

SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Hierarchical Advice and Advising Hierarchies:

Exploring the Social Ordering of Line-Organization's Feedback Culture

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I. Introduction

The act of giving and receiving advice is often perceived as commonplace, seldom prompting profound contemplation. Yet, my involvement in human resources projects as a consultant spurred a reassessment of this assumption. Throughout this project, a recurring theme surfaced from interviews with stakeholders across diverse organizations: amidst considerable challenges, there was a collective ambition to improve problem-solving skills, promote knowledge sharing, and cultivate learning environments. This ambition was accentuated by a drive to strengthen overall innovation capabilities, taking cues from modern organizational models epitomized by industry giants such as Apple. The narratives on the culture of these innovative firms often linger around characteristics such as openness, strong cohesion, and flatness the organization (Thompson 1967, Arshi and Burns 2018) contrasting with classical models that emphasize hierarchy in the tradition of Max Weber (1922). This drive for innovation and organizational transformation has been further fueled by technological advancements like GenAI and socio-economic movements such as diversity, which have prompted reforms in organizational structures and corporate cultures (Bain 2022, Deloitte 2024). At the crux of these discussions lies the significance of intra-organizational advice as a conduit for knowledge exchange.

This phenomenon is frequently examined through the lenses of social capital and social status theory, as will be explored in the Literature Review section of this essay (Chapter 2). However, while these established theories offer frameworks for understanding this phenomenon, displaying both specific weaknesses and strengths (Section 3.1), there remain uncharted structural elements in current research, such as the locality in conflicts due to intra-organizational competition and the latency of resource access, offering potential avenues for further research (Section 3.2). This analysis will also touch on the normative significance of advice and its implications within the context of broader societal shifts, particularly the growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion (Section 3.3). Finally, recognizing the technological disruption and truly digital transformations of organizations and their advice practices, the essay will close with highlighting the potential of HR technologies as a new frontier for research on advice networks within organizations (Chapter 4).

II. Literature Review

The literature relevant for this essay on organizational learning and innovation, specifically the subject of advice networks viewed through the lens of Social Network Analysis (SNA), can be delineated into three primary categories (Agneessens and Wittek 2012) subsequently analyzed in a form of a topical review. Firstly, the perspective of social status is deemed pertinent, followed by the perspective of social capital. These perspectives are often viewed as opposing theoretical frameworks or understanding advice relation. For instance, Agneessens and Wittek (2012) emphasize that both concepts "differ in their behavioral micro-foundations [-] from a status perspective, advice giving is a means to generate prestige, whereas asking advice decreases one's relative standing (...) [, while] from a social capital perspective, advice seeking creates obligations for the advice seeker" (Agneessens and Wittek 2012, 333). Some researchers also operationalize a hybrid approach – either implicitly (e.g., Lazega et al. 2011) or explicitly (e.g., Agneessens and Wittek 2012).

II.1 Social Status Theory

Social status, which is radically intersubjective, can be defined as being respected or admired by others (Lazega et al. 2006, 2011, Agneessens and Wittek 2012, Flynn et al. 2006, Ravlin and Thomas 2005, Magee and Galinsky 2008). This perspective implies not only that social status functions as a motivator for social behavior, particularly in seeking and providing advice, but also that such social status considerations encourage individuals to actively pursue high status (Lazega et al. 2011, Agneessens and Wittek 2012, Loch et al. 2001). Following Wittek (1999), in particular intra-organizational advice can influence the definition of status in an organizational context. However, there is no unanimous approach in the literature to the definition of social status, although it is widely acknowledged that social status exists and the description of individuals possessing social status exhibits a fundamental commensurability (Krackhardt 1990,

Agneessens and Wittek 2012). Agneessens and Wittek (2012) argue that the various theoretical standpoints of the social status theory can be delineated as follows: (1) the expectation states theory (e.g., Berger et al. 1972), (2) the social exchange theory (Montgomery 1996), (3) the status value theory of power (Thye 2000).

