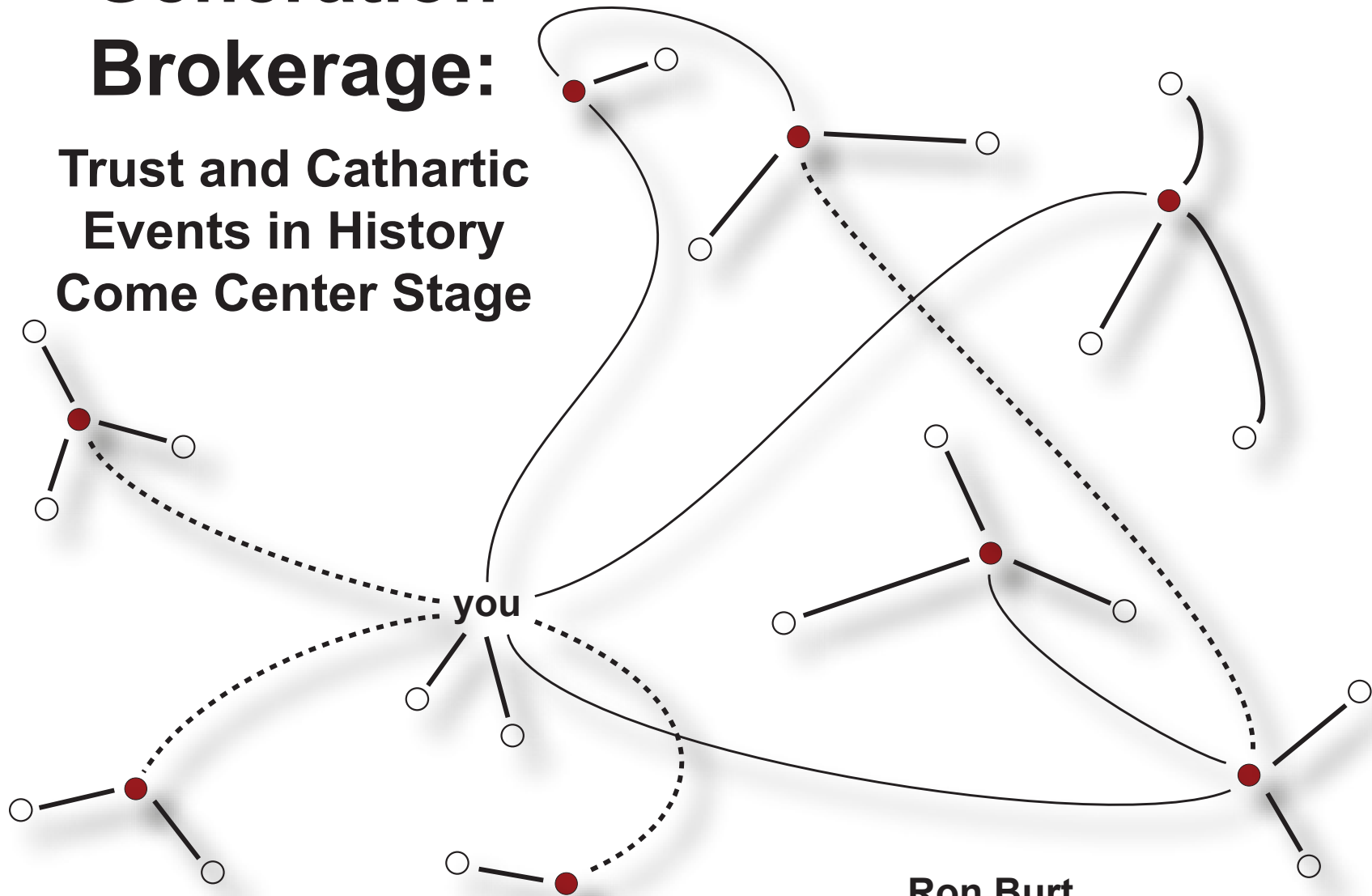


Fourth Generation Brokerage:

Trust and Cathartic
Events in History
Come Center Stage



Ron Burt
Bocconi University, 2026

What to say (content) versus when/where to say it (context)

Question to Claude the AI guy: “Why did the 1998 AMR introductory essay on trust by Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer succeed so well in attracting citations?” (18K Google cites in 2026)

The paper occupies a structural hole. Trust research in 1998 was fragmented — psychologists, economists, sociologists, and organization theorists were each running their own conversation, citing themselves but not each other. The paper set out to synthesize shared understandings of trust across disciplines while also recognizing that divergent meanings can add value. That is the classic broker position: you bridge groups that were not talking to each other, and everyone on both sides of the gap needs to cite you when they want to reach across.

It provided a shared vocabulary at exactly the right moment. The paper identified trust types — deterrence-based, calculus-based, relational, and institution-based — and established risk and interdependence as the two core conditions under which trust operates. Once a field adopts a common typology, every subsequent paper either uses it, argues with it, or has to explain why it isn't using it. All three options generate citations.

The author team itself was a structural signal. Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer together spanned organizational behavior, sociology, and experimental economics. That breadth told readers before they even read the abstract: this paper is safe to cite regardless of which silo you work in. It credentialed itself across audiences simultaneously.



Fourth Generation Brokerage: Trust and Cathartic Events in History Come Center Stage

Abstract

Long familiar is the image of people finding advantage from brokering contact between otherwise disconnected groups. Using data on the social network around an individual, research over the last few decades has made the image concrete: Network brokers are disproportionately the source of good ideas, new processes, and new products - for which they are celebrated with positive evaluations, faster promotions, and higher compensation.

My purpose here is to highlight four generations in the research on brokerage. I am less concerned with distinguishing generations (though that is an interesting point in its own right), than I am concerned with distinguishing between more and less significant questions for future research (high-payoff targets).

Transitions between the three previous generations in the research have accompanied advances in research technology. Conditions for those transitions have implications for candidates defining a fourth generation.

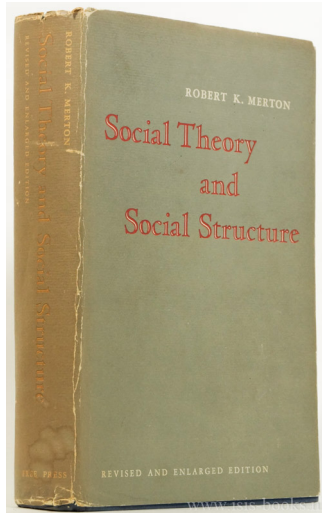
Of candidates advocated — language and neuroscience outstanding among them — I believe it will be trust and cathartic events in history that define the fourth generation. I here explain why (noting that jumps in conceptualization tend to occur with corresponding jumps in data methodology).



Four Generations of Development in Concepts of Network Brokerage

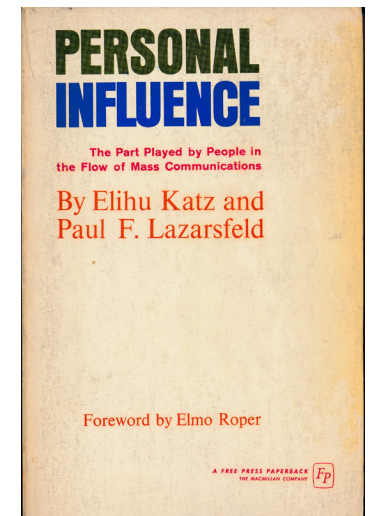
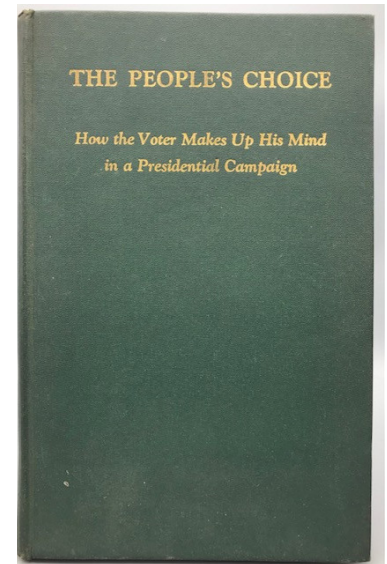
Generation	First Generation (Columbia, 1940s-50s)	Second Generation (Harvard, 1960s-70s)	Third Generation (diffuse, 1980s-90s)	Fourth Generation (diffuse, ongoing)
Theme	Wisdom and Influence via Bridge Relations	Successful Search via Bridge Relations	Success via Bridge Relations	Success via Strong Bridge Relations
Key idea	Bridge and Cluster Structure to Information	Weakness of Relationship Can Be Used To Infer Bridge	Lack of Surrounding Relations Defines Bridge	But Only Trusted Bridge Relations (history moves to center stage)
Key New Kind of Data	Survey Contacts*	Relationship Strength	Context Surrounding Relationship	Event History Defining Relationship
Key concept	Cosmopolitans and Opinion Leaders	Strength of Weak Ties	Structural Holes	Strong Bridges

*See Jean Converse (1987, *Survey Research in the United States*). Note central role of graduate students.



Robert Merton on local and cosmopolitan influentials (1957 *Social Theory and Social Structure*, p. 447 in 1968 ed., from 1949 book chap.)
 “The localite largely confines his interests to this community. Revere is essentially his world. . . . Contrariwise with the cosmopolitan type. He has some interest in Revere, and must of course maintain a minimum of relations within the community since he, too, exerts influence there. But he is also oriented significantly to the world outside Revere, and regards himself as an integral part of that world. He resides in Revere but he lives in the Great Society.” This is later image of a "T-shape" manager.

Paul Lazarsfeld on opinion leaders in the two-step flow (with Bernard Berelson, Hazel Gaudet in 1948 *The People's Choice*, and with Elihu Katz in 1955 *Personal Influence*, p. 138). "What we shall call opinion leadership, if we may call it leadership at all, is leadership at its simplest: it is casually exercised, sometimes unwitting and unbeknown, within the smallest groupings of friends, family members, and neighbors. . . . We began by interviewing a cross-sectional sample of some 800 women in Decatur, Illinois, a middle-sized city in the Middle West. We inquired into four areas of everyday decisions: marketing, fashions, public affairs, and movie-going. And for each area, we asked our respondents not only about themselves and their own behavior but about other people as well — people who influence them, and people for whom they are influential.”



Long History, Many People Set Today's Stage

Network Structure Maps the Distribution of Information



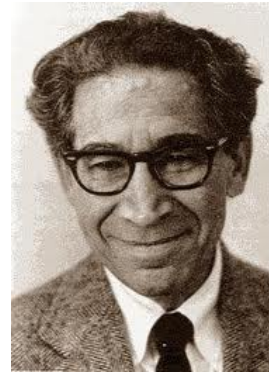
Paul
Lazarsfeld
1901-1976



Bob Merton
1910-2003



Solomon Asch
1907-1996



Leon Festinger
1919-1989



Stanley
Schachter
1922-1997



Elihu Katz
1926 - 2021

Network models of advantage are grounded in two facts about the social distribution of information from the 1950s “golden age” of social psychology (e.g., Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950; Asch, 1951; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Schachter 1959): (1) people cluster into groups as a result of contact opportunities defined by the places where people meet, and (2) communication is more frequent and influential within than between groups so that people in the same group develop similar views.

