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# Different relationships for coping with ambiguity and uncertainty in organizations

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### ABSTRACT

This study seeks to shed light on the relationship between the situation and the activation of specific relationships. We hypothesized that the type of uncertainty present in a situation would prompt people to call upon different relationships based on different types of trust: cognitive trust for expertise and affective trust for friendship. We elaborated vignettes as name generators to test whether the colleagues called upon in different situations were perceived as being more friends or more experts. The perceived level of expertise and friendship were evaluated with Likert-style scales. The results support our theoretical argument to the effect that the “activation” of a relationship is influenced by the type of uncertainty a person is confronted to. Situations of information uncertainty elicit recourse to relationships based on expertise while ambiguous situations call for friendship.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networks within organizations can be understood as the patterns formed by both formal and informal relationships between members of the organization, including instrumental or work related relationships as well as expressive relationships. These networks are intertwined with organizational life, influencing and influenced by the general operation of the organization. Many studies on social networks in organizations<sup>2</sup> have shown the important role played by these relationships on power, turnover and absenteeism, peer pressure and norms, team performance, work efficiency, employee satisfaction and so on.

In the daily routine of organizations, networks, by way of the relationships they are composed of, are constantly “activated” (modified, created and re-created) through the accomplishment of various tasks, the need for technical support, requests for information or clarification as well as through the need for social activities, social support or friendship. This article aims to explore the link

between particular situations and the activation of specific relationships through examining the type of uncertainty present in a situation and the influence of this uncertainty on the choice of addressing some members of one's network and not others.

## 2. Instrumental and expressive relationships

Relationships are complex and no relationship is identical to another. Their ‘content’ (friendship, business, support, etc.) is not always easily grasped and many are multiplex (Burt, 2005; Lazega, 1999). One often found distinction between the content of relationships is whether they are instrumental or expressive (Casciaro et al., 1999; Dabos and Rousseau, 2004; Fombrun, 1982; Ibarra, 1993a,b; Ibarra and Andrews, 1993; Lazega, 2001,1992; Lin, 2007, 2006a; Saint-Charles, 2001; Saint-Charles and Mongeau, 2005; Umphress et al., 2003). In organizational settings, instrumental relationships are related primarily to work situations, whereas expressive relationships address, above all else, emotional matters (Ibarra, 1993b). Among the relational content explored in organizational studies, advice and friendship have been the most studied, each exemplifying either the instrumental or the expressive aspects of social networks in organizations. In understanding the advice network, one seeks to know “Who consults who on work related matters?” (Cross et al., 2001). This allows for the identification of the individuals consulted when one faces specific problems related to ones' tasks; from an individual standpoint, this can be seen as one's “personal network of experts”. When studying friendship networks,

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example: (Borgatti and Foster, 2003; Casciaro et al., 1999; Cross and Parker, 2004; Flap et al., 1998; Friedberg, 1993; Ibarra, 1993a,b; Kilduff, 1992; Krackhardt, 1994; Krackhardt and Borgatti, 2006; Krackhardt and Brass, 1994; Lazega, 2001; Monge and Contractor, 1997).

scientists aim at identifying who considers whom a friend within the organization, the notion of friendship usually being defined with regards to the culture of the organization or with the culture that the organization is embedded in, since the notion of friendship varies with gender, class and culture (Allan, 1989; Bidart, 1997; Burt, 2005; Van Der Gaag and Snijders, 2005). These instrumental and expressive relationships are not mutually exclusive: people often have multiplex relationships—your friend (expressive) can be an expert (instrumental) on some topics, you can confide (expressive) in someone you interact with on a daily basis for your work (instrumental) and so on. Hence, scientists have observed significant overlap between different types of networks (Brass, 1985; Casciaro and Lobo, 2005; Ibarra, 1992, 1993a,b; Lazega, 1999; Saint-Charles, 2001; Vodosek, 1999).