In expectation states theory¹, individuals are ascribed capacities (e.g., high experience due to their age), and these are evaluated and weighted concerning the task in which the advice of these individuals is to be operationalized. Once a specific belief about a status characteristic is activated, individuals will act as if this status characteristic is relevant to task performance (Agneessens and Wittek 2012, Wagner and Berger 2002). These performance expectations are impactful insofar as that they afford individuals both more opportunities and better evaluations of performance (Agneessens and Wittek 2012). However, the main critique lies in their limited scope in addressing heterogeneous group dynamics and their assumption of unidirectional status attribution (Agneessens and Wittek 2012). Building upon the seminal works of Blau (1955, 1964), the *social exchange theory*² argues that individuals try to exchange status recognition for advice (Lazega et al. 2011). In the operationalization of the social status theory, this theory is based on a micro-economic actor model, i.e., that giving advice leads to *opportunity costs* for the advice giver³ which can be *compensated* if advice giving produces social rewards like expert-status and overall prestige. Lastly, the *status value theory of power* (Agneessens and Wittek 2012, Thye 2000) is frequently mobilized essentially arguing that interchangeable resources are perceived as more valuable when controlled by actors with high status than when controlled by actors with low status.

While there are nuances within the social-status theory, it can be theoretically asserted (and empirically supported⁴) as the primary takeaway that "advisors are sensitive to this recognition of their status by the advice seeker and this gives them an incentive to share their expertise (...) with the advice seeker on an informal basis" (Lazega et al. 2011, 324). Moreover, this social-status theory generally implies *status games* (Lazega et al. 2011), suggesting a centralization of the network often closely resembling the structure of the organization itself. However, in terms of the practical implications of this theory, a significant issue emerges. If the act of seeking advice noticeably influences perceptions of social status, it can result in asymmetrical participation within advice networks. High-status individuals may be hesitant to engage in activities that could potentially compromise their status, while low-status individuals may be reluctant to disclose potential problems with tasks posed in the work context (Lazega et al. 2011). To develop a more nuanced understanding, Lazega et al. (2011) contend that integrating the concept of homophily and considering other social ties⁵ which could potentially mitigate these negative effects on sharing knowledge beneficial for task performance. By doing so, it lays the groundwork for incorporating reasoning based on social capital.

II.2 Social Capital Theory

Drawing from Bourdieu's (1983, 1986) theoretical framework, social capital, a canonic concept in sociological inquiry, is frequently discussed both in the context of advice networks as well as general career advancements⁶. Bourdieu attributes social capital to a group and grounds it in material and symbolic exchange relationships via a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu 1983, 1986). It is utilized to consolidate or enhance one's own status within societal classes and groups, essentially constituting a concept of power at its core. In the discourse within SNA, however, this concept particularly stems from the nexus explicitly elucidated by Nan Lin (2000, 2001), which is also operationalized by Vacchiano et al. (2022). This places social

¹ Or E-state structuralism – its later network analytic elaboration.

² Which is also a core concept in the social capital theory (Lazega et al 2011, Agneessens and Wittek 2012).

³ E.g., in terms of time that could be used for other activities.

⁴ For instance, Lazega et al. (2011) reference an impressive amount of literature supporting this finding including: Bapuji and Crossan (2004), Brass (1984), Krackhardt (1990), Barley (1990), Lazega (1992, 1995, 2002), Lazega et al. (2006), Lazega and Van Duijn (1997), and Cross et al. (2001).

⁵ E.g., similar seniority levels and similar education but also friendship. Overall, research indicates that characteristics that individuals acquire over time are particularly important, e.g. the level of education as well as, for instance, being an alumn from a prestigious firm (Lazega et al. 2011, Becker 1993, Wegener, 1991).

⁶ One crucial aspect of this theory is that it – like the social status perspective – helps individuals achieve their performance and career targets (Calciolari et al. 2017).

