

**LOVE ME HATE ME:  
EXPLORING CONTROVERSIAL SOCIOMETRIC STATUS**

Inga Carboni

Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior

Mason School of Business

College of William and Mary

101 Ukrop Way, Miller Hall

Williamsburg, Virginia 23187

Email: [Inga.Carboni@Mason.wm.edu](mailto:Inga.Carboni@Mason.wm.edu)

Telephone: 757-221-1883

Tiziana Casciaro

Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and HR Management

Joseph L. Rotman School of Management

University of Toronto

105 St. George Street, Toronto

Ontario, Canada M5S 3E6

Email: [Tiziana.Casciaro@Rotman.Utoronto.Ca](mailto:Tiziana.Casciaro@Rotman.Utoronto.Ca)

Telephone: 416-946-3146

## INTRODUCTION

Research on sociometric status among youth and adolescents offers a new framework within which to explore outcomes for individuals who are at the center of conflict in the groups and organizations to which they belong. In particular, individuals who are both well-liked and disliked – so-called *controversials* – may occupy a unique and previously unrecognized role in organizational life. In this chapter, we explore controversial sociometric status. Drawing mainly upon psychological and organizational research, we consider personality, behavioral, and structural antecedents that may contribute to the formation and maintenance of controversial sociometric status and advance propositions regarding socio-emotional and performance-related outcomes for individuals with controversial sociometric status. Lastly, we report and reflect upon insights gained through a series of interviews we conducted among fifteen executives.

## CONTROVERSIAL SOCIOMETRIC STATUS

### **Sociometric status**

Sociometric status forms the basis for informal social hierarchies in groups and organizations. By *sociometric status*, we refer specifically to the extent and interaction of liking or disliking evaluations received by individuals from others. Sociometric status can be differentiated from social status, which refers to relationships defined by honor, respect, admiration, and deference (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995) and from reputation (Craik, 2008) which refer to perceptions of status rather than actual interpersonal liking or disliking. Sociological, psychological, and ethological research on youth suggests that sociometric status may have two distinct dimensions: *social preference* and *social impact* (Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002).

*Social preference* refers to the likability or unlikability of individuals. Moreno (1934) first advanced the notion that there are two basic facets of interpersonal experience: attraction (liking) and repulsion (disliking) which correspond to approach and avoidance behavioral tendencies. Despite this early conceptual imprinting, social preference tended to be conceptualized and measured as a single dimension, along which affective evaluations ranged from negative on one end to positive on the other (e.g., Klein et al., 2004). With the concept of the social ledger, Labianca and Brass (2006) reversed this trend, and established that positive relationships do not necessarily offer an accurate window into the negative sphere of informal social behavior in organizations (Labianca et al. 1998). As a result, it is generally agreed that interpersonal liking and disliking are distinct relational domains with unique social-psychological and structural dynamics.

Positive (liking) and negative (disliking) relationships have different outcomes and consequences on organizational activities. Positive relationships are characterized by interpersonal liking and positive affective evaluations. Individuals who receive many nominations of positive affective relationships tend to have comparatively positive outcomes. Compared to other individuals, well-liked individuals are more likely to be included in workplace activities (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008), participate in intraorganizational knowledge transfer (Reagans & McEvily, 2003), and receive higher performance evaluations (Ahuja, Galetta, & Carley, 2003; Baldwin, Bedell, & Johnson, 1997; Brass, 1984).

In contrast, negative affective relationships are characterized by affective conflict, i.e., interpersonal tension, antagonism, and dislike (Jehn, 1995; Labianca & Brass, 2006). Compared to other individuals, greatly disliked individuals tend to have lower levels of individual performance (Baldwin, Bedell, & Johnson, 1997; Seibert, Kramer, & Liden, 2001; Xia, Yuan, &

Gay, 2009), group performance (Sparrow, Liden, Wayne, & Kraimer, 2001), cognitive trust (Chua, Ingram, & Morris, 2008), organizational commitment (Morrison, 2008), organizational attachment (Jehn, 1995), helping behavior (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007), expertise-seeking (Yuan, Carboni, & Ehrlich, 2010), and personal and life satisfaction (Baldwin et al, 1997; Gilman & Huebner, 2006), in addition to having higher levels of psychological distress (Lincoln, 2008).

