Special Feature on Harrison White – *peer-reviewed*
Edited by Peter Bearman and Ronald L. Breiger
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/21638

Sociologica. V.19 N.2 (2025)
ISSN 1971-8853
https://sociologica.unibo.it/

Bonds without Bondage: Escaping Entrapment in Managerial Networks

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Submitted: March 28, 2025 – Revised version: May 20, 2025
Accepted: May 23, 2025 – Published: July 10, 2025

Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of constraints in managerial networks and the strategies by which individuals regain autonomy. Drawing on Harrison C. White's theories, we construct and analyze a series of examples that are composite narratives informed by the second author's work at a global investment bank. Our examples show how professional relationships, initially pursued for career advantage, can crystallize into rigid, constraining roles. We also illustrate three strategies that restore autonomy: annealing, a strategy of controlled disruption; network reaching, which establishes counter-normative ties across social boundaries; and prolepsis, a form of anticipatory rhetoric that affects action through vivid, seemingly inevitable pictures of the future. We thus portray autonomy as recoverable through strategies that reshape network ties and conversational frames. We also explore how status shapes the feasibility of these strategies, with low status requiring network reaching and trust-building dialogue, and high status supporting prolepsis. Our discussion adds to the literature on networks and leadership, emphasizing how roles, strategy, and status interact to constrain and enable managerial agency.

Keywords: Markets; roles; annealing; networks; prolepsis; status.

Acknowledgements

We have benefited from the advice of Reza Azarian, Peter Bearman, Gianluca Carnabuci, Jan Fuhse, Huseyin Gurkan, Benjamin Kessler, Julia Langdon, Ann Mische, Eric Quintaine, David Ronayne, and Stefan Wagner.

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1 Introduction [1]

Switching conversational frames (White, 2008) can be eye-opening. Consider the example of Sofia and Carl.[2] As the COO of a global investment bank, Sofia started her town hall in a high-stakes, combative frame, emphasizing "radical candor" (Scott, 2019) as the bank's new leadership anchor. While Sofia projected confidence, her insistence on candor hid her frustration with a new, collaborative culture that had clouded her ability to "read the organization". With "so many yes-men running around", striving to "outdo" each other as "team players", she said, they'd "all gone soft" and were afraid to tell her "the brutal facts". Candid dialogue was ceding ground to "ruinous empathy" (Scott, 2019).

When Sofia opened the floor for questions, Carl, a senior quantitative analyst, saw his opportunity (White, 1970). Carl started politely, but this was remembered as "the whiskey before the knife". Carl attacked twice: the root cause of the yes-men culture was the bank's dangerously subjective bonus system, he claimed, and Sofia's role in nudging that system away from hard performance metrics was self-evident. Sofia felt a sting — how much had the turn toward teamwork, and the resulting production of "yes-men", biased and ensnared her too? She was aware that, while obtaining "information is easy [...] getting reliable information on what is truly going on in the organization", especially from yes-men, "is surprisingly difficult" (Porter & Nohria, 2010, p. 439). Sofia still dodged Carl's attacks. "Fair point", said Sofia. "And that's exactly why we're getting back to our roots — in open, honest dialogue. Leadership isn't about dodging blame — it's about adjusting course, it's about re-centering". The room rewarded Sofia with support for cooling the exchange, while Carl's countenance sank, his face downcast.

Sofia turned again to her audience before leaving the stage. She invited anyone interested to discuss radical candor in an informal group session. Intrigued by her offer, Carl reluctantly joined — inching from the edge of the group toward Sofia's whiteboard. Moving into this lower-stakes, more collegial conversational frame (Fuhse, 2022, pp. 229–230), Carl confessed to Sofia that working in the bank's new, "softer" culture — which Carl believed was largely of Sofia's making — felt confining, like "walking in molasses". Carl, taken aback by his own honesty, even admitted feeling trapped in his role. Sofia nodded, realizing hers and Carl's experiences were comparable. Sofia saw in Carl's confession a glimpse of her own bind — both had, in different ways, shaped their contexts in ways that trapped them. Sofia was ensnared by a culture of her own making — one that privileged conformity over candor — and Carl, as we later describe, by an expert role that left him indispensable yet locked-in.

1. The opinions and conclusions expressed here by the co-author Richard Haynes do not necessarily represent the views of the Commission or the United States Government.

2. Our examples are composite narratives, similar to the examples used in ethics and moral philosophy to develop normative prescriptions. Our starting point in generating these narratives was a multi-year study of White's publications and of those of other authors influenced by his work. This study began for the first author during his graduate studies in the 1990s. Using this as our foundation, we conducted several semi-structured interviews of the second author, who worked for a global investment bank from 2006 through 2011. We next used ChatGPT-4o to organize and convert qualitative accounts of the second author's experiences and observations, and those of the author team more broadly, into rough drafts (cf. Griffin, 1993, for important, early machine-based research on narratives). These drafts — in which no first names match those working with the second author at the bank — were the basis for the resulting examples that we then crafted to reflect White's ideas in a managerial context. We also note the balance we have sought to strike in applying our method: on one hand, our aim has been to abstract away from noise that would distract from our presentation of White's concepts; on the other hand, we have sought to ensure that our examples are in keeping with the felt realities of managers working in large, complex organizations like the global investment bank that has been our point of departure.