networks at the center of the concept. Here, social capital is portrayed as the resources that can be mobilized through social relationships, i.e., *access* can be gained, but *investment* is required beforehand (e.g., Vacchiano et al. 2022; Agneessens and Wittek 2012, Adler and Kwon 2002, Portes 1998; Borgatti et al. 1998, Flap et al. 1998, Zhang et al. 2009, 2016, Knoke 1999). While it bears some resemblance to the social status perspective, particularly as it also builds on the *social exchange theory*, it is differently oriented. Essentially, the theory of social capital can be construed as a system of status attainment predicated on "who people know" (Vacchiano et al. 2022; Bourdieu 1986, Lin, 2000/2001) influenced by factors such as homophily and transitivity (Vacchiano et al. 2022). Within this framework, Agneessens and Wittek (2012) outline two significant structural elements, resembling a *system of debt*: the *reciprocity* of advice, where future return of investment is anticipated, necessitating the avoidance of excessive imbalances, and the pursuit of substantial *knowledge* through this exchange. Consequently, within the framework of social capital, there exists a reduced asymmetry in the advice behavior of individuals with high status as they engage in *reciprocal* advice exchanges. Based on micro-economic principles assumptions of this theory, an individual who only receives advice without reciprocating may be perceived as a *free rider*, potentially leading to exclusion from vital resources and social networks (Walker et al. 1994, Uehara 1995). Thus, there are arguments to avoid extensive indebtedness, especially for new actors in a network. However, it is still pertinent that frequent advice seekers are considered as important sources of knowledge, thus their advice is deemed valuable⁷. Furthermore, the concept of weak ties, i.e., that these weak ties provide individuals with access to structural opportunities and resources beyond their immediate environments, is regularly mobilized in this context (e.g., by Vacchiano et al. 2022 or Abbasi et al. 2014). This concept is particularly nuanced by considering individuals both as individuals and as organizational members (Vacchiano et al. 2022) – thereby, individuals to some extent gain a "dual-positioning" (Vacchiano et al. 2022) which grants them access to resources in both networks, including those from other organizations.

III.3 Hybrid Perspectives

Further insights from Lazega et al. (2011, and Vacchiano et al. 2022) highlight a shifting landscape in contemporary research on social status and advice relations. The previously perceived rigid dichotomy between social status and capital perspectives appears to be fading, with arguments emerging that resonate with both viewpoints, thus fostering a convergence. This trend, notably prominent in studies published post-2010, induces the emergence of the studies from Lazega et al. (2011) and Agneessens and Wittek (2012) as pivotal reference points within this scholarly discourse. Methodologically, both studies rely on the Stochastic Actor-Based Network Model⁸, as implemented in the SIENA program (Boer et al 2006, Snijders 2001, Snijders 2005, Snijders et al 2007) and operationalize panel study's focusing on understanding employees' respectively judges' advice-seeking behavior. Regarding the operationalization of this model, Agneessens and Wittek (2012) capture the frequency of advice in their inquiry, while Lazega et al. (2011) only examine the mere existence of advice relationships during the observation periods. On the other hand, Lazega et al. (2011) provide a more detailed insight into the hierarchical position and academic as well as professional backgrounds of the respondents. Furthermore, both papers have methodological limitations. For instance, the non-addressing of the phenomenon of *panel conditioning* (e.g. Heise 1970, Groves et al 2009, Burgard et al 2020, Tourangerau et al 2000, Warren and Halpern-Manners 2012) and the exclusion of individuals who have left the company or court during the observation period. This decision, particularly in Agneessens and Wittek (2012), requires further substantiation, as this group, in particular, might reveal shortcomings in organizational culture like exclusion from advice networks and

⁷ However, it is also possible to construct reasonable sub-categories of social capital. For instance, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) as well as Lazega et al. (2011) discuss three dimensions of social capital within advice networks: a structural dimension stemming from formal expectations, a relational dimension shaped by factors like friendship and familiarity, and a "cognitive" dimension influenced by shared values or beliefs.

⁸ This model serves as a statistical framework for analyzing longitudinal network data, modeling changes in network ties over time based on individual-level attributes and network structures, thus, accommodating both endogenous and exogenous processes. According to the Agneessens and Wittek (2012), the algorithm of SAOM delineates changes in networks observed at different time points as a series of consecutive steps, estimating the probability of each potential change towards the specific structure envisioned by the researcher based on the current state of the network and the individual and network attributes of the actors involved (Snijders 2001, Snijders 2005).

prompting individuals to leave the organization⁹. Insights on this group could inform practical implications how to improve inclusion and belonging in organizations fostering long-term talent retention and, thus, enabling organizations to fully leverage the skill set of their human capital.