*Social impact* refers to visibility or salience and represents the extent to which individuals elicit strong opinions from their peer group. Individuals high in social impact have many positive and negative relationships, and thus are distinguished by their social influence rather than their absolute (or relative) likability (Cairns, 1983). Individuals with low social impact are ignored, excluded, and socially invisible. Individuals who low in social impact should not be mistaken for unpopular individuals (i.e., individuals who are perceived to have low social standing) because unpopular individuals may be well-known as having low social standing and, as such, be highly visible (Cillessen & Marks, 2011; Gorman, Schwartz, Nakamoto, & Mayeux, 2011; Scott & Judge, 2009), whereas individuals who are low in social impact always have low social visibility. Further, although both youth with low liking and low disliking ratings, and unpopular youth are friendless and tend to be submissive, only unpopular youth are easily identified, which may be why they are much more likely than other youth to be victims of peer bullying (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). Despite the extensive research on antecedents and outcomes for individuals who are at the extremes of social preference, the social impact of individuals is rarely considered as an aspect of sociometric status among organizational researchers.

Individuals can be classified into five social statuses based on social preference scores (liking ratings minus disliking ratings) and social impact scores (liking ratings plus disliking

ratings) (Coie et al., 1982). *Rejected* sociometric status characterizes individuals with a disproportionately high number of negative nominations but a disproportionately low number of positive nominations. Conversely, when an individual has a disproportionately low number of negative nominations, sociometric status takes one of two forms: *popular* sociometric status, defined by a high number of liking ratings and a low number of disliking ratings; and *neglected* sociometric status, defined by low ratings in both positive and the negative affective relationships. Individuals who do not receive extreme sociometric ratings are defined as having *average* sociometric status. The fifth category is most relevant for the present purposes: *controversial* sociometric status, which is defined by the co-occurrence of high ratings in both positive and negative affective relationship networks (see Figure 1). Controversial sociometric status comes with the highest level of social impact (Coie et al., 1982).

### **Characteristics of Controversials**

Research on youth and emerging adults (i.e., those 18 to 25 [Arnett, 2000]) has established two distinctive characteristics of individuals high in controversial sociometric status: social competence and social aggression (Hill & Merrell, 2004; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). Like their peers with popular sociometric status, controversial individuals tend to demonstrate social competence through their superior social skills (Newcomb et al., 1993), including prosocial and trendsetting leadership skills (Lansu & Cillesson, 2012; Miller-Johnson et al., 2003). They may be even more socially engaged than their “popular” peers (Lease et al., 2002; Rodkin, Famer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). Unlike popular individuals, however, their friends are likely to include individuals who are high and as well as those who are low in social preference (Lease et al., 2002). Controversial youth tend to be both admired and perceived as “cool” by their peers (Farmer & Rodkin 1996; Miller-Johnson et al., 2003; Rodkin et al., 2000).

The second distinctive characteristic of individuals holding controversial sociometric status is their tendency to engage in socially aggressive strategies, such as negative gossiping and social exclusion, to assert and maintain their social position (Lease et al., 2002). Unlike popular youth, controversial status youth tend to be aggressive, sometimes displaying higher levels of aggression than rejected youth (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004) although they may use their aggression in more socially competent ways (Derosier & Thomas, 2003; Hill & Merrell, 2004). They may be acutely aware of their social environment and adept at engaging in behaviors strategically to achieve desired outcomes, such that they know when a certain behavior will be successful — e.g., physical aggression with a peer and charm with a person in position of formal authority (Hill & Merrell, 2004; Newcomb et al., 1993). Controversial status youth tend to be adept at hiding their aggressive behavior from adults, an ability referred to as *chimera* (Patterson, 1993). Relatedly, they may strive to control resources, using coercive or prosocial strategies as needed (Hawley, Little, & Pasupathi, 2002). They may be disruptive in the classroom (Rodkin et al., 2000) and leaders of deviant peers (Miller-Johnson et al., 2003), and may be for this reason that they are often perceived as anti-establishment and anti-authority rebels (Miller-Johnson, Costanzo et al., 2003).

