Network, culture, and career success:
When strong ties matter[*]

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〈Content〉

Traditionally, research on career success was developed with human capital or organizational structural approach. This paper extends this research stream by adding social capital approach on determining career success. Previous research on career success based on social capital approach emphasizes the importance of weak-ties in career success. However, by constraining the cultural context in non-Western culture which has interdependent self-construals, this paper proposes that strong ties rather than weak ties are important for career success and specifies how the types and qualities of resources acquired through these strong ties affect career success. In addition, this paper shows how global and local network structure interacts to affect one's career success.

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Ⅰ. Introduction

Career success, the accumulated positive work and psychological outcomes resulting from one's work experiences (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001), is important not only to individuals but also to organizations, given how one's success can eventually contribute to organizational success. Much research has been done to examine the factors that affect career success in organizational research, mostly focusing on determining the effects of human capital and organizational and industrial structural approach (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Seibert et al., 2001). However, recently social capital approach in career research is becoming more promising, given that human capital and structural approach cannot provide exhaustive explanations for career success (Bozionelos, 2003; Davis- Blake & Pfeffer, 1989; Ferris & Judge, 1991). Social capital approach to career success is about understanding the roles of informal interpersonal relationships and social behaviors in career success (Seibert et al., 2001). Given how social networking is important in achievement of career goals (Wolff & Moser, 2009) and job search (Van Hoye, Hooft, & Lievens, 2010), social capital achieved from the network quality and structure could be core determinants of one's career success.

Social capital approach to career success examines a focal actor's quality (e.g., strength) and structure of relationship that a focal person creates and maintains with others (Coleman, 1988), and studies social resources achieved from the quality and structure of ties and its effect on career success. Regarding the effect of strength of relationship on career success, for instance, most of previous research shows the importance of weak ties on career success, highlighting the importance of more access to information and resources in building career paths (Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981; Seibert et al., 2001). However, empirical research has provided mixed findings

on the relative importance of weak ties compared to strong ties in successful career building. Although it is from research on job search not on the career specifically, Bian (1997) showed how strong ties of trust and obligation were more advantageous in influencing obtaining jobs in China. Wegener (1991) argued that whether or not strong ties vs. weak ties are important in job search depends on the initial social status. They show how individuals with high status prior to job search benefits from weak ties, whereas individuals with low status prior to job search do not. Hence, research on whether strong ties vs. weak ties are more critical on career success is inconclusive.

Inconclusive findings on the effect of network quality and structure on career success might be, first, due to lack of considering the effect of cultural context. Previous research on the relationship between social capital with career success has been mostly studied in major Western economies which belong to the Anglo-Saxon culture (Bozionelos & Wang, 2006; Sullivan, 1999; Tu, Forret, & Sullivan, 2006). People in different national cultures have strikingly different values, such as different construals of the self, of others, and of the interdependence of the two (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These differences in construals can influence the way they act their social relations with regard to their careers (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sullivan, 1999). Many Asian culture emphasize their fundamental relatedness of themselves to others, showing distinct attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Given how they don't separate their construals from others, they might tend to build strong ties based on their kinship, educational, and hometown backgrounds. In this kind of cultural context such as in South Korea, strong ties might affect career decisions more strongly than weak ties.

In addition, social context vary across national borders, such that countries where workers have higher work centrality, placing a greater emphasis on job security and

stability, such as Japan or Korea, might show different patterns on the relationship between network resources and career success (Lin, 2002; Sullivan, 1999). Especially in these cultures which have a long tradition of life-time employment, inter-organizational career building is limited, will result in limited development of executive search firms. Hence, more emphasis is shown on leveraging one's own network in inter-organizational career building. With these variations in cultural and social context, understanding how the relationship between social capital and career success in non-Western context is imperative. In this study, we examine how the effect of social capital on career success in South Korea differs compared to that in the Western cultural setting.

Second, most of research on career with related to social capital examined what types of resources achieved through network in a simple way. Extant research simply measured the degree of information and resources achieved by simply asking the quantity of what is achieved (Seibert et al., 2001). However, types of resources achieved could be studied in more diverse way, such as from whom the resource was achieved and how prestigious that person was (Lin, 2002). By examining types of resources achieved more comprehensively, we might be able to examine the effect of social capital on career success more vividly.

Third, based on structural hole theory (Burt, 1992), some researchers showed how one's position in global network structure, such as one situated in structure hole, benefits one to have more successful careers by having more access to information and resources (Seibert et al., 2001). However, not much is studied on how these global network interacts with local network to affect career success. Although individuals activate and mobilize their social networks to engage in career building at the local level, these individuals are all located within a global social network, and the location in a global network can constrain and facilitate one's interactions at the local level. The importance of understanding the interaction between local and global

process in social network research has been much highlighted (Reagans & Zuckerman, 2004; Tortoriello & Krackhardt, 2010).