This paper, which we dedicate to the memory of Harrison C. White, draws on White's models to sketch answers to two questions arising from the back-and-forth between Sofia and Carl. First, why might a manager find that relationships with colleagues — pursued for seemingly rational reasons — eventually crystallize into binding constraints? Second, what are plausible avenues up and out of these constraints — into autonomy?

In addressing these questions, we draw inspiration from how White "did" sociology. We recall Bearman's (2024) observation that, for White, "doing sociology was a normative project. He wanted to identify the tangible sources of constraint so that we could embrace and experience real freedom". White was searching for routes out of binding roles into novel actions. On a personal note, we are grateful for the intellectual experiences that Harrison C. White made, and even continues to make, possible. His rare insights and encouragement make equifinality into such experiences unimaginable.

Our brief examples, like that of Sofia and Carl, thus start with an anatomy of entrapment — when bonds turn to bondage (Kumar, 1979; Berger & Kellner, 1981). Our discussion of entrapment is based on White's (1981a; 1981b; 2002) model of markets, applied at the micro level of the manager. White's training as a theoretical physicist, and then as a pioneering theorist of social networks, informs our subsequent examinations of annealing and network reaching as strategic pathways from constraint to autonomy.

Our closing example draws again on the markets model, but differently. We conclude with a manager whose collaborative successes attract control efforts, around which maneuvering through proleptic rhetoric becomes possible in ways aligned with White's (2008) theory of identity and control. We also incorporate complementary lines of research, which expand and contextualize White's frameworks, offering parallel perspectives to clarify and extend his ideas. Before turning to these additional examples, we offer, as background, a summary of four of White's most relevant concepts.

1.1 Whitean Concepts: Markets, Annealing, Reaching, and Prolepsis

For White, production markets are two-edged mechanisms. They shelter their member firms from uncertainty, while also locking these firms into predictable roles (White, 1981a & 1981b; Leifer & White, 1987; Bothner & White, 2001; White, 2002). Unlike exchange markets like Facebook Marketplace, where supply and demand drive one-shot transactions, production markets are self-reproducing systems sustained over time by member firms' monitoring of each other. These firms (the producers) watch each other's actions — mainly, their manufacturing volumes and associated revenues — and then use this information to guide their own decisions. Mutual monitoring yields an ongoing network of interdependent roles (or niches) shaped by the observable relationship between volume and revenue in that market. This volume–revenue relationship "controls" (White, 2002, p. 28) all member firms: each firm's actions are subject to the actions of its peers.

White's markets model, although usually centered on firms (as corporate producers), is also scale-invariant: it applies at the micro-level (Bothner et al., 2004). Just as firms watch competitors' volumes and revenues, managers eye colleagues' effort levels and performance. At that level, managers (as individual producers) engage in similar processes of peer monitoring and role-taking in their organizations: the constraints facing managers within firms echo the role-related constraints that firms face in markets.

Each producer's goal is to find and hold its own niche — its unique pairing of volume and revenue — that fits within its market ecosystem. "A production market regularizes competition

https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/21638

as a linear array of niches. To secure a niche is to win" (White, 2002, pp. 321–322). Securing that niche "provides a measure of shelter from the uncertainties of business" (White, 2002, p. 1). This promise of certainty motivates each firm to keep playing its role. And over time, firms' reliable role-performances afford their market a valuable, higher-order identity of its own, as San Pellegrino and Evian did for bottled water.

Different relationships between manufacturing volume and revenue distinguish types of markets. For instance, in mass-market athletic footwear, revenue rises with volume at an increasing rate. Here, more volume gets associated with higher quality — and more status: Nike has more status than Skechers. In contrast, in luxury handbags, revenue rises with volume at a decreasing rate. There, together with status-conferring price signals (Askin & Bothner, 2016), lower volume signals exclusive, elite standing: Hermès bags preserve their prestige by offering limited quantities at a premium.

These market structures, while offering stability and certainty, also limit producers' autonomy — both in markets and within firms. Firms lock into specialized roles, just as managers get trapped by their own expertise and the scrutiny of colleagues. Innovation and strategic maneuvering become more difficult. Continuing to occupy their unique niches, firms then face pressures to meet the expectations of each other and of their buyers. Firms' manufacturing technologies also get wrapped around their niche's demands, furthering system-wide inertia.

When such constraints grow overly rigid, White's producers have strategic options for pursuing autonomy. Annealing, network reaching, and prolepsis are three strategies that differ in the targets at which they aim. Annealing reshapes the entire system. Network reaching reconfigures particular relationships. Prolepsis shifts interpretations of reality.

"*Annealing* is a term from metallurgy. To anneal is to heat and thus shake up the mineral [...] more or less at random, and then to cool [so] that the new formation will have more desirable properties" (White, 2008, p. 325). For firms in a production market, annealing can occur, for instance, through a sudden deregulation that disrupts long-standing roles and incites fierce rivalry.

However, for White, annealing typically occurs at the individual level, as when managers "melt" their organizations and then "cool" them in a better configuration (Leifer & White, 1986). Unlike explicit, top-down commands, annealing relies on strategically raising uncertainty — forcing those subjected to its heat to alter their roles and routines. Some possibilities for generating higher temperatures are compressing timelines, setting seemingly unreachable goals, reshuffling roles, or articulating a strategic end without specifying the means (Eccles & Nohria, 1992; Bothner et al., 2025).