### **CONTROVERSIAL SOCIOMETRIC STATUS AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES**

Although even among youth researchers, there is little research specifically focusing on controversial status youth, their outcomes vary more than those of other sociometric groups (Bukowski & Newcomb, 1985; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Like individuals with popular sociometric status, controversial youth tend to have better psychological outcomes such as lower levels of loneliness (Woodhouse et al., 2012), higher sociability, and higher cognitive abilities

than average and rejected status youth (Newcomb et al., 1993). These positive outcomes may also apply to controversial adults. For example, Venkataramani and his colleagues (Venkataramani, Labianca, and Grosser, 2013) found that individuals who were both well-liked and greatly disliked were no less satisfied with their workplace relationships than were individuals with well-liked.

On the other hand, controversial youth have been found to be more susceptible than average status students and similar to rejected status students regarding the use of substances such as nicotine (Aloise-Young & Kaepfner, 2005). They may be equally or even more at-risk than rejected youth for other adverse outcomes (Aloise-Young & Kaepfner, 2005; Newcomb et al., 1993; Wentzel, 2003). For example, they are at greater risk for dropping out of school (Staff & Kreager, 2008). In summary, empirical research is currently split in terms of predicting negative or positive outcomes for controversial youth.

Two lines of research make opposing predictions regarding socio-emotional outcomes for controversial adults. Social ledger theorists (Labianca & Brass, 2006) suggest that the effect of negative relationships outweigh the effects of positive relationships. In general, negative information is given more weight than positive information when making evaluative judgments (Baumeister et al., 2001). One explanation for this effect, also called the positive-negative asymmetry effect (Taylor, 1991), is behavioral-adaptive in that the evaluations promote approach or avoidance and more weight is put on negative cues because bad is potentially more threatening than good (Baumeister et al., 2001). As a result, controversials could be predicted to have more negative socio-emotional outcomes than individuals with popular or rejected sociometric status, although their outcomes may not be as negative as those for rejecteds because they have at least some positive relationship benefits.

On the other hand, the emotional support provided by being embedded in a tightly connected social groups is thought to act as a buffer to experiencing negative emotions, such as stress (Haines, Beggs, & Hurlbert, 2002) and negative affect (Totterdell et al., 2004). Totterdell and his colleagues (2004), for example, found that the employees who were embedded in a set of closely-knit co-workers were less likely to report high levels of job-related gloominess and anxiety. If positive ties provide a protective buffer against some of the negative outcomes usually associated with negative ties (Cohen and Wills 1985), then controversials may not suffer all of the negative outcomes experienced by rejecteds.

We argue that socio-emotional outcomes for controversials may depend upon the structure of their positive relationships. More specifically, controversial individuals who are embedded in friendship groups may have fewer negative and more positive socio-emotional outcomes compared to controversial individuals who have more fractured friendships.

Adolescents who are more embedded in their peer groups have enhanced empathy and social understanding compared to their less embedded peers (Wolfer, Cortina, & Baumert, 2012).

These skills may contribute to the social competence that distinguishes controversial from rejected status youth. Moreover, controversials who are embedded in a friendship group may have more social support than controversials who have more fractured relationships. Among youth, for example, the friends of controversial youth may support their aggressive or bullying behaviors, protecting them against becoming a victim themselves (DeRosier & Thomas, 2003).