### 2.1. Different situations call for different relationships

Despite this overlap, both instrumental and expressive networks have been shown to affect – albeit differently – organizational processes such as power turnover, innovation, technological implantation, unionization, ethical behavior, social capital, etc. (Brass, 1992; Brass and Burkhardt, 1992; Brass et al., 1998; Cross et al., 2001; Ibarra, 1993a; Krackhardt and Brass, 1994; Saint-Charles, 2001). For example, in her study on innovation involvement, Ibarra (1993a) showed that the correlation between status and centrality was higher in instrumental network than in expressive networks. In their study on power and perceptions, Ibarra and Andrews (1993) showed that advice and friendship networks affected employees' perceptions of work related conditions differently—advice centrality had highly significant effects on perceptions while friendship proximity had significant but weak effects on work related conditions. The authors concluded that there is a need for more research on the distinction between instrumental and expressive relationships. Others have observed differences in the composition of men's and women's instrumental/expressive networks in organizations, where men's instrumental and expressive networks tend to overlap more, bringing them greater “competitive advantage” (Campbell, 1988; Ibarra, 1992, 1993b; Lin, 2006b; Marchand et al., 2007). Umphress et al. (2003) also found differences between instrumental and expressive relationships with regards to organizational justice.

Krackhardt and Brass (1994), in their review of social network studies within organizations, propose that there could be different “use” of different networks depending on the type of situation. In other words, in organizations different situations would lead individuals to “call upon” different alters. It is such an association between situations and types of relationship (expressive or instrumental) that the present study addresses. Following the precedent set by Krackhardt and Brass, we have looked at situations in terms of their uncertainty.

## 3. Information uncertainty and ambiguity

Reducing uncertainty and making sense of one's situation are considered to be among the central motives for human communication (Berger and Calabrese, 1975; Berger, 1987; Bradac, 2001; Goldsmith, 2001; Knobloch and Solomon, 2002; Stinchcombe, 1990; Weick, 1993, 1995) and the solicitation of one's network members is undoubtedly often prompted by uncertainty. But uncertainty has many facets and there may be a need to distinguish between them (Beckman et al., 2004). Such a distinction was proposed by Krackhardt and Brass (1994, p. 213) as an answer to what they called *seemingly conflicting results* between studies relative to the role and importance of advice and friendship networks in

organizations—one study stating the importance of friendship in situations of uncertainty; another emphasizing the importance of expertise. They suggest that these conflicting results may be reconciled by taking into consideration the type of uncertainty faced in the situation. In their opinion, when change is related to a lack of information – as in a change in information technology within the organization (Burkhardt and Brass, 1990) – then individuals from the advice network are sought. This advice network is composed of people considered “experts” or “specialists” in the field (Krackhardt, 1992; Saint-Charles, 2001). On the other hand, when information is sufficient but decision making is difficult, the friendship network is called upon—as in a unionization vote (Krackhardt, 1990).

In other respects, Weick's research on sensemaking in organizations (Weick, 1969, 1993, 1995, 2001) offers a way of formalizing Krackhardt and Brass's (1994) observations and ideas. Indeed, Weick (1995) identifies two significant instances for sensemaking: ambiguity and uncertainty. Ambiguity occurs when the actors are confronted with too many interpretations, causing a shock of confusion. In an ambiguous situation there is no lack of information, no gap that could be filled with a better scanning of available information, rather there are at least two (and often more) different interpretations of the situation. The example given by Krackhardt and Brass (1994) on the unionization vote, where both sides (the union and the company) propose their (conflicting) interpretation of the situation, illustrates well an ambiguous organizational situation. On the other hand, Weick proposes that uncertainty emerges in the absence of information, causing a shock of ignorance (Weick, 1995); a situation of uncertainty might be resolved with the gathering of more information as is the case in the ‘change of technology’ example given by Krackhardt and Brass (1994), where employees go to the experts in the company for advice and information. For the sake of clarity, we will, in what follows, qualify what Weick calls uncertainty as being “information uncertainty” so as to distinguish it from uncertainty as a more general concept.

As stated earlier, the process of reducing uncertainty prompts communication with others and, faced with either information uncertainty or ambiguity, it is likely that people in organizations would turn to trusted members of their networks (Church et al., 2003; Granovetter, 1985; Krackhardt, 1992), since trust can be defined as an anticipated cooperation from the other person in situations of uncertainty or risk (Burt, 2005; Luhmann, 2000; Newell and Swan, 2000). Scientists have distinguished between trust based on the reliability of alters' contributions and trust based on alters' care and support; these two types of trust have been called cognitive and affective trust (Lewis and Weigert, 1985; McAllister, 1995) or competence and companion trust (Newell and Swan, 2000).

