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Peer Coworker Relationships

While interviewing people for one of my studies, a participant, Dan, spoke about one of his coworkers, Luke. Luke had been dealing with serious marital problems. While Dan sympathized with his coworker, he also noted that Luke's preoccupation with these problems began to seriously distract him from his duties, both by causing Luke to miss work more frequently and also by distracting Luke from his tasks when he was at work. This, of course, forced Luke's coworkers, including Dan, to pick up the slack. In addition, because Luke's tasks affected the rest of the workgroup, Luke's distractions also began to harm the work of the entire group. Dan really began to resent the situation and this resentment eventually took a toll on his relationship with Luke. As Dan stated, "I lost all respect for him and even when he got his personal life back together I could never look at him the same way again." In fact, Dan began to complete tasks in different locations just to avoid contact with Luke. This, of course, made it difficult for both of them to do their jobs effectively.

Most people have one supervisor and several peer coworkers. Consequently, most of us spend more time with our peer coworkers than with anyone else at work (Comer, 1991). And many of us spend more time with our peer coworkers than we spend with our family and friends. The bulk of organizing, therefore, occurs in the context of coworker relationships. As Dan's story suggests, the quality and effectiveness of coworker relationships has important implications for the quality and effectiveness of employees' experiences and the organization as a whole.

Given their ubiquitous nature, it is unfortunate that these relationships have received relatively little research attention. The enduring hierarchical and authoritarian nature of contemporary organizations is likely responsible for the overwhelming predominance of supervisor-subordinate relationship research over peer relationship research. This is unfortunate because, as this chapter demonstrates, peer coworker relationships are of great importance to both organizations and the individuals who participate in these relationships.

Overview

Peer coworker relationships refer to relationships between employees at the same hierarchical level who have no formal authority over one another. The term *coworker* can refer to any individual with whom one works (including supervisors and subordinate employees). However, coworker relationships are often assumed to refer specifically to relationships among peer employees. For clarity, and ease of reading, I use the term *peer relationships* for the remainder of this chapter.

Peer relationships were largely ignored in early formal theories of management. Bureaucratic theory (Weber, 1946) and administrative management theory (Fayol, 1949) focused almost solely on hierarchy, authority, and, consequently, supervisors. Effective communication was prescribed as downward and formal, focusing on supervisors instructing, controlling, and disciplining subordinate employees. Lateral relationships and lateral communication among peers was considered largely unnecessary. Fayol (1949) granted that peer communication was sometimes a necessary evil to be used only in emergency situations via “Fayol’s bridge,” which referred to links between peers, if necessary. Otherwise, peer communication was assumed to be “chitchat” and unrelated to work. As discussed in this chapter, subsequent research reveals that non-work-related communication is *not* non-work related; rather, such communication in the context of peer relationships is strongly associated with work and a number of important organizational and individual factors.

The famous Hawthorne studies represented a major turning point in our thinking about peer relationships. These studies began as a typical “Taylor-esque” efficiency study of production processes at the General Electric plant in Hawthorne, Illinois. Through a series of studies, Elton Mayo and his team made some surprising discoveries regarding peer communication. First, they found that individuals are motivated to work for intrinsic rewards such as satisfaction, enjoyment, and development, and these rewards are derived, in part, via communication with their coworkers. Second, when observing workgroups actually carrying out their work (in this case, installing wiring in banks), they found that employee performance was impacted primarily by informal communication among the group members, rather than by formal rules and job descriptions. Thus, the Hawthorne studies revealed what most employees already knew—people like to interact with their peers, and peer communication is one of the most important influences on employee behavior and performance (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939).

The Hawthorne studies sparked a great many “new” management theories that placed interpersonal relationships at the center of organizational processes. Human relations theorists such as Maslow (1954) and McGregor (1960) highlighted the links between peer relationships and employee morale. Human

resources theorists such as Likert (1961) highlighted the ways employees each bring a unique set of competencies to the workplace and how, via interpersonal relationships, organizations could effectively “tap” their human resources to their fullest potential. Together, these two sets of theories placed peer relationships at the center of organizational processes and sparked a stream of research in the broad area of peer communication and, in particular, the ways peer communication was associated with a variety of individual and organizational “outcomes” such as satisfaction, commitment, productivity, and employee turnover.

It was not until 1985, however, that scholars explicitly examined peer *relationships*. In an examination of mentoring alternatives for employees, Kram and Isabella (1985) identified three primary types of peer relationships—the information peer, the collegial peer, and the special peer. Their study was the first to empirically examine peer *relationships*, rather than simply peer *relations* (in the form of peer communication) and the first to categorize different types of peer relationships. The Kram and Isabella (1985) study spawned further research in the area of peer relationships and provides the foundation for many studies reviewed in this chapter. It is described in detail in a later section.

In this chapter, I discuss peer relationship research according to three primary areas—functions of peer relationships, peer relationship developmental processes, and outcomes and consequences of peer relationships. I then forward a research agenda conceptualizing peer relationships from alternative theoretical perspectives. Finally, an applied case is provided at the end of the chapter to help the reader appreciate the practical implications of considering organizational issues from different perspectives. Table 3.1 provides a brief summary of research on these various themes.

Functions of Peer Relationships

Peer relationships provide a variety of important functions for the individuals involved in the relationship and for the organization in which the relationships exists. These functions include mentoring, information exchange, and social support.

MENTORING

As mentioned earlier, peer relationships are an important mentoring “alternative” to the traditional supervisor–subordinate mentoring relationship (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Kram and Isabella (1985) noted that at the time of their study, researchers tended to assume mentoring relationships developed between a young protégé and a more experienced, higher ranking mentor. They argued that a number of other relationships in organizations could provide

Table 3.1 Summary of Peer Relationship Research

Peer Relationship Functions

Mentoring

- Factors influencing mentoring relationships (sex, race, technology)
- Mentoring networks

Information Exchange

- Information-seeking tactics
- Peer relationship quality and information exchange

Power, Control, and Influence

- Coworker talk and control
- Peer relationships and concertive control
- Bullying and mobbing

Social Support

- Peer relationships as sites of instrumental, informational, and emotional support

Peer Relationship Development

Factors Influencing Peer Relationship Development

- Individual/personal factors
 - Personality
 - Similarity (demographic, attitudinal)
 - Sex and sex composition of dyad
- Contextual
 - Organizational climate
 - Organizational culture
 - Proximity
 - Shared tasks
 - Work-related problems
 - Extra-organizational socializing
 - Life events
 - Sex composition of the organization

Communication in peer relationship development

- Increased frequency
- Increased breadth
- Increased intimacy
- Decreased caution

Outcomes and Consequences

Employee Adjustment and Behavior

- Motivation
 - Professional satisfaction
 - Job satisfaction
 - Organizational commitment
 - Self-esteem
 - Stress
 - Turnover
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alternatives to these traditional types of mentoring relationships, which tended to be relatively rare and difficult to access. In particular, they focused their study on peers at work. Their study revealed three primary types of peer relationships, distinguished primarily by the nature of communication between the relationship partners. *Information peer relationships* exist at a superficial level. Communication among information peers reflects a low level of intimacy and low levels of self-disclosure and trust and is limited to work-related topics. Information peers communicate primarily as required by their tasks and work responsibilities. *Collegial peer relationships* are characterized by moderate levels of trust, intimacy, emotional support, and self-disclosure. Collegial peers discuss a broader array of topics regarding work and nonwork issues. Collegial peers combine coworker and friendship roles in their relationship (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Odden & Sias, 1997). *Special peer relationships* are characterized by high levels of trust, intimacy, self-disclosure, and support. Kram and Isabella (1985) describe the special peer as equivalent to a “best friend.” Special peers talk about virtually any topic and at high levels of openness and intimacy.