III.3.1 The Case of the Commercial Court of Paris (Lazega et al. 2011)

Lazega et al.'s (2011) study investigates the case of the Commercial Court of Paris, an institutionalized joint regulation of markets by lay and voluntary judges, examining the advice networks among judges and analyzes the influence of shared norms and values¹⁰ on these networks. Building upon the theory of social status, specifically the social exchange value theory as espoused by Blau (1955, 1964), the study asserts a trade-off between status recognition as well as solidarity and homophily – the latter aligning more closely with the theory of social capital. The paper argues that through homophilic relationships, including ties such as friendship, transaction costs for advice, i.e. advice requires less in terms of conferring status recognition, and consequently the destructive effects of social-status games, are mitigated (McPherson et al. 2001, Lazega et al. 2011). In nuce, social advice networks can be characterized as operationalizing elements of both social capital and social status theory¹¹.

En detail, the study demonstrates that status hierarchy remains the primary incentivization and motivation structure for advice relationships, with advice predominantly sought from high-status individuals, thus reinforcing the status hierarchy over time. The study accentuates a crucial aspect, namely the *(super-)centrality* of advisors – in this case defined by both formal components, i.e., specific areas of responsibility within the court, as well as an informal component, i.e., above-average in-degrees. Central advisors tend to gain status progressively and become even more central in the network, leading to the emergence of a group elite comprising super-central advisors (Lazega et al 2006, 2011). This elite group remains relatively stable and significantly influences intra-organizational advice relations and organizational learning dynamics (Lazega et al. 2006). Lazega et al also suggest that these networks also may exhibit traits akin to a *spinning top model* including a *fragile equilibrium* due to the issue of task overload posing the risk of losing this high-status position and indicating a cyclical element (Lazega et al 2006). In addressing the mitigation of negative effects, i.e. asymmetries in advice due to status games (Lazega et al. 2006, 2011), the study reveals a nuanced perspective operationalizing reciprocity obligations stemming from the social capital theory: while the mitigation effect holds true for chamber similarity and employment status similarity, it does not extend to normative homophily (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). The results of the study can be interpreted either as indicating no significant mitigation effect of shared values, or suggesting that in conflict situations, entering into advice relationships may be perceived as an additional signal of alignment, indicating a positioning within such conflicts and a normative alignment. Its normative choices are adopted by a majority of non-(super-)central advisors¹². Thus, the effect of norms and values – as well as the social capital perspective in general – is fundamentally related to social-status effects. Consequently, while the perspective of social capital through homophily is considered for examination and partly confirmed, the empirical evidence in this case attributes the primary effect to the theory of social status¹³ – which may be particularly due to the study being tailored to the concept of homophily.

III.3.2 The Case of a Dutch Housing Company (Agneessens and Wittek 2012)

Agneessens and Wittek (2012) undertake an exploration of advice-seeking behaviors within organizational networks based on the case study of a small housing cooperation in the Netherlands. This study distinguishes itself by undertaking a deliberate juxtaposition of the theories of social capital and social status. It achieves this by formulating hypotheses that are explicitly grounded in these theoretical frameworks. In general, some researchers (e.g. Mirc and

⁹ E.g., permanent members may avoid asking temporary members for advice to not risk a drop in status (Wilkin et al. 2018).

¹⁰ These are, through reference to the concept of homophily and the work of Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), grounded in the theory of social capital.

¹¹ I.e. "advice networks tend to be both hierarchical and cohesive (at least within subsets of peers), with the hierarchical dimension usually stronger than the cohesive one" (Lazega et al., 2011).

¹² This indicates that advice relations in Lazega et al.'s case study are decisively shaped by "conformity via progressive alignment on the norm promoted by the elite" (Lazega et al. 2011, 331) rather than shared values.

¹³ Which, however, may be particularly due to the study being tailored to the specific concept of normative homophily limiting the generalizability to other social capital related factors.

Parker 2020, Renzini et al 2024) argue that the paper complements the findings of Lazega et al. (2006, 2011) as the paper finds empirical evidence for the social capital (*reciprocity*¹⁴) as well as social status theory (*Assortativity indegree (sqrt) to outdegree (sqrt)*). A notable finding is that two main-results in less elaborated models – i.e. that individuals are less likely to receive advice from the advisees of their advisees and that more active advice seekers are less likely to be approached for advice themselves – become statistically insignificant *Assortativity indegree (sqrt) to outdegree (sqrt)* parameter is introduced. This, thus, indicates that these effects are limited to active advice givers. The primary conclusion drawn from this study underscores the necessity of closely scrutinizing the nuances of social status effects, which encompass both *local*, i.e. individual relations within triads, and *global* manifestations, i.e. an individual's overarching position within the organizational hierarchy. Consequently, there arises a need to examine the behavior of sub-groups within the organization.