### 3.1. Hypothesis

Since ambiguity and information uncertainty respond to different needs and call for different answers we can hypothesize that individuals call upon people they trust to be honest and open when confronted with an ambiguous situation on the belief that the confidant will care and help reduce the confusion. On the other hand, they would turn towards people they trust to be competent for the matter at hand when faced with information uncertainty. In the former case, friends are likely candidates while experts would be more desirable in the latter.

However, in formulating such a hypothesis, further considerations must be taken into account: first, relationships are often multiplex and therefore instrumental and expressive networks overlap; and, second, expertise and friendship are not either/or concepts but are best conceptualized as a continuum. Therefore, we hypothesize that, in organizational contexts, when individuals are faced with a situation of information uncertainty, they will

seek alters they perceive as having more expertise in that area whereas when confronted with an ambiguous situation they would call for alters they perceived more as friends. If such a hypothesis were proven true, this would give us a better understanding of the relationship between the situation and the activation of either expressive (friendship) or instrumental (advice) networks.

In order to make allowances for the multiplexity of relationships, which implies that the same alter can be called for in different situations and can be both an expert and a friend, we propose to compare alters' perceived expertise and friendship in each type of situation (Hypothesis 1) as well as across the different types of situations (Hypothesis 2).

**Hypothesis 1a.** In situations of information uncertainty, the mean perceived expertise of alters is significantly higher than their mean perceived friendship.

**Hypothesis 1b.** In ambiguous situations, the mean perceived friendship of alters is significantly higher than their mean expertise.

**Hypothesis 2a.** The mean perceived expertise of alters is significantly higher in situations of information uncertainty than it is in ambiguous situations.

**Hypothesis 2b.** The mean perceived friendship of alters is significantly higher in ambiguous situations than it is in situations of information uncertainty.

However, in organizational contexts, there may be fewer friends than experts available for discussion. In this case, the expected difference between friendship and expertise should be much larger in information uncertainty situations than in ambiguous situations.

**Hypothesis 3.** The difference between friendship and expertise of alters is significantly larger in uncertain situations than in ambiguous situation.

#### 4. Methods

We chose to test our hypothesis through the use of a *vignette-based experiment* (Jergerby, 2007; Taylor, 2006), where vignettes are used as ego-network name generators, since the conduct of such a study using social network analysis methodology in organizational settings is constrained both by the complexity of organizations and by the cumbersome methodological requirements of network analysis (Lazega, 1998; Richards, 1985, 1988). Indeed, it would be almost impossible to isolate situations of ambiguity and situations of information uncertainty in organizations, since to do so it would be necessary to identify and analyze several organizational settings where either one of the situations is prevalent. This would lead to multiple network analyses, which would be extremely costly, both in human and financial resources. The use of a vignette-based method allows for the testing of the hypothesis at a much lower cost while ensuring the validity and the reliability of the measurements obtained. Here, the vignettes are short written "situations" of ambiguity and information uncertainty proposed to the respondents who are then asked to identify members of their social networks within the organization in whom they trust and would turn to in the process of solving such situations.

First, we created 20 vignettes and submitted them to a pre-test in order to evaluate the respondent's comprehension of the items. Out of these 20 vignettes, 10 presented situations of information uncertainty and 10 depicted situations of ambiguity. Also, in order to limit bias that could emerge from a potential association between relational matters and ambiguity, and technical matters and information uncertainty, in each sub-group half of the situations where more "relationship oriented" (involving dealings with others), while the other half was more "technically oriented"

(involved dealing with an object or an organizational process). After some correction of the wording, the vignettes were submitted to eight experts (semiologists, network analysts, experts and consultants in organizational behavior) for validation. After providing them with Weick's (1995) definitions, we asked these experts to indicate whether each of these vignettes were situations of information uncertainty or ambiguity. Out of the original 20 vignettes, 12 obtained an inter-judge rating of a 100%—the vignettes without a perfect score were eliminated. We also eliminated four more situations because they were not relevant to the organization studied – a situation deemed relevant being a situation that members of the organization could easily picture happening – a pre-test allowed us to ascertain this relevance. In the end, 8 vignettes were used for the study: 4 information uncertainty situations of which 2 were more relationally oriented and 2 more technically oriented and 4 ambiguity situations of which 2 were more relationally oriented and 2 more technically oriented (see Appendix A). Each vignette was presented to the respondents in a face-to-face interview and the interviewer wrote down the answers. For each situation, respondents were verbally asked to:

- identify all the members of their social networks within the organization to whom they would talk about the situation and to explain the motivation for their choices;
- evaluate, on a 5-point Likert-type scale the strength of their friendship with each person. On the scale, "1" stands for "strictly professional" and "5" stands for "friendship";
- evaluate, on a 5-point Likert-type scale the degree of expertise of each person regarding the situation. On the scale, "1" stands for "little expertise" and "5" stands for "strong expertise";
- provide, for all alters identified, the duration of the relationship.