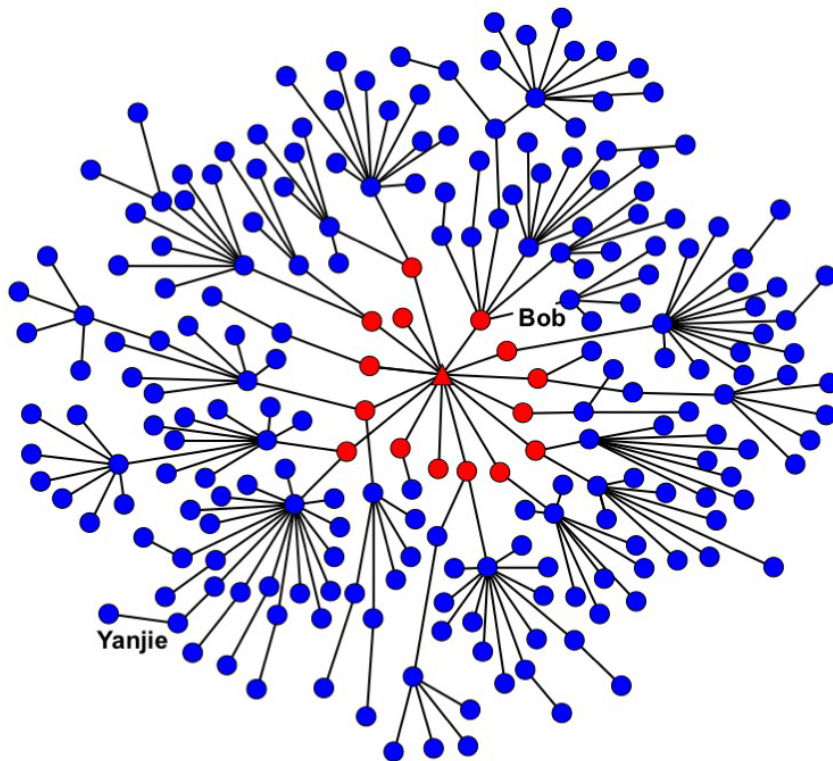
People tire of repeating arguments and stories explaining why they believe and behave the way they do. Within a group, people create systems of phrasing, opinions, symbols and behaviors defining what it means to be a member. Beneath the familiar arguments and experiences are new, emerging arguments and experiences awaiting a label, the emerging items more understood than said within the group. What was once explicit knowledge interpretable by anyone becomes tacit knowledge meaningful primarily to insiders. With continued time together, information in the group becomes “sticky” – nuanced, interconnected meanings difficult to understand in other groups (Von Hippel, 1994). Much of what we know is not easily understood beyond the colleagues around us. Holes tear open in the flow of information between groups. These holes in the social structure of communication, or more simply structural holes (Burt, 1992), are missing relations indicating where information is likely to differ on each side of the hole and not flow easily across the hole. In short, the bridge and cluster structure in social networks indicates where information is relatively homogeneous (within cluster) and where information is likely to be heterogeneous (between clusters).

From Burt, "Network disadvantaged entrepreneurs" (*Entrepreneurial Theory and Practice*, 2019, page 22)

Foundational Context: Bridge and Cluster Structure

A. Formal Organization

(reporting relations among 227 top managers in a large EU company)



B. Informal Organization

(frequent and substantive work discussion; “small world” by deleting isolates, pendants, & adding bridge)

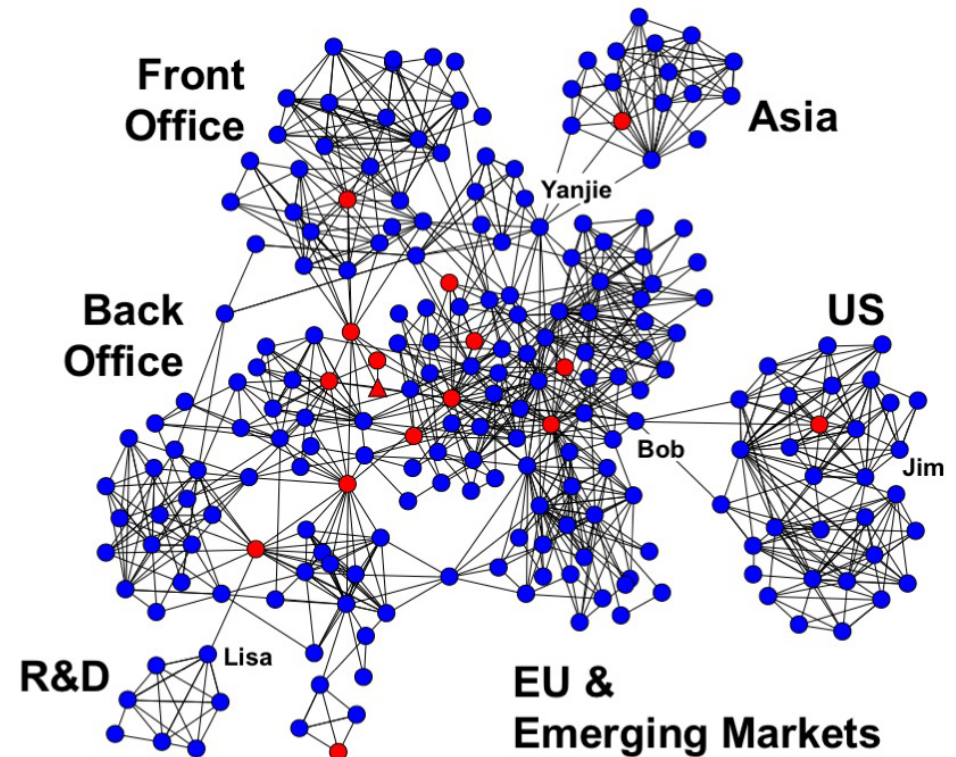


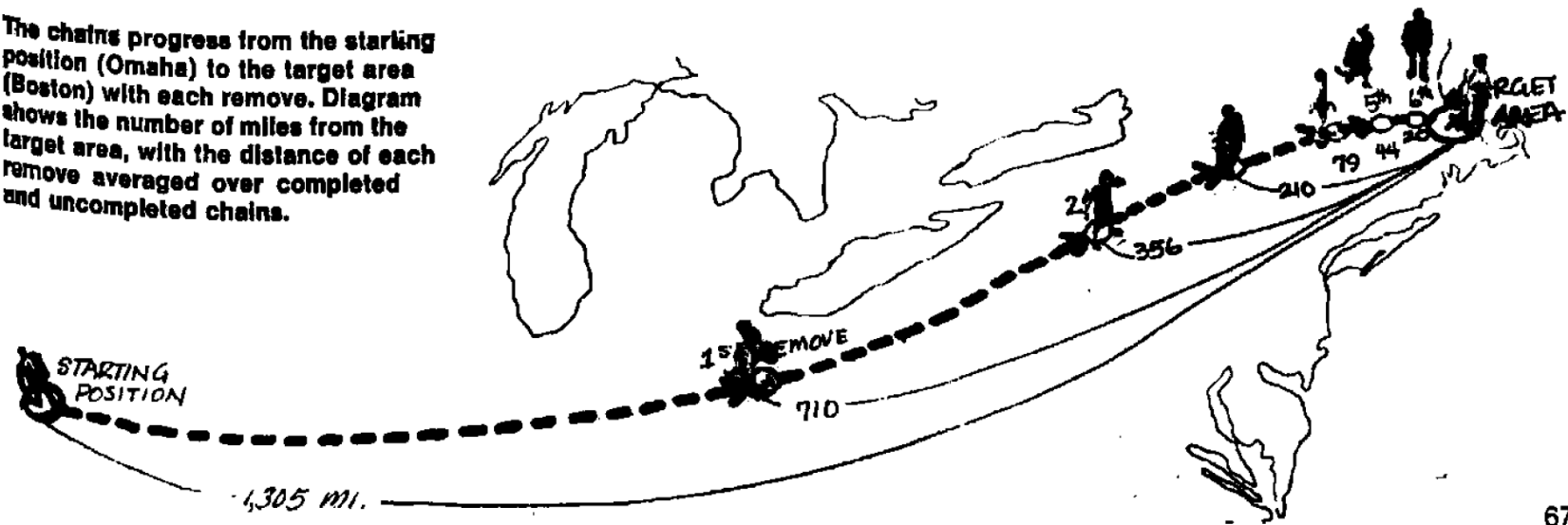
Figure 1 in Burt (2026, “Fragile brokerage?”)

Four Generations of Development in Concepts of Network Brokerage

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The chains progress from the starting position (Omaha) to the target area (Boston) with each remove. Diagram shows the number of miles from the target area, with the distance of each remove averaged over completed and uncompleted chains.



67

Stanley Milgram small-world study (Gordon Allport & Solomon Asch; 1960 Harvard PhD & initial funds, 1967 *Psychology Today*). The message passes through a sequence of acquaintances (median 5), each known personally to the next, forming a chain of contacts bridging widely separated social worlds.

Nancy Howell Lee abortionist study (Harrison White; 1968 Harvard PhD & initial funds, 1969 *The Search for an Abortionist*). “Think back now to all the people you asked for information on how to arrange an abortion, or for the address of an abortionist. Without mentioning any names, please describe briefly each person you asked for help...” (p. 177, median 2 on p. 69). The lines of inquiry most likely to be successful were those that reached beyond one’s immediate circle.

Mark Granovetter job-seeking study (Harrison White; 1970 Harvard PhD & initial funds, 1974 *Getting a Job*). “How did you find out about your present job? (for example, through an advertisement, or through a friend, relative, or acquaintance?)” “If through a person, who was that?” “Was this person a close friend, a relative, or more of a casual acquaintance?” “Of those finding a job through contacts, 16.7% reported that they saw their contact often at the time, 55.6% said occasionally, and 27.8% rarely (N 54). The skew is clearly to the weak end of the continuum.” (AJS p. 1371; also see book p. 54) Median chain was 2 steps (former friend knows of opportunity, AJS p. 1372).

The “forbidden triad,” an immensely productive didactic device (not a fact).

from Granovetter (1973,
“Strength of weak ties,”
American Journal of Sociology,
pp. 1361 and 1363. First
submitted in 1969, while Mark
was still a graduate student at
Harvard [graduated in 1970].)

Most intuitive notions of the “strength” of an interpersonal tie should be satisfied by the following definition: the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie.² Each of these is somewhat independent of the other, though the set is obviously highly intracorrelated. Discussion of operational measures of and weights attaching to each of the four elements is postponed to future empirical studies.³ It is sufficient for the present purpose if most of us can agree, on a rough intuitive basis, whether a given tie is strong, weak, or absent.⁴

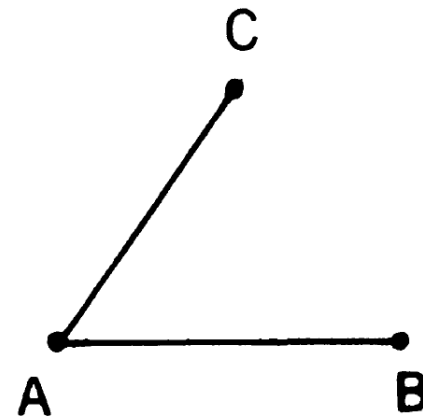
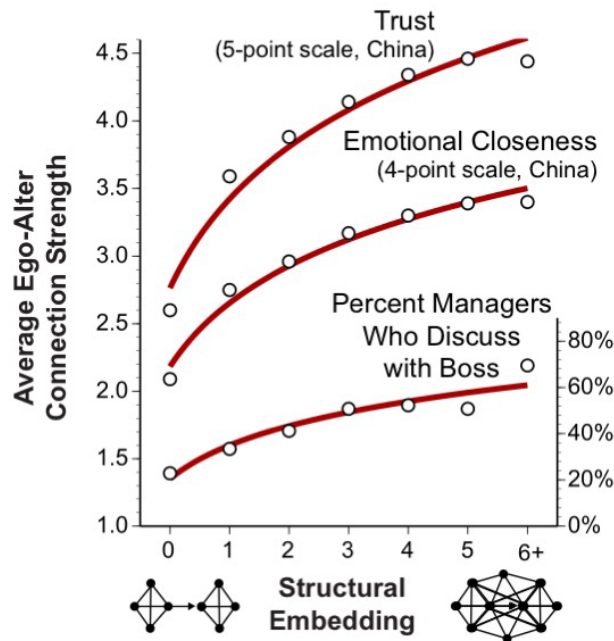


FIG. 1.—Forbidden triad

I will exaggerate it in what follows by supposing that the triad shown *never* occurs—that is, that the *B-C* tie is always present (whether weak or strong), given the other two strong ties. Whatever results are inferred from this supposition should tend to occur in the degree that the triad in question tends to be absent.