These relationships provide distinct types of developmental *mentoring* functions and these functions vary as one’s career progresses. The primary function of information peers, as the name indicates, is information sharing. In the early stages of an individual’s career, information peers are key to helping the new employee “learn the ropes” and accomplish necessary tasks. As the individual’s career advances, maintaining contact with information peers ensures that the employee obtains information and, therefore, is perceived by others as a knowledgeable employee, which helps that employee maintain visibility to higher ups. Although the information peer relationship tends to be rather superficial and limited in its scope, these relationships are crucial for an employee’s ability to “network,” “stay in the loop,” and be an informed and competent decision maker; all of which are needed for career success.

Collegial peer relationships are more complex and multifaceted than information peers. Beyond providing work- and organization-related information, collegial peers provide feedback and emotional support to one another. In the early career phase, conversations among collegial peers deal with “evolving professional roles and job performance” (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 125). Receiving feedback from a collegial peer helps an employee develop professionally, rather than just stay informed. As an individual’s career progresses, collegial peers engage in career strategizing and help one another gain recognition and identify “realistic advancement options” (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 126).

Special peer relationships fulfill the information sharing, feedback, support, and strategizing functions of the information and collegial peer relationships. They also, however, are characterized by higher levels of trust, self-disclosure, and intimacy and are even more multifaceted than the collegial peer in the breadth and depth of conversation. Although such relationships are rare in the early stages of an individual’s career (Odden & Sias, 1997), special

peers help at this stage by providing “confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship,” which helps the individual “acquire competence and confidence” (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 126). As the individual’s career advances, the multifaceted nature of the special peer is particularly important in helping the individual deal with “work/family conflicts and with concerns about their potential and the extent to which they are willing to make commitments and conform to the demands of the organization” (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 126). Special peers also help one another manage “fears of obsolescence and processes of reassessment and redirection” that can occur as one’s career progresses over the years (p. 126).

Having relationships of all three types provides individuals with multifaceted and multidimensional mentoring. A subsequent study by Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos, and Rouner (1989) supported the value of multidimensional mentoring. Their study of mentoring in an academic setting revealed that the traditional “mentor/protégé” relationship between an individual and someone of higher hierarchical status (e.g., a supervisor) comprises only part of an employee’s mentoring and support network. Employees also benefit from receiving “collegial task” and “collegial social” support from their peer coworkers. *Collegial task* support refers to engaging in the exchange of ideas and working together on joint projects (e.g., coauthoring papers). *Collegial social* support refers to the exchange of confidences, consideration, and constructive criticism, as well as devoting more time and sharing confidential personal information with one another. As Hill et al. point out, the collegial task function is consistent with the collegial peer role, and the collegial social support function is consistent with the collegial and special peer roles identified by Kram and Isabella (1985). Taken together, these studies highlight the value of multidimensional mentoring from a variety of sources.

M. C. Higgins and Kram (2001) recently revisited the topic of multidimensional mentoring by developing the concept of “developmental networks.” A developmental network refers to “the set of people a protégé names as taking an active interest in and action to advance the protégé’s career by providing developmental assistance” (p. 268). This conceptualization broadens mentoring beyond a single relationship with the protégé’s organization. Their conceptualization includes both career support (e.g., advice, sponsorship, exposure, and protection) and psychosocial support (e.g., friendship, counseling, confirmation, etc.). The authors theorize that employees’ developmental networks vary on a variety of dimensions. *Network diversity* refers to the extent to which a protégé receives developmental support from different types of mentors, such as mentors from different areas of the organization and different areas of the protégé’s social environment. *Network strength* refers to the extent to which the tie between an individual and that individual’s relationship partner is reciprocal such that each provides support to the other.

Varying combinations of these two dimensions result in four distinct types of developmental networks. A network of a few weak ties (low strength) from the same social context (low diversity) comprises a *receptive* network in which the protégé is open or receptive to receiving support from a limited number of mentors but does not actively cultivate developmental relationships. A network with a large number of diverse yet weak (low-strength) ties comprises the *opportunistic* network in which a protégé is open to receiving assistance from various sources but is largely passive toward cultivating these relationships. A network of a few or even just one (low-diversity) mentor in which the mentor(s) and protégé exchange mutual respect, trust, and sharing (high strength) comprises the *traditional* network. Finally, a highly diverse network of strong ties comprises the *entrepreneurial* network of mentors who are “highly motivated to act on behalf of a protégé and who collectively provide access to a wide array of information” (M. C. Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 271).

The above all indicate that peer mentoring is important to an individual’s career experience and progression. Access to mentors, and in particular to a variety of mentoring sources, is therefore crucial. Not all employees, however, have such access to peer mentoring. A number of studies have examined factors that are associated with access to peer mentoring, including individual factors such as personality, gender, and race, and the workplace contextual factors such as task requirements and technology.

Individual Factors. Research on the relationship between the two is complex. Women are more likely than men to develop in their peers characterized by friendship (Sias & Sias, 1997). In addition, most of these close relationships are with other women (Sias, Smith, & Avdeyeva, 2003).

Because such characteristics comprise collegial and special peer relationships that are important mentoring sources, one might think women have an advantage over men with respect to access to mentoring. This advantage is mitigated, however, by the “glass ceiling,” which refers to the difficulty women experience in attempting to “break through” to higher levels of management such that women remain largely unrepresented at the higher levels of management in U.S. organizations (Veale & Gold, 1998). Consequently, a female employee’s network of mentors is largely limited to lower hierarchical levels. Men, on the other hand, have access to mentors at higher hierarchical levels, and as male employees’ careers progress together, their peer mentoring continues. Thus, while men may have fewer close mentoring relationships, they are more likely to have more mentors at higher hierarchical levels. Accordingly, cross-gender mentoring relationships are important.

Such relationships are difficult to negotiate, however. Hurley (1996) identified some dangers associated with cross-gender mentoring. First, individuals

Laureen: This and the next heading probably could be H3s. What do you think

involved in such relationships sometimes have difficulty maintaining appropriate levels of intimacy and instead cross the line into sexual harassment. Second, even when the relationship remains appropriate, others in the organization may misinterpret the relationship as romantic, rather than simply a close mentoring relationship. These perceptions can cause a many of problems for the relationship partners. As a consequence, individuals appear to be quite cautious about developing cross-gender mentoring relationships, and functional relationships of this type are relatively rare (Sias, Smith, & Avdeyeva, 2003).

