well apply in the case of individuals' professional networking activities if, based on the networking behavior demonstrated, male and female employees do not behave consistently with prescriptive gender stereotypes.

In this context, researchers maintain that the behavior required to form professional network ties tends to be of an agentic nature (Woehler et al., 2021). By displaying agency, individuals likely behave in a particularly dominant and highly confident manner while pursuing self-directed goals and benefits for themselves (Dufner & Krause, 2023). In this regard, the literature also classifies self-promotion, i.e., attempts to gain the respect or favor of a particular person by highlighting one's performance and achievements, as an agentic behavior (Smith et al., 2013), which may be of particular relevance for individuals trying to increase their internal visibility. In order for employees to enhance others' awareness of their competence and create a favorable perception of themselves as potential network contacts, it is conceivable that, to a certain extent, they might need to engage in self-promotion.

However, although the execution of agentic tactics such as self-promotion is considered crucial for managing a competent impression, there is empirical evidence in the literature suggesting that, by self-promoting, women tend to violate gender role prescriptions to behave modestly

(Rudman, 1998). At the same time, by focusing on themselves, they may be perceived as violating the other-oriented traits traditionally prescribed for women (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010). In this context, Greguletz et al. (2018) maintain that female self-promotion thereby regularly implies social costs, such as the loss of likeability, due to being gender-stereotype inconsistent. Thus, as females are generally believed to be less capable, ambitious and competitive, i.e., less agentic than their male counterparts (Rudman & Phelan, 2008), it is likely that if women nonetheless exhibit such attributes, showcase their competences and thereby behave contrary to normative conceptions of femininity in an attempt to enhance their visibility, they might evoke a sense of disapproval in others. This view is supported by Fielding-Singh et al. (2018) who state that, to the extent that females actively make efforts to increase their visibility, they could likely receive backlash for violating existing gender-related expectations. Men, on the other hand, by coming across as agentic in their potential pursuit of internal visibility and the therewith likely associated self-promotional approach, may be perceived as conforming to gender-related norms, thereby gaining relatively greater acceptance from other individuals.

Considering that females tend to perceive seeking visibility as being associated with self-promotion and aggressiveness (Ballakrishnen et al., 2019), i.e., behaviors commonly labeled as agentic in nature and thus more associated with men (Smith et al., 2013), it is conceivable that female employees may be less inclined to display this type of networking behavior, as it is not aligned with their respective gender role. Particularly the fact that self-promoting women tend to be considered as less socially attractive (Rudman, 1998) may thereby discourage women, as opposed to their male counterparts, from striving for greater internal visibility. In a similar vein, Ballakrishnen et al. (2019) argue that, in order to avoid negative reactions from bosses and colleagues, which a self-promotional and assertive appearance could potentially give rise to, female respondents in their study even choose to remain rather invisible within their organization.

Therefore, due to widely-held gender stereotypes typically casting women as communal and men as agentic (Heilman, 2012), and the fact that both genders tend to show behaviors consistent with such gendered role prescriptions (Smith et al., 2013), I propose that women, compared to men, may engage relatively less in increasing their internal visibility. Considering that this type of networking behavior is probably associated with promoting oneself by demonstrating and calling increased attention to one's capabilities and achievements, women may be relatively reluctant to demonstrate it, as it is not in line with feminine norms and could thereby result in others' disapproval. Accordingly, I suggest that, to the extent that female

employees participate relatively less in practices which serve the increase of their visibility with potential high-status contacts, they are likely, in comparison to men, taking fewer opportunities to engage in interactions and build network ties with respective individuals. This may followingly as well contribute to women having relatively fewer high-status network contacts than their male counterparts.