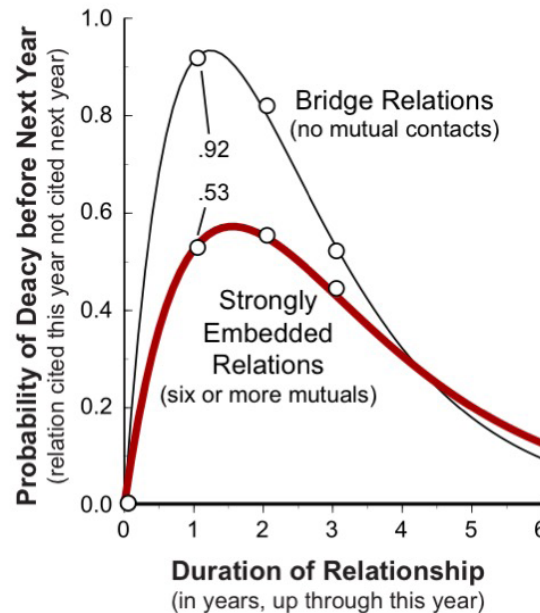
Closure-Trust Association: Local cohesion facilitates trust inside, distrust outside — creating weak bridges & suspicion of brokers

Can I trust this information received from someone in that group? Their interests can be less virtuous, irrelevant to my own, even contradictory. Is it even worth the costly due diligence to test the truth of the information?



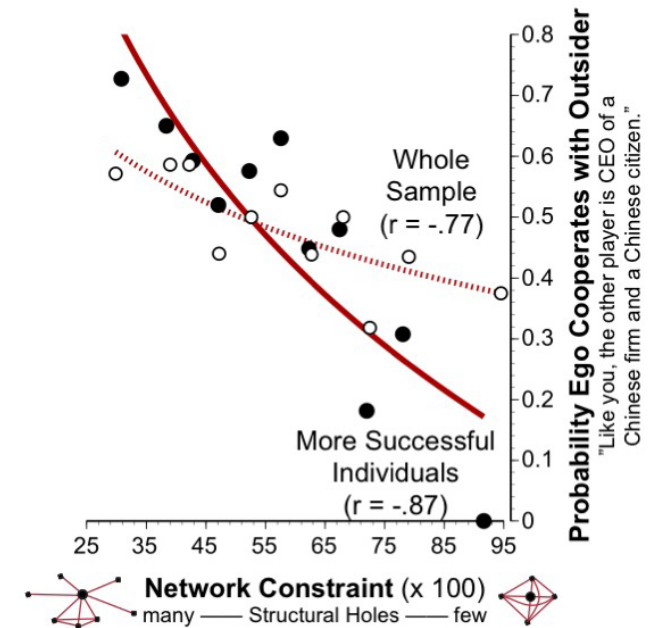
A. Closure-Trust Association

Rich history: **Economics** (Coase 1937 through Greif 1989), **Psychology** (Heider 1958, Festinger et al 1950), **Sociology** (Blau 1974; Granovetter 1973 1985, Coleman 1988), **Law** (Ellickson 1991, Bernstein 1992), **Political Science** (Putnam 1993). Two top lines are based on 7,166 evaluations by Chinese entrepreneurs of business contacts. Bottom line is based on 674 evaluations by American managers of discussion with corporate boss. Adapted from Burt and Opper (2026a:Fig. 2).



B. Which Protects Against Decay

For a population of investment bankers and analysts in a large US firm, this graph plots the probability of a relationship cited this year not being cited next year (based on 48,231 relations, from Burt 2010:181).



C. And Intensifies Distrust of Outsiders

For a probability sample of Chinese entrepreneurs, this graph plots averages for 5-point intervals on X with thin tails of X truncated for infrequency. "More Successful" are entrepreneurs whose businesses had above-median profit last year. Adapted from Burt et al. (2022:503). Regression lines in all three graphs are through the plotted data.

Figure 3 in Burt (2026, "Fragile brokerage?")
OLD SOCIOLOGY TRUISM: Micro cohesion creates macro fragmentation.

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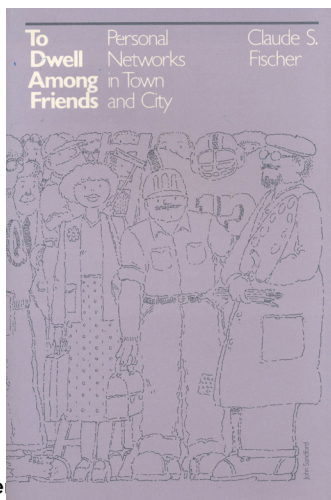


MEASUREMENT:

Capture strength of relations surrounding a relationship.

Network surveys need to include matrix questions such as the 1984 proposal here to put network questions on the General Social Survey (drawing on Fischer's 1982 *To Dwell Among Friends*).

from Burt (1984, "Network items and the General Social Survey," *Social Networks*)



Q1. From time to time, most people discuss important personal matters with other people. Looking back over the last six months -- that would be back to last August -- who are the people with whom you discussed an important personal matter?

Please just tell me their first names or initials. (RECORD NAMES IN THE ORDER LISTED BY RESPONDENT AND RECORD TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE NAMED. IF FEWER THAN FIVE NAMES ARE GIVEN, PROBE: **Anyone else?**)

RESPONDENT

EC var 1	FIRST NAME				
EC var 2	S EC var 3	SECOND NAME			
EC var 4	S EC var 5	S EC var 6	THIRD NAME		
EC var 7	S EC var 8	S EC var 9	S EC var 10	FOURTH NAME	
EC var 11	S EC var 12	S EC var 13	S EC var 14	S EC var 15	FIFTH NAME

NUMBER OF PEOPLE NAMED

IF NO ONE IS NAMED,
SKIP TO QUESTION 16

IF ONLY ONE NAME CAN BE OBTAINED, CIRCLE THE VAR 1 EC AND SKIP TO QUESTION 5

Q2. Do you feel equally close to all of these people? ____ Yes ____ No

IF YES, THEN CIRCLE THE EC CODE IN THE RESPONDENT COLUMN FOR EACH ROW NAMED

IF NO, THEN ASK: **Who is especially close to you?** (CIRCLE THE EC CODE IN THE APPROPRIATE ROW OF THE RESPONDENT COLUMN IN THE MATRIX)

Q3. Please think about the relations between the people you just mentioned. Are [NAME 1] or [NAME 2] or [NAME 3] or [NAME 4] or [NAME 5] total strangers, in the sense that they wouldn't recognize one another if they bumped into one another on the street? ____ Yes ____ No IF NO, SKIP TO QUESTION 4

IF YES, THEN ASK: **Who among them are strangers?** (CIRCLE THE S CODES IN THE APPROPRIATE BOXES OF THE MATRIX -- SKIP TO QUESTION 5 IF MATRIX IS FULL)

☐ ALL ARE STRANGERS - CIRCLE S IN NAMED ROWS, THEN SKIP TO QUESTION 5

The Natural Distribution of Relationships

(bridges are likely to be weak, but weak ties are not likely to be bridges)

	Location in Social Structure		Total
	Redundant Tie within Cluster	Nonredundant Tie beyond Cluster	
Strength			
Weak Tie	many	some	More
Strong Tie	some	rare	Less
Total	More	Less	

Table 1.1 in Burt (1992 *Structural Holes*)

Create Value by Bridging Structural Holes

STICKY INFORMATION

Information expensive to move because: (a) tacit, (b) complex, (c) requires other knowledge to absorb, or (d) interaction with sender, recipient, or channel.

STRUCTURAL HOLE

disconnection between two groups or clusters of people

BRIDGE

relation across structural hole

NETWORK ENTREPRENEUR

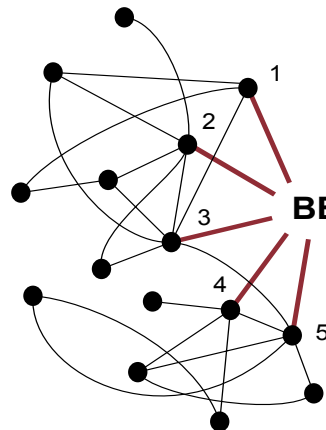
or "broker," or "connector:"
a person who coordinates
across a structural hole

BROKERAGE

act of coordinating across
a structural hole

Here is the core network for a job **BEFORE** and **AFTER** the employee expanded the network advantage of the job by reallocating network time and energy to more diverse contacts.

It is the weak connections (structural holes) between contacts in the **AFTER** network that provides expanded network advantage.

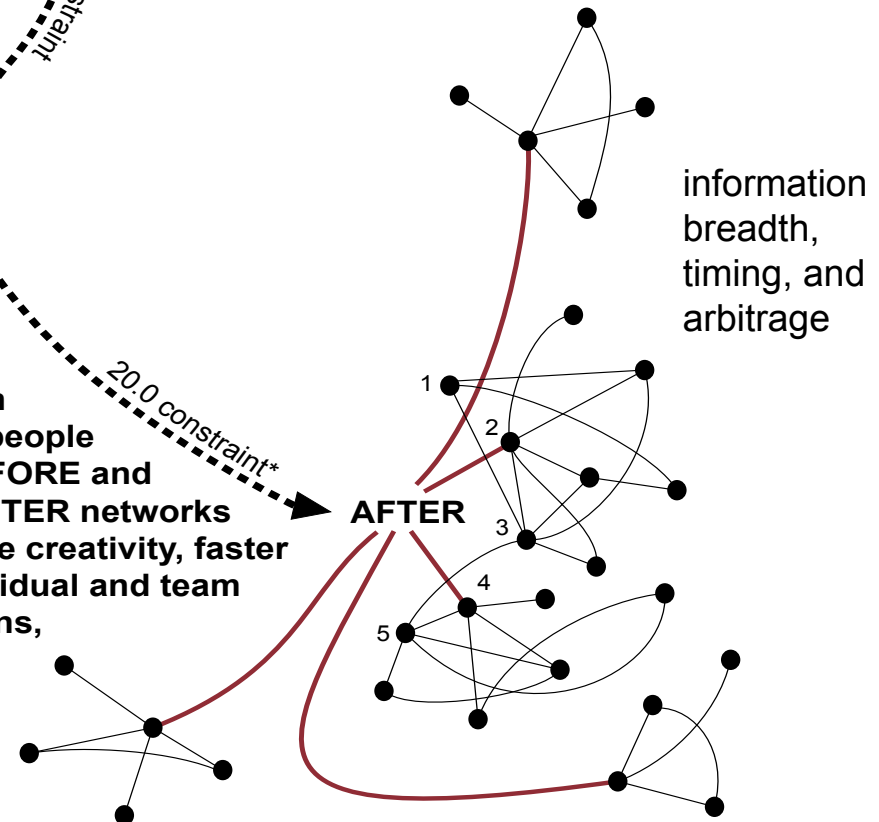


BEFORE

The employee **AFTER** is more positioned at the crossroads of communication between social clusters within the firm and its market, and so is better positioned to craft projects and policy that add value across clusters.

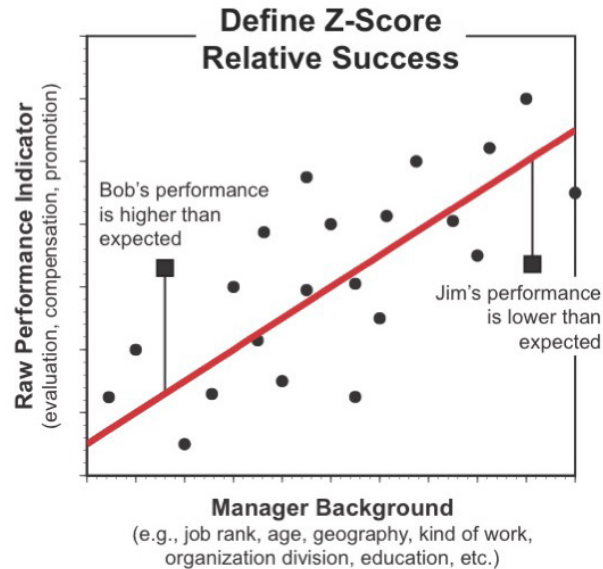
Research shows that employees in networks like the **AFTER** network, spanning structural holes, are the key to integrating operations across functional and business boundaries. In research comparing senior people with networks like these **BEFORE** and **AFTER** networks, it is the **AFTER** networks that are associated with more creativity, faster learning, more positive individual and team evaluations, faster promotions, and higher earnings.

*Network scores refer to direct contacts.