Work Context Factors. The environment in which a mentoring relationship is embedded can impact that relationship in a number of ways. M. C. Higgins and Kram (2001) argue that communication technology, or the lack of such technology, can either enhance or hinder an individual's ability to cultivate and maintain effective mentoring networks by providing, or limiting, access to potential mentors. Physical proximity may also be of consequence. Employees who are physically isolated from others at work will have more difficulty developing relationships than those who are near their peers (M. C. Higgins & Kram, 2001). In sum, research indicates the peer mentoring relationships and mentoring networks are very important for employee development and advancement. Related to the information sharing component of mentoring, the following section discusses information exchange as a primary function of peer relationships.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

As seen in the discussion of mentoring above, peer relationships are crucial sites of information exchange. A large body of work has addressed employee needs for information and the tactics and strategies employees use to obtain information. The bulk of this work centers on the experience of new employees. Grounded primarily in uncertainty reduction theory (C. Berger & Calabrese, 1975), these studies posit that new employees experience a great deal of uncertainty when they enter an organization. Many experience uncertainty about the nature and requirements of their new job (referent uncertainty). For example, a new faculty member may understand her teaching assignment but be unsure about other faculty duties such as committee work, advising, and the like. New employees also experience uncertainty about their ability to competently perform the tasks required in their new job (appraisal uncertainty). For example, a new faculty member may be clear about her teaching assignment, but unsure about her ability to teach those classes competently. Finally, new employees typically experience uncertainty about their relationships with their new peers and their ability to fit into the social network of the organization (relational uncertainty). According to uncertainty reduction theory, when individuals experience uncertainty, they seek information to reduce that uncertainty. Studies consistently identify peer coworkers as one of the most

important information sources. Peers typically are the most knowledgeable about the tasks themselves. They also have greater opportunity to observe the new employee performing his or her tasks so they are likely the most accurate sources of appraisal information. Finally, peers are likely the most knowledgeable about the social network. Accordingly, much research addresses how and why new hires seek information from their peers.

In general, and similar to information exchange in supervisor–subordinate relationships (see Chapter 2), new employees rely on direct and indirect tactics when seeking information from their peers. Direct tactics refer to overt questions to peers while indirect tactics refer to a variety of methods, including indirect questions, hinting, observation, and the like. Regardless of the tactics used, new hires typically find peers to be among the most informative sources in the organization, particularly with respect to information about tasks and the social relationships of the workgroup (Comer, 1991; Morrison, 1993; Teboul, 1994). Research also indicates that, at least early on, new employees rely primarily on direct tactics when seeking information from peers. After a time, however, the new employees become increasingly concerned that continued questioning of peers may make the new employees appear incompetent and unconfident (i.e., seeking information incurs “social costs”). Consequently, new employees turn to more indirect information seeking (V. D. Miller & Jablin, 1991).

Information exchange among peers does not apply only to new employees, and it does not cease when a new employee becomes a veteran in the organization. Information exchange is a crucial part of the organizing process, and being well informed is necessary for both individual and organizational effectiveness (Spillan, Mino, & Rowles, 2002). Accordingly, information exchange is an important and *ongoing* function of peer relationships. The nature of information exchange among peers varies, however, according to the nature of the relationship between those peers. As noted in an earlier section, information, collegial, and special peer relationships are distinct from one another primarily with respect to the communication that occurs in those relationships (Kram & Isabella, 1985). More specifically, the type of information exchanged and the nature of that exchange process vary. Information peers, as the name indicates, primarily exchange work-related information that is superficial, rather than intimate. These peers do not share personal information or personal feedback. Information exchange in the context of these relationships is limited to that required to accomplish tasks. Collegial peers exchange information in a substantially different way. Information exchange among these peers is task related, but also extends to nonwork and personal information exchange. Collegial peers share information with one another regarding their personal life. They also provide one another with feedback, both with respect to personal and work-related events. In particular, collegial peers will often exchange information regarding problems at work, rather than simply information needed for

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task accomplishment (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Special peers have unique information exchange characteristics as well. The information shared among special peers is virtually limitless, dealing with any topic—work or personal. These peers share intimate information regarding their personal lives and work lives. Special peers freely share their opinions and feelings about work-related issues such as problems with a supervisor or other peers (Sias & Jablin, 1995).

Not only does the type of information shared vary in different types of peer relationship, but so does the quality of that information. Using the Kram and Isabella (1985) peer coworker typology, Sias (2005) examined links between the quality of peer relationships and the amount and quality of information shared in the context of those relationships. Information quality refers to the extent to which individuals perceive that the information they receive is accurate, timely, and useful. Results indicated that employees with higher proportions of information peer relationships reported receiving lower quality information than those with higher proportions of collegial peers. Consistent with Kram and Isabella's (1985) claim that collegial peers tend to engage in higher amounts of trust and self-disclosure than do information peers, collegial peers appear to be more forthcoming with information; therefore, the information they provide to one another is perceived as more accurate, useful, and timely than information received from the more superficial and role-bounded information peers. These results indicate that employees with primarily information peer relationships are at an information disadvantage relative to their colleagues.

Interestingly, the Sias (2005) study found that special peer relationships were unrelated to information quality. Thus, although collegial and special peer relationships are similar in many ways, they also have distinct characteristics. A possible reason for this comes from research that indicates special peer relationships are often associated with problematic work environments. Sias and Jablin (1995), for example, found that special peers can become isolated from a problem supervisor, thus increasing the social distance between employees and supervisor. In a similar vein, Sias and Cahill (1998) found that work-related problems (e.g., an inconsiderate supervisor) can draw peer coworkers into closer relationships as their communication about the problems becomes more intimate and more frequent. As communication between the supervisor and employees decreases, information sharing between supervisor and those employees likely decreases as well. As a consequence, these employees likely receive less, and less accurate, information from their supervisor that they can subsequently share with one another. Thus, "As special peers isolate themselves from their supervisor, they may also isolate themselves from information, harming the quality of information they share with one another" (Sias, 2005, p. 390).

In sum, peer relationships are important sites of information exchange throughout one's career. The nature of an individual's relationships with peers

is associated with both the type of information and the quality of those peers' exchanges.

POWER, CONTROL, AND INFLUENCE

While supervisors are assumed to exert control and influence via legitimate authority, hierarchy, and bureaucratic structures, scholars have also examined the ways power and control are embedded in peer coworker relationships. This line of research began, of course, with the Hawthorne bank wiring studies mentioned above, which were the first to reveal the power of informal group communication and norms over employee behavior. Subsequent research focused on relatively overt forms of power and control, such as French and Raven's (1959) typology of power sources including coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, and expert power. Pfeffer's (1981) resource dependency theory conceptualized power as control over critical resources such as money and budgets, prestige, rewards, sanctions, and expertise. With the exception of expertise, these theories privilege supervisors and others in positions of authority. It was not until the "interpretive turn" in the early 1980s (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983) that scholars began to focus on power outside the obvious authority holders, that is, unobtrusive forms of control and influence that operate in the "deep structure" of the organization. This move brought attention back to informal power and control. #

Interpretive scholars study organizational power by focusing on "the relationships among communication, power and meaning" (Mumby, 2001, p. 595). Power, therefore, refers to the ability to manage meaning and is exerted through communication. In contrast to earlier conceptualizations of power as control over resources (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981), power is conceptualized as control over meaning. Kunda's (1992) study of engineers exemplifies this approach and is particularly relevant to peer relationships. He examined how employees create and manage meaning in their everyday conversation. His analysis revealed that these conversations, rather than being simply idle chitchat, are important sites of meaning creation and meaning management, in other words, organizational power. Kunda's study shows "how organizing is produced in the moment to moment, as members 'do' meetings, engage in hallway talk, and tell stories" (Mumby, 2001, p. 595). As peers engage in such interaction, they develop and maintain relationships. From this perspective, exerting control requires access to these sites of organizing; or, put differently, exerting control requires participating in peer relationships. ^S

Barker (1993) examined control and influence in self-managing teams. In particular, he examined how a self-managing team developed normative rules that functioned as forms of *concertive control*. In contrast to bureaucratic, authoritarian, and technological forms of control, concertive control emerges from the

employees. As Barker explains, “Workers achieve concertive control by reaching a negotiated consensus on how to shape their behavior according to a set of core values found in a corporate vision statement. In a sense, concertive control reflects the adoption of a new substantive rationality, a new set of consensual values, by the organization and its members” (p. 411). Concertive control, then, is a particularly powerful form of control created and maintained by the workers themselves via socially constructed normative rules and “rationalities.” Barker’s ethnographic study followed a self-managing team as it developed such rules over three phases. Phase 1 involved *consolidation and value consensus*. In this phase, employees explicitly articulated mission and value statements, and over several conversations, the coworkers achieved consensual agreement on these rules. Phase 2 represented the *emergence of normative rules*. During this phase, employees focused on enforcing the normative rules, rather than on creating and building consensus around those rules. This phase involved “peer pressure” among the coworkers to ensure adherence to the norms. Phase 3 represented *stabilization and formalization of rules*. In this phase, the previously informal normative rules became rigid and formalized, essentially “bureaucratized.” This study reveals the control embedded in peer relationships as the peers socially construct normative rules and “substantive rationalities” via their interaction with one another.