3.5.3 Men's and Women's Networking Behavior: Engaging in Professional Activities

According to prior research, a second type of networking behavior particularly relevant in a career-related context is engaging in professional activities as part of which the demonstration of one's expertise is commonly sought (Forret & Dougherty, 2004). In this regard, the extent to which individuals take part in such professional activities may be assessed based on their involvement in a variety of tasks, whereby examples include the acceptance of speaking engagements or also the attendance of professional seminars and conferences (Forret & Dougherty, 2001). Although previous studies have paid rather little attention to why respective practices may offer specific opportunities to form network ties with individuals of higher status in particular, there are different explanations for why this might likely be the case. For instance, participating in high-profile professional events and conferences is often considered to be the key to establishing valuable network connections (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007), which may not least be due to the fact that on such occasions a broad group of professionals is regularly represented (Mata et al., 2010), among which may also likely be influential potential contacts (Forret & Dougherty, 2004) who enjoy higher status in the organization and profession. It is also conceivable that company-wide internal conferences, at which employees are commonly given the chance to gather with executives and at which they may potentially also be engaged as speakers, could provide them with the opportunity to also connect with those individuals located in high positions of the company, with whom day-to-day interactions possibly may not be the norm.

Correspondingly, in the literature, the relative participation of male and female employees in respective activities has been subject to considerable discussion. Based on their empirical research on networking behavior, Forret and Dougherty (2001) argue that men and women do not differ in their propensity to engage in professional activities. On the other hand, the interview study by Greguletz et al. (2018) provides contradictory findings suggesting that females likely engage less in professional conferences which, however, represent important networking events. As an illustration, the female interviewees who participated in this study report that women are thereby generally underrepresented among the speakers at panel

discussions that are commonly organized as part of such conferences. In a similar vein, Tartari and Salter (2015) examine women's and men's engagement in professional, industry-related activities in an academic context and provide empirical proof of existing gender differences. Analyzing multi-source data for a large sample of researchers in the UK, the researchers find that women academics, relative to their male counterparts, engage relatively less in respective practices.

A possible explanation for women's relatively lower engagement in such professional practices may pertain to a lack of confidence and the related feeling of uneasiness which women typically tend to experience in such a context, i.e., if they take up space and present themselves at respective networking events (Greguletz et al., 2018). In this regard, according to Greguletz et al. (2018), this may likely be linked to the phenomenon of gendered modesty which delineates women's general tendency to underestimate their own value in professional contexts. The scholars assert that many women, even if they aspire to engage in respective professional activities as part of their networking, tend to harbor feelings of self-doubt, and are thereby likely constrained by limited faith in their own expertise and skills, which causes them to underrate what they have to offer to potential business contacts. Accordingly, a number of studies confirm, that, in professional settings, women tend to show lower levels of self-confidence with regard to their abilities, whereby particularly in comparison to men (e.g., Heilman et al., 1990; Kirkwood, 2009). In this regard, in a comprehensive empirical study, Cech at al. (2011) investigate individuals' confidence in their ability to successfully fulfill their professional role, the identity features thereof and to demonstrate the skills needed for it. Using a sample of 288 individuals studying at different institutions of higher education, they find that women cultivate significantly lower levels of confidence in their professional expertise than do their male counterparts. Therefore, to the extent that females generally lack confidence in their professional expertise, it is conceivable that they may be less inclined to take part in those networking activities which specifically involve the application of one's professional skills and knowledge.

In this context, a great deal of previous research also increasingly associates women's modest perception of their professional self-worth with the above-mentioned prevalence of gender-related stereotypes (Greguletz et al., 2018), which, thus, also in this particular context may potentially provide an explanation for observed gender differences in networking behavior. Gender-stereotypic beliefs typically affect how individuals, particularly women in this case, evaluate themselves (Heilman, 2012). According to prior studies, there is a possibility that prevalent stereotypical expectations of female incompetence (Rudman & Phelan, 2008) may

contribute to women exhibiting less confidence and underestimating their abilities. Particularly the fact that they are generally assumed to be less competent relative to their male counterparts (Broverman et al., 1972) could thereby likely negatively affect women's perception of their own capabilities. Moreover, some studies suggest that specifically the prevalence of gender status beliefs, according to which greater competence is generally expected from men than from women, tend to have a self-fulfilling effect, thereby shaping the confidence of both genders (Ridgeway, 1997), which could followingly contribute to women developing a relatively lower level of confidence in their competencies.