III. Critical Analysis

III.1 Similarities, Differences, Strengths and Weaknesses of the Social Status and Social Capital Theory

First and foremost, it can be observed that both perspectives, namely social capital and social status, share significant similarities and are regularly considered together in the literature – a notable exception being the work of Agneessens and Wittek (2012), who were the first to explicitly separate and empirically test both perspectives. This should not come as a surprise, as both theories stem from the same core, the theory of social exchange, and thus do not differ in the underlying theoretical foundation, but only in the expectations for practical behavior derived from it, as well as in the structure of intra-organizational advice, learning, and subsequent hierarchies. The difference lies, therefore, as per Agneessens and Wittek (2012), in the behavioral micro-foundations – resulting in asymmetrical and strategic advice relationships being entered into in line with the social status perspective, while the acquisition of knowledge is prioritized in line with the social capital perspective, wherein individuals who have already sought advice extensively are not considered invaluable for advice, but rather particularly capable, coupled with the fundamental attempt to promote reciprocity and avoid new debts.

The perspective of social capital is particularly characterized by its high empirical robustness. Specifically, the finding that individuals with high status are central advisors in organizations, and they are sensitive to the exchange of advice for status, i.e., they strategically leverage this, is highly robust in the literature of SNA and is evidenced by numerous studies. Therefore, it seems accurate, following Lazega et al. (2011), to assert that status is the core motivation for individuals to enter into advice relationships in organizations. Without this perspective, essential characteristics of social advice networks, such as *status games*, the *spinning top concept*, or the *fragile equilibrium* (Lazega et al. 2006, 2011, 2022), would not be theoretically and empirically graspable. Additionally, this perspective stands out for its robust applicability in contexts of organizations that are both formally hierarchized, i.e., there are positions with varying levels of competence distribution from ordinary employees to presidents or boards, but also informally hierarchized. This is demonstrated *par excellence* by Lazega et al. (2011) when it is shown that super-central advisors are not necessarily the presidents of the individual chambers, i.e., those with formal status, but also informal status, such as education (specifically bankers with a law degree in the examined case), play a significant role and may have divergent normative expectations, which otherwise risk being overlooked. However, the weakness of this concept seems to lie essentially in that it may lead to a consideration that neglects other essential relational characteristics, including normative concepts, such as the influence of friendship, trust-building, and shared characteristics in general, which enable access to another network (Lazega et al. 2011, Becker 1993, Wegener 1991, Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). Moreover, it may not conceptualize the empirically robust finding of reciprocity and free riding (Agneessens and Wittek 2012). Additionally, the literature is still indifferent what extent the quality (both in terms of quality and type) of the advice influences these

¹⁴ Furthermore, in support of the social capital theory the paper indicates that individuals who seek advice from many others are also sought after for advice by many others and that advice givers prefer seeking advice from their own recipients rather than from others they have not recently advised.

relationships and status recognition (Agneessens and Wittek 2012) – this seems *prima facie* evident, as it cannot be assumed that advice that does not help solve a problem should be rewarded, nor should it be repeatedly requested. This could at least implicitly manifest itself when individuals, although initially deemed relevant (for example, based on attributions as in the expectation states theory), are less central in the network than expected over the course of an observation period because repeated advice-seeking from them is not relevant due to the deficient quality.

This is complemented by the perspective of social capital, which operationalizes a more holistic view, including trust. Therefore, the perspective can potentially explain normative influences on behaviors. However, the significant weakness of this approach is that the empirical evidence – aside from reciprocity and friendship – is by far not as extensive as for the theory of social status. Additionally, it seems pertinent that if this perspective were to be solely used, significant drivers of social networks, as outlined earlier in the theory of social status, could be neglected (Lazega et al. 2011, Agneessens and Wittek 2012). Furthermore, this perspective also runs the risk of reductionist tendencies with its strong focus on the acquisition of resources and knowledge neglecting the genuine motivation to help and operationalizing questionable metaphors like debt. There is a tendency to use terms operationalized by sociologists in various context without adequate reflection of their possible contextualization and, notably, without considering their normative foundations. This oversight may inadvertently reduce concepts like reciprocity – a key-concept of Habermas theory of deliberative democracy (Habermas 2021) – to a mere technical component within an input-output framework. Consequently, it impedes a comprehensive assessment of the normative and societal implications associated with advice and its recognition.

