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Recent Higher-Connection Theory: Explaining Social Bond Realignment in Status Elevation

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Article Info

Abstract

Individuals have the tendency to neglect older connections once they get elevated in either in social, professional, business and love relationships by increasingly privileging recent higher ties, while leaving their foundational ties dormant. Recent higher-connection theory explains this recurring sociological and managerial pattern. Drawing on theories of social mobility, class consciousness, and network realignment, this paper develops the assumptions, applications and implications of the theory. The application of the theory spans politics, love relationships, business relationships, organizational management and personal advancement. The theory offers a framework for understanding how individual status elevations act to influence loyalty, identity, and relational ethics, with implications for leadership, organizational behaviour, and management scholarship. This paper argues that relational realignment is less a matter of betrayal or conscious neglect than an unconscious adaptation to new structural demands of power, identity, and resource access from the new ties. By analyzing RHCT through empirical insights from political space, sociology, and management research, this theory contributes to a deeper understanding of how status shifts reshape relational commitments and the ethical challenges this creates for leaders and individuals alike.

Introduction

It is important to know that human relationships are deeply influenced by the contexts where individuals are resident, such as where they live, work, and advance. When people get elevated in social or career/professional roles, they tend to change their community with people, thereby redefining new forms of access, opportunity, and belonging (Bianchi & Vohs, 2016) [7]. Granovetter's (1973) [25], as a classic sociological theorist, propounded the strength of weak ties, while Bourdieu (1986) [8] emphasized the concept of social capital, which explains how networks develop. However, these theorists failed to fully explain the systematic neglect of former or earlier connections as soon as people's upliftment takes place (Andreoni, Nikiforakis & Stoop, 2021) [4]. Network realignment is particularly investigated in management and organizational research, in the context of career success or progression, leadership transitions, and organizational embeddedness (Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2010) [43]. This happens due to the neglect or less emphasis on the ethical and relational implications of this process.

The recent higher-connection theory is poised to bridge this gap by proposing that individuals who experience upward mobility tend to prioritize new, high-status ties at the neglect of older, lower-status ones. This happens naturally as a result of seeking power and expectations, but not attributed to malice or selfishness, but rather due to unconscious adaptation to new environments

of power and expectation. This is evidently supported by recent sociological studies. Wang (2019) argued in a study on migrants in Beijing that achieving class elevation is why individuals engage in local fragmentation of friendship networks by replacing older with new connections to align with their status. Nevertheless, Chetty *et al*. (2022) [15] found in the studies on economic mobility in the United States of America that friendship with high-status peers, to an extent, determines one's elevation, whereas having close ties with friends with lower status diminishes one's importance or worth.

This theory finds its high relevance in the context of management and leadership in organizations. This is true because leaders usually start their careers at the lower levels within an organization and move up the ladder to the elite networks of executives, investors, or policymakers operating at the higher level. While such elevation enhances strategic position and access, they may tend to forget their earlier colleagues who have not attained a similar position, thereby creating a perception of neglect or betrayal (Uzzi, 1997; Algoe & Jolink, 2021) [46, 3]. This phenomenon is also prevalent in the political space, where politicians tend to forget the electorate that voted them into political offices. We hear voters most time complaining of being abandoned or neglected. This situation is deeply rooted in Nigerian politicians. Personal life and love relationships are not an exception, as partners of successful individuals may feel displaced by new elite circles of influence.

The theory, thus, offers a perspective for understanding and explaining how status elevation influences loyalty, integrity, and relational ethics. Management scholars are challenged by this theory to reflect on the two-sided nature of the individual social advancement: while new connections present opportunity and confer capital, aligning with the new ties erodes or makes foundational or earlier connections go into extinction. This paper is therefore important as it offers a theoretical foundation for understanding the recent higher connection theory, by demonstrating its applications in political, personal and love, organizational and everyday contexts.

Assumptions of the Proposed Theory

A theory is not without assumptions and the authors have conceived certain assumptions which underlie the theory's application and have been discussed in detail in the subsequent paragraphs.

Status elevation leads to the formation of new connections

People who experience status elevation have a certain view of the world and identity shifts which suit their new social networks (Carey & Markus, 2017) [12]. People's behaviour and consciousness, as argued by Weber (1978) [47], change with a corresponding change in status. This is not merely a conscious decision but a structural necessity to adapt to evolving opportunities and challenges. McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) [35] demonstrate that homophily (the tendency to associate with similar individuals) drives this shift, as individuals seek relationships that align with their new cultural capital and life situations.

