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C O M M E N T A R Y

IS TIE MAINTENANCE NECESSARY?

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With their empirical analysis of the causes and consequences of maintaining ties with former co-workers, Walsh, Halgin, and Huang (2018) make a meaningful and intriguing contribution to an on-going debate over the value of maintaining one's relationships. On one side of this debate, Walsh et al. (2018) build on the central premise of what we would call the *activity-based perspective* of tie maintenance, namely, that "ties to individuals who are associated with one's past are"—according to this view—"important to maintain." In our own research, we have challenged this premise by taking what we would call the *memory-based perspective* on tie maintenance, arguing that the memory of a prior relationship is often sufficient and "that past relationships can retain considerable value, without the need for active maintenance" (Walter, Levin, & Murnighan, 2015: 1449) and even that "the necessity of tie maintenance may be overstated" (McCarthy & Levin, 2018).

When it comes to the activity-based perspective of tie maintenance, i.e., the view that ongoing tie maintenance is critical for performance-related benefits, Walsh et al. (2018) are in good company. Indeed, much of the seminal research on networks has assumed that social capital requires ongoing maintenance to remain valuable (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2002; Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1990; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). For example, Coleman (1990: 321) declared that "[r]elationships die out if not maintained; expectations and obligations wither over time." Burt (1992: 9) similarly argued at one point that if any party to "a relationship withdraws, the connection, with whatever social capital it contained, dissolves." In our own research, however, we have found the opposite. Results from hundreds of executives rekindling their long-lost relationships show that ties that have been dormant for years, when reconnected, provide as much as or even more useful knowledge than active ties (Levin, Walter, & Murnighan, 2011a). Others, too, have found performance benefits from such network churn (e.g., Burt & Merluzzi, 2016; Maoret, 2013; Mariotti & Delbridge, 2012; Vissa, 2011), lending support to the memory-based perspective of tie maintenance, i.e., the view that active tie maintenance is not a necessary condition for achieving performance-related benefits from one's ties.

Of course, there are other potential benefits of tie maintenance besides performance-related ones, such as personal well-being and a need to belong (Morrison, Epstude, & Roese, 2012). Staying in touch with people you have known a long time can bring a sense of belonging or identity, whereas losing touch could potentially lead to loneliness or feeling adrift. Relatedly, perhaps maintained ties are more likely to provide social support (Halbesleben, 2006) than new ties or reconnected dormant ties. This role for tie maintenance might help explain the intriguing finding by Walsh et al. (2018) that maintaining more ties from a former job can help social integration into a new workplace, as perhaps maintaining these old ties might give a new employee a feeling of security or self-confidence to become better adjusted at a new job. On the other hand, however, tie maintenance may not be necessary to achieve these positive consequences. For example, we have observed in our own research that nearly all executives who reconnect with their dormant contacts find the experience to be fun and enjoyable, above and beyond any value received (Walter, Levin, & Murnighan, 2016). Moreover, reconnecting with old friends can provide self-discovery and self-insights by hearing what one used to be like in the distant past. Indeed, even if there is no reconnection at all, still-dormant ties can be beneficial, e.g., having more such ties to current coworkers increases organizational commitment (McCarthy & Levin, 2018). These findings suggest that emotional

and psychological benefits—albeit perhaps not social support—are available even when ties are not maintained for years at a time.

In sum, we would argue for the memory-based perspective, namely, that dormant ties may achieve similar performance-related and psychological/emotional benefits as actively maintained ties, but with considerably less time and effort. For as Walsh et al. (2018) themselves point out, a *negative* consequence of tie maintenance is that it can be costly, in terms of time and effort, thereby constraining a person's actions, e.g., making it harder to form new ties, participate in other activities, get one's work done, and so on.