As suggested by Broverman et al. (1972), females who are perceived and perceive themselves as relatively incompetent might thus potentially develop feelings of inadequacy in an occupational context. In this regard, it is conceivable that, if female employees display lower levels of confidence in their professional expertise and abilities, they may, compared to men, be more hesitant to participate in professional activities. In fact, previous research has established that individuals with higher self-confidence are more likely to show a greater willingness to engage in networking behaviors, including professional practices, which may not least be attributable to the fact that they believe to have valuable resources to offer (Forret & Dougherty, 2001). However, as women tend to be relatively less confident with regard to their skills (Kirkwood, 2009), whereby in particular those concerning their professional role (Cech et al., 2011), which are likely of particular importance during individuals' engagement in professional activities, they may underestimate the value of their potential contributions in such a context. Thus, I propose that females' likely modest perceptions of their professional abilities may lead to them participating less in professional activities, in comparison to males. Consequently, to the extent that female employees show a reduced involvement in professional events, such as conferences, they may, compared to men, be seizing fewer opportunities to interact with potential influential, high-status contacts who likely attend respective meetings. This reduced interaction may, in turn, constrain their chances, relative to those of men, to build network ties to these individuals which may thereby contribute to them having a relatively lower number of high-status network contacts.

4. Discussion

4.1 Conceptual Model and Theoretical Implications

Based on the gender and networking literature, the present thesis aims to develop a holistic understanding of the mechanisms likely causing the networks of male and female employees to be unequally endowed with contacts of high status in their organization, which, consequently, contributes to them being provided with differential access to the career-related networking benefit of sponsorship. Considering that previous studies have demonstrated that women's relatively fewer ties with high-status individuals can be regarded as a major factor causing them to miss valuable career sponsorship opportunities (McGuire, 2000), which are, however, viewed as critical to employees' career advancement (Helms et al., 2016), it is worth synthesizing different theoretical rationales which may clarify why gender differences in the development of respective ties occur. Therefore, a comprehensive review of prior research in this field has been conducted, and, in an attempt to provide greater conceptual clarity, an integrative research model delineating key explanations has been proposed (see Figure 1). In the following section, I recapitulate the individual factors of influence and the relationships proposed.

By drawing upon the reviewed literature, I propose that, for employees, a higher number of high-status network contacts in their organization implies an enhanced access to the career-related networking benefit of sponsorship. Correspondingly, there is broad consensus among scholars that network contacts of higher standing generally offer enhanced access to career-benefitting resources (McGuire, 2000; Woehler et al., 2021). In particular with regard to career sponsorship, current theory and research have established that network relations with individuals at higher hierarchical levels are positively related to the receipt of this benefit (Seibert et al., 2001). Considering the fact that network contacts at hierarchically high levels of organizations are generally given increased decision-making authority (Brass, 1984), formal power as well as influence (Seibert et al., 2001), whereby particularly with other senior executives (Ibarra et al., 2010), it is conceivable that they, through the use of these assets and their connections, are in a position to more effectively advocate for the professional advancement of certain employees. For instance, their increased authority may enable them to directly drive decisions regarding the assignment of career opportunities in the favor of certain employees (Ang, 2018). Therefore, it is likely that if employees increasingly establish network ties with individuals occupying positions of high status in particular, they may receive greater access to sponsorship.

Furthermore, in an attempt to explain why female employees, however, might not form as many relations with respective high-status individuals as their male counterparts, I have developed a set of propositions with regard to the mechanisms which may likely produce these gender differences.