For instance, a CEO of an East Asian company could begin annealing her executives by abruptly mandating entry into South America, but without clarifying the desired entry point: the CEO purposefully gives no direction on whether Buenos Aires, Santiago, or São Paulo is the better hub. Her executives, disrupted by this open-ended mandate, must then explore and propose alternatives. Cooling then occurs when the CEO, having learned, chooses the best launch point and recognizes the executives whose search was most fruitful, ending the disruption.

Annealing is a useful strategy when no other solution is evident, and incremental steps are insufficient (Leifer & White, 1986). In addition, while all annealing is disruptive, not all disruption matches White's conception of annealing. Annealing involves distinct phases of heating and cooling, which are not necessarily present in other disruptive strategies, such as network reaching — a more targeted approach to regaining autonomy.

Whereas annealing targets the entire system, network reaching is narrower in scope: it is a localized effort to form connections across social boundaries. White (2008, pp. 297–307) identifies three forms of "reaching" within networks — up, through, and down.

Reaching up seeks to mobilize higher-status individuals or groups. Law firm associates might jointly propose new client services to the managing partner, in order to gain support. If successful, their initiative makes their practice group more agile and raises their status.

Reaching through is cutting across boundaries. A managing partner, frustrated by his colleagues' resistance to his agenda, might work to acquire a boutique firm that specializes in new legal technologies — and which also employs his friends. Once those allies join his firm, his agenda easily rolls past the old resistance.

Reaching down engages directly with lower levels of a hierarchy. Senior partners, wanting better hiring strategies, circumvent the hiring committee and go straight to the most junior associates, in order to learn how to recruit digital natives.

Unlike annealing and network reaching, prolepsis operates at the level of sensemaking (cf. Ancona, 2012). It does not immediately force structural change but shifts how others interpret reality — making novel actions seem inevitable. More specifically, prolepsis creates vivid images of the future in order to change behavior in the present. When Joe Namath, the NFL quarterback known as "Broadway Joe", promised a Sunday victory for the New York Jets (Griffiths, 2015), he was acting proleptically. Declaring the win inevitable, Namath influenced his teammates and fans.

Prolepsis relies more on persuasion than on giving direct commands. By making a future scenario seem certain, even preordained, managers can shape decision-making without giving explicit orders. Mobilized audience members see their circumstances differently, making them less inert.

Unlike cheap talk (Farrell & Rabin, 1996), which often lacks credibility, and can fail to mobilize when interests diverge, prolepsis compels belief and commitment. A commander's pre-battle rallying cry arouses conviction, builds emotional energy (Collins & McConnell, 2015), and inspires action. While cheap talk involves no direct costs and no binding commitments, prolepsis carries implicit commitments — for the speaker and the audience. Its picture of inevitability, jointly produced by speaker and audience, thus yields engagement, not complacency.

White's (2008, p. 282) discussion suggests that the use of prolepsis is concentrated among high-status people, whose elite standing gives them a competitive advantage in discerning what's possible in their social terrain. Compared to annealing, prolepsis is less disruptive; compared against network reaching, its influence is wider. Most distinctively, it does not change structures directly but alters how audience members perceive them.

These three strategies — annealing, network reaching, and prolepsis — offer different avenues out of bondage into looser, more manageable social bonds. To illustrate, we examine three examples drawn from Sofia and Carl's investment bank, each with two stages — first, an account of entrapment, second, a portrayal of autonomy regained. Figure 1 shows the persons and groups we discuss.

2 Decoupling from Expert Entrapment

2.1 An Elite Identity Trap

More than seven years before Sofia's town hall, Carl began at the bank as a hungry nomad. A newly-minted PhD in geometry, with prior work experience in spatial engineering, he'd already crossed the gap between abstract and practical knowledge, but he knew almost nothing about investing before joining the bank as a junior "quant". Eager to learn, Carl rotated across five desks — commodities, equities, credit derivatives, interest rates, and foreign exchange — each with its distinct challenges.

Although these rotations deepened his understanding of the markets, they came at a cost. Uncertainty, as envisioned by Knight (1921), dogged him. Carl couldn't estimate his chances of success on any particular desk, nor could he assess if better options existed elsewhere. Unlike risk, which he could quantify, career uncertainty seemed unsolvable. Carl was hounded by multiple unknowns, including how to build an identity that fit into the bank's complex ecosystem.

Carl found shelter from this uncertainty by committing to the global commodities desk. In time, Carl carved out an elite role in the group. His role required ongoing interaction with the desk's "buyers", the many traders whose gains hinged on Carl's models. Carl became the key player, the trusted "go-to" quant whenever anomalous fluctuations on a trader's screen called for interpretation.

Maintaining this trust, however, brought new, unanticipated costs. Unending consultations, late-night calls, and weekly meetings were now causing much regret. His deep knowledge of his models meant others leaned solely on him. Importantly, in weekly meetings with fellow quants and the traders, Carl also had to talk the most (White 1981a, fig. 6). Carl had the "hot-seat" role, which required time-consuming preparation. Mutual monitoring in the group amplified these pressures, tying Carl even more tightly to the role he'd taken. Carl's role was "a double-edged sword", imposing unrelenting "opportunities to disappoint as well as impress" (Martin & Murphy, 2020, p. 102; Kovács & Sharkey, 2014).

In other words, Carl's carefully crafted role became an "overpowering regimen" (White, 1981b, p. 3), forcing him to question the certainty he'd once prized. He realized, with a wince, that his desire to be a team player had locked him into a role — just as Goffman cautioned: "Choose your self-presentations carefully, for what starts out as a mask may become your face".