A recent study of adolescents (Borowski et al., in press) found that controversials whose friends were not friends with each other had more negative psychological functioning (i.e., lower self-esteem) and more negative social functioning (i.e., increased levels of social stress and greater dissatisfaction with interpersonal relationships) when compared not only to controversials

who were embedded in cohesive friendship groups but also when compared to rejecteds and neglecteds. The same study also found that controversial youth whose friends were friends with each other had lower social stress, lower dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, and higher self-esteem when compared to other groups.

Thus, one possible structural moderator of socio-emotional outcomes for controversial status individuals may be the extent to which they are embedded within a set of cohesive, positive relationships.

Proposition 1: Individuals with controversial sociometric status in organizations will experience more positive socio-emotional outcomes to the extent that their friends are friends with each other.

## **CONTROVERSIAL SOCIOMETRIC STATUS AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES**

Controversial sociometric status is a function of both positive and negative responses from others. Previous research on associations between sociometric status in organizations and performance outcomes has focused almost exclusively on outcomes related to positive *or* negative affective relationships (e.g., Klein et al., 2004). Thus, although organizational researchers have a fairly extensive understanding of performance outcomes for individuals with popular sociometric status and a growing understanding of performance outcomes for individuals with rejected sociometric status (e.g., Sparrowe et al., 2001), little is known about performance outcomes for controversials. The developmental literature gives little guidance regarding the performance outcomes for controversial youth.

Among organizational researchers, the effect of sociometric status on individual performance in organizations tends to be explained from a social resources perspective (Lin, 2001). Social resources theory holds that well-connected individuals have access to valued resources with which they can improve their outcomes whereas less well-connected individuals have reduced access to valued resources and are therefore less able to improve their outcomes (Lin, 2001). Individuals who have many negative relationships may have even more restricted access to task resources—indeed, others may actively block their access (Sparrowe et al., 2001; Xia et al. 2009). For this reason, certain structural positions have greater (lesser) access to performance-related resources and therefore may be associated with better (worse) performance outcomes (e.g., Kane, Labianca, & Marineau, 2011). Social resource theory thus implies that the effects of positive and negative relationships are additive such that access to performance-related resources is greater for popular individuals than it is for controversial individuals, even if they have the same amount of positive relationships. By the same token, controversials could be predicted to fare better than rejecteds, even if they have the same amount of negative relationships, because controversials also have access to performance-related resources through their positive relationships. Controversials should thus also outperform neglecteds who do not have any positive relationships upon which to draw resources.

However, we think it likely that controversials may receive *lower* performance evaluations than both neglecteds and rejecteds, because of their high social visibility and the increased relational demands it places on them, their co-workers, and their supervisors. We argue that these greater relational demands take three forms: decreased time on task for controversials; greater complexity of social information for controversials to process; and increased relational complexity controversials place on their coworkers.

Unlike rejected and neglected individuals, controversial individuals are embedded in the fabric of organizational life. Individuals who are perceived as burdensome or “deviant” or otherwise threatening to group functioning are likely to be ostracized by others (Pickett & Brewer, 2005; Schachter, 1951), especially if the consensus regarding interactions with the person becomes a social norm (Schachter, 1951). Experience-sampling models of attitude formation suggest that avoiding interactions with a rejected person also limits opportunities to change negative impressions (Denrell, 2005), further entrenching the rejected’s relative isolation. Thus, rejecteds are less likely than controversials to be invited to participate in social interaction, potentially freeing them to concentrate on task execution. Among academics, for example, faculty who are widely disliked are less likely to be asked to serve on committees, take on administrative roles, or mentor junior faculty. As a result, unlike controversial and popular faculty members, they may have more time to devote to research activities, the main metric of performance in most academic institutions.

People who enjoy interacting with the controversial are likely to want to engage with her in workplace activities (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008). At the same time, those who dislike her and therefore expect interpersonal interactions to be negative—provoking unpleasant emotions—are likely to avoid interacting with her (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Accordingly, if controversials want to take advantage of the benefits of their positive relationships, they may need to allocate considerable time and effort to managing their negative workplace relationships, potentially reducing the amount of these resources that they have available for performance-related activities. Moreover, if the controversial individual finds herself occupying a position between polarized subgroups (defined by the valence of their relationships with her), her mental and relational energy may be further sapped at the expense of time and effort devoted to task

performance. In this way, having many positive relationships may heighten, not buffer against, the negative effects of having many negative relationships.