In this context, the next proposition states that employees occupying a higher structural position in the organizational hierarchy are likely given an increased structural accessibility of high-status members in their organization. This, in turn, could facilitate engaging in interaction with respective individuals, thereby providing opportunities for the development of network relationships in the first place. As shown by McGuire (2000), individuals working at higher organizational levels can more likely access high-status others, which may not least be attributable to the fact that their work environments compose of more such high-ranking employees, thereby offering chances for more frequent interaction.

Since women, compared to men, tend to be disproportionately represented in positions of relatively lower organizational rank (Woehler et al., 2021), it is conceivable that, on average, potential high-status contacts are structurally less accessible to them than to their male counterparts. Accordingly, a number of studies point to the existence of such structurally determined constraints (Ibarra, 1993; Moore, 1990) and demonstrate that female employees are less likely to be located in positions which could put them into contact with individuals of higher status in the first place (McGuire, 2000). Thus, to the extent that female workers, on average, hold relatively lower positions in firms and operate in a context in which their chances to interact with individuals of high rank are structurally constrained, they may not be able to develop as many ties to high-status individuals as men.

Moreover, I propose that employees' structural position in the corporate hierarchy not only affects the degree to which high-status individuals can be accessed, but equally serves as a factor based on which employees' attractiveness as network members is evaluated. In this regard, I suggest that individuals in high-status positions may be more receptive to establishing network ties to those employees who are located higher up in the hierarchy. This may be explained by drawing on the reciprocal nature of networking (Kaplan, 1984), which makes it likely that high status persons who possess greater power, influence (Seibert et al.., 2001) and an enhanced command over resources (Lin, 2001) which they can use to their network members' advantage, may be more inclined to form network ties with those individuals who are believed to be capable of reciprocating the contributed benefits. In fact, previous research has established that occupants of high-status positions typically have an incentive to interact with employees who have an increased control over resources and who are thereby able to offer

something that may be of value to them (Blau, 1964). In turn, these individuals are typically found in positions at higher organizational levels (Seibert et al., 2001), which likely causes high-status members of the organization to show a greater receptiveness to their network relationship initiation attempts than to those of workers located at relatively lower firm levels. Thus, this may not only cause female employees, who are often hierarchically less favorably positioned than their male counterparts, to experience difficulty in accessing contacts of high status, but could as well lead to them being characterized as less desirable network associates from the perspective of high-status individuals in the first place. Therefore, I suggest that this may as well contribute to them, on average, developing relatively fewer ties to high-status contacts than male employees do.

Furthermore, by drawing on the status characteristics theory (Berger et al., 1972), I propose that, irrespective of the structural position which individuals occupy in the organizational hierarchy, potential high-status contacts might be relatively more receptive to forming network ties with male than with female employees. According to widely held gender status beliefs, women are typically regarded as being of lower status than men which thereby equally implies that they, in general, are considered to be the less competent gender (Ridgeway, 2001; Roth, 2004). In this regard, as noted by Woehler et al. (2021), such perceptions of females' relatively lower general competence may create assumptions of their reduced capability to reciprocate resources in network interactions. This may, consequently, lead to them being inherently viewed as less attractive potential network members. Considering that individuals generally prefer to engage in interactions with high-status others (Lin, 1982), men's higher culturally prescribed status could, on the other hand, likely cause male employees to be perceived relatively more favorably as potential network associates. In fact, particularly individuals in high-status positions could, based on their preference to connect with dominant status group members (McDonald, 2011) thereby show a relatively enhanced receptiveness to developing network relationships with males, as opposed to females. Therefore, this could likely as well contribute to female employees forming relatively fewer ties to respective individuals.

However, apart from structural factors and the receptiveness of potential high-status contacts to the development of network relationships with male and female employees, I propose that the extent to which workers develop network ties to high-status individuals is as well dependent upon their degree of engagement in certain types of networking behaviors which may provide them with particular opportunities to increasingly connect with high-status others. In the same vein, Gremmen et al. (2013) show that certain types of networking behavior are related to a greater number of higher status ties than others.