However, the most concerning deficiency of the literature available is the limited generalizability, as the object of observation is each specific, i.e., a court in Paris or a small housing company, and small in terms of the number of respondents. Therefore, it would be particularly relevant to consider an object of observation such as a blue-chip company, as this could reveal further elements that provide evidence for the interplay of both perspectives and add new structural elements explored in the next section of this essay – in particular as big line-organizations are regularly characterized by high internal competition and power games. The methodology employed by Agneessens and Wittek (2012) and Lazega et al. (2011), based on the SIENA model (Boer et al 2006; Snijders 2001; Snijders 2005; Snijders et al 2007), would likely be suitable and appropriate for this purpose.

III.2 Avenues for Further Research in SNA

Expanding upon potential directions for future research, three crucial areas emerge – each of them particularly relevant for big organizations which are not yet explored in the applicable and relevant literature. The first concerns the issue of advice, intra-organizational competition, and loyalty. During my work as a consultant, I contributed to a project on the digital transformation of Human Resources Management for a large German pharmaceutical company, which is essentially organized as a line-organization but also has some flatter, more deliberative, and overall freer parts (such as Centers of Excellence). The company aimed to streamline the management process from recruiting through retention to dismissal and to optimize skills, knowledge, and their utilization in the organization to become a more agile and innovative firm. Thus, *corporate culture* as well as skills and knowledge sharing, became the focus of our project. Through the interviews in our study, we discovered an *intention-action gap*: While the managers unanimously advocated for better knowledge networking within the various business units and the organization as a whole, a significant portion of them, especially the higher their formal status in the company was, expressed that when considering how they share their knowledge, i.e., also provide informal advice, they neither do expect direct *reciprocity* from their subordinates nor a direct increase in their status. Several managers stated that they expect general support, essentially a *loyalty effect*, which can be activated when a conflict arises with someone of equal status to them in the formal hierarchy – especially when it comes to competition between high-level managers, such as a promotion or an important project, which in turn represents a crucial opportunity for performance and visibility. This was described, among other things, as *reinforcement of the troops* by a senior executive of the organization. This connection between advice giving and increased loyalty has remained largely unexplored within the context of SNA. Similarly, in other

disciplines within the social sciences, this relationship has received scant and superficial analysis. One notable exception is the work of Dickinson (2017), who operationalizes based on advice giving finding that positive interactions with party actors are associated with increased loyalty and that members who received more useful advice from party actors were more likely to rate themselves as highly influenced by the party leadership. This effect may implicitly also be associated with normative alignment, as observed by Lazega et al. (2006, 2011) in the case of the *Commercial Court of Paris*, but it also demonstrates a perspective of social status, especially the expectation states theory (Thye, 2000). However, this willingness has a crucial limit, which *prima facie* could be most pronounced in large line organizations, i.e., that through this advice, there must be no significant threat to one's own position – for example, through enabling competitors from one's own loyalty environment. This project-based insight suggests a research direction that further explores the nexus of loyalty and competition on the meso-level of (in-)formal teams in highly hierarchically structured companies. It appears plausible that within this context, tendencies of both social capital and social status may emerge, thereby potentially complementing the research conducted by Lazega et al. (2006, 2011) and Agneessens and Wittek (2012).

Furthermore, this case raises another elemental and hitherto in the realm of SNA unexplored structural element of such advice relationships: the temporal latency of investment in terms of social capital. Loyalty relationships and the associated indebtedness may only be called upon after more than a decade – however, such long-term dynamics cannot be adequately captured within the short observation periods typical of present studies. Consequently, the influence of social capital and its associated normative obligations may be systematically underestimated. Yet, this general effect has been discussed within the broader scope of social capital theory, it has not been specifically examined in the context of advice or through the quantitative methodologies (Rahadiano Sutopo et al. 2017, Hindl et al. 2009). For instance, McCarthy (2014) argues that the axiomatic assumption in the social capital literature that relationships require ongoing maintenance to remain valuable prompting research's to only consider active relationships neglecting dormant ties, during dormancy. His research finds that dormant ties have implications for organizational attitudes and performance-affecting organizational behaviors, particularly in their interaction with active ties and when they are high in trust¹⁵. Examining these structural moments from the perspective of SNA, thus, appears to be a fruitful research direction.