Hence, in this paper, I will examine (1) how cultural and social context affects to build strong ties at the local level, (2) how these strong ties at the local level result in different access to the degree of network resources, affecting career success, and finally (3) how local tie strength at the local level interacts with global network structure to affect their types of network resources achieved, resulting in career success.

Given that career research could unfold very differently depending on what types of careers are studied, I propose to limit the boundary of this study to examining inter-organizational careers at the executive levels. I propose to examine current and ex-consultants in management strategy consulting firms in South Korea, which is a great fit to examine inter-organizational careers at the executive levels. Management consultants in South Korea are interesting sample to study, given how they are brought in together in consulting firm explicitly to build network and aim for building "boundaryless career" (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). In addition, South Korea is one of the Asian countries that shows strong tendency toward emphasizing relatedness with others in defining self-construals. Having same educational or institutional background affected getting new jobs too much that even policies are adopted to mitigate these effects of relatedness. Moreover, traditionally, the economy of South Korea has been depended on a few large conglomerates where their internal labor market is strongly built, resulting in low mobility in inter-organizational career building.

I expect that this research will contribute to research on social network approach to career in several ways. First, by showing how strong ties might be beneficial to career success in certain context, this research will extend previous research that emphasized the importance of weak ties on career success. By considering different

social and cultural context, strong ties might help accessing higher quality information, influence, and solidarity, resulting in higher career success in some cultures. This paper will also confirm the importance of studying cross-cultural differences with regard to career. Second, this research will expand social network approach to career success by examining types of network resources achieved in a more detailed, nuanced way. By classifying high-quality vs. low-quality of information accessed, influence, and solidarity through social network, we could have more thorough understanding on how strong ties (vs. weak ties affect acquiring different types of network resources, eventually leading to career success. Third, given that previous research on social network and career success was limited in examining local and global network process independently, this research contributes by examining the interaction effects of network structures on career success. Finally, this research will deepen our understanding on professional service firms by showing the detailed analysis on how professionals build up their career.

Ⅱ. Local process: how strong ties affect career success

1. Effects of social and cultural context

Granovetter's (1974) "strength-of-weak-ties" hypothesis has stimulated many areas of research, and the study of career is not an exception. Weak-tie is known to "provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circles"(Granovetter, 1982:114). Hence, much research on career with social network emphasized the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1974; Lin, 1990; Seibert et al., 2001). Granovetter (1974) show how American professional workers obtain job information through weak ties more frequently than through strong ties.

Seibert et al. (2001) show how weak ties allow more access to information, resources, and career sponsorship, resulting in higher career success. Burke and Kraut (2013) show how weak ties provide access to novel information about jobs, while strong ties produce redundant information, by analyzing Facebook users.

However, although weak ties may provide more novel information and resource beyond those from their own social circles, strong ties may be more willing to show their influence and more active resources in coaching career paths and getting jobs. Granovetter (1973) argues that weak ties are beneficial for information spread, while strong ties are beneficial for influencing others. Hence, strong ties might be more influential in career building especially when mobility across boundaries of organization is limited. Although fundamental shift in the psychological contract at work occurred, which made no more lifetime employment in Western economy (Cappelli, 1999), South Korea is gradually following the trend, yet it still shows limited mobility across organizations.

How socially limited mobility might affect different patterns in career building could be understood from both the company (job supply) and employee (job demand) side. First, from the company side, the economy of South Korea shows heavy dependence on large conglomerates, and this creates limited opportunities for career building across organizations. In these large conglomerates, internal labor market is built strongly, such that still much executive jobs are filled internally. In this context, when recruiting executives outside the firm, much heavier scrutinizing on candidates might occur, which will make firms rely on information coming from strong ties of the members in the firm.

Second, from the perspective of job seekers, due to long tradition of lifetime employment, seeking careers across organizations are not common and even the development of search firms is limited compared to that of Western economy. Hence, employees could not help relying on their social networks to build up their career,

particularly inter-organizationally. Given the limited job openings to outsiders, employees need to acquire high-quality resources from their ties. Just simply having an access to information on career building is not enough. They must need to get their ties to act and influence on behalf of them to build up their careers. Hence, having strong ties with strong solidarity will help employees to achieve high-quality support of active influence on career building, which will result in higher career success.