Finally, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the abuse of power in peer relationships by examining workplace bullying and “mobbing.” *Bullying* is a dyadic phenomenon in which a bully repeatedly continually harasses and abuses a specific victim. Such abusive behaviors include verbal abuse, undermining the victim’s work, and belittling the victim (R. T. Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). *Mobbing* is basically a group version of bullying that involves a group of people “ganging up” on a victim. Employees who mob a coworker actively seek out communication with the victim with the intent to torment, hurt, and frustrate, rather than simply ignore, the victim (Einarsen, 2000). Moreover, mobbing is a “long-lasting, escalated conflict with frequent harassing actions systematically aimed at a target person” (Zapf, 1999, p. 70). Mobbing occurs in many forms, including threats to the victim’s professional status (e.g., belittlement), threats to the target’s personal status (e.g., teasing and humiliation), intentional marginalization and isolation, and destabilization, such as repeatedly mentioning mistakes or blunders (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2005; Girardi, Monaco, Prestigiacomo, & Talamo, 2007).

A number of factors are associated with the likelihood an employee will be bullied or mobbed by his or her coworkers. Research suggests that homosexual employees are among the more likely targets of ostracism, and these individuals experience a great deal of anxiety regarding whether or not to “come out” at work (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007). Employees from ethnic and racial minorities are more vulnerable to ostracism than are majority employees, particularly in the form of mobbing. One of the

reasons for this is that mobbing can be motivated by racism. However, as Hodson, Roscigno, and Lopez (2006) explain, “Workplace bullies often attempt to socially isolate and ostracize their victims. This may be easier in the case of minority workers because these workers already face a certain degree of isolation from majority groups” (p. 386). For similar reasons, employees are often ostracized because of a physical disability (Zapf, 1999).

Various elements of the organizational context can enable or even encourage ostracism bullying and mobbing. Zapf (1999), for example, found that employees who reported working in conditions of *organizational uncertainty* and high levels of *work stress* were significantly more likely to report being bullied or mobbed than those working in healthier environments. Hodson et al. (2006) likened some organizational environments to “pressure cookers” in which mobbing can thrive. In particular, organizations characterized by high levels of *job insecurity* and uncertainty can decrease trust among employees and increase feeling of powerlessness and conflict. These, in turn, can lead to intimidation and bullying among those employees (Hearn & Parkin, 1987; Hodson et al., 2006). *Chaotic* organizations also provide fertile environments for ostracism in the form of bullying and mobbing. Chaotic organizations are those in which production processes lack coherence, are not well integrated, and in which all processes lack organization. Such environments tend to “depress citizenship and spark worker revolt” (Hodson et al., 2006, p. 388). As Hodson et al. (2006) explain, “in the chaotic workplace, bullies may feel free to intimidate and belittle others at will” (p. 388). Similarly, Leymann (1996) notes that mobbing can thrive in organizations with poorly organized production processes and oversight.

Adopting a critical and structuration stance, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) examined the ways victims enacted their agency and resisted bullying. Her analysis of narratives obtained from bullying victims revealed five primary forms of resistance. *Exodus* refers to quitting, threatening to quit, or requesting a transfer. *Collective voice* refers to talking with other coworkers and seeking advice on how to deal with the situation. In these conversations, employees socially constructed the bully as cruel, crazy, and/or unfair. Thus, these conversations produced both knowledge (in the form of advice) and support. *Reverse discourse* “turned repressive practices and language to liberating advantages” (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006, p. 416). With this strategy, victims appropriated or co-opted controls or labels by producing alternative meanings. For example, victims referred to themselves as “troublemakers,” as a preferred identity (e.g., someone who stands up for what she or he believes in). Other tactics under this category included making use of formal and informal grievance procedures, and seeking help from others who were influential or experts (e.g., lawyers, EEOC staff, etc.). Finally, retaining written documentation of bullying incidents empowered victims as they pursued a positive outcome.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Organizational life can be stressful. Beyond bullying and mobbing, individuals experience stress from a number of sources, including the work itself and the organizational environment. Work overload or underload, role ambiguity, and role conflict are just a few of the stressors employees experience from their tasks (K. I. Miller, Ellis, Zook, & Lyles, 1990). Emotional labor is another source of task-related stress. Emotional labor refers to work in which employees are required to display certain mandated emotions and, in contrast, hide nonmandated emotions (Hochschild, 1983). Flight attendants, for example, are required to display a calm and pleasant demeanor, regardless of whether or not they feel calm and pleasant (Murphy, 1998). Such management of emotions is stressful and can result in mental and physical exhaustion (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Stress also comes from the work environment as employees deal with workplace politics, conflict, change, and uncertainty (Frost, 2004; Persoff & Siegel, 1998).

Regardless of its source, workplace stress is associated with a number of negative consequences, including low morale, physical and mental health problems, absenteeism, turnover, and decreased productivity (Blau, 1981; LaRocco, House, & French, 1980). Consequently, employees attempt to relieve stress by seeking social support from others. Social support refers to verbal and nonverbal communication between receiver and provider that reduces uncertainty about a situation, one's self, another, or a relationship, and enhances the perception of control over one's life (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). Research indicates individuals rely on three primary types of social support. *Instrumental support* refers to more tangible forms of help such as providing services and material assistance (e.g., helping someone find the copy machine on their first day of work). *Informational support* refers to providing information and advice. *Emotional support* refers to venting or providing consolation to someone, for example, helping a peer get through a difficult time with a boss by listening and offering support and consolation (House, 1971).

Having access to sufficient support is important for individual and organizational well-being. As Eisenberg and Goodall (2004) note, access to a network of support is necessary for dealing with work-related stress. Research consistently demonstrates that peers are among the most effective support sources for organizational members. Peers offer a unique type of support—support that a family member cannot provide with the same knowledge and understanding and, in fact, when faced with a work-related problem, employees often turn to peers first for support (Cahill & Sias, 1997).

One's access to social support is dependent, however, on one's relationships with peers. As seen in the preceding section, peers are important sources of informational support as they provide crucial information to one another. Peers of all types provide information; however, as Sias (2005) found, the quality

of that information is strongly associated with the quality of the peers' relationships. Similarly, the quality of informational support an employee receives from peers depends on the quality of that employee's relationships with those peers. While information peers provide task-related information to one another, collegial and special peers provide more intimate, multifaceted, and substantial information to one another (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Not surprisingly, then, providing informational, and in particular emotional, support are important functions of the collegial and special peer relationships.

Persoff & Siegel (1998) found peer relationships to be crucial sites of support for employees experiencing stress resulting from a corporate merger. Their results provide interesting insights into the role of peer relationships during times of uncertainty. Specifically, they found peer relationships play a pivotal role in reducing stress via information exchange (i.e., informational support). They also found, however, that peer relationships provided a number of "psychosocial" functions that were of even greater value in helping employees deal with the stress of the merger. Among these psychosocial functions were mutual support, collaboration, confirmation, and the provision of emotional support. This social support resulted in decreased stress and anxiety, and increased learning for the employees (Persoff & Siegel, 1998).