Meanwhile, other quants on the desk — specialists in energy, metals, and agriculture — faced lower workloads. They also expected Carl to maintain his expert status, adding to the pressure that embedded him in an ever-taxing role. Their expectations, together with Carl's toil, entrenched him in his niche (Leifer & White, 1987).

Traders' expectations of Carl only aggravated his sense of entrapment. They too expected him to remain the expert. And, much to Carl's consternation, the value traders derived from his expertise denied him luxuries enjoyed by junior and mid-level quants. They, unlike Carl, had chances to engage in lower-stakes, exploratory initiatives, framed as "slack time" (Kanter et al., 1997; Bothner et al., 2011). Safely distant from Carl's "hot-seat", they could learn, experiment, and problem-solve with relative freedom.

Watching colleagues enjoy lighter workloads underscored the constraints Carl faced. His once-nomadic spirit had vanished in a job he now found both stressful and unfulfilling (cf. Bearman, 2005, p. 76). Like Sofia — trapped by norms she helped create — Carl's pursuit of certainty had cost him the freedom he once prized.

2.2 Annealing for Autonomy

Wanting relief, Carl chose to act like a sword maker annealing metal. Annealing fit Carl's predicament, "where no global solution [was] known, and where incremental improvement techniques [stood] the risk of getting stuck in a local optimum" (Leifer & White, 1986, p. 238).

Carl's goals were existential and practical: he craved more autonomy within his group, while also wanting to make his colleagues more adaptive.

So, he considered how he might anneal the other quants. First, Carl contemplated a ratchet effect: he could drastically reduce their window for responding to traders' ongoing questions from three days to just one. Second, he imagined forcing his team to boost the bank's league-table ranking in the Asian commodities markets from ninth to fifth in just a year. Both methods could raise the system's temperature — in search of a better configuration — but each had drawbacks: Reducing response-times could destroy work quality, and forcing sharp mobility in the regional league table might break the team's spirit.

Ultimately, Carl settled on a third method of annealing: role reshuffling. In a weekly meeting with the traders, Carl surprised the other quants:

> "Tess, you're no longer our only energy expert. And Blake, you can stop 'hiding' in agriculture. Starting today, you'll switch roles: Tess, you'll handle the 'ags' questions, and Blake you'll take the questions on energy. You two will start us off, and we'll go from there — reshuffling more of you each week. It won't be pretty, but you'll find your way".

Carl took the temperature up further:

> "And this isn't just some 'exercise'. You'll need to prove this is making a difference for our traders. Each week, we'll hear updates on how your cross-training has improved their positions".

Carl had injected a controlled dose of uncertainty, "actively making [the] system worse off in an effort to let it right itself" (Leifer & White, 1986, p. 240).

Complacency, in turn, gave way to a hopeful sense of panic. Junior and mid-level quants saw that the slow-moving exploration they'd enjoyed as a perk was crowded out by this sudden shock. Similar to the process of physical annealing, where heating disrupts a material's structure to release stress and raise durability, Carl's disruptive approach disordered familiar routines to foster new, stronger bonds (cf. Perry et al., 2018). New conversations began of necessity, but soon took on a momentum of their own. Since Carl monitored the interactions and occasionally intervened, competition on the team stayed largely productive, rarely veering into rash risk-taking (Bothner et al., 2007) or destructive conflict (Piezunka et al., 2018a). Carl knew that without careful modulation, the intensity of his approach could drive his colleagues past their resilience thresholds. He was artfully prompting new, productive interactions unimaginable in the prior structure.

In the ensuing weeks, Carl saw more change, accepting that the group on balance was getting better, even if some couldn't keep up. Most quants were "generatively resilient" (Grandori, 2020; Shipilov et al., 2023), seeing the disruption as a chance to build new connections and skills, but the lowest-status quant, Jake, broke down and resigned under Carl's pressure. Jake's reliance on a narrow, predictable role left him unprepared for Carl's reshuffling. Jake floundered under the domain-changes, heightened scrutiny, and the threat of obsolescence.

In contrast, most others adapted. Tess and Blake, for instance, both shared insights that blurred boundaries between their specialized roles and engaged colleagues outside the group, making their networks more robust (Bothner, Smith, & White, 2010). In addition, the traders, who were drawn to the desk's upsurge in emotional energy (Collins & McConnell, 2015), shifted from narrow questions to playful dialogue with the quants. Untethered to past dynamics, traders and quants engaged each other in ways more suited to the volatile and complex markets in which the bank traded.

Traders' increased performance signaled that Carl's strategy was working. Importantly for Carl, he was no longer the lonely guardian of expert knowledge; he enjoyed greater freedom in a better terrain. With his team members more exploratory and confident to step into the spotlight, Carl was no longer the sole responder to traders' most pressing requests.

Satisfied with these changes, Carl initiated a cooling phase. He retained the role reshuffling, but slowed its pace to avoid burnout (cf. Estévez-Mujica & Quintane, 2018). Carl's choice to guard his colleagues' emotional energy in turn preserved his influence over them. Carl sensed that ongoing cycles of heating and cooling — possible in a laboratory, with inanimate metal or glass — couldn't work here (cf. Leifer & White, 1986), so he pursued stability. Colleagues responded well. They stayed nimble — aware of Carl's "willingness to start an occasional fire so that existing patterns of interlocking coalitions could dissolve and form anew" (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p. 200). Carl also fared better, having recaptured a vital part of his professional identity — marked by autonomy and latitude to explore, while staying anchored in the group he'd reshaped. No longer the group's firefighter, Carl explored new East Asian markets, made the desk's models more robust to market volatility, and helped his colleagues think more like traders.