A study by Rivera, Soderstrom and Uzzi (2010) [41] disclosed that elevation in status influences one's identity formation,

especially with professionals joining elite institutions. That is not all, status elevation also shapes perceptions of fairness, inclusion and self-esteem, usually empowering and alienating. Studies in labour migration also indicated that status elevation reshapes alignment and changes individual participation in certain activities (Koczan, Pinat & Rozhkov, 2021) [30]. Gerlich (2023) [24] and Friedman and Reeves (2020) [23] also affirmed that individual elevation deepens sensitivity to symbolic boundaries and culture. Nevertheless, individual orientation to trust and loyalty are modified due to status elevation. Comparative research in the global South confirms that new class positions change one's perceptions of morality and responsibility (De Keree, 2019) [18]. The authors thus argue in support of the propositions that status elevation inarguably reshapes consciousness, loyalty, and belonging (Rivera *et al*., 2010; Weber, 1978) [41, 47].

Older ties are deprioritized but remain dormant

This assumption holds that people prefer to align with new, higher networks because of the gain they will get whether political, whether political, emotional, or economic. This assumption as described by Lin (2001) [32], is an instrumental dimension of social capital. Although older ties may lose prominence and relevance in the lives of individuals who experience elevation in status, they rarely vanish completely. Rather, these older connections enter a "dormant" state where they no longer serve as the centre of attention but can be reactivated when need arises. Levin, Walter, and Murnighan (2011) [31] explain dormant connections as unique relational resources because they retain familiarity yet offer new, sometimes untapped, perspectives. In the context of this theory, deprioritization happens when elevated individuals focus their energies on connections that give immediate symbolic or material gains. However, these older connections remain latently valuable, especially when individuals encounter crises or transitions that necessitate retracing to reconnect with their older connections.

As business organizations expand, owners tend to place more value on the investors and regulators to the neglect of small, old customers and friends (Cai, Polzin & Stam, 2020) [11]. Entrepreneurs' realignment with the start-up support ecosystem is a strategic move to gain access to adequate resources or capital and legitimacy. Digital economy studies find that utility-based networking governs collaborations and partnerships (Bejjani, Göcke & Menter, 2023) [6]. Research in the area of venture capital explains that utility-driven connections with investors are more powerful than legacy networks when scaling globally (Zhou, 2022) [50]. Political lobbying is also a good example of utility prioritization, where companies align with politicians with influence to initiate policies that support their businesses. In Nigeria, Aliko Dangote is a good example of lobbying for influence. More so, company leaders realign in their networks to maximize boardroom alliances (Song & Wang, 2023) [44]. According to Chen and Liu (2024) [14], global entrepreneurs demonstrate the importance of prioritizing relational utility in cross-border markets. We therefore argue that relational priorities are constantly changing because of perceived network gain (Lin, 2001; Manstead, 2018) [32, 34]. Individuals realign with higher connections to gain certain benefits that they considered not available from lower connections.

Recent connections are perceived as carrying higher value

This assumption holds that individuals are motivated to recall older connections mostly because of the benefit rather than sentiment. According to this theory, individuals often reconnect with dormant connections when immediate needs arise, confirming the conditionality of these relationships. Burt (2005) [10] emphasizes that structural gaps in connections create opportunities for brokerage, where once-overlooked connections become crucial for bridging gaps. In politics, this pattern is evident when candidates revisit their grassroots supporters only during elections, exploiting these ties for votes (Norris, 2011) [38]. In business, firms often return to small clients or long-standing partners when larger accounts falter, reaffirming the instrumental nature of relational recall. Levin et al. (2011) [31] similarly found that dormant ties offer cost-effective and reliable information during crises, making them attractive sources of support. Importantly, this utilitarian recall often lacks reciprocity, as those re-engaged may perceive it as opportunistic, leading to disillusionment (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, 2001) [20].