Underlying this debate over the consequences of maintaining versus not maintaining one's ties is a more fundamental disagreement over the importance of activity versus memory. On the one hand, ongoing activity—i.e., maintenance—is more salient and top of mind and has its own momentum. By seeing someone regularly, there is a constant reinforcement of the norms and behaviors associated with that relationship. The other person's presence serves as a continual cue for how one feels and acts toward that person. The question remains, however, if this activity (i.e., tie maintenance) is necessary, or if memory alone can substitute for activity, to benefit from a given tie. Prior research has provided some support for memory alone—such as when a tie is dormant—having a powerful influence on people's work life. For example, Soda, Usai, and Zaheer (2004) found evidence of "network memory," with the benefits of past networks persisting over time. Kilduff, Tsai, and Hanke (2006) similarly argue that "ghost ties" can constrain and enable people's actions, even when the other person has died, let alone when the tie has gone dormant. Indeed, research on cognitive social structures (e.g., Brands, 2013) suggests that not just activity but also memory—as well as paying attention to others even without any ongoing interaction (Corredoira & Rosenkopf, 2010)—can help maintain a tie in people's minds and hence retain its value as social capital.

One way to frame this debate is that it is about the longitudinal nature of relationship investments. As noted by Burt and Merluzzi (2016), and consistent with a memory-based perspective, valuable ties can be seen as episodic, oscillating between activation and dormancy, whereas the more traditional, activity-based perspective is that valuable ties are stable, enduring, ongoing investments. Arguing for the activity-based view, Kuwabara (2011: 5) notes that "[i]t is almost a truism that our most reliable contacts tend to be the ones we have known and been loyal to since childhood, college, or the early days of working together." He further elaborates that this is driven by long-term contacts having "one of the most

essential attributes of effective relationships—trust. […] Like aging a fine wine, developing trust is a gradual process, and time is a key ingredient." This widely-held assumption that trust requires time to develop, however, has been called into question, as an emerging body of research suggests that trust can exist even among brand-new ties (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998; Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996) and that trust is in fact uncorrelated with relationship length (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

What it may come down to, then, is how frequent the interaction between two people has to be—or at what interval a tie has to be maintained—for a tie to remain consequential. At one extreme, we might imagine an argument that says a tie is only being maintained when two people are in continuous contact, i.e., during their every waking moment. Most observers would reject this extreme view as absurd—but in so doing, they are implicitly admitting that one can maintain a tie even when there are time gaps between interactions. After all, presumably even proponents of the activity-based perspective on tie maintenance would agree that if two people have not talked in an hour, they still have an active tie that is being "maintained" in some way. The same would probably be true for a week or even a month since the last interaction. So, from a theoretical standpoint, what is the difference between having a short time gap versus longer ones that can last a year or a decade or more between interactions? One answer—and admittedly, one we ourselves have given (Levin et al., 2011a)—is that at some point a tie begins to "feel" dormant and unmaintained. This may be true, but it is beside the point when it comes to the *consequences* of tie maintenance. Rather, the key issue here is how much decay, if any, there is in the value and benefits of a tie—its social capital—as the time gaps between interactions get longer. This is an empirical question that may ultimately hinge on how people remember and perceive an unmaintained tie, i.e., it may depend on cognitive and emotional processes in the minds of each person, not necessarily on the objective reality of time elapsed since two people interacted with each other.

So what are these cognitive and emotional processes that might make tie maintenance more valuable? We can think of two: poor recall and extensive maintenance expectations. First, obviously if either person forgets the other, or cannot remember their history together, then the activity-based perspective would be correct, and tie maintenance is critical. Such poor recall seems especially unlikely, though, for ties with any enduring emotional residue, as this can preserve the memories even without any ongoing maintenance (Dolan, 2002). Indeed, we have found "that once people have exceeded a threshold of

intimacy, a relationship qualitatively changes, so that time apart has little impact" (Levin et al., 2011a: 934). Second, besides the issue of recall, tie maintenance might become more valuable in response to expectations, norms, and meaning. For example, if one person expects another to stay in touch, and the other person does not, then feelings of resentment, abandonment, and ill will may arise. Ironically, when people assume that ties can and should be maintained, this might make it more important to maintain them. On the other hand, people often underestimate how gracious and understanding the other person is about a tie becoming dormant (Walter et al., 2015).