In comparison, neglected individuals are socially invisible and largely immune from the strong affective responses that controversialists elicit from others in the organization. While they do not enjoy the performance and buffering advantages that many positive ties may provide, neither do they suffer from the performance disadvantages of negative ties. As a result of their social invisibility, neglected people may experience fewer relational distractions from task performance than controversialists, allowing them to spend less time on extra-role behavior and more time on task-related behavior.

The higher relational demands placed upon individuals with controversial sociometric status may also require that they process more complex social information than individuals occupying any other sociometric status, further reducing their ability to leverage their positive relationships. Whereas neglected individuals face a relatively simple relational environment because they have few, if any, positive or negative relationships to consider when seeking resources, the social landscape of controversialists is varied and contradictory. Unlike popular individuals, who are likely to freely exchange valuable resources through their social interactions, and unlike rejected individuals, who are likely to expect to gain access to social resources only through carefully negotiated agreements (Lau & Cobb, 2010), controversial people are likely to have mixed experience accessing resources from peers. As a result, controversialists may need to devote more time and effort than others to discerning the value of their social connections. For example, a controversial individual, A, will need to assess her own feelings toward person B, the valence of B's feelings toward her (which can be particularly

challenging in settings that discourage overt signals of negative affect), and how the feelings of a third party, C, may affect B's willingness and ability to provide resources to A.

Controversials also place a relational burden on their coworkers. People prefer to help those they like and avoid those they do not like (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). A person's sociometric status serves as an indicator of community opinion (Craik, 2008). Positive reputations generally confer acceptance and approval, whereas negative reputations can trigger social disapproval and even ostracism (Homans, 1961). As a result, sociometric status can influence helping, withholding of help, or even harming depending upon a target's reputation (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). But when making the decision to provide task resources to a controversial person, co-workers also need to consider the reputational risks and benefits of helping someone who is both positively and negatively regarded by others. Instead of continually engaging in complex social calculations that are bound to result in some disapproval from someone, co-workers may prefer to reduce their own social liability by not offering or sharing resources with a controversial colleague, even if their interpersonal relationship with the controversial is positive.

From a management perspective, controversials may also require disproportionately more of their time and effort than other employees. Controversials are likely to be perceived by managers as socially risky because the response they elicit from co-workers is unpredictable. As a result, managers may need to make numerous social calculations when considering, for example, into which team or project a controversial should be placed. The perception of social risk may also trigger uncertainty-avoidance and risk aversion biases leading to an initial negative impression that can be resistant to change (Denrell, 2005; Denrell & March, 2001). Managers who do remain open to changing their initial impression are still likely to spend significant time

coaching controversialists to develop their assets and overcome their social liabilities. They may also find themselves spending time and effort managing the workplace relationships in which the controversialist is embedded.

In summary, we argue that controversial sociometric status creates relational demands that impose social and cognitive processing costs on both the controversial individual and those who are connected to her. Consequently, controversialists may have reduced access to task resources when compared to populars, may need to spend more off-task time and energy managing workplace relationships than either neglecteds or rejecteds, and may place the highest management burden on supervisors. As a result, controversial individuals may receive lower objective and subjective performance evaluations than popular, neglected, or rejected individuals.

Proposition 2: Individuals with controversial sociometric status in organizations will receive lower objective and subjective performance evaluations compared to individuals in all other sociometric status categories.