Individuals realign with new connections with the belief that they carry greater legitimacy and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) [8]. In business relationships, executives are comfortable connecting with recent high-status individuals for reputational benefits. Even if in the long term, recent connections remain emotionally significant (Mizruchi, 2018) [37]. Social capital research explains that higher connection enhances perceived legitimacy and symbolic worth (Salimi, Heidari, Mehrvarz & Safavi, 2022) [42]. Also, research by Lunn, Donnell, MacCurtain & Coffey (2025) [33] noted that realigning with higher connection groups carries with it immediate reputational capital, signalling inclusion in leadership transitions. Similarly, entrepreneurs use new higher connections to show creditworthiness to investors (Pahnke, McDonald & Wang, 2020) [39]. Recency of connections is also linked to enhanced symbolic capital in international business partnerships (Forsgren, 2016) [22]. In online platforms, recent higher connection boosts the visibility and perceived authority of influencers' connections. Therefore, the perception of higher value in recent executive connections strengthens the theory that new connections carry unequal legitimacy and symbolic returns (Bourdieu, 1986; Mizruchi, 2018) [8, 37]. The authors, therefore, argue here that whether in personal or love relationships, political, or management contexts, individuals realign with recent higher connections to be seen by others that they are wealthy or influential.

Network realignment is not inherently malicious but structurally conditioned

Many people believe that the neglect of old connections or ties is a result of betrayal or ingratitude, but that is structurally made possible by a shift in relational priorities. To support the assertion, Kilduff and Brass (2010) [29] argue that people's connection or tendency to realign when elevated is influenced by organizational and social network pressures as against one's morality. The benefits and expectations of a new social class or elevation in status are what lead individuals to align with new, higher-value connections. This structural conditioning reflects Weber's (1978) [47] emphasis on social stratification, where individuals align with some behaviours to keep close ties with their new class. An example can be

seeing where an upcoming politician may be forced structurally to exhibit close ties with the higher political class, believing that such a connection can sustain their new position, even if this adversely affects the followers at the grassroots. That is not all, in organizational settings, Uzzi (1997) [46] demonstrates that companies reinforce connections with deep-pocket partners to remain relevant in their industry, neglecting less profitable partners. Therefore, the recency higher connection theory emphasize that connection realignment is a rational, changing response to pressure rather than an individual's inherent behaviour or choice. By situating relational neglect within broader structures, the theory distances itself from perceived disloyalty as a functional adaptation, offering a mixed understanding of how individuals handle or deal with evolving social contexts.

Applications of the Proposed Recent Higher-Connection Theory in Different Contexts
Application in Politics

The political space demonstrates a good example of the application of the theory. The upward movement of politicians was initially maintained and sustained by the grassroots supporters, friends, and local connections. Once politicians are elected or voted into office, they tend to neglect the people who voted them in and align with donors, lobbyists, and political stakeholders. As observed by Norris (2011) [38], power consolidation is the essence of why political actors realign with new ties. Remember, the democratic processes usually reflect the imbalance between grassroots participation and elite influence. This shift has brought about political apathy among local supporters, especially in Nigeria, where many citizens are neglected even after playing crucial roles in ensuring the emergence of political leaders (Adebayo & Ojo, 2021) [1]. The theory describes this neglect as a rational adaptation, not as betrayal, because the elite connections can provide the resources, information, and legitimacy necessary for the emergence of the political leaders, hence the realignment. However, the neglected local connections are reawakened during another round of elections, when votes are needed. This act reflects the notion that dormant ties are reactivated only when they are needed. This phenomenon is cyclic and ever changing, thereby proving the broader notion that realignment as a result of elevation in status is structurally conditioned by situational and contextual needs. It is true that the neglect occasioned by the status elevation may undermine the long-term trust local supporters have in their political leaders, thus affirming the theory's assertion as a predictable feature of power dynamics, where politicians realign their networks to meet evolving requirements of power, survival, and influence (Adebayo & Ojo, 2021) [1].

