

Liking or Needing? Theorizing on the Role of Affect in Network Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Informal networks are crucial for the functioning of public organizations and the quality of government service. Because of this, public administration scholars increasingly theorize on what drives informal network behavior, particularly in terms of whom public officials contact for information or advice. However, existing studies provide a rather rational and strategic account of how such networking occurs, pointing to factors, such as preference similarity, resource availability, and social capital as its main drivers. This article critiques the microfoundations of existing theoretical models, arguing that they (a) potentially require too extensive information-processing capabilities on behalf of individual decision-makers and (b) discount the role that affect and emotive responses are likely to play in the social activity of networked interaction. In response, this article proposes three lines of theorizing on how (interpersonal) affect can be incorporated into theorizing about the network behavior of public officials: (1) affect as a fallback strategy; (2) affect in the driver's seat; and (3) affect as a decision distorter. Several methods are discussed to empirically pursue the presented lines of theorizing.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the complexity and dynamics of the day-to-day tasks public officials face, they frequently rely on their informal networks for information or advice (O'Toole 2015). Such network contacts exist both inside organizations, with colleagues from the same or other units and departments (i.e., *internal* networking), and outside of them, in which contacts are established with *outsiders* or representatives from other organizations (i.e., *external* networking). Beyond the pursuit of personal or career gains, active (social) networking generally makes for more committed and better performing public officials (Maroulis 2017; Siciliano and Thompson 2015). Moreover, these beneficial outcomes translate to the organizational level, in which strong social networks within and beyond organizations are associated with lower turnover rates (Moynihan and Pandey 2008), more organizational learning (Siciliano 2017), and higher organizational performance (Meier and O'Toole 2001).

Given this importance, public administration scholars increasingly theorize on what drives *task-related* network behavior, particularly in terms of *with whom* public managers or policy officials establish informal network contacts or *ties* (see Siciliano et al. 2021). However, in doing so, many scholars provide a rather rationalist and strategic account of how networking occurs. Network contacts are assumed to be chosen by weighing the instrumental value of potential contacts and choosing the one that contributes most to accomplishing a particular goal or assigned task. For instance, if the goal of network behavior is to acquire policy advice or information, they will seek out partners they

perceive as (most) resourceful or technically competent (e.g., González and Verhoest 2020; Park and Rethemeyer 2014). Or if the goal is to build a coalition with like-minded others, public officials will establish contacts with those who have similar (policy) beliefs or values (e.g., Calanni et al. 2015; Gerber et al. 2013).

This article argues that several problematic theoretical assumptions underlie this instrumental logic for explaining network patterns and behavior. For one, to conform to these explanations, individual actors should be able to make a reasonably accurate estimation of the motives, preferences, and capabilities of potential network contacts. These informational requirements are often not met in practice. Organizational research demonstrates that individuals find it incredibly hard to assess the characteristics of others, particularly if these characteristics are not directly observable (Kilduff et al. 2008). Moreover, organizational officials often lack the time and cognitive capacities to accurately map out the local network structures in which they are embedded (Krackhardt 1987). These restrictions problematize the straightforward application of strategic cues as an impetus to networked patterns of interaction. Although you might have strategic motivations to network, how do you know who has the resources, information, or influence for which you are looking?

In addition, networking is a *social* activity in which people inevitably differentiate each other by liking and disliking (Casciaro and Lobo 2015). In that sense, current theoretical explanations of network behavior in the public administration literature discount the role that *affect* and emotive responses are likely to play in decisions about whom to contact. A broad scholarship on the role of *affect* in human judgment and decision-making (Fiske et al.

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2007; Zajonc 1980) provides sufficient basis to assume that the moods and emotions experienced [toward others] in social interactions will also be important for the task-related network contacts that public officials establish and maintain (see Casciaro and Lobo 2008). Affective responses may color the information we have of others, interacting with existing theoretical explanations of network behavior (e.g., thinking someone is competent because you also like him or her). Moreover, affect-based assessments of others are often easier to make and may take primacy when judging others that are relatively unfamiliar (Cuddy et al. 2011; Wojciszke and Abele 2008).

Both these considerations have been largely absent in theorizing on the way in which informal networks form and develop in the public sector (for a recent review, see Siciliano et al. 2021), resulting in a distorted image of how networking occurs. This article puts them center stage, focusing on the role that *interpersonal affect* plays in the network behavior of public officials (cf. Casciaro and Lobo 2008). Such interpersonal affect describes the global “like” and “dislike” feelings that people form toward others and—as this article argues—should be more central in public administration theorizing about network behavior and the collaborative patterns that emerge from there. To work out its potential, three different ways are suggested in which public administration scholars can incorporate affect into theorizing about network behavior: (1) affect as a *fallback strategy*; (2) affect in the *driver’s seat*; and (3) affect as a *decision distorter*.

These three lines of theorizing differ in the role they ascribe to *affect* in human judgment and decision-making. For the first line of theorizing, the starting point is that individual actors will engage in rational and strategic network behavior, but when decision-making situations regarding network contacts become too complex, they require a fallback by which to still make decisions (i.e., affect-based heuristics). The second line disregards the complexity of decision-making situations all together assuming our emotions and affective states cannot be turned off in forms of social interaction and will dictate network behavior. In the third line of theorizing, network behavior is assumed to be intendedly rational and goal-oriented, but affective states distort and falsify the way we experience others, as well as resulting partner choices. Overall, affect can thus play different roles in relation to more rational or cognition-based modes of decision-making dominant in public administration theorizing. Exploring these roles complements existing theoretical work and leads to a better understanding of how network behavior occurs in practice.

To clarify the scope of the argument, this article first describes how it understands network behavior and what its core focus is. A discussion is then provided of the current public administration literature that studies network behavior, focusing on typical determinants of partner choices and their underlying behavioral assumptions. After this, the role of affect in understanding network behavior is argued, focusing primarily on how to accurately define the concept and its general role in decision-making as emphasized in a broader social-psychological literature. The three potential pathways to incorporate affect into studies of network behavior are presented as well as several promising empirical methods to study them.