In addition to the effect of social context on career, different cultural context that South Korea reside in might also affect different social network patterns in building career. Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue how Asian cultures show interdependent self-construals, which focuses on the fundamental connectedness of human being to each other. They argue that having interdependent self-construals lead to "seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991: 227). If employees in South Korea also holds interpersonal self-construals, then when making important decisions such as careers, one could not help relying on others with strong ties they have. They might value the information, resources, and influences they could get from their strong ties who build up their self-construals.

Extant research on career with social network approach shows limited understanding on non-Western context, but there are some empirical evidences that strong ties are more effective in achieving career success. Bian (1997) showed that jobs in China are acquired through strong ties more frequently than through weak ties by having both information and influence flowing through strong tie networks. Watanabe (1987) found that strong ties were helpful in job search for Japanese professional and

technical workers. Hence, I argue that in non-Western context, strong ties rather could positively influence career success strongly than weak ties.

> *Proposition 1: The number of strong ties at the local level are positively associated with career success in non-Western context.*

2. Types of network resources achieved

To make sense of why strong ties might affect career success contradictory to previous findings, one must understand what resources actually flow through job-seekers' networks (Bian, 1997; Seibert et al., 2001). Extant research on career success with social network approach limitedly examined types of resources achieved through certain networks. For instance, Seibert et al. (2001) showed access to information, resources, and career sponsorship intervenes the relationship between weak ties and career success. Bian (1997) highlighted the importance of expressive support, such as socio-emotional support, achieved through strong ties affecting career success. Bozionelos (2003) showed how instrumental network resources (e.g., exposure and visibility to upper organizational echelons) were associated with extrinsic career success, and how expressive network resources (e.g., safe outlet for concerns and emotions) were associated with intrinsic career success. However, most of these studies measured the type of resources achieved from social network in a simple-minded way. For instance, Seibert et al. (2001) measured simply the quantity of access to information and degree of career sponsorship.

I argue that types of network resources achieved through social network could be more detailed out in terms of the breadth and depth of resources. Social capital that could be built through social network is known to be due to access to information,

influence, and solidarity (Coleman, 1988). With regard to career, access to information and resources could be information of career openings or information of resources that are critical to obtain to enhance career. Influence with regard to career would be the degree of the network influences on one's career decisions as well as influence on creating opportunities and hiring. Solidarity with regard to career would be the degree of career sponsorship including socio-emotional support.

Moreover, these resources could be examined in the degree of depth, such as higher-quality of information, influence, solidarity vs. lower-quality. For instance, having a large number of information and resources accessed vs. having a small number, yet high-quality information and resources (e.g., attractive job openings, gaining access to influential, prestigious leaders) will have different influence on one's career. I predict that weak ties will show access toward large number of information and resources, but their overall quality will be lower. Whereas strong ties will show access toward small number, yet higher-quality of information and resources, that might be influential in building one's career. Perhaps the reason why weak ties (vs. strong ties) were associated with access to information and resource was due to lack of considering the quality depth of information and resources achieved. This lack of specifying types of network resources achieved through social network related to career might overestimated the importance of weak ties.
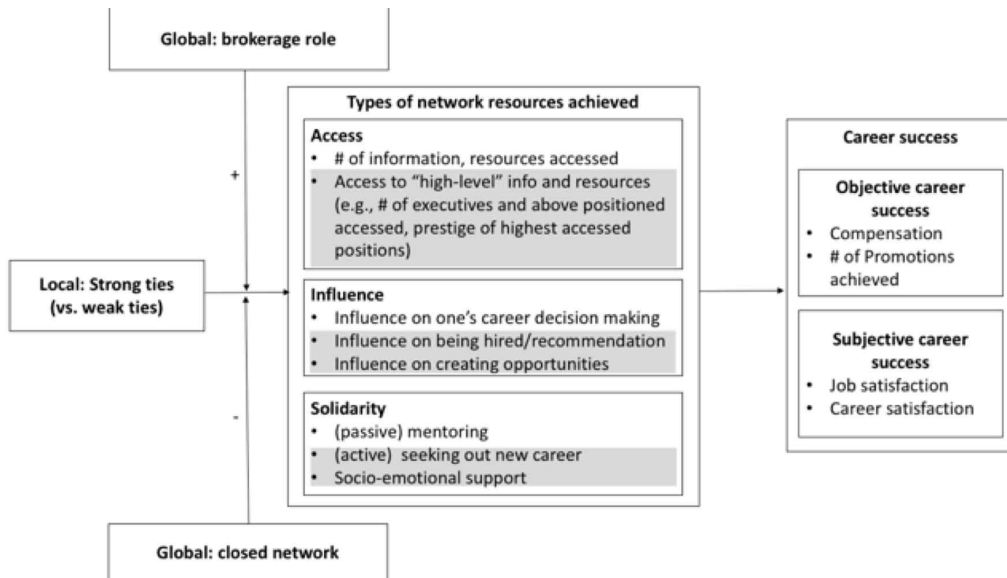
Proposition 2: Types of network resources achieved (i.e., high-quality network resources in access, influence, and solidarity) mediates the relationship between strong ties and career success.