Future research might help settle this debate by evaluating more explicitly the implications—e.g., for performance, psychological well-being, social support, organizational commitment, workplace integration, and so on—for ties that are maintained versus those that are not maintained, and for people who do versus do not maintain a large number of ties. Experiments or quasi-experiments would be especially helpful here, if they could be done ethically (i.e., it is problematic to tell people which ties, or even how many ties, they can maintain) and logistically (i.e., preventing accidental interactions, even by social media, for years). As with most such debates, the answer may come down to "it depends," and so we would also encourage the search for moderators of when tie maintenance may (or may not, as we have argued) be necessary.

One troubling aspect of this debate is that the activity-based perspective sometimes seems to rest not only on the argument that tie maintenance is beneficial, but also on a taken-for-granted belief that tie maintenance is the right thing to, a belief that can take on almost normative qualities. We would suggest this normative belief is not necessarily rational, however, but likely rests on cognitive biases and a wish to avoid short-term negative emotions. For example, it is well established that human beings suffer from a status-quo bias (or, endowment effect) that leads them to prefer their current situation (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), due to people's preference to avoid losses over obtaining gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). In the case of social networks, this may make people feel instinctively that dropping an active tie is wrong and should therefore be avoided. Moreover, tie maintenance can feel virtuous perhaps because the alternatives make people feel bad: people feel shame and embarrassment about initiating a new tie, especially for instrumental reasons (Casciaro, Gino, & Kouchaki, 2014); they feel guilt about letting a tie become dormant (Levin, Walter, & Murnighan, 2011b); and they feel anxiety about reconnecting a dormant tie (Walter et al., 2015). The result can be an instinctive normative belief that failing to maintain one's ties is akin to a moral failing. Yet this belief seems misguided

to us, as it rests on cognitive biases and a short-term emotional response, not a thoughtful assessment of long-term consequences. Indeed, most ties become dormant; this is normal, inevitable, universal (Small, Pamphile, & McMahan, 2015), and also reversible (Levin et al., 2011a). Thus, we would argue that the debate between the activity- and memory-based perspectives should rest on the empirical questions of whether or not tie maintenance is necessary for different outcomes (and perhaps under what circumstances).

The debate we have described above is about the consequences of tie maintenance. Whichever side of that debate one comes down on, we believe that it is still fascinating to learn more about the causes of tie maintenance. Here Walsh et al. (2018) make important contributions as well. For example, their study demonstrates conclusively that a nontrivial number of work ties can and do get maintained even when there are no obvious instrumental goals involved, which prior research has assumed to be a crucial determinant for tie maintenance. That is, Walsh et al. (2018) show that ties to former coworkers are maintained even if the former company goes out of business and even if the two people are only personal friends and not a family member, client/customer, business contact, or current coworker. This is a fairly high bar, and if we can still see ties being maintained even under these circumstances, then it suggests that a typical person's work network includes not only ties within their current organization, and not only accumulated dormant ties, but also active ties from former employers. Plainly put: we may debate if the consequences of tie maintenance are good, bad, or indifferent, but Walsh et al. (2018) show that it is definitely a thing. Indeed, the fact that such tie maintenance persists, even when the odds are stacked against it, suggests that our field may need to rethink the boundaries of bounded organizational networks to include former employees as well.

We also find the idea of the midlife transition to be especially intriguing. Specifically, Walsh et al. (2018) find that work ties formed when one is ages 35-45 are more likely to be maintained down the road than are ties formed at a younger or older age. We do not know if this is due to which contacts are chosen at this age (i.e., tie selection) or due to the actual experience of being this age (i.e., imprinting), but either way it suggests that something special is happening in people's networks at midlife. We ourselves have noticed that reconnections only start to become useful by one's late 20s or early 30s (Levin et al., 2011b). We have previously attributed this finding to the age when one has accumulated a sufficiently large pool of dormant contacts who are in one's field or industry, but perhaps the imminent midlife transition plays a role here as well. In particular, the

prospect of approaching midlife may lead people to reflect more on their networks and how to shape them in more productive or rewarding ways.

We look forward to reading additional studies that build on Walsh et al.'s (2018) intriguing findings. Indeed, such future research may finally settle the debate over how necessary tie maintenance actually is.

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