For instance, involvement in increasing one's internal visibility may likely enable employees to get into greater contact with high-status members of their organization. Accordingly, practices such as going to lunch with higher-level managers (Forret & Dougherty, 2001) or taking on highly visible work assignments from senior leaders (Castrillon, 2023) are aimed at the enhancement of one's visibility in the firm and thereby likely lead to further interaction with persons of high status and thus, provide opportunities to build network relationships with them. However, mainly drawing on the gender role theory (Eagly, 1987), I propose that female employees, on average, engage less in increasing their internal visibility, compared to their male counterparts. Although Forret and Dougherty (2001) find no significant differences between men's and women's involvement in this type of networking behavior, other scholars largely offer opposing results suggesting that women forgo roles which could provide them with increased visibility (Greguletz et al., 2018), or even intentionally try to limit their visibility in the firm (Ballakrishnen et al., 2019). As females tend to regard pursuing visibility as being related to aggressive or self-promotional behavior (Ballakrishnen et al., 2019), which is typically characterized as agentic and thus more associated with males (Smith et al., 2013), they may be reluctant to engage in respective practices out of the fear that they, by acting in a gender-role inconsistent manner, may face negative social reactions in the workplace. Therefore, if they do not show this type of networking behavior to an equal extent as men, they are likely seizing fewer opportunities to interact with high-status individuals in the first place, which may as well contribute to them developing relatively fewer network ties to these persons.

Moreover, engaging in professional activities is another type of networking behavior which, if demonstrated, may as well likely enable workers to also interact with and form ties to high-status members of the organization. It is plausible that, by taking on speaking engagements or attending professional events such as conferences (Forret & Dougherty, 2001), whereby particularly company internal ones in the present context, employees may be given the opportunity to reach out to even those at higher firm levels, with whom maybe daily interactions in the workplace are not frequent.

In this regard, however, I propose that women, on average, engage relatively less in such networking behavior than men do. Despite the fact that Forret and Dougherty (2001) observe no gender differences therein, recent evidence points to women's typically lower representation at events such as conferences, whereby particularly among the speakers (Greguletz et al., 2018), thereby offering contradictory results. Considering that, as part of professional activities, individuals' expertise is sought (Forret & Dougherty, 2004), but that women tend to show a lower level of self-confidence (Heilman et al., 1990), whereby especially with regard to their