NETWORK BEHAVIOR: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE?

The everyday practice of public administration consists of complex webs of informal linkages between public officials (see Provan and Lemaire 2012). These webs of linkages are formed through the network behavior of public officials, who build and nurture interpersonal networks around them on which they rely for information, resources, and support. Such networks exist both *within* organizations, in which an official asks a colleague for advice on a complex policy dossier (Siciliano 2015), and *between* organizations, in which counterparts from different ministries or agencies share their experiences with a similar issue (Binz-Scharf et al. 2012). One can thus conceptually distinguish between *internal* and *external* network behavior, although this article largely ignores this distinction and focuses on partner choices in network behavior more generally.

Network behavior and the formation of network *ties* can fulfill multiple purposes. Many readers will associate the term “networking” with establishing informal contacts with “important” people to pursue personal or career gains, for example, learning about new job opportunities or raising one’s profile with people deciding on your career. Although there is a large scholarship that has studied this kind of network behavior (see Wolff and Moser 2009), public administration scholars mainly focus on network activities instrumental for work tasks (Meier and O’Toole 2001; Siciliano 2015). This is also the conceptual focus of this article, that is, *task-related* networking aimed at acquiring the knowledge, information, and advice needed to better fulfill the requirements and tasks of public officials’ everyday work.

Task-related network ties should also be conceptually distinguished from *friendship* ties, typically aimed at fostering social support and emotional wellbeing (see Gibbons 2004). Although both types of informal relationships play a significant role in organizational life, public administration scholars have primarily studied the effects and antecedents of *task-related* network ties rather than friendship ties (for an exception, see Siciliano 2015). This article has a similar focus in terms of explaining task-related network behavior but notes how task-related and friendship networks often overlap in practice (see Kapucu and Hu 2016; Lazega 2001). This *multiplexity* is important to consider, because the explanations for friendship ties (primarily affect-based, given its socio-emotional goals) have relevance for task-related ties as well (see Casciaro and Lobo 2008).

A last conceptual consideration relates to the question of what actually counts as networking, given that public officials constantly meet each other and interact when attending the same committee meeting or because of workflow requirements (see Leifeld and Schneider 2012). Because participation in such settings is often mandated, it does not fall within the scope of network behavior as specified in this article. Network behavior is about the informal contacts established with others (i.e., information search behavior, advice seeking) and the patterns of interaction that emerge from there. Such behavior is voluntary and implies a choice, first about *whether* to engage in such behavior and second about *whom* to contact. The next section describes how the current public administration literature theorizes on these choices and the various ways in which they can be made.

EXPLAINING NETWORK BEHAVIOR

Although public administration scholars are traditionally more interested in the outcomes that networks generate, an increasing number of studies now also focuses on how networks emerge (Alexander et al. 2011; Siciliano et al. 2021). By defining networks as sets of actors with particular patterns of relations between them, the interesting question becomes what explains these patterns. In other words, what determines the specific (structure of) *ties* or relationships that exist between the actors in a network? This section first describes the predominant theoretical mechanisms that public administration scholars use to hypothesize on this question. Then two caveats of this standing literature are noted: (1) the extensive information requirements for making strategic choices about network contacts and (2) the neglect of affect and emotions in the *social* activity of network behavior. These two caveats pave the way for more specific theorizing on the role of affect in networked interaction—the focus of the second part of this article.

Existing Theoretical Mechanisms and Tie Formation

In explaining network behavior, studies within public administration rarely explicitly distinguish between the organizational- and individual-level. The “actors” of which the network behavior is to be explained often refer to organizations, sometimes to individuals, and sometimes to both. This article holds the position that any theory on network behavior—at least implicitly—holds a theory of *individual* choice. In practice, network relationships are often established through relationships formed by individuals representing organizations (Provan and Lemaire 2012, 643; see also Brass et al. 2004). Although many of the specified theoretical mechanisms discussed in this section were originally developed to explain organizational behavior, they implicitly have theoretical assumptions about individual behavior underlying them (i.e., *microfoundations*, see Gilke et al. 2019). Three theoretical mechanisms for explaining *tie formation* are noted in particular: (1) attribute-based similarity; (2) access to resources; and (3) *bridging* or *bonding* social capital.¹

First, a main assertion of many scholars studying network behavior is that actors form network connections to those that are similar, also known as the principle of *homophily* (see McPherson et al. 2001). Although sociological studies typically look at similarity in terms of ethnicity, sex, age, education, or class, public administration and policy studies typically apply this principle to less-observable traits, such as value or belief similarity and *goal consensus* (Calanni et al. 2015; Elgin 2015). Such forms of similarity are expected to drive collaborative choices as they create a shared understanding of the problems at hand, automatically drawing actors to each other given overlapping concerns or priorities. Moreover, attribute-based similarity lowers the transaction costs of collaboration by facilitating the establishment of *trust* and clearer mutual expectations. Although most scholars use this factor to explain the formation of (advocacy) coalitions within policy networks (Gerber et al. 2013), attribute-based

similarity has also been shown to play a key role in the advice-seeking behavior of teachers (Siciliano 2017) and the horizontal collaboration ties between first responders (Song et al. 2018).

Second, departing from a *resource-based* view of organizations, scholars have theorized how actors seek out partners deemed influential or useful due to their control over (or access to) critical resources, such as information, expertise, or political power (González and Verhoest 2020; Henry 2011). From this perspective, actors are assumed to be power- or resource-seeking, aiming their network behavior toward strategic resources that are instrumental to their work requirements (Park and Rethemeyer 2014). At the individual-level, the perceived influence or access to resources of others thus becomes the most important driver for seeking out particular network contacts (see Calanni et al. 2015; Matti and Sandstrom 2011). This leads Andrews and Beynon (2017) to argue that the network behavior of local government managers is primarily aimed at reducing resource dependence and eliciting stakeholder support. Nisar and Maroulis (2017) hypothesize that street-level bureaucrats primarily contact experienced alters that possess critical resources.