In sum, peer relationships fulfill a number of functions, including mentoring, information exchange, and social support. The effectiveness of those functions is associated with the quality of the relationships. Understanding how and why peer relationships develop is, therefore, an important concern. These developmental processes are discussed in the following section.

Peer Relationship Development

The nature and quality of one's relationships with peers has important implications for both the individuals in the relationship and the organization as a whole. As discussed above, employees with high-quality and functional peer relationships are more likely to receive effective mentoring, are better informed, and have greater access to effective networks of support in the workplace. The processes by which peers develop relationships with one another is, therefore, an important issue.

As noted earlier, virtually all peer relationships begin as *information peer* relationships. However, not all peer relationships remain information peer relationships. Many develop into more intimate, multifaceted relationships such as collegial or special peer relationships. Research indicates that an individual employee's highest proportion of peer relationships is likely comprised of information peers. Collegial peers are typically the second highest proportion, and special peer relationships are the most rare (Fritz, 1997; Odden &

Sias, 1997). This is likely due to the fact that time and effort are required to develop and maintain collegial and special peer relationships.

Odden and Sias (1997) used the Kram and Isabella typology to examine links between peer relationship development and the organizational climate. Results indicated that climates perceived as highly “cohesive” were related to larger proportions of collegial and special peer relationships, and lower proportions of information peer relationships. Thus, a high proportion of collegial and special peer relationships may be indicative of an organization in which employees like one another, get along well, and help each other out. “Supervisor consideration” (i.e., the extent to which employees perceived their supervisor to be supportive, trustworthy, and fair) was negatively related to special peer relationships. In other words, higher proportions of special peer relationships were more likely to be found in organizations with problematic supervisors.

Along these lines, Sias and Jablin (1995) found that peers often increased their interaction and became closer when their supervisor treated employees unfairly. Thus, while Kram and Isabella (1985) suggest that special peers act as “sounding boards” or places in which to vent problems, in particular, special peers may act as confidantes with whom to discuss troubling dimensions of the superior–subordinate relationship and may, therefore, be likely to develop in problematic work environments (Odden & Sias, 1997; Sias & Jablin, 1995).

Sias and Cahill (1998) examined the ways peers become friends. Although this study is not grounded in the Kram and Isabella (1985) typology, it does provide some insights into how information peers develop the friendly characteristics of collegial peers and the close friendship that characterizes special peer relationships (see also Chapter 4 of this volume). Sias and Cahill (1998) found that peer relationships develop into friendships due to individual and contextual factors. Specifically, individuals became closer when they perceived they were demographically and/or attitudinally similar to one another and when they enjoyed each other’s personalities (although research has not yet identified specific personality factors associated with peer relationship development). Peers who worked in close physical proximity (e.g., had desks, offices, or work stations near each other) or who worked on projects together were also more likely to become friends. Finally, consistent with the research discussed in the preceding paragraphs, Sias and Cahill (1998) also found that work-related problems, such as problems with the supervisor or other peers, often propelled peer relationships toward closer levels.

As Sias and Cahill (1998) noted, proximity and shared tasks provided the coworkers opportunities for interaction. Perceptions of similarity and liking provided the coworkers with motivation to interact with one another. And work-related problems created stress and uncertainty for employees for which they sought support via interaction with peers. As the peers interacted, their communication changed. Specifically, as their relationship developed, communication among peers became broader, more likely to address nonwork topics,

be more intimate, and be less cautious. The changes in communication effectively changed the relationship.

In an interesting study that examined peer relationships through a critical lens, Ashcraft (2000) examined relationships in a “feminist” organization—that is, an organization comprised primarily of female employees with an explicit commitment to “feminine” ways of organizing values such as collaboration and emphasizing interpersonal relationships, in contrast to bureaucratic and more masculine approaches such as rationality and the bifurcation of work and personal relationships. The study examined how the culture of the organization strongly encouraged the formation of close personal relationships among employees. However, a variety of consequences associated with those relationships (e.g., politics, competition, favoritism) resulted in the organization embracing a more bureaucratic approach that explicitly banned friendships and romantic relationships among staff members. This study highlighted the ways peer relationships both influence, and are influenced by, the organizational culture.

In addition to the relational and contextual factors discussed above, a number of individual characteristics are associated with peer relationship development, including gender, race, physical ability, and employment status. Odden and Sias (1997) found that women tend to have higher proportions of collegial peer relationships than do men. In contrast, men appear more likely to have higher proportions of information peer relationships than do women (Fritz, 1997; Odden & Sias, 1997). Similarly, in their study of work-related stress and social support, Cahill and Sias (1997) found that women were more likely to talk to their peer coworkers about work-related problems than were men, and that women thought talking with peers about these problems was more important than did men. Moreover, Fritz (1997) found that women and men differed with respect to peer relationship functions. Women rated socioemotional functions such as emotional support as more important than did men who, in contrast, rated engaging in outside activities as more important than socioemotional functions. Taken together, these studies suggest women and men approach workplace relationships with different orientations and, consequently, form different types of relationships with their peers.

A more recent study indicates the complexity of links between biological sex and peer relationship development. Sias, Smith, and Avdeyeva (2003) examined links between sex and *sex composition* (i.e., same-sex versus different-sex dyads) and peer friendship development. Results indicated that men and women did not differ significantly with respect to the reasons their peer relationships grew closer (e.g., information to collegial and special peers). However, the sex composition of the dyad did distinguish respondents' relational trajectories. Specifically, same-sex peer relationships were more likely to result from factors outside the organizational context such as important events in the partners' personal lives and socializing outside the workplace. Cross-sex

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relationships, in contrast, were more likely to result from workplace factors such as working together on projects and physical proximity. Thus, while same-sex friendships extend beyond the organizational boundary, cross-sex friendships tend to exist primarily within the workplace context.

At an even broader level, Ely (1994) examined how women's peer relationships were associated not with the individual's sex, nor with the sex composition of the dyad, but with the sex composition of the organization itself. Their results indicated that women in male-dominated companies were more likely to perceive their relationships with female peers as competitive, while women in sex-integrated companies (e.g., greater numbers of women in managerial positions) were more likely to perceive their relationships with female peers as supportive. This study and the Sias et al. (2003) study indicate that links between gender/sex and peer relationships are more complex than simply male/female differences in relationship orientation and development. Dyadic and organizational factors appear to be important components in these developmental processes.

Relatedly, Teboul, and Cole (2005) developed an evolutionary psychological model of workplace relationship development. This model suggests that humans' natural tendencies toward similar others, along with their needs and instincts for survival, adjustment, and adaptation, lead them to develop relationships with "high-preference partners" or HPPs. Characteristics of HPPs include similarity as well as placement and integration in prestigious hierarchies. Thus, individuals are motivated to develop closer relationships with people like themselves and who the individual perceives are well placed in prestigious and important social networks.

Outcomes and Consequences of Peer Relationships

The nature and quality of peer relationships is consequential for the relationship partners as well as the organization in which the relationship is embedded. Individual outcomes include indicators of employee adjustment such as satisfaction, commitment, and stress. Organizational outcomes include employee performance, citizenship, and turnover.

EMPLOYEE ADJUSTMENT

Peer relationships are linked to employee adjustment in a number of ways. Bottger and Chew (1986) found that the more satisfied employees were with their peer relationships, the more motivated they were and the more satisfied they were with their professional development and growth. Similarly, Sias (2005) found that employees' perceptions of the quality of their peer relationships were positively associated with employee job satisfaction and commitment.