III. Global process: how global network structure affects local interaction and types of achieved network resources

Although individual's tie quality at the local level affects types of network resources achieved to build career, those individuals are all located within a global social network, and the location in a global network can constrain and facilitate one's interactions at the local level. Global social network includes not only the ego network, but also all the alters and alter of alters' networks. In order to get the full global network structure, the boundaries of alters and alters of alters are normally set. For instance, Reagans and Zuckerman (2001) distinguish local and global by the boundary of actor's team. If interactions occur inside a team, then it is local, and if interactions occur outside a team but within a firm, then it is defined as global.

Distinguishing local and global network processes and understanding the interactions of those two processes in social network research has been critical. Reagans and Zuckerman (2001), for example, were able to solve the debate regarding the performance implications of demographic diversity by applying local vs. global network processes. Dense patterns of local interaction help demographically diverse teams in coordination and collective action, whereas bridging across global network helps them to transfer information andlearning (Reagans & Zuckerman, 2001). Tortoriello and Krackhardt (2010) show that in the context of cross-boundary relationship, not just one single strength of ties is important for the generation of innovations, but a strong bridging ties embedded in a dense clique like global structure, such as Simmelian ties, were critical in innovation. With regard to career study, Seibert et al. (2001) studied two different approaches of weak-ties and structural holes and examined how they affect network resources achieved and career success. However, they did not consider the interaction between these two theories, leaving the understanding of their effects as limited.

Based on how global network structure affects the local network process in previous network research, I argue that how individuals positioned in a global network can affect how individuals mobilize their local networks to achieve network resources with related to career success. Specifically, when an individual is located in a bridging role in small-world network (Granovetter, 1973), then they are naturally positioned to achieve diverse sets of knowledge base with their bridging ties. Hence, when individuals having strong ties are located in bridging role, then they can achieve both high-quality network resources from local strong ties and low-quality (in other words, more quantity) of network resources from bridging role in global network, which will enable them to achieve higher career success. On the other hand, when those with local strong ties are situated in a closely connected network, then the embeddedness with their closed network will lock them to absorb only the limited quantity of high-quality information, resources, influence, and solidarity, which might not be enough to achieve higher career success.

Proposition 3: Global network structure moderates the relationship between strong ties and types of network resources achieved, such that when strong ties at the local level are situated in global brokerage role (closed network), the relationship between ties and network resources achieved become stronger (weaker), by achieving both low and high quality network resources (only low quality network resources).

IV. Proposed Research Methods

In order to empirically examine the suggested propositions, there are several ways to design the studies. For example, given that some aspects of this study, such as specifying detail types of network resources for career, have not been explored in previous research on career, a qualitative study based on interviews will be appropriate to explore the untapped areas. In order to investigate the proposed relationships, various quantitative studies could be applied, such as cross-sectional survey-based study or a longitudinal study following career changes from a specific company or industry. In this section, I propose two representative research methods to empirically test the propositions.

Study 1: Interview-based qualitative study

Qualitative study will be useful to understand the detail types of network resources that were achieved while building careers through network. By interviewing various people, a more nuanced understanding will be possible on the different qualities of career resources achieved through network. The outcomes of interviews on different qualities of career resources achieved could be used later as measures to diagnosis the types and the extent of resources achieved in quantitative studies.

In order to conduct the qualitative study effectively, sampling the interviewees will be critical, and I propose to follow two criteria when conducting sampling. First, interviewee's local and global network status needs to be differentiated. For instance, some samples should be obtained from those with strong (or weak) tie, yet in global brokerage role, and other samples should be from those with strong (or weak) tie, yet in closed network. Second, samples need to show varying career success outcomes: (1) both high in objective and subjective career success, (2) high objective, yet low subjective career success, (3) low objective, yet high subjective career success, and lastly, (4) both low in objective and subjective career success. By choosing interviewees that fall into different categories, the highest range of diversity in types of network resources for building careers could be obtained.

Study 2: field survey-based quantitative method

Various quantitative studies could be conducted to verify the proposed relationships, but in this paper, I will propose the most widely used method in organizational behavior research of self-report survey-based method.