Third, scholars relate their explanations to the concept of *social capital*, focusing on the bonding and bridging strategies assumed to drive network behavior (Berardo and Scholz 2010). For instance, by forming bridging ties, actors try to occupy strategic network positions that maximize their access to (diverse and novel) information (Schrama 2019). Or by forming bonding ties, that is, dense and tightly clustered network relationships, actors increase the costs for defection of network partners, because information about misbehavior will more easily spread (Angst and Hirschi 2017). Risks for defection and concerns about trust² thus play a vital role in the network behavior of individual officials. In choosing network contacts, public officials primarily derive information signals from the network positions that others occupy. This creates a higher likelihood that individual actors choose partners through “referrals” from existing contacts (i.e., network closure) or focus their networking activity on central actors with a high popularity (i.e., preferential attachment). Although often focused on organizational actors, Feiock et al. (2012) explicitly apply such reasoning to the network behavior of individual administrators in local governments, arguing that notions of risk aversion are an important driver of their partner choices.

Overall, the standing literature thus provides different answers to the question of how public officials form a network of informal contacts around them. For some, the (similarity in) beliefs or values of others are what makes someone a suitable network partner and determines who public officials will contact. For others, perceived influence or resource access is the primary driver. And for still others, the predominant characteristic by which potential network contacts are evaluated are the network positions they occupy. Still, some common threads can also be noted. Most prominently, all three types of explanations more or less assume public officials to make a calculative and instrumental assessment of others, based on which informal network contacts are chosen. In this process,

¹A systematic review by Siciliano et al. (2021) based on 107 articles showed that 54% of the hypotheses are covered by these three types of explanations. Adding the risk hypothesis and rational choice theory (closely related to bridging and bonding strategies) increases this coverage to 70%.

²Trust is conceptualized here in rational choice/transaction cost terms, that is, a more cognitive form of trust in which it is defined a willingness to accept vulnerability to others because of particular perceptions regarding the risks for opportunism or defection (see McAllister 1995).

potential networking partners are evaluated on dimensions of *competence*, that is, actors assess the desirability of a potential partner based on the instrumental value that they perceive (Nebus 2006). Although the substantiation of instrumental value depends on the theoretical position from which one departs, for all three explanations, this instrumental value is assumed to have a direct effect on the task-related network ties actors will form.

Informational Requirements of Network Behavior

Although the above-provided explanations differ in terms of the strength of their rationality assumptions, network behavior is typically conceptualized as strategic and goal-oriented. Task-related ties are instrumental for completing day-to-day tasks or for gaining influence within an organization or broader network. These goals of networking then seemingly provide its motivations, also about *whom to contact*. However, to be able to strategically make use of network ties in this way, several pre-conditions need to be satisfied. For one, individual actors must be able to make a reasonably accurate estimation of the local networks in which they are embedded to locate potential network contacts. Moreover, they need to have an idea of the motivations, values, capabilities, and trustworthiness of these contacts, to be able to make a choice about whom to approach. Otherwise, the *goals* of network behavior cannot be linked to *action*, that is, a choice about whom to contact.

A first challenge here is that—within public administration research—the assumed drivers of network behavior often refer to *non-visible* (or at least not directly observable) attributes, such as attitudes, values, or competencies. Importantly, mere exposure is not enough to assess such attributes in others; it requires one to be acquainted with or at least have had the opportunity to get to know someone (Van Duijn et al. 2003). If this is not the case, public officials will need to actively gather such information about potential network contacts, for which they often lack time and (cognitive) resources. Without having worked together in the past, many colleagues within an organization remain unfamiliar in terms of their values, preferences, and competencies. Such unfamiliarity may be even greater outside of organizations, where opportunities to meet and get to know others are even fewer.

As a result, public officials often remain unaware of the expertise that exists within and around their organizations. Although such competencies of others may become known over time, this requires experience or considerable effort on behalf of the public official. The same goes for identifying network contacts with similar beliefs or values. Although belief homophily is often presented as a decision-making heuristic (Calanni et al. 2015), public officials sometimes still need to “discover” their own preferences on complex and newly emerging issues, as well as those of others (Jones 2001, 102). Moreover, for many issues, the values or preferences involved remain unclear. Although similar beliefs or values might smoothen collaboration once contact is established, it might not be the original reason for contact-making. In many instances, *preference similarity*, expertise, or access to resources will not provide clear cues for contact-making, as these attributes are not easily assessed in others.

Given these considerations, belief similarity or resource availability may only work well in institutionalized settings that facilitate regular interaction, such as organizational units

or working groups and committees (Leifeld and Schneider 2012; Whetsell et al. 2021). Still, even within such settings, the circumstances under which network behavior takes shape are more complicated than typically assumed. Studies within organizational theory have shown that it is incredibly hard for individuals to visualize their network surroundings (Kilduff et al. 2008). Even in small groups, the number of potential relationships between individuals is enormous and this number rises disproportionately as more people are added. Keeping track of the social network connections in your work settings is challenging and the bounds of one’s potential network are often unclear. Individuals are cognitively limited in calling to mind potential network contacts (Shea et al. 2015). As a result, the correlations between individuals’ cognitive maps of what a network looks like and the actual network are often rather weak (Brands 2013).

This last consideration is particularly challenging for the group of scholars who assume public officials pursue *bridging* or *bonding* strategies in their network behavior (Berardo and Scholz 2010; Schrama 2019). The problem here lies with the assumption that actors can comfortably locate themselves within a broader network structure and pursue a network strategy from there. Bonding strategies used to mitigate collaborative risk would require one to know the ties of your own connections as to form a closed triad. Creating bridging ties potentially requires even more overview of the overall network structure and one’s own position therein. In practice, network perceptions are often severely biased, in which people systematically overestimate their own centrality (Kumbasar et al. 1994) and typically believe local network structures to be much more clustered than they actually are (Freeman 1992). As a result, the network cues to which choosing actors are assumed to respond might be hard to discern, providing less of a guide for action than many social capital kinds of explanations would assume.