Finally, while the existing literature differentiates between various levels of hierarchy, it does not distinguish between specialization and generalist status. However, this distinction significantly determines the frequency and centrality of the advice given, but not necessarily the social status. For example, for a legal specialist in a large organization, such as the deputy head of labor law, it is an inherent characteristic of the position that they are asked for advice much more frequently, both formally and informally, than other generalists at the same hierarchical level. Conversely, generalist, by default, would have to ask more frequently for advice from specialists. This asymmetry might be the core of a good specialist-generalist relationship (Pearson 1999). However, in the literature of SNA, social status seems to be primarily and most often determined not by the quantity of requests but by the quality of the response. This aspect – along with the general research question of whether advice actually follows an advice request – appears to be a meaningful subject of investigation for a valuable complement to the theory of social status.

¹⁵ In various political and economic contexts, mentorship relationships, both ethical and ethically questionable, are evident. Take Wolfgang Schäuble, former Federal Minister and President of the Bundestag in Germany, as an example. Throughout his career, he mentored individuals known as the *Schäublies*, including Friedrich Merz, the current party leader. These mentees gain status through the proximity and implied intensity of their mentoring and advice relationships, often referred to as the *hard Schäuble school* enabling them to secure key leadership positions within the German administration. On the other hand, through these loyalty networks, Schäuble could be sure of support in essential matters within his faction – as he held *dormant, yet reactivatable* ties into virtually every top-tier organization in Germany. However, the example of Friedrich Merz shows that the return on investment in terms of the theory of social capital for Schäuble in the advice relationship with Merz may only be realized after Schäuble's death, when a significantly more conservative government might be formed under Merz's chancellorship than in the last legislatures under Angela Merkel. Although it can be noted that these mentor relationships have a special quality – and sometimes have a significant influence on German and European politics – such structural moments can probably be found in many other advice and mentor relationships as well.

III.3 Think different – Incorporating Normative Perspectives

However, the majority of SNA research advice networks fall short in addressing the *cultural* component of advice in an organization, especially Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) parameters central in the current discussion of (large) organizational performance and learning and, thus, advice (Moore and MacKenzie 2020, Vargas and Schafer 2013, Zhang and Peterson 2011). In SNA, the theories of social status and social capital are grounded in a micro-economic foundation, which assumes a fundamental rationality of individuals aimed at strategic control neglecting emotional parameters like a sense of belonging or being heard, are nonetheless central to the strategic orientation of organizations. From the perspective of diversity, advice should not only be conceived in the context of problem-solving but also as a means to foster inclusion and promote individuals from marginalized groups. Research has highlighted a pervasive lack of inclusivity in the workplace, impacting a majority of employees across diverse demographics – particularly evident in large line-organizations. According to Bain & Company (2022), over 70% of workers, including straight white males, report not feeling fully included at work. Furthermore, employees are placing a growing emphasis on cultivating positive relationships with coworkers when assessing job priorities. According to Bain (2022b), 39% of employees rank this aspect as one of their top-three priorities, closely trailing behind job security. This aligns with the discovery that the emphasis on status recognition ranks as the least important among ten key dimensions (e.g., financial orientation, variety, and autonomy) of what constitutes a *good job*, albeit with notable variations across different worker types (Bain 2022b). On the other hand, companies in the top quartile for gender diversity and a strong sense of inclusion are 39% more likely to financially outperform peers (McKinsey 2023). Furthermore, Shazi et al (2015) argue that inclusion and trust drive innovation. High-status individuals should, therefore, adapt their understanding of advice and status recognition to disproportionately offer guidance to low-status individuals, who have limited access to social capital and may fall outside networks of homophily, thus advancing the organization as a whole. Agneessens and Wittek (2012) suggest that – however keeping in mind the limitations of generalizing these findings – such positive status recognition for such supportive and asymmetrical behavior is lacking and this behavior could potentially worsen the position of the advisor. This implies that a significant organizational culture transformation is necessary, impacting essential parts of organizational design, including financial incentive structures for sponsorship of marginalized groups via the organization's leadership (McKinsey 2021). Consequently, even in a culture driven by constant optimization and calculated competition, the genuine offering, recognition, quality, and applicability of advice could be the actual key competitive advantage. Practically, this could be implemented by, for instance, creating equally distributed slots for giving and receiving advice randomly allocated between individuals in the entire organization¹⁶, so that asking for advice can gain back its productive power and doesn't get reduced to a game of the careerists.