Data sampling. Samples should be obtained from the industry that shows significant inter-organizational career changes. I suggest that management consulting firm in South Korea could be an interesting sample to study, given that they are brought to the company explicitly to build network and most of the employees there are aiming for building inter-organizational career. Both current and ex-consultants in management consulting firm should be sampled. In addition, those who went through at least one year of consultant experience, which is mostly achieved after their MBA degrees should be sampled specifically.

Measures. For measuring strong vs. weak ties, I suggest to follow Seibert et al. (2001)'s method of asking to list (by initials) "the people who have acted to help your career" and then asking to indicate how close they felt to the alter on a scale

where 2 was "especially close", 1 was "less close", and 0 was "distant". Weak tie will be the sum of all ties between the respondent and his/her alters coded as 0 or 1. Strong tie will be the sum of all ties between the respondent and his/her alters coded as 2. The other alternative way to measure this is to simply ask the frequency of contacts with each listed person, and determine the strength of ties.

For measuring qualities and types of network resources, the measures should be developed through qualitative interviews Some suggested examples are listed in Figure 1. After deciding the full list of potential career resources that could be achieved through networks, respondents should determine the extent of network resources achieved from each listed alters in a scale of 1 to 5. By analyzing the degree of each type of network resources provided to the actor, this could be a proxy for the quality of resources actor achieved. Depending on the measures developed after interview, some types of resources could by itself indicate the quality of resources actor achieved, such as "whether the person provided emotional support" or "whether the person reached out to create a job for the actor."

For dependent variables, I propose to follow Arthur et al. (2005)'s approach of measuring both objective and subjective career success. For instance, measuring number of promotions and salary will be an example of objective career success. Career and job satisfactions will be an example of subjective career success (Arthur et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2001). In addition, sets of commonly used control variables in career research should be applied (Dreher & Cox, 2000; Forret & Dougherty, 2004), including human capital variables, job and organizational variables, and demographic variables.

The biggest challenge in empirically testing the hypothesized model is measuring actor's global network. Given that the alters who provide career support for the actors might not be located within the same firm or team, it is challenging to measure the entire global network structure. I propose several ideas here that might

help researchers to guide the way. First, one way to measure proximately is asking respondents to examine alters' networks, but this will be limited based on the perception of respondents. Second, another way is to get alters' contact information from the respondents, and contact those alters to get their network information, such as alters' position, industries, and the degree of structural hole, centrality, etc. This method is the most ideal way to examine a global network, but realistically it will be the most challenging method to gather all the information needed. If this method is pursuit, then the size of respondents samples should be limited so that operationzalition of getting alters' information could be feasible. Finally, the another way is by adopting Reagans and Zuckerman's (2001) approach by measuring the degree of structural holes within the team vs. outside of the team. Researchers might extend this and analyze structural holes of the respondents within the consulting firm and measure the degree of structural hole outside the consulting firm.

If none of these work, then as an alternative to considering an actor's global network, I suggest to slightly change it to argue how ego-network structure constraints or facilitates ego-network quality. For instance, by measuring structural holes and degree centrality of ego-network following Wang, Rodan, Fruin, and Xu's (2014) methods, researchers can interact these ego-network structure with ego-network quality of the strength of ties to see how the interaction affects types of resources achieved through network, and eventually to career success.

V. Conclusion

This paper examines how strong ties could positively affect career success by proposing to study professional service firms in South Korea context. This paper will contribute to both career and social network research by introducing more detailed,

nuanced analysis on types of network resources achieved through certain networks and by showing how global and local network interacts to affect career success.

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네트워크, 문화 및 경력 성공:
강한 연결 관계(strong tie)가 중요할 때에 관한 연구

김 현 지[*]

요 약

전통적으로 경력 성공(career success)에 관한 연구는 인적 자본 접근방법 (human capital approach)나 조직 구조적 접근 방법(organizational structural approach)에 기반하여 왔다. 이 논문은 경력 성공에 관한 기존 연구를 확장하여 경력 성공을 연구하는 데 있어서 사회 자본 접근방법(social capital approach)을 취해본다. 사회 자본 접근방법을 취하는 기존 경력 성공 관련 연구에서는 대부분 약한 연결 관계(weak ties)가 경력 성공에 도움을 준다고 알려져 있지만, 상호의존적 자기관(interdependent self-construals)을 지니고 있는 비서구권 문화에서는 서구권 문화와 달리 강한 연결 관계 (strong ties)가 약한 연결 관계보다 더 중요할 수 있다고 제언한다. 이를 위해 다양한 네트워크 연결 관계에서 경력과 관련해 얻게 되는 자원을 세분화/구체화하고 행위자의 글로벌 및 로컬 네트워크가 어떻게 상호작용을 일으키며 경력 성공에 영향을 미치는지를 논한다.

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