Kirsch (2000) also found that positive relationships were associated with employee satisfaction and self-esteem.

Interestingly, just as peer relationships are helpful in coping with stress, these relationships can also be a *source* of stress. Such stress results from problems that emerge from the peer dyad itself, not from sources external to the dyad such as the task or workplace environment. Waldron (2000) identified several ways in which workplace relationships create rather than relieve stress, including tensions related to balancing public and private issues at work, “emotional buzzing” or the ways in which emotions regarding organizational problems and issues spread to employees via relational communication, and the conflicting loyalties individuals experience as they attempt to balance multiple peer relationships.

Fritz (2002) identified eight “troublesome” types of peers, all of whom were perceived by study participants to be unpleasant and create stress for the participant. These troublesome peers include peers who focus excessively on their personal problems to the point that their talk about those problems distracts from their work (the “soap opera star”). The “adolescent” is a demanding, controlling, self-promoting, and unprofessional peer who, in Fritz’s words is “the prototype of an employee who has not reached professional maturity as a functioning member of an organization and whose focus is on the security and comfort of the self rather than on the community” (p. 427). Similar to the adolescent is the “self-protector” whose primary concern is his or her own advancement and self-interests. The “bully,” the “rebellious playgirl or playboy,” and the “abrasive, incompetent harasser” are all types of workplace bullies who cause a great deal of stress for employees. The “bully” is controlling and rebellious. This peer is also a type of “hustler” who gets other peers to do the bully’s work. The “playgirl/boy” gives peers unwanted attention that is considered sexually harassing. Similarly, the “abrasive, incompetent harasser” is a peer who fears for his or her own job, sexually harasses others, and is perceived by peers as incompetent, unprofessional, distracting, and bossy (Fritz, 2002, p. 427). All of these types of peers contribute to a difficult, unpleasant, and stressful work environment. Thus, as mentioned earlier, while peer relationships are crucial mechanisms for coping with stress, they can often be the source of stress.

Related research on “social undermining” also indicates peer relationships can be a source of stress. Social undermining refers to “behavior intended to hinder, over time, a worker’s ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation” (Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006). Such behaviors include putdowns, insults, belittling, shunning and silent treatment, refusing to help the employee, talking behind the employee’s back, and similar acts. Duffy et al. (2006) found employees who suffered such undermining behavior were more likely to suffer depression, lower job satisfaction, and higher intent to quit.

Research also indicates that peer relationships are associated with behavioral outcomes. Many studies suggest peer relationships impact employee turnover. Scott, Connaughton, Diaz-Saenz, and Maguire (1999) found peer relationship strength (assessed with measures of peer communication) was negatively associated with employee turnover. Similarly, Sias and Cahill (1998) found that employees with close peer relationships often chose to remain in highly dysfunctional work environments because they did not want to leave their coworkers. These two studies suggest that high-quality peer relationships are effective employee retention mechanisms, regardless of whether staying in the job is the best thing for the employee. In contrast, Cox (1999) found that peers also encourage one another to quit their jobs in a number of antisocial (e.g., berating peers, criticizing their work) and prosocial (e.g., informing them of better job opportunities, assisting peers with job transitions) ways.

In sum, research demonstrates that peer relationships are associated with employee attitudes, experiences, and behavior. The relationships an employee has with his or her peers can make organizations pleasant or miserable, and can “tie” that employee to the organization, whether staying in the same job is good for the employee or not.

Theoretical Perspectives on Peer Relationships

Despite the fact that most workplace relationships are peer relationships, relatively little research has focused on these important entities. Likely due to the hierarchical nature of contemporary organizations, scholarship has instead centered on supervisor–subordinate relationships. Those who have examined peer relationships have made important contributions to our understanding of peer relationships. Extant research provides insights into the types of relationships employees form with their peers (e.g., Fritz, 2002; Kram & Isabella, 1985) and the primary functions of peer relationships such as mentoring (e.g., Kram & Isabella, 1985), information exchange (e.g., V. D. Miller & Jablin, 1991), power and influence (e.g., Kunda, 1992), and social support (e.g., Persoff & Siegel, 1998). We have also developed a useful understanding of how and why peer relationships develop in particular ways (e.g., Sias & Cahill, 1998) and the consequences and outcomes associated with engaging in various types of peer relationships (e.g., Bottger & Chew, 1986).

Consideration of existing peer relationship research from the theoretical perspectives outlined in Chapter 1 reveals that, similar to supervisor–subordinate relationship research, peer relationship research is grounded largely in post-positivism. Consideration and examination of peer relationships from other perspectives would provide a much richer and more multifaceted understanding, as seen below. Table 3.2 summarizes these theoretical perspectives and an agenda for future research.

Table 3.2 Research Agenda for Peer Relationships

	<i>Postpositivism</i>	<i>Social Construction</i>	<i>Critical Theory</i>	<i>Structuration Theory</i>
Conceptualization of organizations	Real entities that exist beyond human perception "Contain" individuals Indicated by attitudes, behavior	Socially constructed Constituted in social practices Dynamic	Socially constructed Constituted in social practices Dynamic Systems of power, domination, and control	Socially constructed Constituted in social practices Dynamic Patterned social practices of organizational members across social systems
Conceptualization of communication	Occurs "inside" the relationship Indicates nature and status of the relationship	Constitutes social reality Constitutes relationships; as communication changes, so does the relationship	Constitutes social reality Constitutes relationships Essentializes and reifies organizational "realities" and relationships	Constitutes society and social systems Enables, produces, and reproduces structure Enabled and constrained by structure
Conceptualization of relationships	Real entities that exist beyond human perception "Contain" individuals Indicated by attitudes, communication behavior Predictive of outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, productivity, commitment) Influenced by physical environment	Socially constructed Exist in interaction Observable in interaction	Socially constructed Sites of power, domination, marginalization Sites of hegemonic, unobtrusive control	Socially constructed Constrained and enabled by structure

(Continued)

Table 3.2 (Continued)

	<i>Postpositivism</i>	<i>Social Construction</i>	<i>Critical Theory</i>	<i>Structuration Theory</i>
Research goals	Measuring indicators of relationship quality and status Predicting outcomes of relationships	Understanding social construction process Understanding relationship development dynamics	Understanding social construction of power, marginalization, reification, consent, domination, universalism of managerial interests and rationality	Understanding production, reproduction, and institutionalization of relationships
Sample research topics/questions		How do peers socially construct relationships over time? How do peers socially construct the relationships of other employees? How do peers socially construct "performance"? How do peers socially construct social support? What are the characteristics of effective and ineffective social support communication?	How do peer relationships become "reified"? How do peer relationships contribute to employee consent to concervative control? How do "victims" contribute/consent to peer "bullies"? How is workplace bullying socially constructed? How do peer relationships contribute to managerial concerns and interests?	What structures guide peer relationships? What structures guide information exchange, mentoring, and social support among peers? What structures constrain/enable same-sex and mixed-sex supervisor-subordinate relationships? What structures constrain/enable gendered communication in peer relationships?