Overall, existing explanations thus likely vary in terms of how well they explain network behavior, depending on the circumstances under which such network behavior takes shape. In complex network environments, uncertainty may exist about the characteristics and networks positions of other actors as well as the payoffs of network behavior and establishing contact. This complicates strategic network behavior as it may be hard to link the goals of network behavior (e.g., acquiring information or resources) to a particular action (i.e., contacting someone who has these resources). Evaluating others on dimensions of *competence* is difficult and identifying suitable network contacts often poses a cognitive challenge. As a result, individual officials might (a) refrain from network behavior all together, being overwhelmed by its complexity; (b) still make network choices but based on incomplete or inaccurate perceptions of the capabilities, preferences, network positions of others, for instance by focusing on proxies such as experience or status; or (c) make network choices in entirely different ways. For all three options, the concept of affect can play an important role, both as a separate explanation and in interaction with existing explanations. This potential is worked out below.

THE ROLE OF AFFECT IN NETWORKED INTERACTION

The above-provided discussion draws us to the concept of affect in two ways. First, besides the dimensions of *competence* by

which existing theoretical models assume individual officials to evaluate potential network contacts, social psychologists have demonstrated how in social interaction dimensions of *warmth* and social liking are also important (see Casciaro and Lobo 2015; Fiske et al. 2007). Second, given the extensive information requirements for assessing network contacts on dimensions of competence, affect-based explanations of network behavior are promising because experimental evidence demonstrates that such warmth-based assessments are often easier to make (Wojciszke and Abele 2008). Before working out these arguments, however, the concept of *affect* should be defined more concretely.

Within psychological literature, *affect* is used as an overarching or umbrella term for (individual) experiences related to feeling, including both affective states and traits (Barsade and Gibson 2007, 37). Affective states include emotions (short and intense) and moods (longer, more diffuse, and sometimes unconsciously). Traits refer more to the relatively stable, underlying tendency to experience positive and negative moods or emotions. Many psychological studies have demonstrated how affect functions as a powerful motivator for behavior, particularly in social relationships (see Van Kleef 2009). Lawler (2001) describes emotions as a separate type of reward (or punishment) in social interaction, for which actors are motivated to reproduce positive emotions and avoid negative ones.

This article uses the concept of affect to capture the global “like” and “dislike” feelings that people form toward others. More specifically, we focus on the role of *interpersonal affect*, which describes a person’s generalized positive or negative feelings toward others (Casciaro and Lobo 2008), and explore the different ways in which it is likely to play a role in how (task-related) network ties form and develop. Following Casciaro and Lobo (2015), affect is thus conceptualized *relationally*, describing the moods and emotions a person experiences toward others during social interactions. Besides differentiating potential network contacts based on dimensions of competence, dimensions of warmth are assumed to play a central role in social perception (Fiske et al. 2007). This argument can be extended to the way in which public officials choose network contacts.

Within organizational theory, forms of interpersonal affect are primarily used to explain friendship ties (see Gibbons 2004). This makes sense, given the socio-emotional goals of such network relationships, that is, having emotional and social support in the workplace. The work of Casciaro and Lobo (2008), however, has demonstrated that affect-based explanations may also be important for task-related network ties. Notably, this importance goes beyond such ties growing out of friendship ties and the idea of network *multiplexity* (see Kilduff and Krackhardt 2008). Rather, the contention is that such instrumental ties may develop for affect-based reasons without a friendship tie existing prior to it. Dimensions of warmth might be just as important as dimensions of competence when evaluating others in social interaction, providing a separate explanation for the task-related network relationships through which public officials gather information and advice.

To specify how this works, two further dimensions are considered to describe the different ways in which individuals socially evaluate others (Casciaro and Lobo 2015, 374; Fiske et al. 2007). First, *valence* describes your subjective feelings of pleasantness toward someone, that is, do you instinctively like

someone or not? Translated to the way in which individuals seek out and activate network contacts, the assumption is that you generally avoid people who make you feel uncomfortable and seek out those you believe to be pleasant or nice. Second, *activation* describes the state of being energized or de-energized by someone. Such a classification also applies to work and network relationships, in which some of these relationships generate positive energy, while others “suck the life right out of you” (Gerbası et al. 2015, 1423). People will avoid contacts they perceive as draining, as they result in negative emotions and can lead to energy depletion (Labianca and Brass 2006).

Importantly, such affective assessments of others are often easier to make than the competence-based judgments discussed earlier. Compared to assessing someone’s expertise or policy preferences, one need not necessarily acquire elaborate information about others to assess whether you perceive someone as pleasant or energizing. Merely observing someone or catching a glimpse of their behavior is enough to already have an *affective response*. As Zajonc (1980, 151) famously noted, “preferences need no inferences.” This claim is backed up by experimental evidence demonstrating that individuals infer warmth significantly faster than competence when judging faces and generally weigh it more heavily in their overall assessments of others (Ybarra et al. 2001). Moreover, Wojciszke and Abele (2008) show that the global impressions we have of others are more determined by warmth-related traits, such as pleasantness, kindness, or helpfulness, than competence-related traits, such as efficiency, intelligence, or skillfulness. Particularly in complex environments where global impressions are sometimes the only cues one has, the affect-based assessments of others may be crucial for understanding the network behavior of public officials.

The concept of *interpersonal affect* thus has potential for helping us better understand the way in which informal networks emerge in the public sector. The next section raises the question of what the roles of affective states and emotive responses might be, for the way in which public officials choose their network contacts. Does affect work implicitly, or can it also be an explicit, rational strategy to only establish contact with those you intuitively like? Do we interpret an instant liking of others as an indication of perceived intent and a proxy for trust?³ And what exactly is the relation of affect-based assessments of others to the theoretical mechanisms on network formation discussed earlier? Rather than formulating a general theoretical argument on the way in which affect should be incorporated into studying network behavior, the next section outlines several different options.