expertise in professional contexts (Cech et al., 2011), it is conceivable that, in comparison to men, they may be more hesitant to take part in such practices. In this regard, the prevalence of gender status beliefs and stereotypes which undermine their competence relative to that of men may not least be a factor contributing to the perpetuation of this issue. Correspondingly, to the extent that they engage relatively less in this type of networking behavior, they are likely seizing fewer chances to further interact with high-status others, which may thereby cause them to develop relatively fewer network connections with these individuals.
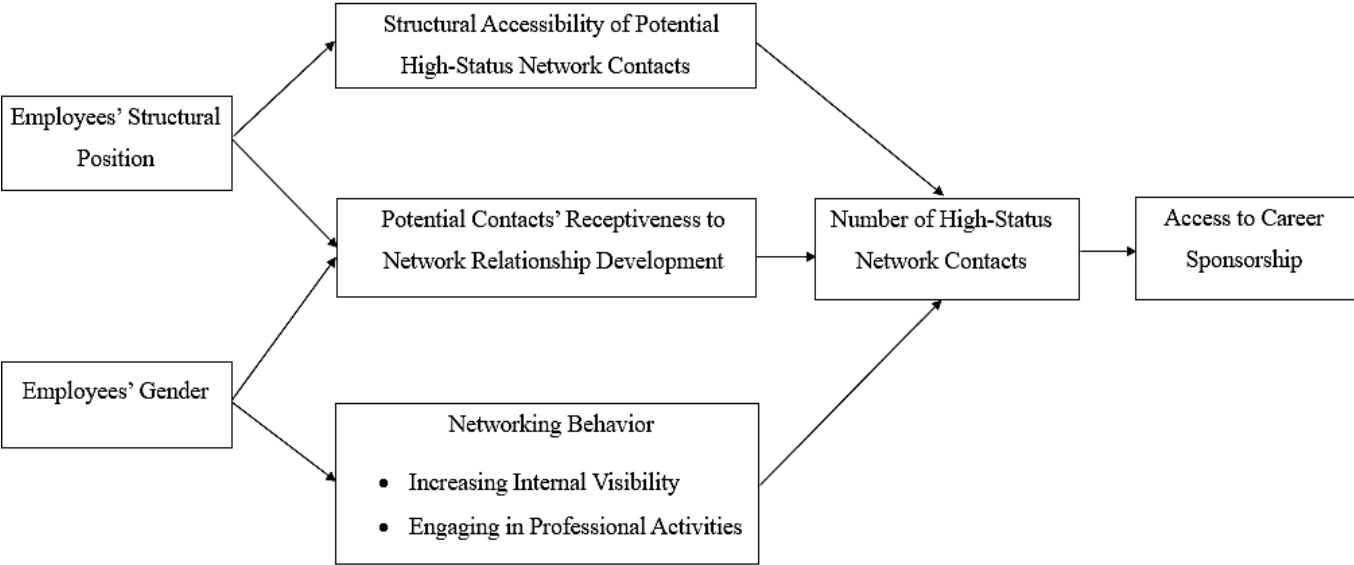

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

4.2 Practical Implications

The findings of the present study have a number of implications for organizational practice and emphasize the importance of approaching professional networking also from a gender perspective. In this context, the proposed model offers a theoretical lens to recognize how gender differences in access to valuable career sponsorship may be driven by men's and women's unequal endowment with contacts of high status, i.e., those network members who are typically in a position to provide this particular career-related networking benefit. Considering that women's relative difficulty in advancing in their careers is strongly associated with them not being sponsored to the same extent as their male colleagues (Ibarra et al., 2010) and not having equal access to high-status contacts (Aten et al., 2017), organizations could likely reduce these career inequalities and indirectly support women in obtaining career-related

assistance by implementing practices which, from the perspective of female employees in particular, facilitate and encourage the development of network connections to high-status individuals in the company. Thus, to the extent that the latter provide career sponsorship, i.e., advocate for them in ways which directly lead to career advancement (Helms et al., 2016), female employees can be expected to thereby advance professionally.

In this regard, it is primarily important for organizational decision makers to, on the one hand, develop greater awareness of certain employees' structurally constrained chances for the development of high-status network relationships at work, and, on the other hand, to effectively launch initiatives to address and mitigate this issue. Specifically, in light of the fact that women are disproportionately located in lower-ranking positions (Woehler et al., 2021) and thereby more frequently than men face structural barriers in reaching out to and interacting with those occupying high-status positions in the corporate hierarchy, it is advisable to internally create additional opportunities for them to get into contact with those employees at more senior levels. In this regard, according to a study by McGuire (2000), adequate methods for equalizing structural access to respective high-ranking individuals might include the desegregation of jobs, arrangement of cross-functional assignments or also the implementation of internship programs in different parts of the firm. It is conceivable that such practices may contribute to more frequent encounters between employees who may usually be differently positioned within the organizational structure, thereby also potentially enhancing the likelihood of interacting, and connecting with those of higher status.