<i>Postpositivism</i>	<i>Social Construction</i>	<i>Critical Theory</i>	<i>Structuration Theory</i>
Sample research topics/questions (continued)	<p>How do peers in cross-sex dyads socially construct boundaries between personal and work spheres?</p> <p>How do peers perform gender in the context of peer relationships?</p>		<p>How do employees become knowledgeable about peer relationships structures?</p> <p>What peer relationship structures span time and social context?</p> <p>How do peer relationship structures become institutionalized across time and space?</p> <p>How do current institutionalized peer relationship structures compare to those of the past?</p> <p>How do the media contribute to the institutionalization of peer relationship structures?</p>

POSTPOSITIVIST PERSPECTIVE

Similar to research on other types of workplace relationships, peer relationship research is grounded largely in postpositivism, typically conceptualizing employees as separate from the organization and as physical objects who can be observed and who occupy and operate in the physical world (e.g., the organizational “container”). Postpositivists assume reality exists outside our direct perceptions, and tend to examine observable indicators of reality such as self-report assessments, observations of communication, and the like (Corman, 2005). As seen in the above summary of extant literature, the vast majority of peer relationship research relies on self-report survey data to test hypotheses and examine research questions. The data provide information about employee perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported behavior (e.g., peer relationship quality, job satisfaction, and performance), which, in turn, “indicate” the “reality” of the relationship.

Similar to research on supervisor–subordinate relationships, peer relationship studies also often explicitly conceptualize employees as physical objects and examine how the individuals’ physical characteristics impact their relationships. This is particularly notable in studies of “gender” and peer relationships in which gender is treated as an immutable physical characteristic by operationalizing gender as biological sex. Several of the studies reviewed indicate that being a man or a woman, or being of the same or different sex as your relationship partner, has important implications for the quality of the relationship and the outcomes you may or may not garner. These studies, grounded in the naturalist principle, conceptualize individuals as physical objects that impact, and are impacted by, the physical context in which they operate. The naturalist principle is also illustrated in the many studies that rely on cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal, data to obtain an assessment or “snapshot” of the relationship at that single point in time. This method, at least implicitly, conceptualizes relationships as static and unchanging, consistent with the postpositivist notion of a stable, immutable reality. While such research provides useful insights into a number of important issues, it prevents thinking about and studying peer relationship dynamics and change.

In sum, while peer relationship research has yielded an important and useful body of knowledge and understanding of these relationships and their role in organizational processes, the literature is grounded primarily in a postpositivist perspective, and consequently, our understanding is constrained by the assumptions of that perspective. The remainder of this chapter discusses alternative conceptualizations and approaches to peer relationships that could guide innovative research that will enrich our understanding of these important entities.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION PERSPECTIVE

As summarized in Table 3.2, the social construction perspective conceptualizes organizations and relationships in a number of ways that contrast with postpositivism, and these unique conceptualizations and goals suggest a number of important topics for future research in the area of peer relationships. For example, social construction research would provide important insights into how peers socially construct not only their own relationships, but other organizational “realities.” Using the joint conversation reconstruction (JCR) method (Sias & Odden, 1996), Sias (1996) examined how peer coworkers socially constructed “differential treatment” and perceptions of fairness in their workgroups. Using this method, the researchers had dyads or small groups of coworkers reconstruct past conversations they held with one another regarding differential treatment. Analysis of these conversations revealed that employees typically constructed these issues as being the fault of their peers, not the supervisor, and these perceptions had important consequences for their peer relationships. Studies using similar methods could obtain knowledge regarding a host of other issues, such as how employees socially construct the relationships of other employees in their workgroup. Research could also reveal how employees construct the performance of other employees, and themselves, which would have important implications for formal evaluations and the potential for promotion and career advancement. During times of change and uncertainty (e.g., a merger or layoffs), social construction research would be useful in understanding how employees construct those realities in their conversations with one another, which in turn impacts attitudes and behavior such as absenteeism and turnover. Similarly, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) found that coworkers often discuss the workplace “bully” with one another as a form of resistance. Social construction research could provide important insights into the communicative nature of bullying, addressing questions such as how people interact in ways that bring bullying relationships into being, how employees communicatively make sense of bullies and victims, and the communicative strategies employees use to effectively deal with bullying.

Much research indicates that peer relationships are important sites of social support. However, we have little understanding of what social support “sounds like.” Nor do we have an understanding of the communicative nature of effective support and ineffective support. Many of my own studies (e.g., Odden & Sias, 1997; Sias, 1996; Sias & Jablin, 1995) indicate that peers often turn to one another for support when dealing with a problematic work environment; however, the results of that support vary greatly. Sometimes such support results in employees quitting their jobs, while other times, the relationships forged via such interaction essentially “chain” employees to the very

work environments they should escape. Examination of social support conversations would provide rich insights into why and how social support functions differently across situations and dyads.

Finally, as noted above, many studies indicate that gender/biological sex is associated with peer relationships in a number of ways. That research is limited in that it equates gender with biological sex, ignoring the socially constructed nature of gender and gender-specific roles. Our understanding of the links between gender and peer relationships would be greatly enriched by research grounded in social construction theory. Such studies could, for example, illuminate the ways peers in cross-sex relationships socially construct the “boundary” between work and personal spheres noted by Sias and Cahill (1998) and how that boundary may, or may not, limit the complexity of those relationships and the outcomes, negative or positive, of those relationships.

In sum, examination of peer relationships from a social construction perspective would guide scholars toward the study of a variety of peer relationship dynamics that have been largely overlooked to date. Critical theory, grounded in large part in social construction concepts, would provide further important insights. This is discussed in the following section.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Table 3.2 summarizes the ways critical theory conceptualizes workplace relationships as socially constructed sites of power and domination. Despite the fact that peers are equal with respect to *formal* authority, power, influence, and control are nonetheless important dynamics in peer relationships, making these relationships an important area for critical research. As in my discussion of supervisor–subordinate relationships (Chapter 2), I organize the application of critical theory to peer relationship research by referencing three of the themes of critical theory explained in Chapter 1—reification, consent, and universalization of managerial interests.

The process of reification refers to the ways in which socially constructed phenomena become naturalized and unquestioned. Critical research could examine reification with respect to peer relationships by examining how such relationships themselves become reified via the partners’ everyday interaction. Such studies could, for example, examine the ways in which Fritz’s (2002) various types of “troublesome peers” become reified—how does peer conversation consistently reproduce the “harasser,” and how does such interaction prevent employees from considering that peer in different ways, that is, if one is “typecast” as a certain type of peer, to what extent, and via what processes, is that typecast unchangeable? Revealing the socially constructed nature of these

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“stereotypes” would be useful in liberating and transforming employees, in this case, liberating both the harassed employee and the harasser who may feel trapped by the bully identity and unable to imagine change.

Critical studies could examine a number of other issues such as the extent to which individuals perceive their relationships as static and unchangeable. To what extent, and in what ways, do employees with primarily information peer relationships perceive and reinforce those relationships as immutable, thus reinforcing their isolated role in the social network of the organization? Examining peer interaction, along with interview data of their perceptions, would provide insights into their understanding of the nature of their relationships, and the extent to which those understandings are considered to be “real” and “natural” and, therefore, permanent.

Related is the critical concern with consent. Concertive control is effective because employees work in *concert* with one another to exert control and discipline. By necessity, then, employees consent to concertive control by their willingness to engage in the processes described by Barker (1993) and others. Those studies reveal concertive control is enabled by communicative and discursive practices that encourage employees’ consent to discipline and power. Critical scholars could examine a variety of other peer relationship issues through the lens of consent. For example, scholars have not studied the extent to which employees co-construct problematic relationships with their peers. For example, while scholars have identified characteristics of the workplace “bully” (Seigne, Coyne, Randall, & Parker, 2007), and of the bully’s victim (Salin, 2003), no research in this area has examined bullying from a dyadic or relational perspective. Individual-centered approaches assume, either implicitly or explicitly, that a bully is a bully across contexts, and across relationships. Every bully requires a victim, however. Critical research could examine the dyadic dimensions and dynamics of the bully–victim *relationship* by addressing issues such as how bully and victim socially construct their problematic relationship, how bully and victim co-construct that relationship, and the communicative practices by which the victim consents and participates in his or her own victimization. Similar to the reification studies discussed above, interview and interaction data would lend insights into the extent to which employees are unaware, or perhaps aware, of their consent to bullying and other problematic and dysfunctional peer relationships.