AFFECT AND NETWORK BEHAVIOR: THREE LINES OF THEORIZING

To explore the role of affect in network behavior, three different lines of theorizing are developed: (1) affect as a fallback strategy, (2) affect in the driver’s seat, and (3) affect as

³In contrast to cognition-based trust (see footnote 2), affect-based trust describes the emotional bonds between individuals (McAllister 1995), that is, caring about others and having a concern for their welfare. Importantly, such forms of trust require relational depth. This article is more interested in the role of affect in making contact, not necessarily in how relationships (and trust) develop over time. That is why the perception of trust in others is not discussed separately as an affect-based assessment of others. Only valence or activation is assumed to provide such initial affect-based assessments, which actors may then use as a proxy for the trustworthiness of others.

a decision distorter. Each of these lines assumes affect has a different role in overall decision-making,—that is, in relation to more strategic, competence-based assessments of network contacts discussed earlier. Moreover, each line of theorizing ascribes varying importance to the complexity of the decision-making situation in which partner choices are made.

For the first line of theorizing, the starting point is that individual actors will engage in rational, goal-oriented behavior, and decision-making, that is, the default mode. However, when decision-making situations become too complex, they require a fallback on the basis of which they can still make decisions. Rather than evaluating collaborators on dimensions of competence, they will make the easier choice of evaluating them in terms of interpersonal affect. The second line disregards the complexity of decision-making situations all together and assumes our emotions cannot be turned off when making decisions about network contacts. In other words, we are emotional beings and affect will always play a role in decision-making. Whether we realize it or not: interpersonal affect drives our choice of network contacts. For the third line of theorizing, network behavior is assumed to be competence-based, but affective states distort and falsify the way decision-makers experience others. Affect and cognition thus have a nuanced interaction whenever individual decision-makers decide on potential collaborators: our evaluation of potential collaborators on dimensions of competence is colored by the affect-based assessment we have of them.

Affect as a Fallback Strategy

A first line of theorizing builds on the key insight by decision-making theorists that if decision-making situations become too complex, individuals will fall back on heuristics or mental shortcuts to still make decisions (Simon 1956). These *heuristics* can be defined as simplifying strategies for dealing with the cognitive and emotional limits that interfere with adaptive behavior (Jones 2001, 50). This logic can also be applied to informal network behavior and helps us describe how public officials make collaborative choices, whenever they do not have the needed time and energy that goes into locating, cultivating, and maintaining reliable and useful contacts.

A starting point for this line of theorizing is that public officials are assumed to initially evaluate partners on dimensions of competence as best they can (Nebus 2006), assessing others' preferences, capabilities, or network positions, that is, in accordance with the existing theoretical mechanisms described by the standing public administration literature (see Siciliano et al. 2021). However, in networked environments that confront individual decision-makers with many unfamiliar actors and little opportunities for getting to know others, they will not have the time and capacities to meaningfully evaluate the instrumental value of potential collaborators. Assessing whether a relationship aids or hinders goals to be fulfilled requires more information than mere exposure (Casciaro and Lobo 2015, 375). In these instances, affective responses to social relationships may come into play, as these are more quickly established and require minimal stimulus input (Zajonc 1980). In that sense, affect can serve as a fallback strategy for still achieving the decision-making task of selecting appropriate network contacts for information search behavior, whenever such a decision task becomes too complex.

But what specific fallback strategies should we consider? A most straightforward one is the affect heuristic as described by Slovic et al. (2007). Contextualized to networking, the argument would be that we implicitly tag the people we meet with varying degrees of affect, ranging from positive to negative. Does someone leave us with a pleasant impression (i.e., valence)? Do they appear to be an energetic person (i.e., activation)? Consciously or unconsciously, such affective or emotive responses can serve as important cues that guide judgment and decision-making, particularly when the required judgment or decision is complex or mental resources are limited. If public officials cannot easily judge the preferences or capabilities of a potential partner, readily available feelings of liking or disliking potentially become an important substitute. The affect heuristic provides a mental shortcut which is more efficient than weighing the pros and cons of collaborating with others on dimensions of competence. The question “who do I like?” is seemingly much easier to answer.

A primary concern for this line of theorizing is then to differentiate between situations characterized by high or low decision-making uncertainty, as this determines the degree to which such fallback strategies are needed. The institutional structure of networked interaction seems crucial to consider. Particular committees or working groups through which much collaboration occurs, provide actors with a clearly delineated pool of potential partners (Leifeld and Schneider 2012). Organizational structures and the division of actors in particular units provide a similar function for intra-organizational networks (Whetsell et al. 2021). The “ordering” that such contexts provide can facilitate strategic network behavior and partner selection according to theoretical mechanisms, such as preference similarity or perceived influence. However, with larger group sizes and fewer platforms for interaction, decision-making uncertainty increases, and fallback strategies are more likely required. Affect will then play a bigger role in networked interaction.

Overall, the point to emphasize is that the use of the affect heuristic is not necessarily rational or strategic in terms of reaching policy goals but does provide decision-makers with a straightforward pool of potential partners and a clear cue by which to evaluate them (i.e., “who do I like?”). Particularly when faced with decision-making uncertainty within the social encounter of networked interaction, “feelings of goodness and badness associated with a stimulus object” (i.e., a potential collaborative partner) can be more dominant in evaluating others than strategic considerations such as preference similarity or perceived influence (see Slovic et al. 2007). Although actors are assumed to behave rationally and goal-oriented, cognitive and attentional limits sometimes force them to make use of fallback strategies. Affect presents decision-makers with such a fallback and this is one way in which the concept of affect can be incorporated into theorizing on network behavior.

Affect in the Driver's Seat

In this second line of theorizing, the mode of decision-making in the driver's seat is flipped around. A large scholarship in organizational theory and social psychology can be used to argue that affect or emotions are the main drivers of decision-making, which is often *rationalized* after the fact (Barsade and Gibson 2007). Haidt (2001, 814) has framed this mode

of theorizing as “the emotional dog and the rational tail”: although decision-makers may think they act rational and strategic (and will tell you so when interviewing them), in practice their decisions are based on emotions, intuitions, and other mental states falling under Kahneman and Tversky’s system 1 type of thinking (Morewedge and Kahneman 2010). Such a perspective can also be applied to the domain of network behavior.