Moreover, given the fact that gendered social status expectations tend to be embedded in organizations (Seo et al., 2017) and thereby likely cause female employees to be characterized as relatively less attractive potential network associates based upon their gender, organizations are advised to introduce interventions targeting the discriminatory aspect of respective cultural beliefs. An increased understanding of such commonly unconscious gender biases and their typically negative impact on individuals' propensity to engage in networking with women might contribute to employees, among which those of high status, progressively recognizing and checking their own interactions for potential patterns of male favoritism. For instance, as part of unconscious bias training programs employees may be taught to manage their biases, alter their behavior as well as monitor their progress (Gino & Coffman, 2021), which may thereby also help change their potentially negative perceptions of females' general competence and thus, increase their receptiveness to forming network relationships with women.

In addition, decision makers should make efforts to encourage female employees to more actively engage in the two types of networking behavior discussed in this paper, increasing

internal visibility, and engaging in professional activities. As their involvement in respective behaviors may likely provide them with an occasion to more often meet and interact with high-status others, they should be motivated to show it. However, in order for women to more willingly make efforts to increase their visibility within the organization, it is critical to create and maintain a workplace culture in which they do not fear receiving backlash for promoting themselves during the pursuit of highly visible roles and tasks at work, i.e., for thereby disconfirming traditional gender role stereotypes. In fact, as suggested by Fielding-Singh et al. (2018), by changing the organizational culture to align behaviors, systems, and procedures with gender-egalitarian values, firms can reduce the risk which female employees seeking visibility face, to a minimum. Thus, organizational decision makers are advised to commit to continuously evaluating and developing their corporate culture in order to ensure that it promotes gender equality and provides conditions under which female employees as well feel comfortable with striving for heightened visibility in the firm.

Furthermore, in an attempt to increase women's engagement in professional activities, it might be of particular relevance to enhance their confidence in their professional value, as well as the abilities which they possess and may demonstrate in their favor at respective networking events. For instance, confidence-building practices may help women to more accurately assess the valuable contributions which they can make during networking. Correspondingly, several studies point to the possibility of conducting specific training programs in this context (e.g., Greguletz et al., 2018; Woehler et al., 2021), as part of which female employees could be trained to develop greater trust in their competencies and comfort with networking, which, thus, may induce them to more readily participate in professional events such as conferences.

4.3 Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

The main strength of this work is that it provides a review of prior research and accordingly, an organizing conceptual model which contributes to a comprehensive understanding of why women may not equally as men develop network relationships with high-status contacts and thereby likely receive less sponsorship, based on which, however, they could advance in their careers. Even though scholars have drawn on a variety of theoretical rationales to explain such disparities in women's and men's formation of professional ties to high-status others, and the implications thereof, none of the studies I have been able to locate have organized respective factors of influence into a holistic model. Thus, the conceptual model developed in this paper addresses this gap in the literature.

Correspondingly, future studies could turn to the further evaluation of this model, which may be achieved by empirically examining the proposed links between the individual variables. For example, scholars might conduct qualitative research on the extent to which male and female employees at different organizational levels get sponsored by members of their company, and equally investigate how this is related to their engagement in professional networking with influential, high-status members of their organization. In this context, based on the proposed conceptual model, they may also examine to what degree respective employees perceive to encounter barriers in developing ties to these individuals and how this may be a consequence of structural factors but also potential gender-based biases.

It is, however, important to note that the present research also has limitations which, in this context, should be taken into consideration and could be explicitly addressed by future research. In this context, there is a possibility that the variables in the model may additionally be interlinked in ways, which, due to the limited scope of the present study, cannot be further investigated. Accordingly, it is conceivable that employees' demonstration of the two types of networking behavior may as well be related to high-status contacts' receptiveness to forming network relationships with them. For instance, whereas I argue that women, due to their relatively lower engagement in practices which increase internal visibility, such as having lunch with higher-level individuals, restrict their own opportunities to get into contact and connect with those of higher status in the first place, it is plausible that the latter themselves may thereby also personally be relatively less inclined to network with them. For example, as employees who enhance their visibility are given the chance to prove their capabilities (Forret & Dougherty, 2004), i.e., show their skills and potential in a favorable light, high-status members of the company could generally, based on the possibly more positive perception of the competence of such employees, be more receptive to their relationship initiation attempts. Thus, if women, on average, do this to a lesser extent, high-status others may potentially also show a relatively reduced receptiveness to developing ties to them. However, the potential existence of this particular link warrants further inquiry. Correspondingly, future studies could extend the present model by examining whether further interrelationships, such as the aforementioned, can be observed between the respective variables. In particular, to the extent that a potential link between networking behavior and contacts' receptiveness to relationship development proves to exist, it may be particularly interesting to also examine whether gender, in light of existing gender-based behavioral expectations and prescriptions, respectively (Eagly, 1987), may have a moderating role in this context.