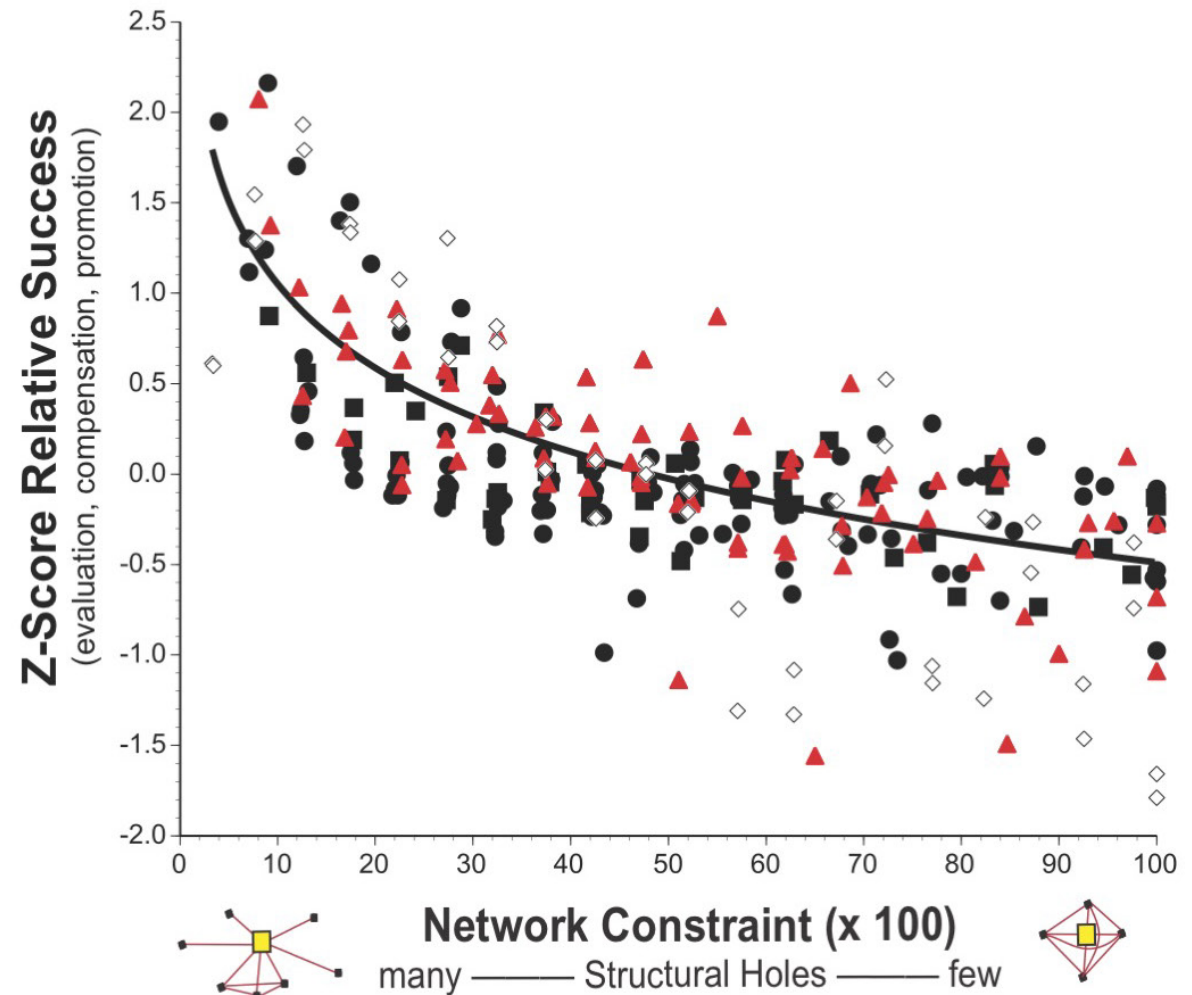


From Figure 1.4 in Burt (1982 *Structural Holes*), and Figure 1.2 in *Brokerage and Closure*. This slide is from my course handout on brokerage (see Appendix I on survey network data, Appendix IV on measuring network constraint).

Replicable Returns to Brokerage



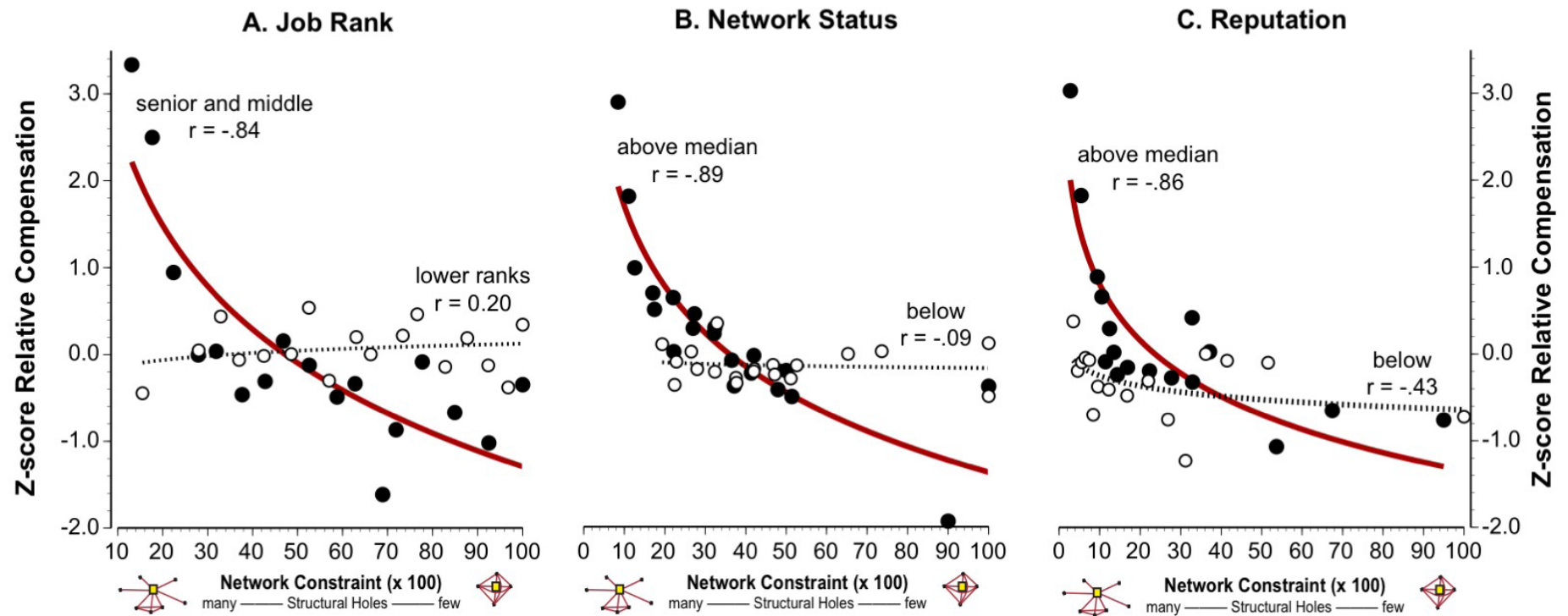
- Managers in the U.S.
(n = 3093, 8 study pops, $r = -.72$)
- Managers in Europe
(n = 1270, 4 study pops, $r = -.70$)
- ▲ Managers in Asia, Primarily China
(n = 1591, 4 study pops, $r = -.75$)
- ◇ Virtual World (21,536 avatars in EverQuest II, played by 13,968 people, 2 samples, $r = -.76$)



NOTE — Plotted data are average scores within five-point intervals of network constraint in each study population. Constraint = f (few contacts, dense connections among contacts, concentration in one contact). Correlations are computed from the plotted data using log network constraint. Inset graph to the upper left contains hypothetical data illustrating computation of z-score relative performance. Adapted from Burt (2019b:38)

Fragile Brokerage: Closure-Trust Association enforces status quo so returns to brokerage are contingent on broker social standing.

Being reputable is not essential for acquiring information, but it is to rewards for shared information.



Note: Plotted data are average scores within five-point intervals of network constraint within four populations (electronics company for job rank, software company and HR in commercial bank for network status, investment bankers for reputation). Solid dots refer to people with high social standing (senior/middle job rank, above-median network status, above-median reputation). Correlations are computed from plotted data for log network constraint.

Figure 4 in Burt (2026, "Fragile brokerage?")

Given the closure-trust association, one way to ensure strong (load-carrying) bridges is to reinforce the bridges with third parties:

Simmel Ties - “Two people are Simmelian tied to one another if they are reciprocally and strongly tied to each other and if they are each reciprocally and strongly tied to at least one third party in common.” (Krackhardt, 1999:186; Krackhardt, 1992; Tortoriello and Krackhardt, 2010)

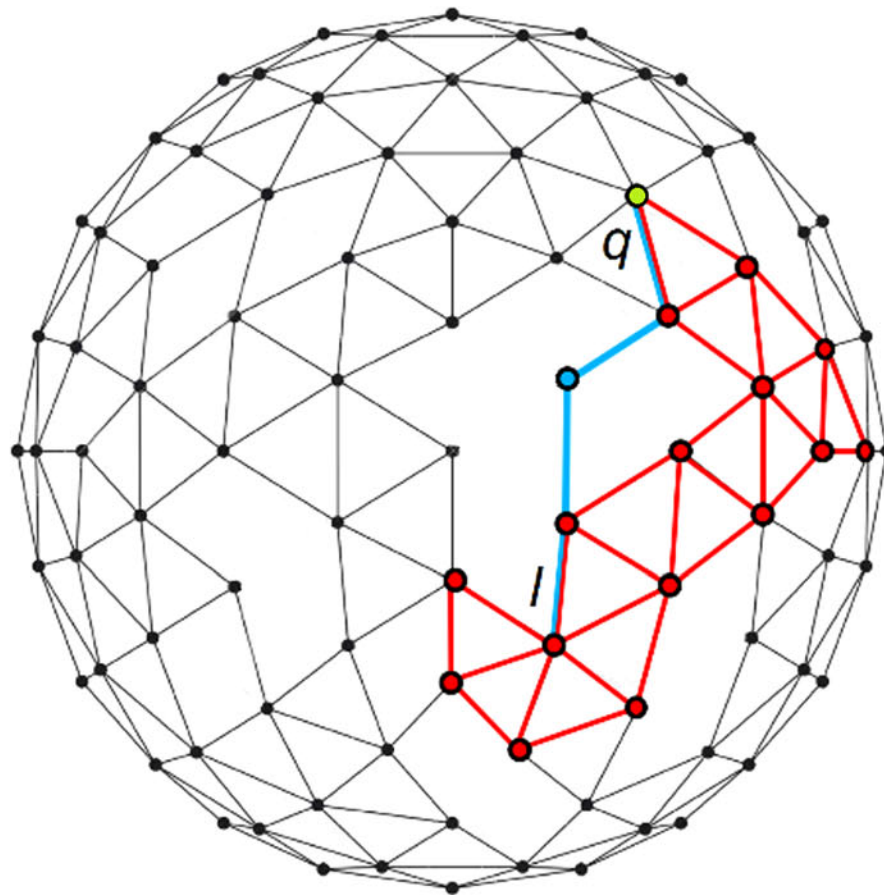
Wide Bridges – “A bridge is generally assumed to consist of a single tie, which is sufficient for simple contact between neighborhoods. However, if a connection requires multiple contacts, then a bridge must consist of multiple ties. Hence, we can measure a bridge not only by its length (the range that is spanned by the bridge) but also its width (the number of ties it contains). ... The importance of bridge width has been overlooked in previous research because it is not relevant for simple contagions. However, propagation of many collective behaviors depends on bridges that are wide as well as long. The structural weakness of long ties is that they form bridges that are too narrow for complex contagions to pass.” (Centola and Macy, 2007:710; Centola, 2010; 2018; Guilbeault and Centola, 2021) See example on next page.

Institutional Embedding - Stovel et al. (2011) discuss examples (cf. Kollock 1998, on “structural solutions,” Bernstein 1992 on diamond exchange): Brokerage can be made less fragile by confining it to a group that cannot abuse broker information advantage (e.g., marriage matchmakers in China), absorbing brokers into one side or the other (e.g., Protestant missionaries supporting practical community interests rather than colonial elite interests), or absorbing brokerage into the activity of an established organization (e.g., social welfare organizations that foster brokerage among members).