Application in Love Relationships

Another possible area where this theory is true is in romantic relationships. At the beginning of love relationships, partners most times prioritize all-time engagement with each other, ensuring they maintain the required closeness (Cho, Impett, Campos, Chen & Keltner, 2020) [16]. But one either of the partners gets elevated in a status socially, in their work, or income level, they tend to realign with new higher connections, dedicating more time, energy to new networks and opportunities. The partners who once enjoyed all-time love and engagement are seen as separated. Ashforth,

Kreiner, and Fugate (2000) [5] noted that once an individual's role or status changes, there is a shift in commitments, which can cut the close bonds between partners. In many cases, partners may feel neglected and abandoned by the other partner as commitments shift toward new professional or social circles that are adjudged to be more beneficial to the partner (Emery & Finkel, 2021). That is not all, the theory explains that the neglect may not necessarily be malicious but may happen due to structural demands from higher status connections. These dormant connections in love relationships can be reactivated when one of the partners experiences moments of vulnerability, stress, or need for emotional satisfaction. This aligns with Levin et al.'s (2011) [31] insights on the utilization of neglected relationships. We are not unaware of this occurrence because we play it, and it also happens to us in our love relationships. For instance, a partner may suddenly fall in love when they need financial support, protection, and satisfy their urge for intimacy, which is explained by the theory in the utilitarian recall of older connections. Therefore, this theory offers a framework to understand changes in relational commitment in love relationships, highlighting how structural demands may influence modern love relationships.

Application in Buyer - Seller Relationships
The theory also finds its way to the dynamics of buying and selling exchange relationships, where sellers may realign with new, higher or deep-pocketed customers. In the early stages of business development, sellers may build close relationships with buyers or customers who are usually small-scale buyers or clients. But as the business expands, the seller or businessman may realign with new high-value clients who are considered to be more resource-rich, neglecting earlier small buyers. Uzzi (1997) [46] illustrates that companies realign connections with clients or buyers with strategic advantage while deprioritizing weaker connections, thereby reflecting the theory's application to the business relationship driven by status-driven reorientation. This most times create dissatisfaction among early partners, customers or clients, who may feel neglected despite their support and patronage during the development stage of the business. However, the theory explains that the realignment is natural and in keeping with market demands. Though the old business partners may reemerge, especially when a business experiences a downturn, such as when large accounts are lost, compelling firms to return back their earlier, smaller but reliable clients (Burt, 2005) [10]. The utilization dimension of the recency theory explains this movement between neglect and reactivation. This is seen in global markets where multinational companies, especially Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) that outsource production to earlier small suppliers only during shortages, while realigning with elite supply chains in times of boom. This theory offers a perspective on explaining the cyclical nature of loyalty, neglect, and re-engagement in the business space, and highlighting structural changes in the relationship with the buyer and seller.

Application in Personal Life
Our individual and everyday relationships are also explained by the recent higher connection theory. As we progress in life, such as in education, career, or social status, we tend to align with new connections and neglect earlier ties, such as our childhood friends, former classmates, believing they cannot offer us what we need. We do that most times unconsciously without even knowing until some of these neglected ties begin to complain (Dietze & Knowles, 2016; Manstead, 2018) [19, 34]. McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook (2001) [35] emphasize that the tendency to live with those with similar status reinforces this shift, as people are comfortable towards those who possess similar current lifestyles or achievements to them. Yes, older friends may still be emotionally significant, but neglecting them is because they are adjudged irrelevant to the present context. Furthermore, the theory explains that the neglected or dormant ties are often reactivated during problem situations, major celebrations that require their roles, or transitional life events such as weddings, funerals, or job loss, where the neglected friends provide succour, emotional stability or cultural continuity (Wellman & Wortley, 1990) [48]. It is important to note that the reactivation is not a result of sentiment but natural, as older friends may offer unique insights and assistance that cannot come from newer, higher connections (Levin et al., 2011) [31]. Thus, it explains individual life not as a story of betrayal or forgetfulness but as a structural process where relationships work and flow according to evolving demands. The theory also explains the changing nature of human ties, influenced by different contexts, and not moral choices.

Practical Implications of the Theory
Although this theory is not supported by empirical investigation, the practical illustrations used in its applications, the authors consider the theory to have practical implications across different contexts. It offers a framework for understanding human interaction across political, organizational, social, and personal contexts (Hooker & Algoe, 2022) [27]. First, it questioned mere assumptions about loyalty and consistency in relationships by defining neglect not as moral choice or failure, but as structural demands from status elevation and realignment. This very perspective widens the scope of social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990) [8, 17], emphasizing that individuals are guided by structural and contextual demands, but not by values of reciprocity. As seen in politicians, for example, who neglect or shift their focus from the local supporters who ensure their emergence, to align with elite donors, described as a natural response to structural demands, and not necessarily a betrayal of trust (Norris, 2011; Adebayo & Ojo, 2021) [38, 1].