Thus, each alter was rated for both friendship and expertise with the use of a single sociometric question which is considered appropriate for network data when a name generator facilitates recall (Marsden, 1990). The rating of each of the alters both for friendship and expertise allowed us to take into consideration the potential overlap between friendship and expertise and allowed us to obtain indices of the perceived expertise level and the strength of the friendship for each situation.

With the eight vignettes used in the study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency for the expertise scale was 0.77 and 0.89 for the friendship scale. The scales were not significantly correlated ( $r=0.11$ ), indicating they were measuring distinct concepts. This was confirmed by factorial analysis from which two principal components emerged, each corresponding either to the items related to friendship or to expertise. A paired *T*-test was used to compare alters' mean levels of friendship and expertise for all situations of each type (information uncertainty and ambiguity).

##### 4.1. Respondents

Interviews were conducted with a random sample of full-time, unionized, permanent (meaning they worked for the organization for at least 4 years) employees in a medium-sized public organization (3000 employees). Through an agreement with the human resources department, we were able to send a note to the selected respondents, indicating that – if they were interested in participating in the study – they would be allowed to do so during their working hours. From a list of employees, we randomly selected 60 names. Each selected respondent was then called by a research assistant to verify his or her interest in participating in the study. In all, 53 employees agreed to participate. The sample was composed of 23 men and 30 women. Mean age for women was 46.5 and 46.2 for men. Twenty-one employees were managers while 32

**Table 1**  
Mean perceived friendship and expertise level by type of situation.

	Situation of uncertainty	Ambiguous situation	p-Value
Expertise	HIGH (3.9)	LOW (3.4)	Hypothesis 2a $p < .001$
Friendship	LOW (2.4)	HIGH (3.6)	Hypothesis 2b $p < .001$
Difference	1.5	-0.2	Hypothesis 3 $p < .001$
p-Value	Hypothesis 1a $p < .001$	Hypothesis 1b $p$ NS	

were clerks, technicians or secretaries. We did not have information on employees' tenure but the mean duration of the relationships (10 years—s.d. 4.6) shows that most of our respondents have been with this organization for more than 5 years (9% of the relationships existed for less than 5 years; 45% were between 5 and 10 years; 30% between 10 and 15 years and 15% more than 15 years). Finally, 7.5% of the respondents had a master's degree, while most of them (56.6%) had a bachelor's degree, 24.5% had a college degree,<sup>3</sup> and 11.3% had completed high school (there were no significant differences between men and women for this variable).

**5. Results**

To test our hypotheses, we compared the mean perceived expertise and friendship level attributed to alters for each type of situation. Table 1 presents the main results: 4 of the hypotheses are confirmed, largely supporting the main hypothesis.

*5.1. Hypotheses 1a, 1b and 3—friendship and expertise within situations*

In accordance with Hypothesis 1a, the mean expertise level of the alters in situations of information uncertainty (3.9) is significantly higher ( $t = 11.26$ , d.f. = 52,  $p < 0.001$ ) than their friendship level (2.4). Hypothesis 1b was not confirmed: in ambiguous situations, the difference between the mean friendship level (3.6) and the mean expertise level (3.4) is not significant. As stated in Hypothesis 3, the difference between expertise and friendship is significantly larger in situations of uncertainty than in ambiguous situations ( $t = 7.94$ , d.f. = 50,  $p < 0.001$ ).

*5.2. Hypothesis 2a and 2b—friendship and expertise between situations*

Hypothesis 2a is confirmed: the mean expertise level of the alters is significantly higher ( $t = 3.44$ , d.f. = 50,  $p < 0.001$ ) in situations of information uncertainty (3.9) than in ambiguous situations (3.4).