### **WHO ARE CONTROVERSIALS?**

To gain insight into the way controversial adults are perceived in an organizational setting, we conducted a series of exploratory interviews with a convenience sample of fifteen executives. These executives represented a variety of industries, including professional services, information technology, telecommunications, financial services, and public relations. We defined the different categories of sociometric status as a function of liking/disliking ratings and asked these professionals to recount workplace experiences that they may have had with individuals

that fit into each of the categories. The managers easily identified individuals who fit into each of the categories.

Three themes emerged from our conversations with the managers. One, managers suggested that controversial sociometric status might be a consequence, not an antecedent, of performance. In particular, they felt that controversialists were likely to be either high performers with poor interpersonal skills or low performers with strong interpersonal skills.

*They're either really great folks and have good personalities but may or may not be very effective which causes some people not to like them, or just the opposite where they're really, really effective in their job but maybe don't have the greatest personality.*

In the case of the low performers, their strong interpersonal skills may lead them to have many strong positive relationships, perhaps with other low performers. Their incompetence, on the other hand, may lead some people to dislike them as a function of perceived threat to goal achievement. Low performance by some individuals might make it difficult for task- or goal-interdependent co-workers to achieve their goals, leading to conflict and associated interpersonal tension.

*His orientation is much more towards keeping my associates happy at the expense of the deliverables to his customer base. So, you'll get the associates who will give him very high rankings because he's a great manager because they can do whatever they want to do, and then you've got his [internal] customers who are saying, "Hey, he's not delivering any of the level of service that I need."*

High performers, the managers suggest, might also attract positive or negative affective evaluations as a function of their competence. When co-workers are task- or goal-interdependent, high performers might be more likely to attract positive affective evaluations because they facilitate goal attainment. At the same time, the success of the high performers might threaten the identity of other co-workers, who may respond to that threat by disliking the source of the threat (i.e., the high-performer). A low performing co-worker, in comparison, poses no threat to social identity and therefore no barrier to interpersonal liking. In these ways, performance might shape affective evaluations.

*This guy was sometimes top sales person of the year. Management loved him because he put up big numbers. He had a following amongst other top producers in the company, but they were kind of their own little clique or own little fraternity. They thought they had the world in the palm of their hands but there were...other people who thought that they got away with murder, who always got special treatment, who when they made a mistake the company looked the other way.*

Competence and affective evaluations are two related but conceptually and empirically distinguishable concepts (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008). Thus, as we talked further, some managers recategorized their “controversial” high-performers as individuals who actually held rejected sociometric status, in that they were recognized as being highly competent but were universally disliked.

*They turn off people because of some of their other behaviors and we kind of put up with their idiosyncrasies and their gaps because they contribute in some particular way.*

*Some of the high performers can be real assholes, but be good at their job and the other high performers are like, "I don't care. I like them because we get the job done together, but I wouldn't have a drink with them."*

It may be that at least some high-performing "controversials" – as categorized by the managers – are actually rejecteds. Relatedly, several managers suggested that rejecteds had to have compensatingly high performance in order to be retained in an organization.

*Most likely I would put them into a fix or exit category..., the amount of effort that is required in the fix is extensive. So, for me to invest that kind of time, they have to be very valuable to me in some way, shape or form, otherwise I would most likely exit them and bring somebody else in who would just be a better fit.*

*He did his job very well. In fact, he was one of the only people in the plant who could do what he did and do it as well as he did. So, in that case, he was very valuable. Where I spent all my time was trying to deal with all the problems he created by basically angering or insulting people throughout the plant.*

At the same time, some low-performers were described as generally well-liked, despite their low performance, perhaps more closely resembling a person with popular sociometric status.

*I don't like the way they work. I don't like their methods. I don't think they have rigor. I don't think they are methodical enough. I don't think they support their decision-making properly. However, he's a good guy to work with and I'll go to lunch with him and I'll tell him my personal stuff or whatever. I'm fine to meet with him because he's present enough.*

The second theme that arose from our interviews with managers was that the sociometric status of controversialists might be a function of their formal or informal role in the organization rather than their performance or interpersonal skills per se.