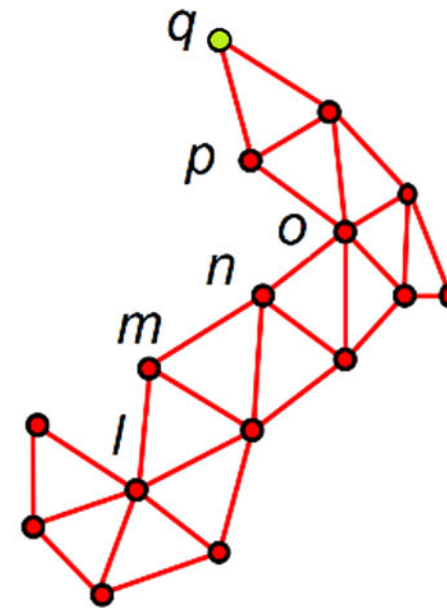
Workable, but Poor Solution - These ideas turn brokerage into closure (e.g., network constraint), which is negatively associated with innovation and growth. Adding third parties converts a bridge between groups into an embedded relationship within a group. Third-party reinforcement has several attractive features (especially for loosely-connected networks across the internet, next page). But for the general case, which includes unambiguously balkanized networks within and across organizations, third-party reinforcement is a theoretically unsatisfactory solution to brokerage fragility.



From Figure 1 in Guilbeault & Centola (2021 *Nature*)



- Complex paths between node l and q
- Shortest simple path between node l and q



Shortest Complex Path

$$V(\text{Geodesic}) = \{l, m, n, o, p, q\}$$

$$E(\text{Geodesic}) = \{(l, m), (m, n), (n, o), (o, p), (p, q)\}$$

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Event name generator provides data on network history.

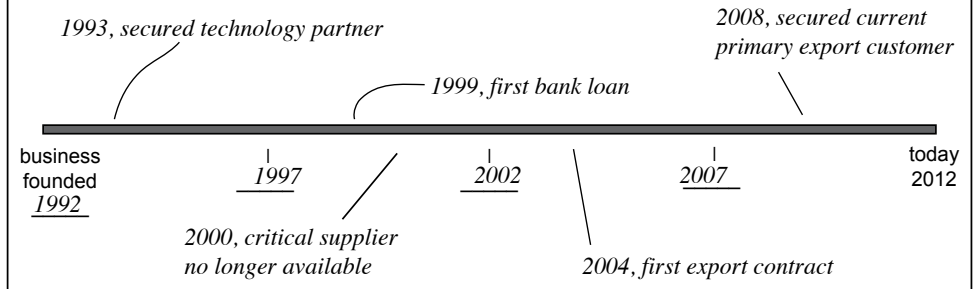
1. Define time line
2. Describe critical events
3. "Who was the person most valuable to you in founding the firm?" or "Who was the person most valuable to you during that event?"

**Contacts named are
"event contacts"**

Confidential

Business Time Line Worksheet

Time Line for an Example Firm

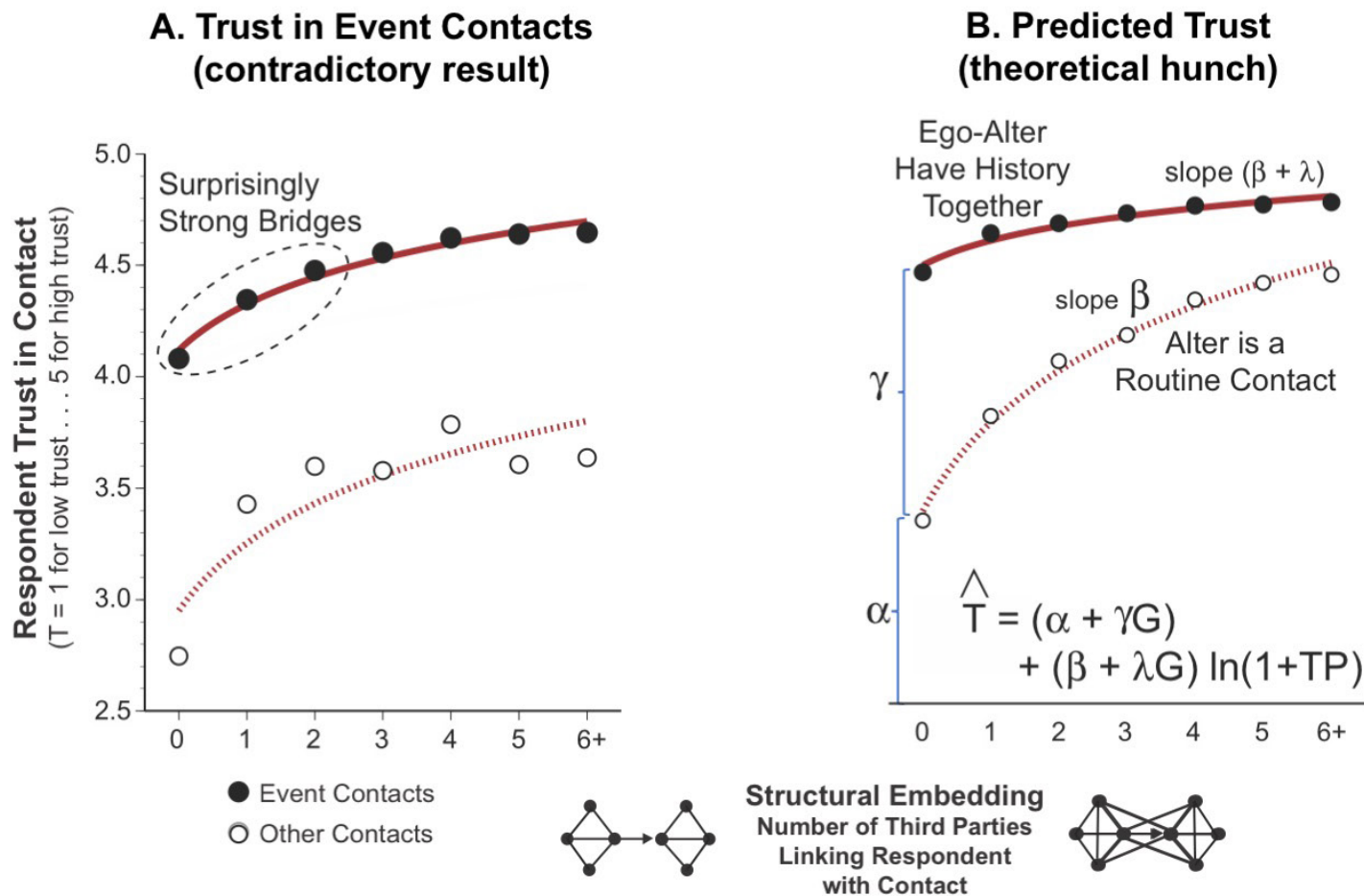


Time Line for Your Firm



Figure A.2 in *Strong Bridges*

Contradictory Data Reveal a General Solution: From Event Contacts to Strong Bridges



NOTE: Dots are average Y scores at each level of X. Graphs describe relationships with 4,464 contacts cited in 2012 by 700 respondents. Vertical axis is respondent trust in contact measured on a five-point scale. Horizontal axis is the number of other people in a respondent's network connected with the contact. Dummy variable G equals 1 for contacts cited as guanxi.

Figure 5 in Burt (2026, "Fragile brokerage?")



Our hunch was that the event contacts correspond to the valuable, particularistic relationships known in China as "guanxi." We launched the inquiry as follows:

A meritocracy is widely understood to be a governance system that distributes resources in proportion to merit. Such systems are worthy of aspiration, but typically noted for their absence. Familiar barriers to a practical meritocracy include accidents of birth, friends, ignorance, love of one's own kind, obligations, quotas, sloth — it is a long list.

The yawning gap between aspiration and reality generates frustration and anger. It is not surprising that people in diverse cultures have a word for relations that provide a way around meritocracy; a manifestation of insider wisdom when you are advantaged, an indicator of corruption when someone else is advantaged: There is blat in Russia, enchufe in Spain, piston in France, quan hệ in Vietnam, raccomandazione in Italy, sifarish in India, Vitamin B in Germany — and guanxi in China.

This category of colloquial words is a playground for social network theory. Theory defines social mechanisms responsible for the referenced advantage. In a narrow sense, this book can be read as a story of building theory around one such word, the Chinese term guanxi.

We treat guanxi as an example of what Merton and Barber (2004: 256) term a niche-word, a word that expresses "a familiar kind of human experience that transcends national and other cultural and linguistic boundaries." Our premise in this book is that the relationships known in China as guanxi refer to a broad category of human relationships.

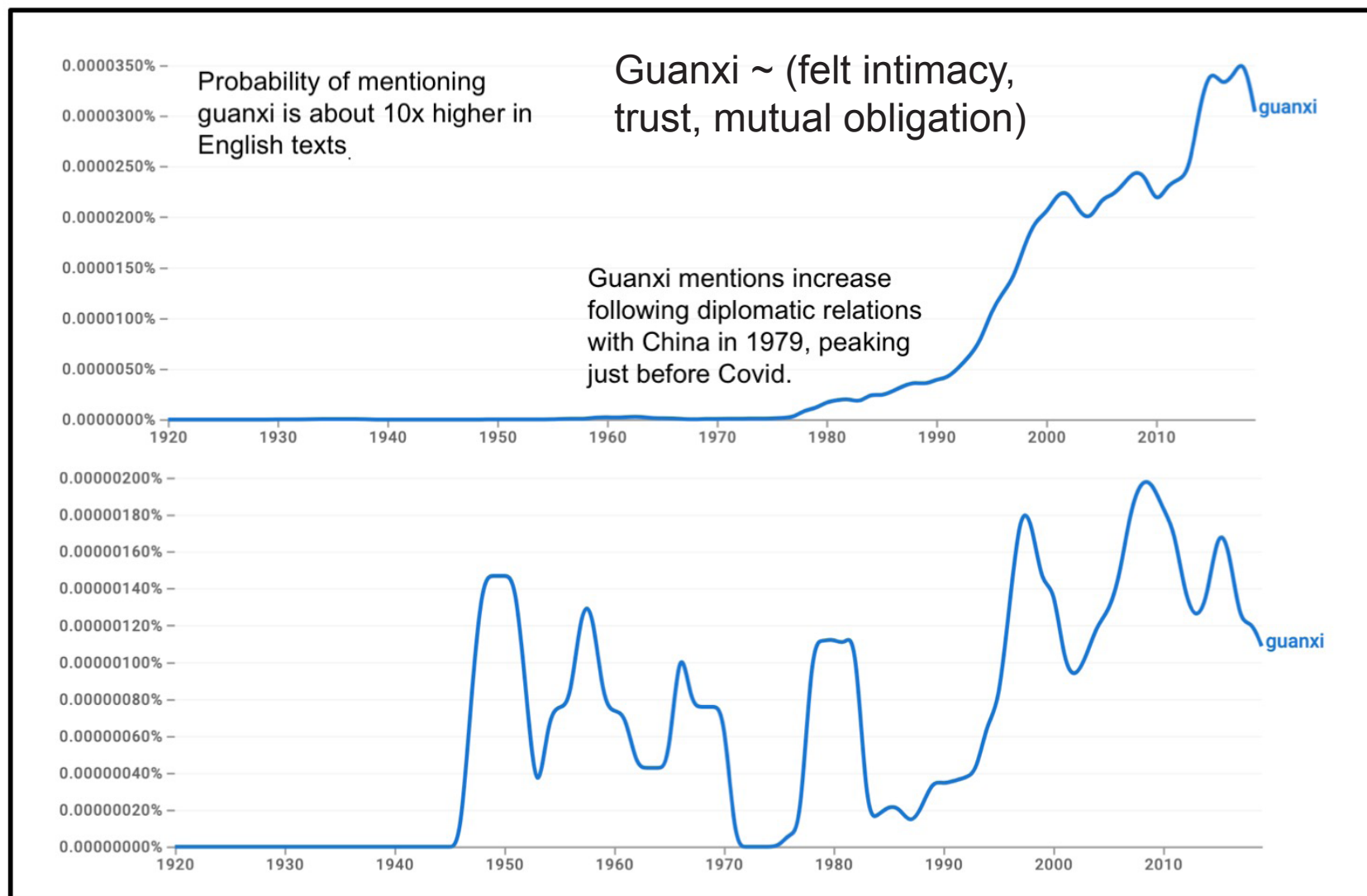
STRONG BRIDGES

TRUST BEYOND STRUCTURE

Ronald S. Burt & Sonja Oppen

From Chapter 1 to Burt and Oppen (2026, *Strong Bridges*).