Hypothesis 2b is confirmed: the mean friendship level of the alters is significantly higher ( $t = -8.53$ , d.f. = 50,  $p < 0.001$ ) in ambiguous situations (3.6) than in situations of information uncertainty (2.4).

*5.3. Sociodemographic and organizational variables*

We ran a regression analysis in order to control for sociodemographic and organizational variables (age, sex, education and organizational status) and for the duration of the relationship. In order to have a sufficient number of cases by category, the education variable was dichotomized: one category grouped those who had a university degree ( $n = 34$ ) and the other those who did not

( $n = 19$ ). The variable for organizational status was dichotomized as well and we distinguished between manager and non-manager.

For Hypotheses 1a and 1b we calculated the difference between expertise and friendship in each type of situation and used the results as dependent variables. For Hypothesis 2a, the difference between friendship in uncertainty situations and friendship in ambiguous situations was used as a dependent variable while a similar calculation was performed for expertise (Hypothesis 2b).

As we can see in Table 2, only education is significant in the difference between perceived friendship and expertise in ambiguous situations. To explore this influence in more depth, we compared the difference between the mean friendship level and the mean expertise level in ambiguous situations for each category of the education variable. Results show that the difference is significant for those who do not have a university degree ( $t = 2.46$ , d.f. = 17,  $p < 0.03$ ) but not for those who have one. Thus Hypothesis 1b is confirmed for the respondents who do not have a university degree.

**6. Discussion**

The main objective of this study was to explore the link between the activation of relationships and the type of situation. Our hypothesis was that the type of uncertainty present in a situation influences an organizational member in his/her choice of addressing some members of his/her network and not others. Our results show clearly that the alters chosen as discussion partners in situations of information uncertainty differ from those chosen in ambiguous situations with regards to their perceived expertise and friendship (Hypotheses 2 and 3).

Our theoretical argument also implied that people should be looking mostly for companion (or affective) trust in ambiguous situations, a type of trust found with friends and not with experts. In our data, this argument was not supported for those having a university degree—for them, it appears that in ambiguous situations friendship and expertise are both called for. What, then, would lead people with a higher level of education to consult experts in addition to friends in ambiguous situations? A first answer that comes to mind is that in an organizational setting, more experts than friends are available for discussion, especially for those having a higher level of education who may be more in a "culture of expertise". Such a supposition cannot be verified with our data. Nevertheless, we can look at how many different alters were named by our respondents in each educational category and, within these, how many were considered experts or friends. Since each alter was rated on both expertise and friendship scales, we included only alters having received a score of 4 or 5 on the related scale in our count of friends and experts. The results are contrary to our supposition: out of a mean number of 6.1 different alters named by our respondents, there are significantly ( $t = -3.18$ , d.f. = 52,  $p < 0.003$ ) more friends (2) than experts (1.4). There are no significant differences based on educational status in the mean number of alters ( $NU^4 = 5.9$ ;  $U = 6.2$ ), friends ( $NU = 2.26$ ;  $U = 1.94$ ) or experts ( $NU = 1.52$ ;  $U = 1.27$ ).

Thus, the mere availability of colleagues considered to be friends does not hold as a convincing explanation for the non-confirmation of Hypothesis 1b. Another lead to the understanding of this unanticipated result was given to us by qualitative notes taken during interviews<sup>5</sup>: the definition of expertise used by some of the respon-

<sup>4</sup> NU = respondents not having a university degree; U = respondents having a university degree.

<sup>5</sup> There were no qualitative data per se in this study but, during interviews, notes were taken whenever the respondents volunteered information about their reaction to the vignettes. Although no material for a qualitative data analysis, these notes give us some leads for a better understanding of the results and for future research.

<sup>3</sup> Akin to community college degree in the USA.

**Table 2**  
Regression coefficients.

	Dependent variables			
	Difference between expertise and friendship in uncertainty situation	Difference between expertise and friendship in ambiguous situation	Expertise's difference between situations	Friendship's difference between situations
Age	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.03)
Male	-0.04 (0.26)	0.58 (0.37)	-0.12 (0.29)	0.50 (0.30)
University	-0.02 (0.29)	0.90* (0.41)	-0.49 (0.32)	0.39 (0.33)
Manager	0.04 (0.29)	-0.44 (0.40)	0.17 (0.31)	-0.31 (0.32)
Duration	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.07 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)

Unstandardized B coefficients (std. error). \*  $p < 0.05$ ; (two-tailed tests).

dents of this group seemed to encompass more aspects than we expected. Indeed, aside from “having expertise in a specific field”, being an expert also means, for our respondents, having gone through a similar life experience or knowing ego well. In the latter case, the respondents would identify an alter as being an “expert on the respondent-self”; all of which is closer to the definition of affective trust.