3 Emerging from the Periphery

3.1 Trapped at the Margins

Carl's process of heating and cooling raised the welfare of many, though not all. Whereas Jake was forced out, a second peripheral member of the desk, Sam, survived, but was worse off. Carl's "controlled disorder", as some called it, left Sam with an uneasy mix of dread and hope. In the turmoil, Sam sensed the disruption he'd endured was prompting long-overdue self-reflection — reflection on his role, his standing in the bank, and his path forward (cf. Fontdevila et al., 2011, p. 195).

Sam's problems began long before the annealing occurred. Sam's skills had always been domain-agnostic. His peers, Tess in energy and Blake in agriculture, were known holders of distinct roles — safely separated, long before Carl broke the structure. Sam, in contrast, was always a techie in limbo — a translator whose work held value, but wasn't strongly status-generating. He turned intricate instructions into high-quality code, yet his contributions were at best ancillary (Bothner et al., 2015).

Having never become a bona fide "shot caller" in a substantive domain, Sam suffered greatly when Carl reshuffled the roles. Sam, his peers felt, couldn't be trusted to field traders' questions on an array of domains, since he'd never gotten a firm grip on one domain. They even joked that he "lacked a hunting license" and was "shooting short loads". Sam's marginal standing was now a discussion topic — a source of bonding that strengthened the "groupness" of the rest of the group (Fararo & Doreian, 1998), as Carl's annealing drove him further to the periphery.

3.2 Reaching for Escape

Desperate, Sam expanded his network outside Carl's group (White et al., 2007), venturing beyond the global commodities desk into other tribes. Sam gathered "cross-domain information and impressions" in casual conversations (Mische & White, 1998, p. 714) with peers on the rates and Forex desks, where news of unmet needs got his attention.

Reaching up to Rick, head of the Forex desk, was high-risk, however. At the bank, the rule was clear: "Time is money". Juniors didn't engage seniors without offering something of substantial value. Compounding this, Rick, though elite, was uncomfortably status-anxious — concerned that associating with "common folk" like Sam might trigger "status leakage" (cf. Podolny & Lynn, 2009, p. 556) from him to them.

So, Sam knew his proposal to help the Forex desk solve their technical issue was a gamble — and could be seen by Carl as a betrayal. Yet, Sam hoped that breaching the norms, if successful, would get coded not as foolish, but as courageous, fueling an upward status spiral (Bothner et al., 2010; Askin et al., 2015; Piezunka et al., 2018b; Sharkey & Kovács, 2024). So, Sam offered his skills to bridge the gap.

Sam also drew on his shared origins with Rick. Their mutual roots in San Francisco and love for the Golden State Warriors gave Sam an entry point. Casual nods to Steph Curry's latest feats lightened their conversations and built trust (Schmitt & Fuhse, 2015). Sam's regional references thus smoothed the flow of his discussions with Rick — allowing for "fresh starts" (Bearman, 2005, p. 159) in otherwise awkward conversational "standstills" (Tilly, 1998, p. 53) and retaining Rick's openness to his ideas.

To further stabilize his exchanges with Rick, Sam strategically reached through Rick's team to draw in Barbara — a colleague with expertise in Sam's solution and, importantly, another San Francisco native. Barbara's entry not only eased the flow of communication, but also gave their triad a shared identity, with familiar references to Bay Area culture. Sam was finding firmer footing — lowering the risk of status-related tensions and embedding himself more deeply in Rick's group.

Sam's network expansion took him in other, less likely directions. A front-office player, Sam took the counter-normative step of reaching down into lower-status teams for information. These teams, invisible to most of the front-line quants, held insights on resource allocation and firm-wide risk-trends that Sam used to strengthen his pitch. To gain information quickly, Sam audaciously bypassed the middle-office managers — the regulatory and risk officers — in order to learn directly from lower-ranking line-risk analysts. Learning from them proved beneficial, but also was risky — at the edge of what's appropriate for someone in his role. If "caught", some of Sam's front-office colleagues would accuse him of "slumming" (Zuckerman & Kim, 2003), a form of objectionable fraternizing. Sam thus prepared a framing of his downward reach both as a way to know the truth and as a counter-weight to the polite, yes-men culture to which the bank was succumbing. He then used what he gleaned from the line-risk analysts to contextualize his pitch to Rick.

When Sam finally laid out his findings to Rick, what mattered most, however, was their human connection. Shared interest in the Warriors had protected and energized their conversations. A mix of courage, shared stories, and technical insight — together with an ability to frame his solution in context — helped Sam craft for himself a new identity. No longer a domain-agnostic techie, Sam had risen from backstage contributor to front-stage collaborator, recasting his identity by crossing taken-for-granted boundaries (Azarian, 2005). Sam's exodus to Rick's group marked his escape from Carl's domain, allowing him to rebuild on new footing.

4 Rhetoric into New Relations

4.1 An Elite Innovator's Dilemma

Meanwhile, the star scientist of the bank's elite innovation lab, Skye, was also trying to go from entrapment to autonomy. As a much higher-status contributor than Sam, her path would be vastly different. Unlike Sam's relatively covert approach to his future, Skye took an "active, purposeful [orientation] toward a future" that she saw herself "striding into", and that she believed she could "control and design" (Mische, 2009, p. 701). Consistent with White's notion of prolepsis, Skye would project a compelling future that seemed inevitable to her colleagues, but first, the extent of her entrapment in the lab must be understood.