Guanxi Mentions in China and the West



NOTE: Google ngram output with 2-year smoothing (created on September 30, 2024). Here are some events related to peaks in Chinese attention: (early 1950s) attack on clientelist ties and feudal networks (so-called 3-Anti-campaign launched in 1951 and 5-Anti-campaign in 1952), (1957) year before Mao launches Great Leap Forward (mass mobilization and collectivization), (1966) cultural revolution begins (to purge counter revolutionaries), (1978-79) economic reforms (Deng Xiaoping begins to replace old veterans), (1997) financial crisis (in parallel 1993-1997, anti-corruption campaign by Jiang Zemin), (2008) financial crisis (in parallel 2003-2012 Hu Jintao's fairly moderate anti-corruption campaigns), (2015) height of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign, started with taking office in 2012).

Figure 4.1 in Burt and Oppen (2026, *Strong Bridges*). For more on language, see Chapter 6 on the language used in China to explain guanxi.



Ask Business Leaders Directly Who in Their Network Is *Guanxi*

After eliciting the names of key business contacts, we put the name interpreter item at the right to the stratified probability sample of 384 Chinese CEOs in 2018 running SMEs to explicitly distinguish contacts they deem *guanxi* versus those deemed not-*guanxi*.

2018 sample is stratified by city, industry, and size (Shanghai, Ningbo, Hangzhou; Auto Parts vs IT; Small vs Large). No firm is included from the 2012 survey.

H1: Guanxi reproduces the two trust associations defining strong bridges from event contacts. (Figure C, page 31)

H2: Guanxi strong bridges are essential for competitive advantage of brokerage. (see pages 32-33)

14. Are you familiar with the word “*guanxi*?”

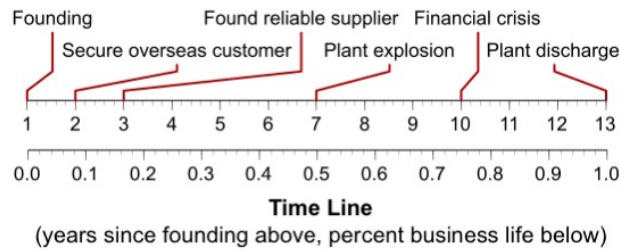
(Interviewer circle answer) **yes** **no**

14b. If no, skip to question 14c. If yes, ask:
When there is *guanxi* between two people, that tells you certain things about their relationship. In your own words, how would you describe to a foreigner the relationship between two people who have *guanxi* with each other? (Interviewer, hand across GUANXI SHEET. Staple sheet to this page with answer.)

14c. In general, people say that *guanxi* exists when two people feel morally obligated to help one another without the expectation of a direct compensation. **Look over the list of your business contacts. Thinking of *guanxi* as feeling a moral obligation to help each other, with whom do you feel you have the strongest *guanxi*? Just read the number next to the name of the person.** (Interviewer, write “1” in response line for named person.)

14d. **Are there any other people on the list with whom you have *guanxi* almost as strong as with the person you just named, contact “number named in question 14c”?** (Interviewer, write “2” in response lines for named people.)

14e. **In terms of the general understanding of *guanxi* as feeling a moral obligation to help each other, with which people on the list do you definitely NOT have *guanxi*?** (Interviewer, write “3” in response lines for each named person.)



2012	2018	
700	384	Respondents
80%	83%	Founders
11	10	Firm Age (med.)
67	66	Employees (med.)

Hunch: The Oddly Strong Bridges Could Be *Guanxi*

Two surveys, stratified area probability sample of Chinese heads of SME private enterprises (CEOs/entrepreneurs). Thick line indicates “especially close,” dashed line indicates “less than close,” no line indicates “distant,” and “trust” indicates relations deemed highest trust.

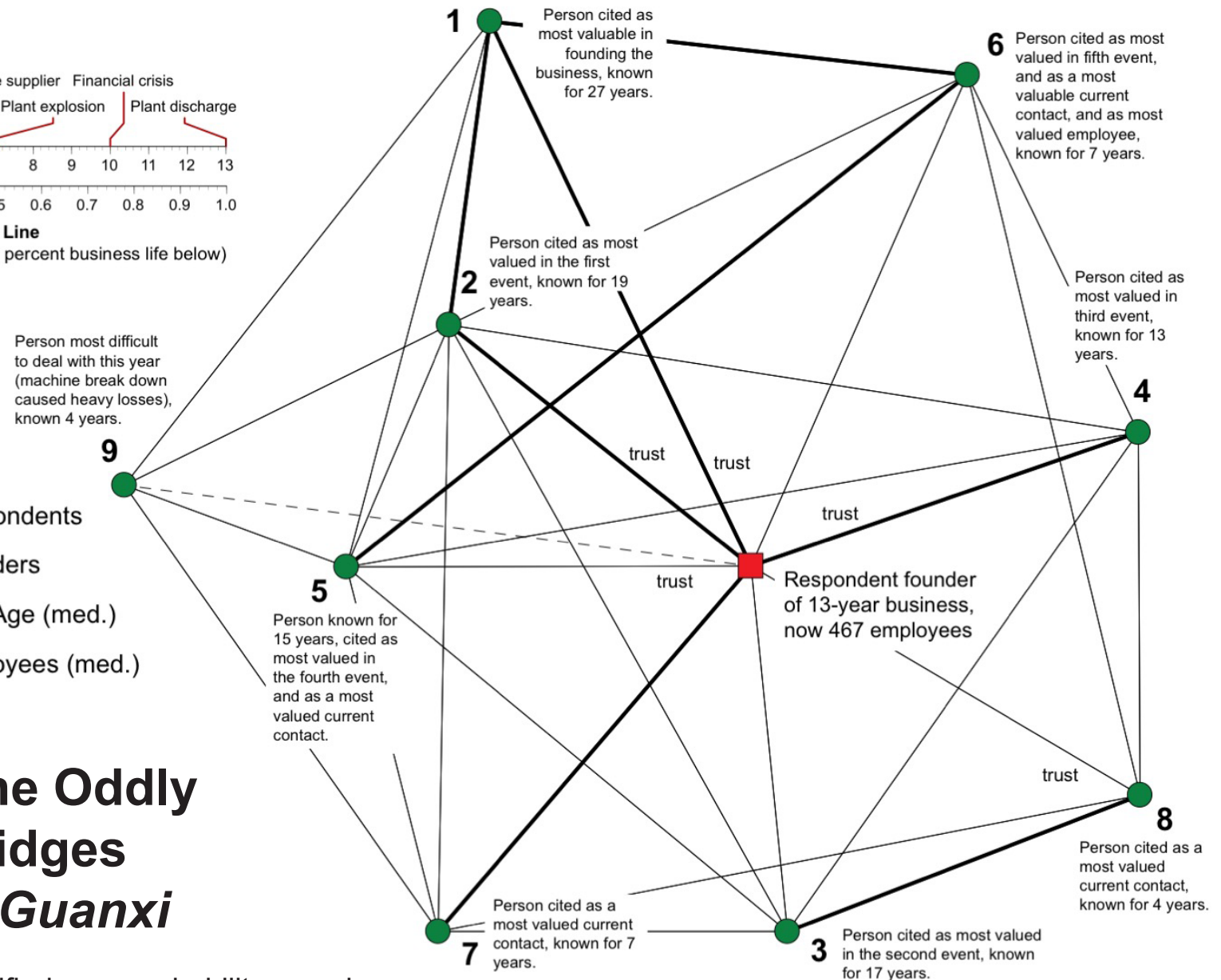
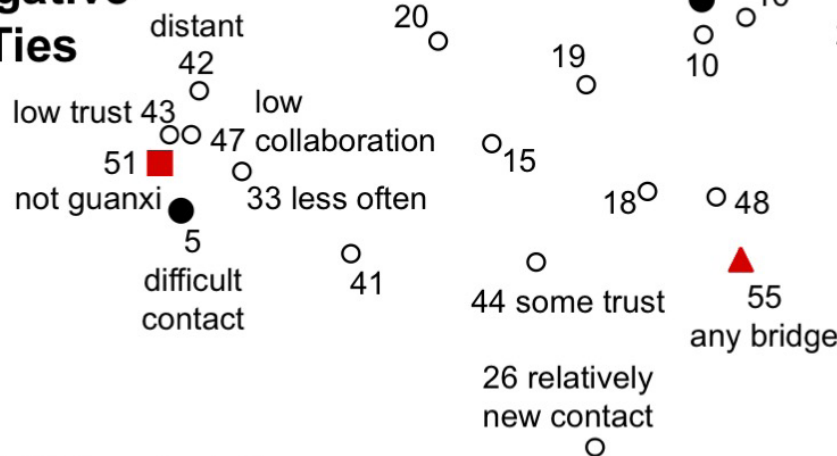


Figure 3.2, Burt and Oppen (2026 *Strong Bridges*)

Guanxi Is Variably Likely in Kinds of Relations

Negative Ties



NAME

GENERATORS

1 founding event	9 neighbor
2 most important	10 party
3 four other events	11 childhood
4 valued current	12 classmate
5 difficult	13 military
6 most valued	14 colleague
employee	15 former coll.
7 valued, but not	16 other - investor
elsewhere classified	17 other - partner
	18 other - client
	19 other - supplier
	20 other - competitor
	21 other - just friend

ROLES

8 family

HELPED HOW?

22 resources
23 referrals
24 emotional support
25 other support

DURATION

26 known < 6 years
27 known 6 - 10 years
28 known 11 - 20 years
29 known > 20 years