In order to give quantitative support to these qualitative observations, we tested to what extent the experts consulted by the U subjects in ambiguous situations were also friends. The data show that experts consulted by the U in ambiguous situations are three times more likely to also be friends (31%) than those in situations of information uncertainty (11%). Moreover, more than half of the experts (55%) called upon in situations of information uncertainty are not considered friends while this is the case for only 26% of the experts in ambiguous situations (see Table 3).

These figures give credit to the idea that the nature of expertise in these cases could be more related to affective trust and expressive matters (life experience, knowing the other) than to cognitive matters. In other words, our respondents with a university degree sometimes take a far more experiential view of the “specific domain of competence” of alter.

Our results also led us to reflect upon the traditional designation of networks based on “content”. In fact, situations of information uncertainty seem to elicit recourse to relationships based on cognitive trust, while ambiguous situations call for more affective oriented trust relationships. The former is concerned with information seeking and exchanges involving cognitive processes while the latter has to do with one’s well-being in a situation where much of the information is already known and where the objective of the discussion with the alters is primarily the resolution of an attractiveness/repulsiveness dilemma between different elements of an ambiguous situation. Traditionally, the labels instrumental/advice; expressive/friendship are used to distinguish networks in organizational studies but the concepts of cognitive trust network and affective trust network better reflect the keystone of the relationships composing these networks and are coherent with the distinction often made between the cognitive and affective dimension of trust (Luhmann 2000; McAllister, 1995).

**Table 3**  
Percentage of friends and experts by type of situation.

	Ambiguity		Uncertainty	
	NU	U	NU	U
Friends/non-experts	39%	23%	10%	8%
Experts/non-friends	14%	26%	53%	55%
Friends and experts	36%	31%	16%	11%
Non-friends/non-experts	12%	21%	21%	26%

Only those who received a rating of 4 or 5 on the related scale are considered “friends” or “experts”.

Our results showed that gender had no significant impact, although other studies (Campbell, 1988; Ibarra, 1992, 1993b; Lin, 2006b; Marchand et al., 2007) have demonstrated important differences in the composition of men’s and women’s networks in organizations. This suggests that the process of “activation” of the networks (the calling upon of specific relationships in one’s network) is similar for both genders.

From a more practical perspective, managers and organizational consultants could benefit from a better understanding of the intertwining of relationships and organizational uncertainties; the examples given by Krackhardt and Brass (1994) are eloquent in that respect. And, as they have shown, such knowledge might be especially relevant in transition times. The importance of a better understanding of the “informal” networks of the organization is more and more acknowledged by managers and consultants although the tendency seems to favour the study of cognitive network (based on information/knowledge sharing) (Cross and Parker, 2004), therefore potentially neglecting aspects of these informal networks which may have an important impact on the organization in certain situations.

However, because the current study was conducted exclusively in one organization, with a small sample size, we should exercise caution in any attempt to generalize its results even though the hypothesis were based on sound theoretical and empirical arguments. Before they can be generalized, our results need to be reproduced in other settings in order to take into account the fact that different types of organizations and different cultures create diverse contexts for cognitive and affective trust (political organization, research and development, hierarchical or collaborative structure located in American, European or Asian countries, etc.).

This study concentrated on relationships – on an individual’s network – and did not take into account the positions of the actors in the social network of the organization. Such positions could influence the pool of friends and experts one has access to as well as the perception one has of the expertise and proximity of other actors (see, for example: Burt, 2005; Ibarra and Andrews, 1993; Krackhardt, 1990; Krackhardt and Brass, 1994; Lazega, 2001). A replication of this study, while controlling for these variables, would give greater insight into the phenomenon. For example, Saint-Charles (2001) showed that people tend not to call those who were hierarchically superior to them a “friend”.