Under Skye's leadership, her lab had caused multiple breakthroughs, including satellite-based oceanic supply-chain models, which poured money into the bank and boosted the lab's prestige. Though colleagues revered Skye's genius, they also confined her to a narrow role. She wanted a market-facing position, having grown tired of inventing ideas that others monetized. Yet, she saw no way out.

Cohesion was both the lab's main strength and Skye's source of entrapment. The lab's "buyers" — desk heads throughout the bank, as well as managing directors — valued Skye's colleagues more as a unified team, an "ensemble" (White, 2002, p. 207), than as individuals (White, 1981a, p. 523, eq. 3; Bothner & White, 2001, p. 188, eq. 4). Celebrating the lab's cohesion and shared identity furthered its success but also tightened Skye's bonds to the group, leaving her feeling invaluable yet immobile.

Even in this dense network, Skye was the linchpin, making any effort to step back or reshape her role feel risky to everyone involved. Her possible departure alarmed both peers and bosses, who were deeply dependent on the lab's unique contributions. Because no other team could replicate her work, demand remained relentless (White, 2002, pp. 132–135), and Skye felt compelled to stay.

Skye's distinct role further tightened the vice. Known as a "quiet sage" for her insightful, empathetic approach, she enjoyed elevated status but felt more like an observer than a driver of innovation. She even wondered if her style bordered on the "ruinous empathy" Sofia had called out during her town hall, where listening and guiding overshadow genuine leadership and action.

In Skye's lab, unlike Carl's desk, status rose as speaking time fell, reinforcing her role as a reserved linchpin. This contrasted with Carl's "hot-seat" status (pre-annealing) in front of traders. While Carl was overexposed, Skye was trapped by the lab's norms of quiet authority, preventing her from taking a more assertive, profit-driven role. Despite being the central player (Light & Moody, 2020), she felt pushed into passivity — upholding the lab's standing while still feeling constrained.

Managing directors' preemptive efforts to block Skye's movements beyond the lab made things even worse. They took two main strategies. First, as a hard-to-read layer targeting a sole individual (Breiger, 2015, pp. ix–x), managing directors masked her true contributions by funneling her lab's trading strategies into different trading desks and revealing only aggregate trading revenues. This "hazy obfuscation" (DiMaggio, 1991; White, 2008, p. 211) made it impossible for her to know the true financial impact of her ideas. Second, Skye's bosses used status incentives, such as opportunities to publish and give lectures, to placate Skye, further disincentivizing entrepreneurial action beyond the lab. Not unlike manipulative in-laws at Christmas time strategically giving cooking gear to a daughter-in-law — to "keep her in the kitchen" (cf. Caplow, 1984) — Skye's bosses reinforced the behaviors they wanted Skye to repeat. By obfuscation and status-conferral, the bank's leadership maintained control over monetizing innovative ideas.

4.2 Change by Prolepsis

Skye's attempts at control began with a reimagining of her role and network (Collins, 2005, p. x). She wanted more than the elite but limited exploratory role to which she'd grown accustomed. Skye envisioned an ambidextrous role built on pairing explorations from her lab with exploitation on the trading floor (March, 1991). This ambition forced her to confront hard tensions between the creative domain she knew well, and the unknown demands of the new, market-facing domain of the bank's exploiters — mainly traders, but also structurers, portfolio managers, and sales team members, who had long profited from her lab's creations.

Skye's first step was thus to decouple from the lab (White, 2008, pp. 36–37). She adopted a stance of "benign neglect" (Piezunka et al., 2018c) toward her scientific colleagues. This was hard at first — costing her the familiar comforts of community — but was strategically necessary to gain the mobility and freedom to maneuver into her anticipated role. Instead of obliging every request for help from the team, as she had in the past, Skye kept her messages terse, deflecting routine questions with replies like, "I don't have the bandwidth to address this at the moment. Please refer to…".

This irritated scientific colleagues, but signaled a shift in her priorities and let her focus on building her network with the bank's exploiters. Unlike Sam, Skye didn't need a conversational bridge — such as a shared home city or a favorite basketball team in common. Instead, her status preceded her: all she had to send was a one-word message reading "Coffee?" and traders would seize the chance to pick Skye's brain, hoping to hear about her latest market-making idea.

Immersing herself in the traders' language was nonetheless difficult, yet crucial for Skye to earn "full tribal membership". While mathematical terms like "Hilbert spaces" and "stochastic calculus" studded the conversation back in the lab, her market-facing colleagues drew on a different — and to her, alien — vocabulary, routinely speaking of "lifting offers", "IFRS", and "CCAR".[3] In working to grasp their jargon (Burt & Reagans, 2022), Skye eventually saw herself, as did others, as gaining a form of "dual citizenship" (cf. Berger & Kellner, 1981), that licensed her movements from the lab into the world of capital.

More tangibly, Skye's goal was to establish her own internal hedge fund — a proprietary vehicle within the bank's infrastructure. She envisioned this fund as a hybrid venture mixing her existing strategy generation with practical, market-facing implementation. Unlike other, less ambidextrous options she'd considered — overseeing the bank's quantitative teams, which remained too exploratory, and engaging high-net-worth clients in wealth management, which was too close to rote exploitation — her fund would let her influence both creative and financial aspects. Skye also saw it as a testing ground for her ideas, ensuring that successful initiatives were executed start-to-finish under her control.