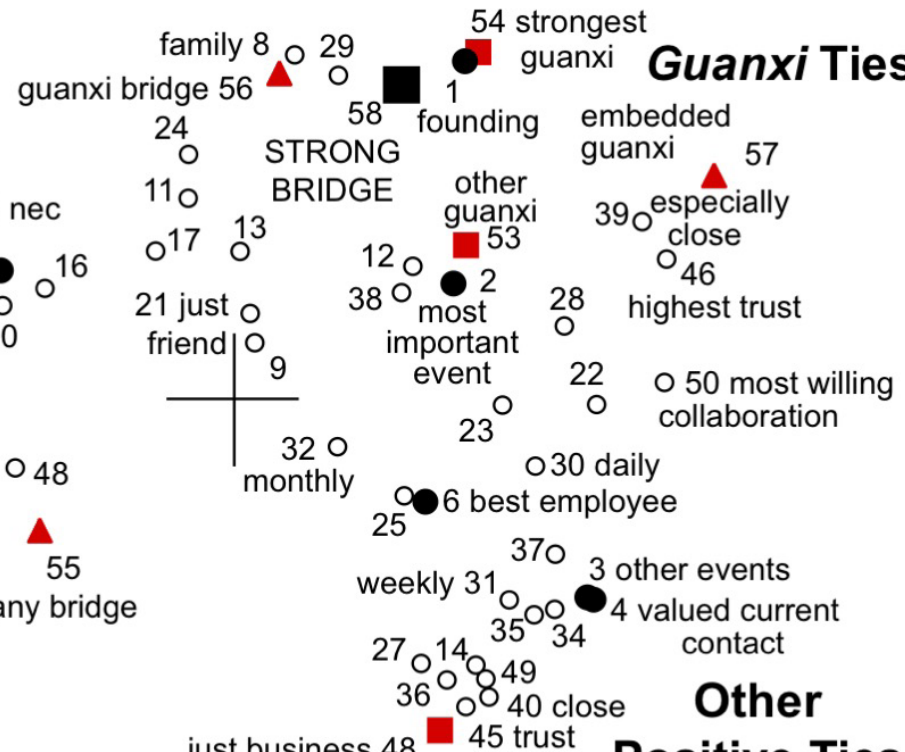
FREQUENCY

30 daily
31 weekly
32 monthly
33 less often

COMMUNICATION

34 face to face
35 video
36 voice
37 email
38 text

Guanxi Ties



Other

Positive Ties

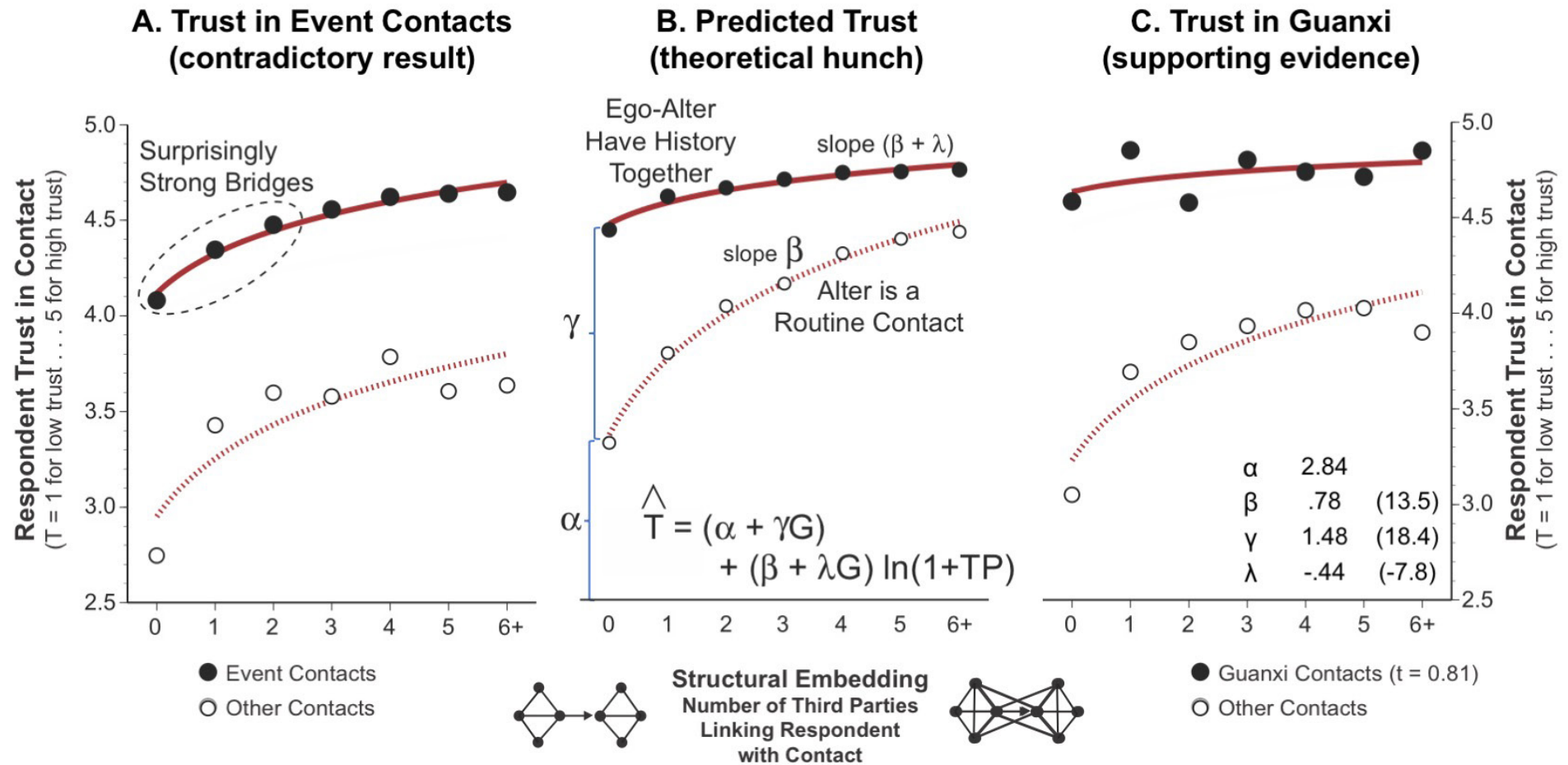
EMOTION

39 especially close
40 close
41 less close
42 distant
43 low trust
44 some trust
45 trust
46 highest trust
47 low collaboration
48 some
collaboration

49 collaboration
50 most willing
collaboration
51 not guanxi
52 just business
53 other guanxi
54 strongest guanxi
55 any bridge
56 guanxi bridge
57 embedded guanxi
58 STRONG BRIDGE

NOTE: Classical multidimensional scaling of Jaccard coefficients measuring co-occurrence of characteristics in same relations. Axes are proportional in length to eigenvalues defining them. Cross-hair marks (0,0) point on the axes. The two dimensions describe 91% of variance in the 56 characteristics. Solid circles are name generators. Red squares and triangles are *guanxi* categories (except #55).

Unexpected Strong Bridges Are Even More Obvious in Guanxi



NOTE: Dots are average Y scores at each level of X. Graphs describe relationships (a) with 4,464 contacts cited in 2012 by 700 respondents, (c) with 2,702 contacts cited in 2018 by 384 respondents. Vertical axis is respondent trust in contact, measured on a five-point scale. Horizontal axis is the number of other people in a respondent's network connected with the contact. Dummy variable G equals 1 for contacts cited as guanxi. Estimates in (c) are with individual fixed effects and jackknife test statistics.

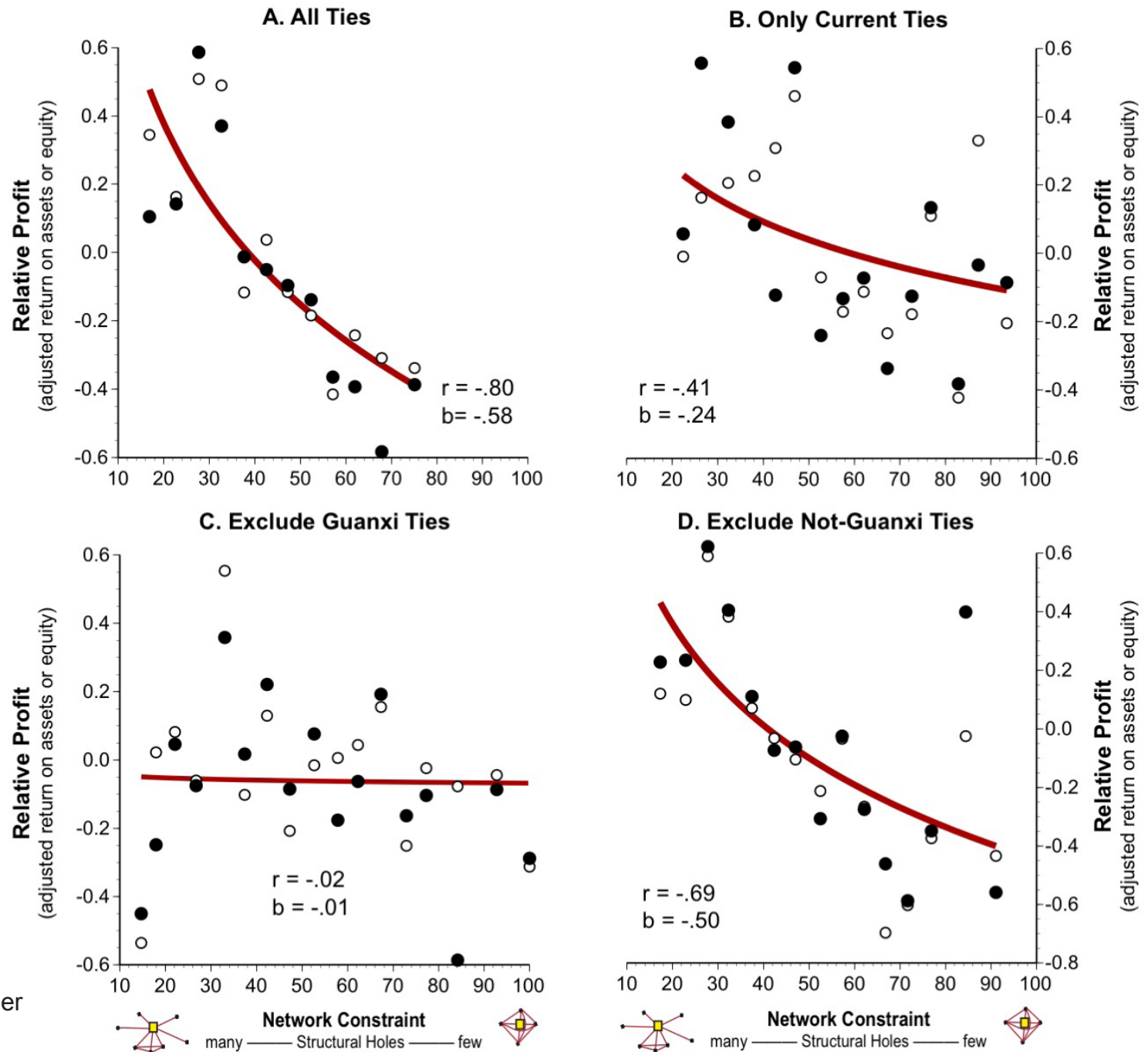
Figure 5 in Burt (2026, "Fragile brokerage?")

How Much Do Strong Bridges Matter?

Key Predictor

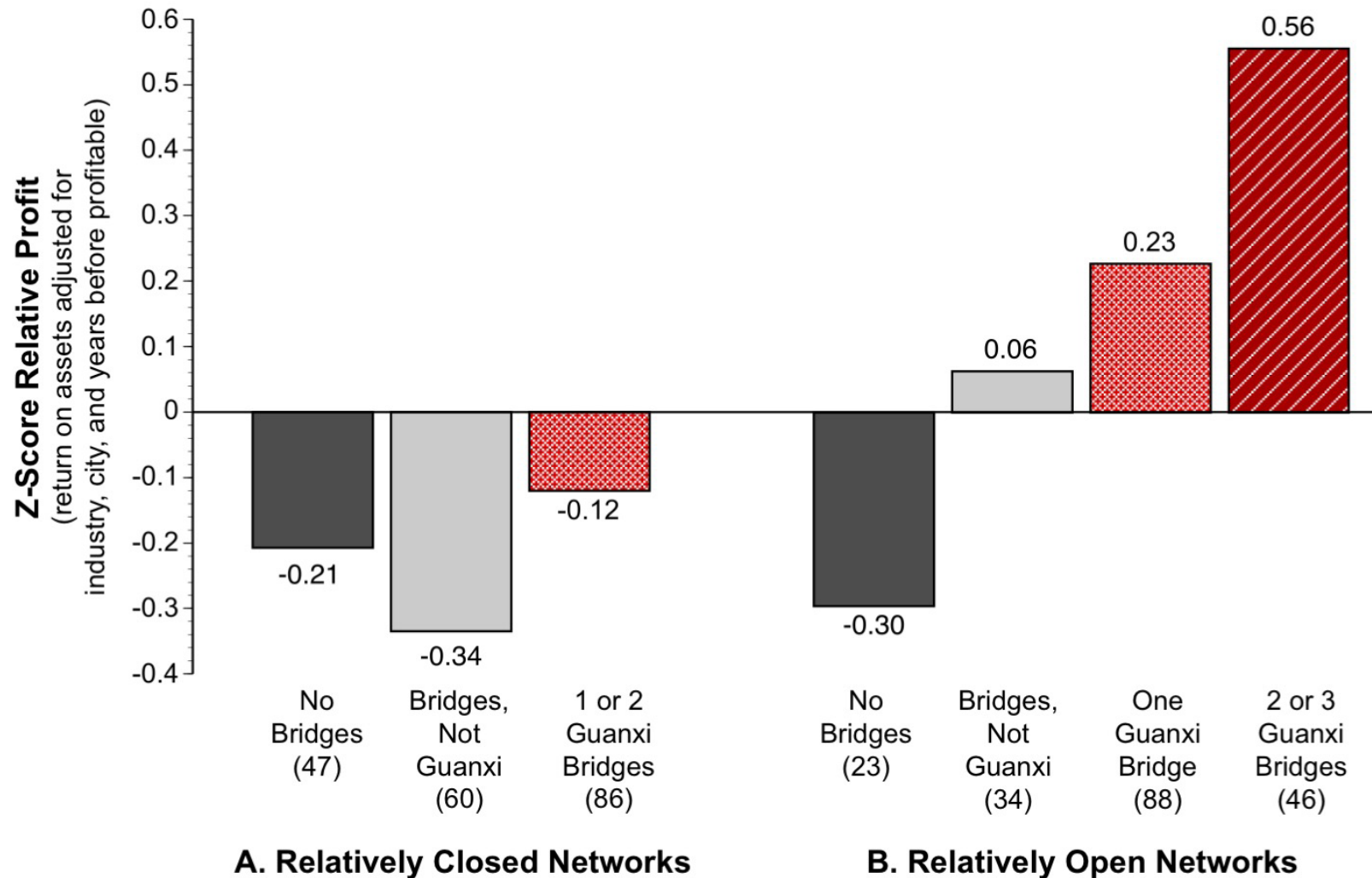
NOTE: Plotted scores are 384 individual scores on vertical and horizontal axes averaged within five-point intervals of network constraint. Dark dots show average return on assets (adjusted for value of business assets, years from founding until business was profitable, and industry). Hollow dots show average return on equity (adjusted for value of business equity, years from founding until business was profitable, and industry). Correlations are computed from plotted data with $\log(\text{network constraint})$.