*He had his group of engineers and maintenance guys who kind of ran the plant, and those guys were very close to him, but he was ... like a lightning rod of an anger for the rest of the place.*

In particular, a few managers suggested that individuals who took on formal or informal change agent roles may attract strong positive and negative affective evaluations as function of their role.

*As you push hard, particularly in a transformational role, a lot of people don't want to come along for the ride. They would rather resist it. ..Consequently, they transfer that dislike ... to the individual asking them to do the work.*

*Those particular roles jump out at me as being they're very well-liked by the senior leadership team because they can actually get to an end point, meaning we have a target, here's where we going, I need you to deliver on that target, bring everybody else along with you, and the folks that are coming along with them often times resent that level of pressure being put on them.*

Several executives we interviewed believed that controversialists were more likely to engage in aggressive conflict-handling strategies and less likely to use integrative or obliging conflict-handling styles.

*[They are liked by] people who have the same aspirations, who don't mind being challenged. Maybe people who are more into getting comfortable and avoiding conflicts don't like them.*

*People who like them are somewhat like them as well, straight-shooters, say it like it is, don't just go with the status quo just because. ...[P]eople that dislike them are people who are afraid of conflict, who avoid it.*

Downplaying or ignoring relational considerations when managing conflict could explain the demonstrated association between controversial sociometric status and social aggression in youth (Rodkin et al. 2000). One manager identified himself as a controversialist, indicating both his formal role and confrontational style as reasons as to why he was both greatly liked and disliked.

*People like me if they're good at their job because I promote them, I give them praise, and I give them challenging jobs. The people that don't like me are the ones that are slackers and they know I think they're slackers because I tell them. I try to manage them up. I frequently end up managing them out.*

Lastly, a few managers suggested that controversials might have specific personality traits that make them liked by some and disliked by others.

*You're not going to go on television unless you have this incredible ego, and most of them have a huge ego combined with an incredible insecurity.*

*They tend to be the strong personalities, they tend to be the A-types, and they tend to be the decision makers, which is what makes them controversial. People say, Hey, as a buddy they're great, but he drives me nuts to work with.*

While the personality correlates are unknown among adults, controversial youth tend to be low in shyness, high in need for social dominance (Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006), assertive (Lease et al. 2002), risk-taking (Miller-Johnson et al., 2003; Rodkin et al., 2000), and have an internal locus of control (Kaya, 2007). These traits paint a picture of an individual who has strong opinions and is not afraid to vocalize them.

We also asked our managers what it was like to manage controversials. They expressed a range of concerns. One executive described such concerns this way:

*It's exhausting. ...Sometimes it's just like, "You know what, it's not worth it." ...It's so unpredictable and, with those people, it's extreme unpredictability. There's no middle group with them. [Their co-workers are] either really happy or really pissed off.*

Another executive similarly commented:

*They're a pain. ...[It's] challenging to balance the people who like them and the people who don't, and, in my experience, they're a pretty polar opposite. Like there's people that really like them and people who really hate them. They're sort of nobody right in the middle, so it can be challenging to manage the other people around them.*

Managers indicated that they often made extensive social calculations when considering how to structure teams or organizational groups.

*I could go this office right now and tell you this person can work with that person but they can't work with this person. We had this example even last week where we were covering this big train crash in Quebec. We very carefully selected who would go based on how the team was going to work. We may have two controversial people who work together really well, but another two who would be a disaster.*

Several managers noted that controversialists required far more of their time than did individuals in other categories.