Moreover, the study invites finer analyses of the embedding of individuals in social structures by linking the “activation” of networks to the situation. Our research was limited to the advice and friendship networks and to certain types of situations for which people were asked to provide names of alters they trust they could consult. It is clear that individuals could have solicited different types of networks and might have different reactions to the situations: they could, for example, have tried to redefine the situation so as to reduce the cognitive and affective conflicts brought about

by the situations. In this case, to select an alter from the influence network would have been a sensible choice.

The nature of expertise calls for more exploration. Is the way our respondents used the word “expert” typical of the organization studied or of the country where the research was conducted or is this a more general phenomenon? Authors have explored the various meanings of “friend” in different countries and in different settings within those countries (Allan, 1989; Bidart, 1997; Burt, 2005; Saint-Charles, 2001; Van Der Gaag and Snijders, 2005): the same should be done for the meaning of “expert”. Moreover, in our study alters were perceived as “trusted people”, but there may be differences in the level of trust required and in the “field” in which this trust is felt. A refined measurement of the extent and level of trust would be helpful. In particular, such a measurement could provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between expertise and friendship in ambiguous situations.

## 7. Conclusion

The present study aimed at better understanding the influence of particular situations on the activation of one’s friendship or advice network. Our main hypothesis can be understood as a formalization of an argument first proposed by Krackhardt and Brass (1994), combined with Weick’s (1995) theoretical framework about sensemaking in organizations and with studies on types of uncertainty and types of trust elicited by different relationships in organizations. This hypothesis stated that advice networks are called upon in situations of information uncertainty and friendship networks in situations of ambiguity. We elaborated vignettes of different situations as a name generator to test who was solicited in uncertainty and ambiguity situations and measured the perceived level of expertise and friendship on a Likert-style scale. The results support the main hypothesis.

At the broadest level, the results contribute to a better understanding of how networks – through the relationships they are made of – differently contribute to the sense making process in organizations. Our results give an empirical foundation for the distinction between two types of uncertainty, information uncertainty and ambiguity, and sheds light on each situation’s relation to either instrumental (advice) networks based on cognitive trust or expressive (friendship) networks based on affective trust. From a theoretical viewpoint, one can argue that friendship and advice have homeostatic functions in organizations. Indeed, friendship networks can be conceptualized as a metaphorical “place” or an “organ” needed to deal with the contradictions and paradoxes of the various norms and rules governing the life of individuals in organizations, whereas advice networks would have the function of allowing instrumental adjustments and the transmission of technical knowledge within the organization.

This study also illustrates the need to always consider networks in a contextual and temporal perspective: “activation” of specific networks and therefore their importance may well depend on what is going on in the organization at that time. Network analysis conducted in organizations are often general in nature: sociometric questionnaires are used to ask people to name their friends, advisers or interaction partners within the organization—“who is your friend?” does not give the same information as “whom would you go to if . . . ?” Not only do we need to take the situation into account, but we should also try to better circumscribe the relationships, since how one defines friendship or expertise matters. With respect to a better understanding of the roles and nature of the networks activated in situations of information uncertainty or ambiguity, it might be more relevant to ask such questions as “To whom do you go to get or to validate information?” “With whom do you feel at

ease to discuss sensitive matters?” or “With whom do you like to discuss information you already possess?”

As with most studies, the answers we propose lead to more questions, but this should not be surprising in a study that deals with uncertainty: people interact in order to reduce uncertainty, creating “new” information which contains its own share of uncertainty.

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## Appendix A

### A.1. Situations of uncertainty

- You cannot get your computer to do a task you know it can do.
- You have decided to denounce an infringement you witnessed but you do not know how to proceed.
- You would like to start a new project in your organization (e.g. a daycare centre, a sport league, etc.) but you do not know how to proceed.
- One of your colleagues has a legal problem and you wish to suggest relevant resources. You do not know if such resources exist in your organization.

### A.2. Situations of ambiguity

- You have recently begun a love relationship with one of your colleague and you are wondering whether you should let other people in the office know about it.
- You were asked to evaluate to work of a colleague and your evaluation is negative. You do not know how you should communicate this evaluation.
- You have to take a day off to help a friend, at a time when such an absence would have an impact on your coworkers. You are not sure whether you should tell them now or if you should call in sick on that day.
- You already have an interesting job and you are offered a new one as interesting, with the same organization. You do not know whether to change or to stay.

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