Rather than treating affect as a fallback strategy, this line of theorizing elevates the dimensions of *valence* and *activation* to the status of separate (and thus competing) explanations for patterns of networked interaction, regardless of the decision-making uncertainty characterizing networked settings. The theoretical argument to work out would be that dimensions of warmth are more important than dimensions of competence in social interaction and, particularly, when evaluating potential collaborators. This may be the case given that studies on impression formation consistently find that in forming judgments about others, people are much more sensitive to warmth information than to competence information (Fiske et al. 2007). Such information will thus also play a bigger role in the contact decisions they make.

Several scholars have contextualized this theoretical position to understand network behavior, in which the emotional content accompanying a relationship (positive or negative) is shown to be a powerful force in determining who one seeks out for advice (Casciaro and Lobo 2015). Interpersonal affect potentially weighs heavier than the instrumental value derived from a potential network relationship. In flowing from situation to situation, individuals are drawn to those interactions that give them the best “emotional payoff” (Lawler 2001). For patterns of task-related workplace interaction, Casciaro and Lobo (2008) report how liking or disliking someone was a better explainer than evaluations of task-related competence. In other words, people prefer a “lovable fool” over a “competent jerk” (Casciaro and Lobo, 2005). Moreover, in looking at the dimension of *activation*, several scholars have shown how people actively avoid de-energizers, even at the cost of acquiring valuable information (Baker 2019).

A point to emphasize in considering these studies is that negative emotions potentially play a bigger role than positive ones. In that sense, this line of theorizing may provide a better explanation of who public officials *avoid* rather than whom they interact with. This falls in line with the human tendency to react more strongly to negative information (Taylor 1991). Incorporating affect into theorizing on networking relationship thus potentially provides more emphasis on the existence of negative network relationships. As noted by Labianca and Brass (2006, 597), such negative relationships “represent an enduring, recurring set of negative judgments, feelings, and behavioral intentions toward another person—a negative person schema.” Given their empirically informed estimation that such negative relationships only make up about 1%–8% of the total workplace relationships, negative affect seems to actively discourage the establishment of network ties (Labianca and Brass, 2006, 597). Such negative sentiments can thus also be used to also explain withdrawal from network behavior, that is, network absenteeism, avoidance, and exclusion.

More ambiguous within this theoretical position is the degree to which the role of affect in judgment and decision-making works consciously or unconsciously. It can be a rational strategy to only collaborate with energetic people you

like, because you believe collaborating with them to be more fruitful or because positive affect or emotions are valuable in itself (see Lawler 2001). However, the role of affect can also work more unconsciously, based on gut feelings and (implicit) intuition (see Casciaro and Lobo 2008). Regardless, there are ample reasons to believe that rather than weighing the pros and cons of various instrumental reasons for establishing contact with others, readily available affective impressions about potential partners are more important to consider (Zajonc 1980). In theorizing about informal network behavior, affect is then potentially *in the driver’s seat*, meaning that collaborative choices for a large part hinge on subjective perceptions of liking or disliking rather than on identifying actors with the desired resources or information. From this line of theorizing, *valence* (i.e., feelings of pleasantness) and *activation* (positive or negative energy) are the primary dimensions by which tie formation patterns could be explained and provide separate hypotheses to be tested.

Affect as a Decision Distorter

The last line of theorizing is one that does not necessarily put one of the modes of decision-making in the driver’s seat but focuses on the interaction between them. Such thinking about collaborative choices falls under *dual-process* models of theorizing, which assume that emotive and cognitive decision modes are hard to separate (Gawronski and Creighton 2013). This means theorizing on how intuitive or emotive and more deliberative or cognitive kinds of judgments interact to produce an outcome or decision. Still, there are numerous ways in which such interaction can occur, and the scope and variety of dual-process models is broad. Contextualized to network behavior, the form of interaction that is developed in this last line of theorizing is one in which affect and emotions act as a *decision distorter*.

To do so, this article build on theories of social cognition that focus on how people process, store, and apply information about other people in social situations (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Affective states are important in this regard, as they can distort and falsify the way you experience others, as well as the assessment you have of them. This is largely an unconscious process in which our inferences about others’ dispositions “silently” pop into our heads (Moskowitz et al. 1999). Or as Ichheiser (1943, 146) aptly describes, “we automatically interpret manifestations of other persons in specific ways without being aware of our doing so and without noticing that our observations are based on, and guided by, these unconscious interpretations.” In that sense, qualities are passively inferred into others.

Given that networked interaction has a social character, such insights on social cognition and impression formation have a clear relevance for our understanding of how network behavior occurs. Affective reactions modulate subsequent perception, meaning that in the judgment and decision-making task of choosing network contacts, people “selectively seek out, notice, and interpret data in ways that confirm and reinforce existing evaluations” (Casciaro and Lobo 2015, 375). Your emotional dispositions potentially determine who you perceive as a suitable or competent networking partner, albeit in a distorted or biased manner. The way we affectively value a social relationship also influences and potentially distorts its perceived instrumental value. In this way, affective states potentially become a basis for cognitive biases in network

behavior, distorting our decisions on who to contact for information or advice.

In particular, the evaluation of potential network partners may be prone to a halo effect, in which likeable people are overestimated in terms of partner suitability. Vice versa, unlikable people are underestimated and perhaps not even considered at all. Stereotyping and prejudices may also play a significant role in this regard. What makes such tendencies even more pervasive is that, even if our initial affective hunches are discredited afterwards, cognitive dissonance theory and confirmation bias will make sure that such biased perceptions are not easily corrected (Festinger 1957). Subjective categorizations quickly become perceptual givens (Trope and Gaunt 1999, 170), affecting the eventual contact choices we make in our network behavior.

These considerations have important implications for existing theoretical models on network behavior. The *perceived* competence of others may still function as a cue for contact-making, but this perception may be distorted by whether we experience someone as likeable or energizing. Vice versa, those leaving us with unpleasant feelings potentially disqualify them as a source for information and advice. Likeable people may be overestimated in terms of how useful they are as a network contact, while the expertise or resources of those we perceive as unpleasant or draining may be left untapped: they never cross our mind as a potential network contact. Experimental research demonstrates how people experiencing positive affect could recall a larger number of network contacts, believing more people to be part of their networks (Shea et al. 2015). Affective feelings influence the way we mentally represent the networks that surround us and the local network structures in which we believe to be embedded. Such considerations have implications for the way in which public officials pursue network strategies (e.g., bridging or bonding): they likely do so based on partial or incorrect perceptions of their networked environments colored by affect.