Moreover, from a societal perspective, this approach can mitigate current inefficiencies within organizations and harness the skills of marginalized groups for societal productivity. Nevertheless, the implications of this paper from the perspective of public policies are somewhat limited. It is often argued that it is not the role of the state to regulate the organizational design of organizations to such a detailed extent. Theoretically, this aligns with Habermas's assertion that solutions become more socially sustainable when deliberative processes are inclusive. Emcke (2000) further postulates an asymmetric responsibility for recognition, advocating for over-proportional consultation of marginalized individuals and low-status individuals in general, in order to foster social innovation and to mitigate the normative alignment effect of high-status individuals, who often tend toward a conservative perspective. However, there might be another theoretical framework worth considering, i.e. *resonance* as developed by Rosa (2019). His research encourages us to investigate whether a deeper understanding and focused, deliberate embracement of advice could have a revitalizing effect for one's relation to the workplace. Work as a fundamental mode of shaping material and an

¹⁶ This can be observed, for example, when considering the coffee-chat culture in consulting firms, where such informal exchanges are institutionalized, resonating with the call for creation of informal networks to promote innovation by Allen and Henn (2007) and Knott (2012).

individuum's character, has been at the core of increasing competitive pressure and what is widely perceived and described as *acceleration* (Rosa 2004). Where meaningful relations to colleagues fall prey to ever-changing *teams*, i.e. both the personal work team as well as the digital connectivity tools, hybrid-work culture, and packed schedules, tight deadlines, and overloaded to-do-lists, there exists the risk of losing the workplace as a sphere of resonance. Thus, a specific emphasis on reclaiming advice culture and its potential for solidaristic connectedness and shared values could distinctively increase the sense for mutual recognition and guide a firm culture of loyalty, openness, and constructive critique.

IV. Concluding Remarks & HR Tech as a New Frontier for Research on Advice Networks

At its core, this essay elucidates how both the social status perspective and the perspective of social capital are utilized in the literature to shed light on networks of advice. Particularly, the findings that social status serves as the primary motivation for giving and seeking advice are empirically robust. These findings are especially pertinent in innovative approaches that integrate both perspectives, although the theory of social capital appears to be less empirically robust in this regard. However, there are significant gaps in the research. The limitation of generalizability (e.g., to major line-organizations) arises from the fact that the organizations under examination are often highly specialized and small, while the observation periods are typically too short to demonstrate potential long-term effects adequately. Thus, potential structural elements discussed in other discourses of social science, such as *loyalty* and *temporal latency*, cannot be adequately explored. Therefore, there are opportunities to complement current research in this field. Additionally, it is notable that the perspective of SNA does not address normative aspects or only does so indirectly, as Lazega et al. (2011) have operationalized.

However, the advent of HR tech, which significantly influences organizational behavior and is considered a key enabler for organizational learning, prompts further research into advice dynamics within organizations and necessitates re-examining certain aspects. In a field experiment conducted with a German van-rental company, it was found that workers managed by algorithms offered roughly 20% less advice to their peers than those managed by humans, and the quality of their advice was lower (Granulo et al. 2024). The change here may be that knowledge is no longer monopolized by individuals and the *access to them*, but rather valuable knowledge is either provided to all individuals within the organization via technology essentially democratizing knowledge or limited via the *access to the technology* (due to resource constraints or concerns about valuable knowledge and information potentially flowing out of the organization through full access for all employees). As a result, the nature of advice-giving behavior by individuals may also change. One conceivable (and to be tested empirically) hypothesis is that in these situations, advice may focus less on informational and technical aspects and more on personal or organizational cultural understanding, fostering potential within an organization under the banner of diversity. With recent developments in GenAI, many practitioners already utilize these systems as a sort of *sparring partner*, a practice that could be interpreted as advice in classical, non-technological situations. Thus, these developments may also impact key structural components identified in existing research, such as the spinning top model proposed by Lazega et al. (2006) as there is a potential for a reduction in the volume of inquiries directed towards central advisors, given the reduced necessity for technical advice, thereby alleviating the underlying mechanisms of overload.

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