Getting others to join her was hard, however. Skye's vision caught resistance from several sides. Some managing directors, realizing their earlier efforts to block her mobility had failed, feared she might give other scientists "the wrong idea" about their "rightful place" in the bank. From another direction, multiple colleagues in the lab saw her career change as corrosive to their status, diminishing the value of pure exploration. Finally, Skye also alarmed the more anxious

3. To lift an offer is simply to buy in the marketplace; IFRS stands for international financial reporting standards; and CCAR is for comprehensive capital adequacy review — the Federal Reserve's stress-testing exercise.

traders, who feared losing their pipeline into Skye's lab, as she constructed her own bridge to the trading floor.

Using the rhetorical tool of prolepsis (White, 2008, p. 282), Skye sought to sideline these resisters and attract and form her coalition of allies. She spoke of her cross-functional hedge fund and its future initiatives as if they were already unfolding — seeking to impart her vision with immediacy and boldness.

Skye's initial attempt at prolepsis failed to mobilize colleagues, however, for two reasons. First, by over-relying on her status and wanting to quickly break down her resisters, her words were depressingly self-referential (Podolny et al., 2004; Pennebaker, 2002). Early, self-focused conversations of hers began as painfully as this:

> "My lab's carried this bank's innovation for years. And now, the way I see it, my cross-functional team is getting others to step up and build a culture of innovation and collaboration across the silos".

While this projected confidence to a few, it alienated many — especially the handful of scientists and traders she'd hoped to recruit. Second, Skye drew — naïvely and mechanically — on abstract values, rather than harnessing vital imagery to communicate her vision (Carton et al., 2014). Her reliance on generic ideals like "innovation" and "collaboration" proved useless, failing to draw colleagues from separate camps into a shared mission (Carton et al., 2014). Nothing in Skye's initial communication came close to the compelling imagery of Disney's "happiest place on earth" or Sandberg's "lean in".

Skye's later attempt at prolepsis succeeded. She began with a shift from "I" to "we", which was noticed and appreciated. Yet, her use of "we" was still just as personally strategic as it was unifying. "We" functioned for Skye almost as an indefinite pronoun: it offered a clear focal point, but also carried enough ambiguity that multiple colleagues, situated in disparate networks within the bank, could somehow imagine themselves as part of the project (White, 2008, p. 176). In addition, much like a university president letting a wealthy donor know about the other donors who are "on board", Skye's proleptic approach to what "we are achieving" pictured her coalition-in-formation in the most favorable of terms. Others, fearing they'd otherwise get left behind (Bothner, 2003; Bothner et al., 2007), joined Skye's team because they were "imitating [...] what they [perceived] others to be doing" (Perry et al., 2018, p. 291).

In parallel, her new mantra, "We make smart money wise", although not yet Disney-level, helped her various recruits "share a similar mental image [with a] limited amount of conceptual detail" (Carton et al., 2014, p. 1545). Skye used this mantra to frame the future as "already completed", even as it was simultaneously "selective, partial" and deliberately "ambiguous" (Mische, 2022, p. 420). Was "smart" a nod to the traders and their "smart money" instincts, or to the scientists and their technical training? Each group could see itself as doing the other a favor — bringing them from smart to wise. Some took it with humor, calling themselves "wise guys" in the mafia sense, while for others — scientists as well as traders — the mantra spoke credibly and with emotional freight to the value of uniting diverse teams. Skye was now mobilizing her ambidextrous fund.

5 Conclusion: An Observation and Three Questions

White's first (1992) version of *Identity and Control* concluded with 100 topics, many of which were questions for extending his theory. Inspired by White's question-driven approach, while staying brief, we close with a general observation, followed by three questions for future research.

Our observation is that uncertainty (Knight, 1921) plays a crucial role in the pendulum-like swings we see between "normality" and "chaos" (White, 2008, p. 1) in so much of social life. White's producers, whether firms or managers, are not risk-neutral agents optimizing within known probability distributions. Instead, they are uncertainty-averse actors who commit to role structures in search of shelter. This shelter often comes at the cost of future adaptability. Indeed, our bank managers rarely focus on "expected values" in a strict economic sense; rather, they labor to reduce uncertainty by forming stable social bonds, which often evolve into bondage.

In White's theoretical framework, this willingness to exchange mobility chances for the "comfort" of predictable roles suggests a structural complement to Knight's (1921) classic distinction between unquantifiable uncertainty and measurable risk. The pursuit of footing in stable roles can easily swing further into binding constraint, followed by reactive, strategic efforts — annealing, network reaching, or prolepsis — to break those constraints and regain autonomy. Each of these strategies involves reintroducing or harnessing uncertainty to (ultimately) get back to a more manageable world of risk — importantly, a world recreated in the image of the strategic actor.

For example, Carl forcibly reshuffled role-assignments on his commodities desk, injecting new uncertainty that triggered exploration. After the cooling phase, Carl had retained his prior status, but this was now paired with a different, more desirable identity. Sam, feeling marginalized, exploited uncertainty over the strength of his weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) to other parts of the bank: had colleagues known of his back-channel meetings beyond Carl's desk, they might have exiled him for disloyalty. Uncertainty made Sam's maneuvers possible — which, if pursued less skillfully, could have also brought career disaster. Finally, Skye harnessed the inherent unknowability of the bank's future, using prolepsis to instill her ambidextrous vision. If colleagues had been more certain of the future, they might have blocked her actions — likely reframing her cross-functional hedge fund as an illusion of grandeur. It is easy to imagine her colleagues' anxious confusion making them, and the wider context, more malleable. In each scenario, the strategic use of uncertainty was vital for maneuvering out of entrapment.