This third line of theorizing draws attention to the interaction between existing theoretical mechanisms in public administration research and our affect-based judgments of others. Moreover, it also underlines some of the perverse effects of affect-based judgment for the eventual network choices that we make. Such affective states play a significant role in the initial categorization of others but may be severely biased. This becomes particularly problematic as such categorizations determine whether further processing kicks in. Although such further processing may be done on dimensions of competence (e.g., perceived influence, access to resources), it is inevitably influenced and colored by our affect-based assessments of others. We more easily see and overestimate the instrumental value of those we like, whereas those we dislike are not even considered. Our initial affective reactions to others spill over into subsequent processing and perception (Blanchette and Richards 2004). In this way, affect functions as a decision distorter, potentially leading to biases in our thinking and our eventual collaborative choices.

HOW TO STUDY ALL THIS EMPIRICALLY?

Overall, the role of affect in network behavior can be considered in diverse ways. To better understand the *conditions under which* it plays role and the different manifestations that affect might have, this section provides guidelines on how to study

the presented theoretical lines empirically. A broad range of methods are considered, in which the focus is primarily on how scholars can empirically distinguish between the three lines of theorizing.

As a starting point, given that many of the concepts and ideas noted in this article have a strong link to the field of social network analysis, these methods can also be applied to study the question of affect. Lazega's (2001) classic study on advice and friendship relationships between lawyers, for instance, is easily translated to a public sector setting. Name generator (or other survey) instruments can be used to establish a list of contacts, which can then be used as an input for further questioning on the reasons for establishing and maintaining contacts (Eagle and Proeschold-Bell 2015). Through also measuring established scales of interpersonal affect, scholars can test whether a statistical association between affect and *task-related* ties exists within public sector organizations (Casciaro and Lobo 2008).

By then assessing the extent to which such a relationship is moderated by factors that characterize complex decision-making situations, we can better grasp the theoretical role that affect is likely to play in collaborative choices. For instance, does an association between *affect* and network contacts only exist in particularly large networks, suggesting that respondents use such affect-based assessments as a fallback strategy? Or do such affect-based assessments *always* play a role (i.e., in the driver's seat), even for networks in which we expect actors to make reasonably accurate estimations of others' preferences or capabilities? Comparing network patterns within settings of low and high degrees of institutionalization is also interesting in this regard, given its hypothesized effect on collaborative uncertainty (Van der Heijden 2022).

Still, such traditional network-analytical methods introduce artificiality and rest heavily on the presumed validity of self-reports. Moreover, statistical associations within network research are often plagued by problems of selection and influence (i.e., are network ties established because people like each other, or do people come to like each other because they have established a network tie?). Recent advancements in network-analytical methods can help in this regard, in which statistical network modeling provides a particularly promising avenue to further assess what drives network behavior (see Scott and Ulibari 2019). However, although such forms of statistical network modeling can more convincingly demonstrate a particular empirical pattern, the same pattern can often be explained by several theoretical models, making it hard to confidently answer questions on the exact role affect plays in network behavior (see Siciliano et al. 2021, 76).

To better grasp the decision-making dynamics underlying network behavior, researchers can also make use of *survey experiments* or vignettes (Barrera and Buskens 2007; Silvia 2018). By presenting respondents with reality-based scenarios describing potential network contacts and systematically varying them on affect- and competence-based stimuli, researchers can establish which cues drive decision-making. Moreover, such an experimental setup allows one to vary the complexity of decision-making situations, both in terms of an over- and undersupply of information. How do respondents make decisions when limited information on potential contacts is provided? Are they more likely to respond to affect-based stimuli or not? *Affective priming* in the context

of collaborative choices could establish the extent to which affect acts as a decision-distorter (see Fazio 2001). In addition, varying positive and negative primes could further differentiate whether respondents react more heavily to negative cues than to positive ones (Klein 1991).

Still, within the artificial settings of an experimental setup, problems with ecological validity exist. To study network behavior *in context*, *diary studies* have shown a lot of potential for studying a varied number of topics in organizational research (Ohly et al. 2010). Such methods would have respondents report on their network behaviors on a (more than) daily basis. Under the assumption that network behavior is highly fluctuating and strongly dependent on situational conditions, a diary design can offer a means for analyzing such fluctuations. Such a setup, for instance, enabled Tschan et al. (2005); to study the display of emotions in work-related interactions and could also be used for better understanding the formation of informal communications patterns. By having respondents report situational conditions such as their stress levels or uncertainty regarding courses of action, diary studies can expose interesting patterns. The conditions under which affect-based stimuli play a bigger role in reported network behavior could help differentiate between the different lines of theorizing.

Another (qualitative) method is to simply interview public officials on their informal networks and the main motivations for establishing contacts. From this, different dimensions of interpersonal affect relevant to network behavior can be distinguished. Although such methods require respondents to memorize previous interactions and are potentially prone to ex-post rationalization or socially desirable responses, they provide context to network behavior and offer the flexibility to deal with unique occurrences and particularities. The use of fieldwork and observations can similarly be used for tracking down informal network patterns and their drivers. Simply observing real-time conversations within and around managerial meetings provided Gibson (2003) with interesting insights on communication patterns. Similarly, fly-on-the-wall or shadowing methods have recently been put to good use in better understanding “the craft” of top civil servants (Van Dorp 2018) and can be used for studying network behavior as well.