*For me, it's a lot of negotiations with the people around them that just don't like to work for them because that particular personality bothers them...I act as the go-between and the buffer to try to move things over.*

*As a supervisor and employer, it's the time in negotiating with two different camps about the individual or the latest drama of the week around this individual. With [the neglected and the rejected], there's consensus. It may not be fair, but there's consensus. So, [managing neglecteds and rejecteds] takes up less energy and it's less distracting to the organization.*

In these exploratory interviews, the challenges of managing controversialists stood in contrast to the clear-cut performance management of neglected and rejected individuals. The interviewees typically described individuals with neglected sociometric status as reliable performers who get their job done “under the radar” and need little managerial intervention. As one executive put it, *They're just kind of doing their job. They don't really stand out good or bad. They're carrying along.* Rejected employees, though difficult and unpleasant, were also described as simpler to manage than controversialists, primarily because of their tendency to become isolated in the organization. One executive described such a relational pattern this way:

*[They] don't want to have anything to do with them. .. people pull away from the individual... “Oh, I didn't bother to invite them to the meeting” or “Oh, I just got frustrated and didn't put them on the account.” They tend to marginalize them.*

As a result, although rejecteds do not get access to social capital, neither do they get entangled in a relational web of conflicting positive and negative ties, necessitating managerial action. One executive illustrated such a pattern:

*So, he could go off in a corner and do what it is he does and would not need to interact with the other team members, but it was because he had a very specific expertise.*

One manager suggested that sociometric status might be a continuum with controversials turning into rejecteds if they are not managed carefully.

*Controversials have a hard time staying controversials and not becoming rejected if the part that makes them disliked is a behavioral attribute which manifests itself more often than not or types of stress more frequently. I've seen that. People who are modestly controversial and in time just get tough and they become extremely controversial. So, then it becomes a big problem. Then, it becomes who they are, and one of the things I know... is this whole concept of internal rebranding. It's a hell of a thing. Once people have decided you're in one box, you are who you are, that's who you are. ...A controversial on their way to rejected almost always lands...there.*

Accordingly, the ability to perform tasks independently—even when operating as part of a team—may allow rejecteds to concentrate on their work, provided they have the necessary expertise to execute assigned tasks. Controversials, by contrast, may not have such luxury, as they are embedded in positive ties that keep them tightly connected in the social fabric of the

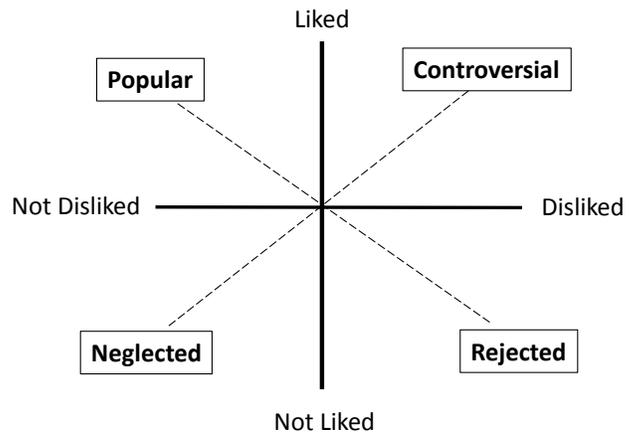
organization while also requiring them to interact with those who direct negative sentiment to them.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we explored controversial sociometric status. Drawing upon both psychological and organizational research, we considered personality, behavioral, and structural antecedents that may contribute to the formation and maintenance of controversial sociometric status and advanced propositions regarding socio-emotional and performance-related outcomes for individuals with controversial sociometric status. More specifically, we posited that (a) controversials might experience positive socio-emotional outcomes to the extent that they are embedded in a group of closely knit friends and (b) controversials may have lower performance outcomes when compared to members of every other sociometric status, including rejecteds and neglecteds.

We also shared and reflected upon insights gained through a series of interviews conducted among fifteen executives. The executives suggested at least three ways in which controversials might gain their sociometric status – i.e., as an outcome of incongruently valenced performance and interpersonal skills, as a function of their formal or informal role in the organization, or as an outcome of their conflict-handling styles. The executives we interviewed also indicated that they spend a proportionately large amount of time managing controversials, precisely because they are embedded in the social fabric of organizational life. Although much research remains to be done, our preliminary exploration suggests that controversials may play an important and hitherto neglected role in organizational life.

**Figure 1. Sociometric status in organizations (adapted from Peery, 1979)**



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