Figure 4.6 in Burt and Oppen (2026, *Strong Bridges*)



How Often Do Strong Bridges Matter?

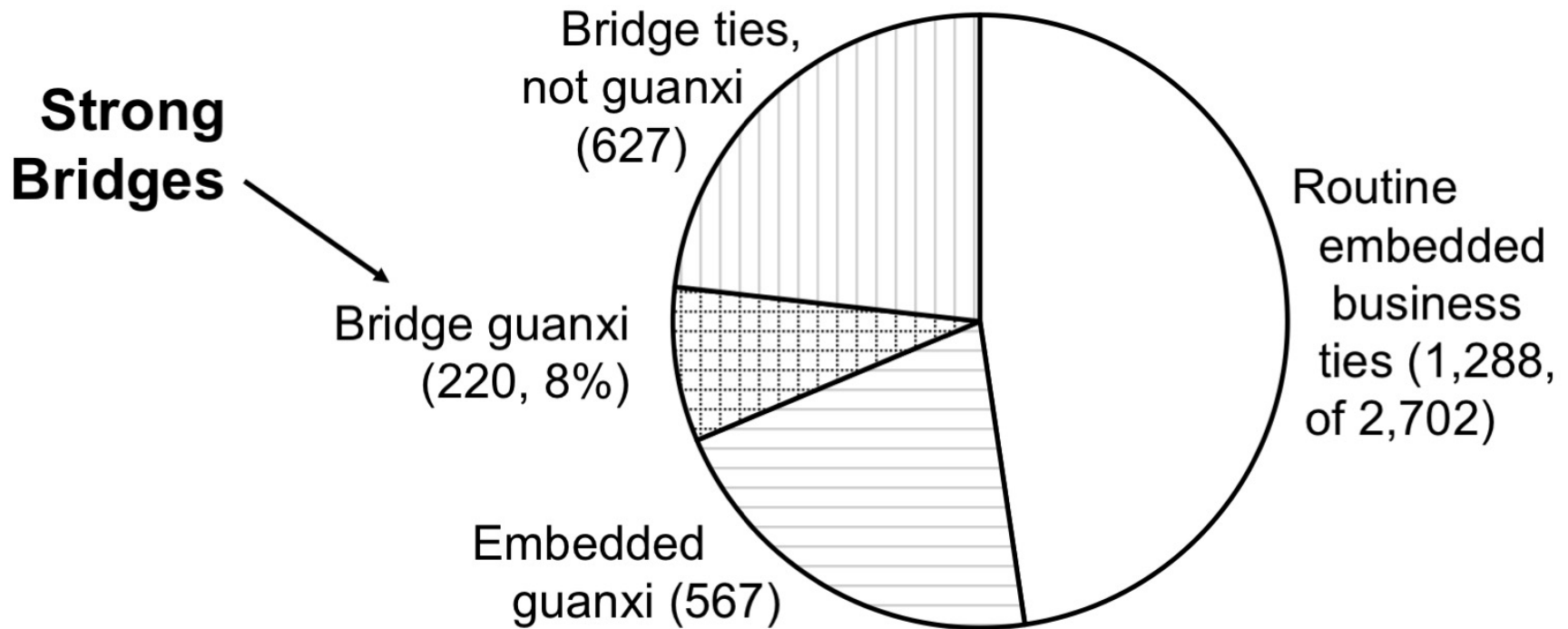
They Are the Only Bridges That Matter.



NOTE: Adapted from Burt and Oppen (2026:Figure 4.7; cf Burt & Oppen 2024:31). Bars show z-score relative profit. Networks are sorted on the horizontal (parentheses contains number of entrepreneurs in each condition). Closed versus open networks are distinguished by median network constraint computed from all ties except the strongest guanxi. No bridges refers to networks in which no relationship is embedded in less than a strong indirect connection. Seven entrepreneurs with two guanxi bridges are combined in the high category of relatively closed networks, and six entrepreneurs with three guanxi bridges are combined in the high category of relatively open networks.

How Many Strong Bridges in an Entrepreneur's Network?

In our probability sample, about one in ten contacts.



(Q367) The relations known in network analysis as strong bridges are known in China as guanxi. **True or False?**

(Q368) The relations known in China as guanxi are known as strong bridges in network analysis. **True or False?**

Figure 4.8 in Burt and Oppen (2026, *Strong Bridges*).

Reassuring Answers to Key Questions

Are strong bridges limited to relations associated with certain kinds of help or certain kinds of events? NO! Strong bridges develop from all kinds of help in all kinds of events. The key is not the kind of help or event so much as significance to the person experiencing the help while going through the event. The event can be soldiers looking out for one another during combat, fraternity brothers pledging in the same cohort, people surviving together a disaster than for some others proved fatal, students struggling with a critical course. In general, guanxi ties are positive sentiment forged to bond through felt support during a significant event. (Chapter 3 in *Strong Bridges*.)

Do the advantages of the strong bridges provided by guanxi depend on family or other roles? NO! The trust and competitive advantage of strong bridges provided by guanxi occur whether the guanxi is family, or work roles, or classmates, or childhood friends, or any other kind of positive relationship. (Chapter 5 in *Strong Bridges*.)

Are the strong bridges provided by guanxi particularly resilient to disruptive events? YES! Relations with quanxi contacts are the only relations likely to survive over time through the COVID pandemic in 2019. Weak bridges in particular are prone to decay. Strong bridges are an asset that lasts. (Chapter 7 in *Strong Bridges*.)

Are the strong bridges provided by guanxi conditions unique to China? NO! The conditions that generate guanxi ties in China are the same that generate strong ties in social exchange theory generally. What seems to be exceptional about guanxi in China is its ubiquity. As a leading Chinese network scholar summarizes (Lin 2001b:159): “What is so unique about guanxi in the Chinese context is that it has been so pervasive and dominant in the entire society throughout much of its historical, political, and economic contexts.” In short, China is a uniquely informative laboratory for learning about the substance and implications of the bridge relations provided by guanxi — in preparation for work on strong bridges outside China. (In fact, you can see them in Europe on the last page in this handout.)





Core Implication:

Don't worry about the diversity of your acquaintances.

Worry about the diversity of the close friends you trust.

Trusted contacts in groups outside your own are your strong bridges. Those strong bridges endure and index your competitive advantage.

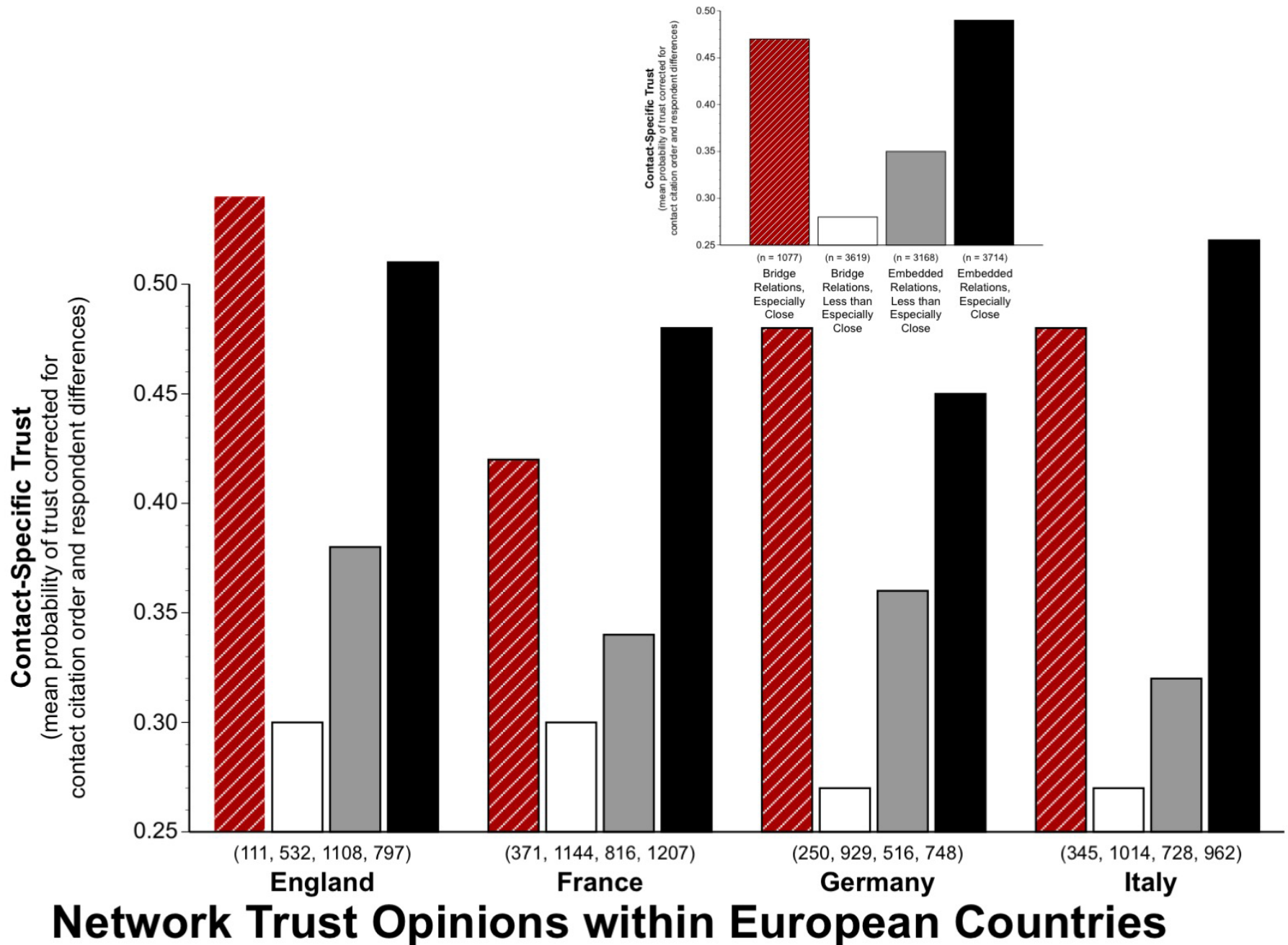
Four Generations of Development in Concepts of Network Brokerage

Generation	First Generation (Columbia, 1940s-50s)	Second Generation (Harvard, 1960s-70s)	Third Generation (diffuse, 1980s-90s)	Fourth Generation (diffuse, ongoing)
Theme	Wisdom and Influence via Bridge Relations	Successful Search via Bridge Relations	Success via Bridge Relations	Success via Bridge Relations
Key idea	Bridge and Cluster Structure to Information	Weakness of Relationship Can Be Used To Infer Bridge	Lack of Surrounding Relations Defines Bridge	But Only Trusted Bridge Relations (history moves to center stage)
Key New Kind of Data	Survey Contacts*	Relationship Strength	Context Surrounding Relationship	Event History Defining Relationship
Key concept	Cosmopolitans and Opinion Leaders	Strength of Weak Ties	Structural Holes	Strong Bridges

*See Jean Converse (1987, *Survey Research in the United States*). Note central role of graduate students.



Appendix



NOTE: Vertical axis is average of observed trust minus baseline trust predicted by contact citation order and the respondent's average observed trust. Respondents who show no variation in trust across their contacts are excluded (trust all contacts or none).

Figure 8.5 in Burt and Oppen (2026, *Strong Bridges*).