Again, focusing on different decision-making situations allows us to think about the different lines of theorizing more clearly, particularly about *when* affect is likely to kick in. By understanding network behavior *in context*, qualitative methods provide crucial tools to assess the role of affect in different decision-making situations. Particularly for theory building and elaboration, the open-ended nature of such qualitative methods is a big advantage, as it allows for new and unexpected insights to emerge. In that sense, different methods—with different strengths and weaknesses—should complement each other to more fully grasp the dynamics of informal network behavior and the role interpersonal affect plays.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Knowledge sharing and information exchange through informal networks is crucially important for the functioning of public organizations and the quality of government service (Binz-Scharpf et al. 2012; O’Toole 2015). Because

of this, public administration scholars increasingly invest in explaining patterns of informal communication and network behavior (Calanni et al. 2015; Siciliano et al. 2021). This article has argued the role of affect and emotions is underestimated in current theorizing and has presented three ways in which this role can still be incorporated. Important to emphasize, however, is that these perspectives need not be mutually exclusive; affect may sometimes be the main driver for network behavior, while other times it is more in the back seat, complementing or distorting more rationalist modes of decision-making. In that sense, investigating the conditions under which what type of decision-making is more prominent is likely most fruitful.

The same qualification should be made regarding existing frameworks on informal network behavior and their hypothesized drivers of collaboration such as preference similarity or resource access. The assumption of strategic, goal-oriented behavior is very reasonable for public officials and existing theoretical explanations have improved our understanding of the way in which informal network patterns form and develop. The core argument of this article is merely that sometimes the complexity of networked interaction makes such rationalist modes of decision-making problematic (affect as a fallback strategy), while other times affective modes of decision-making are more important given the social nature of networked interaction, either interfering with rational decision-making (decision distorter) or taking over entirely (in the driver’s seat). Incorporating such an affect-based perspective into public administration theorizing can have several important contributions.

First and foremost, it provides existing theoretical models on network behavior and collaborative choices with a higher accuracy of description. The role of affect in judgment and decision-making has proven to be such a fundamental aspect of human behavior (see Fiske et al. 2007) that it cannot be ignored when understanding the behavior of public officials. Current research into network behavior emphasizes its rational and strategic aspects, focusing primarily on the instrumental, task-related side of relational activity (see Lopez et al. 2018). This quickly draws one to functionalist explanations of network behavior. However, the complexity of network behavior as a form of social interaction should not be underestimated. People inevitably differentiate each other by liking and disliking and this will play a crucial role in decisions about whom to contact for information or advice. Not acknowledging this leads us unable to account for a great deal of the networked patterns that make up the practice of everyday governance.

Second, theorizing on the role of affect in informal network relationships provides more emphasis on negative network relationships and network avoidance behavior (Labianca and Brass 2006). There exists a human tendency to react more strongly to negative information (Taylor 1991) and such a perspective can also be applied to network behavior. It intuitively makes sense that public officials avoid people who they perceive as unpleasant or mean, regardless of their instrumental value. This potentially hampers proper advice seeking, coalition building, and information exchange. Affect helps us to think more clearly about such network avoidance behavior and the network relationships that *fail* to materialize, despite sufficient functional or instrumental considerations. Acknowledging this, can correct for the positive aura that

exists around network behavior, in which it is primarily interpreted in terms of social capital and ways of *getting things done*. The flipside is that public officials perceive networking as a hassle, in which they actively try to avoid unpleasant people, as such negative network relationships can severely impact job performance and satisfaction (Venkataramani et al. 2013).

Finally, the above-provided lines of theorizing open the door to a potential dark side of informal network behavior. Affective modes of decision-making can be biased (see Casciaro and Lobo 2015), potentially leading to systematic biases in informal networks themselves. A broad scholarship on networks and social psychology demonstrates that it is simply much more pleasant and comfortable for us to interact with those that we perceive as similar (McPherson et al. 2001). In that sense, we are likely to surround ourselves with similarly minded and perhaps even similarly looking people. Particularly this last point allows thinking more clearly on systematic biases in network behavior, leading to pervasive (networked) patterns such as *old boys networks*, *glass ceilings*, and a lacking diversity in the upper echelons of management. Stereotyping and prejudices will play a significant role in network behavior and lead to particular networked patterns. Incorporating the concept of affect in the study of informal network behavior helps us to better understand these problematic tendencies and the mechanisms from which they emerge.

These last two considerations are particularly important when studying network behavior in a public context. The information public officials gather through their informal networks influences the (policy) problems and solutions identified within government. If affect-based assessments of others lead to a choice of network contacts that provide lower quality information or emphasize one-sided concerns, this is problematic. In these instances, it will be important to explore the ways in which our work contexts can elicit a more competence-focused frame for judging others. Perhaps (public service) motivated public officials working within a public sector organizational context may be willing to invest additional time and effort to more comfortably assess potential network partner in terms of their instrumental value, that is, public duties might elicit a competence-based frame. If not, we might need to provide them with the relevant organizational and institutional structures through which public officials can more comfortably identify a diverse array of potential network contacts, facilitating additional pathways for information flows (see Whetsell et al. 2021).

An important aspect not explicitly considered in this article is the role that personality and individual-level characteristics are likely to play in the way public officials engage in network behavior. Of the big-five personality factors, extraversion (sociability, assertiveness, emotional expressiveness) and agreeableness (cooperative, trusting, kind) immediately come to mind as being relevant for network behavior. Such personality characteristics may function as a moderator for the degree to which interpersonal affect will drive collaborative choices and should be explored further (see Fang et al. 2015). The integration of psychological perspectives toward behavior with those of network theories has recently gained prominence in organizational theory (Casciaro et al. 2015; Kilduff and Krackhardt 2008), and clearly has relevance for public administration as well.

In conclusion, one point is clear: knowledge sharing, information exchange, and advice giving are an important part of organizational life and are a direct result of the personal relationships that public officials maintain. Understanding what drives the formation of these relationships is critical to elaborating accurate theories of public organizations. Researchers and practitioners can use this article to think more clearly about the role that interpersonal affect plays in this regard. Given the social nature of networked interaction, this is likely to be a big one. As Collins (1981, 1001) observed, “the most basic emotional ingredient in interactions is a minimal tone of positive sentiment toward the other,” potentially making it a necessary condition for network interaction to emerge. Interpersonal affect often interacts with the instrumental value ascribed to potential collaborators, sometimes precedes it, and can even overrule it. Taking this notion into account will improve our theorizing on networked patterns of interaction within public organizations and the public sector more broadly.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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