More so, the theory is important to organizational and leadership studies, and management studies by enhancing the clarification on how individuals realign with new, higher connections to maximize resources or economic benefits (Suddaby, 2010) [45]. Burt's (2005) [10] notion of brokerage aligns with the recency theory's assertion that connections are reactivated as a strategic move when they serve new purposes. This understanding is essential for business managers and policymakers who want to understand the changes in loyalty within professional and market networks. The theory thus explains that predictive value determines or suggests when and why old connections may be reactivated, affirming Levin et al.'s (2011) [31] findings on the latent utility of forgotten connections.

Thirdly, the theory contributes to the field of sociology and psychology, as it describes how relationships are neglected in personal life, such as among friends or love partners, reflecting wider structural logics. McPherson et al. (2001) [35]

demonstrate how similar individuals reactivate connections on the immediate needs they have, while Wellman and Wortley (1990) [48] highlighted the recall of neglected relationships or connections when faced with crises. The theory draws from these findings into a strong framework that explains neglect and reactivation not as isolated concepts but as closely linked dynamics influencing human interactions (Hooker & Algoe, 2022) [27].

Finally, the theory offers normal implications for ensuring strong co-existence in social systems. By accepting that neglect is structurally driven and normal, individuals and communities, and organizations can design frameworks to maintain early ties or dormant members, making sure that they are not indefinitely forgotten (Hooker & Algoe, 2022) [27]. This identification can facilitate participation by and from all, drive customer loyalty, and maintain personal relationships in the long term. The theory should not be seen as condemning shifts in relationships or connections as a betrayal, but should be used to encourage a pragmatic lens that views adaptation as a fundamental element for survival, while still leaving space for ethical responsibility in managing neglected connections.

Conclusion

The recent higher-connection theory offers a new lens for understanding the changing nature of human relationships in contexts of status elevation, achievement, and social transformation. Unlike traditional theories that most times emphasize loyalty, give and take, or the enduring strength of social capital (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000) [17, 40], it lays the foundation for understanding the changing nature of choices in relationships, as individuals realign their networks as a strategic response to the demands from the new structures or relationships. This makes the theory particularly relevant in today's fast-changing political, organizational, and social environments where individuals frequently navigate multiple stages of status elevation.

The recognition that relational neglect does not always reflect a situation of ingratitude or malice but is due to the desire to keep to the demands of new structures is a central contribution of the theory. Individuals amass and mobilize resources to maintain their changing positions in the social hierarchy as contained in the social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) [8]. It further explains the role of recency in relational choices or realignments, showing how individuals in privilege present, high-connection try to maintain the ties, while allowing older connections to be dormant until they are needed and are reactivated for use again (Levin, Walter, & Murnighan, 2011) [31].

Politically, the theory offers a perspective that helps explain why political leaders often distance themselves from local supporters once elected, only to re-engage them during another period of elections (Norris, 2011) [38]. From an organizational perspective, it explains why managers and businessmen (sellers) neglect smaller networks when partners with larger and more resources emerge, though they may fall back to their earlier connections if the higher value ventures fail (Burt, 2005) [10]. Nevertheless, on a personal/individual level, the theory explains the painful but common experiences of neglect in love and friendship relationships where individuals neglect older or earlier ties when they are elevated in status socially or economically (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001) [35].

Theoretically, it adds to the existing body of literature on management and sociology by offering an explanation that connects micro-level behaviours with macro-level structures (Merton, 1968; 1989) [36, 49]. The theory explains and extends the holistic narrative about the temporal nature of connections by emphasizing structural and psychological changes resonating with established work on similar individuals maintaining their network (McPherson *et al.*, 2001) [35], network realignment (Burt, 2005) [10], and embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) [26]. Therefore, the authors argue that the recent higher connection theory is not just a disconnection of ties, but one of relational evolution. Scholars, policymakers, and practitioners should recognize the patterned nature of connection, neglect, and reactivation as predicting factors or aspects of human behaviour. The theory thus positions itself as both a descriptive and normative framework that explains the ethics and changing nature of human ties in status elevation contexts.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest
The authors report no conflict of interest

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