More generally, White's theories reveal uncertainty as an anthropological constant. Uncertainty drives actors into "normal" social arrangements, while also figuring as an ever-present resource for getting new action. According to White (2008, p. 1), "Sociology has to account for chaos and normality together", and his theories bring into focus how these two states seep into each other. Chaos is at once brutish, escapable, and useful.

Turning from this general observation to questions for future research, we ask first: how do leaders like Sofia and Carl manage emotionally charged, high-stakes encounters by switching conversational frames in ways that productively mix confidence and humility? Mixing confidence and humility is a delicate balancing act. Arrogance — confidence without humility — and fear — humility without confidence — are both dangerous extremes. Some recombinations of confidence and humility are well-received acts of "adaptive leadership", as when Sofia invited her audience to her whiteboard. Other remixtures fail, as might have occurred had Carl lacked the humility to switch at the right juncture from heating to cooling while annealing his team. The German word *Graben* — which means "ditch" and is close to *Grab*, the German word for "grave" — points to the consequences of a misstep in this balancing act, leading to "social death" (cf. Patterson, 1982), the most severe form of entrapment. While Sofia found a balance of confidence and humility, it is easy to imagine a more extreme outcome. Investigating the conditions that lead to this social death, as well as the strategies leaders use to maintain confidence-humility equilibria, in which bonds endure without bondage (Kumar, 1979; Berger & Kellner, 1981), is important for future research.

Second, what conditions make it possible for annealing to improve a social system? A useful first step is to distinguish Carl's practice of annealing from two seemingly similar approaches: organizational transformation and bullying. Unlike a standard transformation, where the end goal is clear, but the path is (at least partially) learned along the way, Carl's approach required him to discover even the destination through disruption. Annealing, distinct from bullying, seeks system-wide benefits rather than persistent individual dominance (cf. Bothner et al., 2012; Bothner et al., 2022). However, confusing annealing with bullying is possible, which makes it critical to understand what conditions preserve the integrity of annealing without dulling its force. Premature cooling (consider a lax drill sergeant) undermines White's vision of the process, while excessive "heating" risks damaging relationships and eroding the annealer's position — especially among colleagues whose stocks of energy are falling rapidly. Understanding the risks of annealing, as well as its (un)sustainable "temperatures", is essential. Differentiating successful from failed annealing is important for future research. Two simple starting points for understanding the conditions for successful annealing — annealing that raises the welfare of the group — are that the annealer starts with a large and robust stock of status (Bothner, Smith, & White, 2010) and that those subjected to it possess the emotional energy (Collins & McConnell, 2015) to respond productively (Bothner et al., 2025).

Third, how does status shape how individuals regain control of their professional identities? For Sam, low status required a strategy of network reaching and trust-building dialogue to move from the periphery to influence. Conversely, Skye's higher status allowed her to use proleptic language, describing her turn toward ambidexterity as inevitable. Skye moved through the bank with less friction than Sam, although her early missteps point to the importance of inclusive language and vivid imagery in mobilizing support. Sam's and Skye's different paths highlight how status determines whether humanizing discourse or visionary rhetoric is the better strategy. Exploring these themes can further our understanding of how actors at various levels of status escape entrapment and redirect their careers.

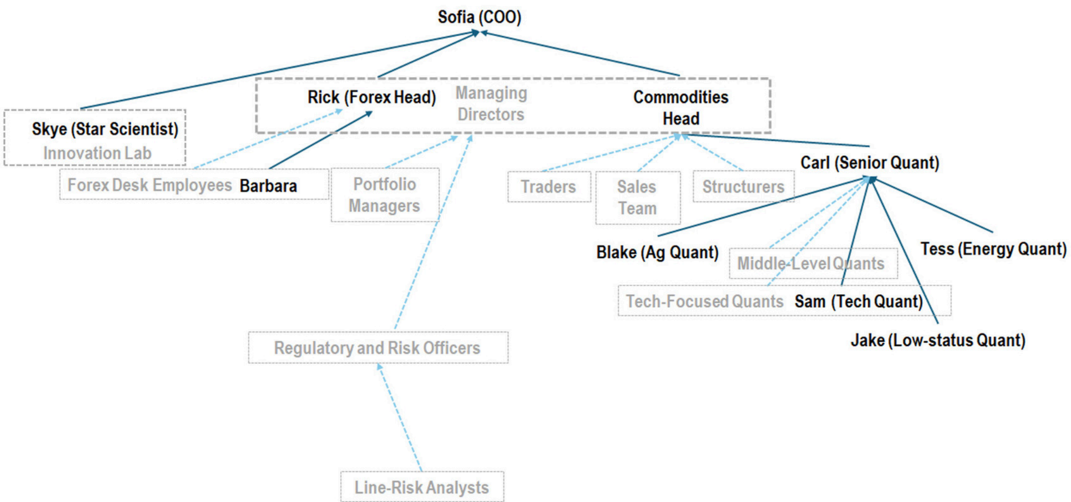

Figure 1. Persons and Groups discussed in examples

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