Furthermore, although recent evidence suggests that females typically engage less in professional activities than males do (e.g., Greguletz et al., 2018) and are hesitant to increase their visibility within their organization (Ballakrishnen et al., 2019; Fielding-Singh et al., 2018), it is essential to consider that some scholars provide opposing results (e.g., Forret & Dougherty, 2001). In this regard, I encourage future empirical studies to more closely investigate the reasons for gender differences in such behaviors and to examine under which conditions they could potentially be more or less pronounced. In addition, to fully understand why female employees, relative to their male counterparts, might possibly show a reduced involvement in respective behaviors, future studies should take into account other factors of influence, apart from those discussed in the present paper. For example, there is evidence in the literature suggesting that women are simply relatively less driven by exclusively instrumental motives during networking (Greguletz et al., 2018) and that, correspondingly, they do not necessarily seek out the highest-level persons they could have lunch with, as opposed to men who more likely display such patterns of behavior (Tannen, 1995) and thereby attempt to increase their visibility with respective individuals. Although, in order to explain gender differences in such networking behavior, the present study mainly draws on the gender role theory (Eagly, 1987) and its typically wide-ranging implications for how men and women conduct themselves, it would be worthwhile for future studies to consider alternative factors and examine the extent to which respective differences can be traced back to, for instance, women's potentially different networking preferences.

It is also important to note that the present paper focuses on two specific types of networking behaviors which, despite being considered to be of the greatest relevance in a career-related context (Forret & Dougherty, 2004) and likely contributing to more interactions with high-status others, are not the only ones which employees can engage in for the purpose of developing valuable connections. In this regard, further research could additionally integrate aspects such as participation in socializing activities into the proposed model and thereby investigate whether and to what degree non-work-related interactions might open up the possibility for establishing network ties to influential contacts of higher status in the company, and how men and women differ in their propensity to demonstrate this type of networking behavior.

Moreover, although having a larger number of network contacts in higher-ranking positions is associated with increased access to career-enhancing resources (Woehler et al., 2021), i.e., career sponsorship in particular (Seibert et al., 2001), some scholars also point to other factors influencing the extent to which individuals ultimately receive respective resources, such as the

strength of the ties established (Ibarra, 1993) and the therewith associated emotional closeness and interaction frequency (Woehler et al., 2021). Therefore, further studies might account for these variables and accordingly, also investigate whether male and female employees' network ties to high-status network members differ in respective relationship characteristics and how this potentially may lead to differential receipt of career sponsorship.

In this regard, it is critical to consider that the current study is limited by its exclusive focus on the career-related networking benefit of sponsorship which directly results in career advancement (Helms et al., 2016). Correspondingly, apart from career sponsorship, studies show that individuals who engage in networking thereby also access other resources involving different forms of guidance and information (Aten et al., 2017) which might assist them in improving their work performance (Seibert et al., 2001) and may thus potentially indirectly contribute to them more likely being provided with promotion, respectively advancement opportunities. Therefore, in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of different instrumental resources which may be accessed through professional networking, a further study could additionally incorporate different types of respective benefits into the proposed model and assess whether an increased number of high-status network contacts is also in this case positively related to the access thereto.

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