Another theme of critical research that applies to workplace relationships is the managerial bias, or the notion that what’s good for the organization/management is good for employees. Similar to supervisor–subordinate research (see Chapter 2 of this volume), much research has examined the “outcomes” of peer relationships, and the vast majority of those outcomes represent

managerial concerns such as turnover, performance, and productivity. Even in the studies of employee adjustment, in which the concern is ostensibly with the employee, the assumption is that employee satisfaction, morale, and commitment ultimately benefit the organization. Critical scholars should question these goals and our understanding of the consequences of peer relationships. For example, while the ability of close peer relationships to “chain” employees to dysfunctional work environments may help organizations prevent turnover, it is likely very harmful to the employee. Critical research that privileges the individual over the organization would be very useful in “unpacking” these problematic dynamics.

STRUCTURATION PERSPECTIVE

Grounded in both social construction and critical theory, structuration theory conceptualizes society, and organizations, as constituted in human practices. In particular, structuration theory focuses on the processes by which social structures and practices are produced and reproduced via human action and, in the process, become embedded and function below the level of consciousness (i.e., reified). Studies of peer relationships guided by structuration theory would provide important and interesting insights to the current body of literature.

Considering the duality of structure as it is enacted in peer workplace relationships suggests a variety of interesting avenues for research. For example, scholars could examine how peers produce and reproduce the structures that simultaneously enable and constrain their interaction. New employee socialization research indicates that new employees enter the organization with a variety of “structures” that both enable and constrain their interaction with veteran employees. Such structures both inhibit (via perceptions of social costs) and encourage information seeking on the part of the newcomer. A structuration study could examine how new and veteran employees are “knowledgeable” about the structures that guide information seeking communication. Studies grounded in structuration theory would enrich our understanding of these processes by examining the structures expressed via conversations among new hires and veteran peers.

Structuration theory conceptualization of workplace relationships as systems or patterns of social relations that stretch across time and space could guide an interesting examination of the various peer relationship “types” reviewed above. Such a study would address issues such as identifying the prototypical qualities of information, collegial, and special peers and how these typical relationships, in the form of structures, are maintained and reproduced in peer communication.

Using the concept of time–space distancing, structuration research could also investigate the extent to which these structures are transported across time and context, that is, the extent to which peer relationship types span organizations. Structuration research could also address issues such as how peer relationship structures today compare to those in the past and how and why peer relationship structures changed over time. A number of types of data could be obtained to answer such a question. Interviews could obtain data from the peers regarding what they perceive as appropriate interaction at the information, collegial, and special levels stranger phase, why such interaction is appropriate, where they learned the prototype (e.g., from prior experience, from educational sources, from the media, etc.), to what extent peer relationship structures (e.g., prototypes) are transferable or context-bound, what structures guide peer interaction in different social contexts (e.g., different countries, industries, occupations, hierarchical levels), and how those structures are created, maintained, and transformed. Data addressing such questions could be obtained from a variety of sources including interviews, observation, and texts such as textbooks, popular press books, television, film, and novels.

Conclusion

Peer relationships are the most plentiful, yet also among the most understudied workplace relationships. These relationships perform many important functions including mentoring, information exchange, social support, and control and influence. Like research on other types of workplace relationships, our understanding of peer dynamics in organizations is limited by reliance on a single theoretical lens. Examination of peer relationships from social construction, critical, and structuration perspectives will provide insights into important issues such as how peers socially construct their relationships, their performance, and other organizational “realities,” how employees contribute to the reification of dysfunctional peer relationships, how peer relationship structures transcend time and context, and a variety of other exciting, interesting, and useful elements of peer relationship dynamics. Understanding peer relationships from multiple perspectives can also inform practice by encouraging practitioners to consider specific situations and problems in broader, richer, and more complex ways. Such consideration will cause practitioners to ask questions about the situation they may not otherwise consider and suggest alternative solutions. Toward that end, the following “Practicing Theory” case illustrates the practical benefits of multiple theoretical perspectives.

PRACTICING THEORY

Strata Tech

Josh joined Strata Tech 6 months ago as a software designer. Strata Tech is a leading software manufacturer, specializing in inventory control software programs. Josh, a recent graduate from Boston College, was very excited to begin his first "real job" and looked forward to getting to know his coworkers—all young, bright "techies." His workgroup is comprised of five software designers, all of whom report to Sara, the department supervisor.

In general, Josh likes his coworkers. As the new person, they were all helpful when he first started at Strata. They helped him learn the ropes of the organization, understand the task assignment and completion processes, and showed him how to deal with occasional (and somewhat ironic) software glitches.

~~He's~~ had trouble developing relationships with his colleagues however. One reason has to do with the pressure of the job and the business overall. All of the designers experience heavy workloads and work under serious and challenging (some might say unrealistic) deadlines. Josh typically finds himself working 10–12 hours per day and eating lunch at his desk. The idea of having a "break" is laughable. On the one hand, Josh likes the excitement, adrenaline rush, and even the anxiety associated with the job. He finds every day and every project a challenge and has learned a lot in a just a few months—a lot of things he didn't learn in college. And although he rarely sees his supervisor, Sara has given Josh positive feedback about his work performance. On the other hand, Josh realizes he really doesn't know his colleagues very well. In fact, the other day, he realized that he spoke to only two of his coworkers the entire day, and that was only to briefly ask about a memo regarding health benefits that he had trouble understanding.

Josh is becoming concerned with the fact that he actually knows very little about his coworkers and about their projects. He doesn't know at any given time what anyone else is working on, how their project might, or might not, relate to his, or how their performance compares to his own. He knows some basic information about their personal lives—Ashley is a newlywed and looks to be about Josh's age; Kevin is perhaps 5 or 6 years older than Josh, married, and has two kids in elementary school; he thinks Mike and Lorie are both single. But beyond that, they are a bit of a mystery.

Andrew is troubling to Josh, but in a different way. Andrew started working at Strata around the same time as Josh. They both appear to have a lot in common—around the same age, recent college graduates, single, intelligent, and hard working. At the beginning, Josh liked Andrew and, given all they had in common, he assumed he and Andrew would become good friends. That friendship never developed, however.

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Since both began working at Strata, Andrew has asked Josh a lot of questions about his work progress, his work experience, his productivity, and how many hours he works each day. Josh senses these questions are not friendly nor are they intended to build a relationship—typically Andrew enters Josh’s office unannounced, asks the questions, and then leaves. And Andrew never talks with Josh about nonwork topics.

The other day Andrew approached Josh when he was getting a cup of coffee in the breakroom. He asked Josh some questions about how he was organizing material for a presentation on a new software design that Josh was due to provide in a couple of weeks. Josh obliged, describing to Andrew the format of his presentation, the organizing system he planned to use, and so on. Andrew seemed impressed by Josh’s plan, and Josh was pleased with himself and motivated to finish the presentation. The next week, however, he overheard his supervisor, Sara, praising Andrew for his “fantastic presentation.” Apparently, Andrew had presented his latest project to management that morning. As Josh listened to Sara singing Andrew’s praises, he realized that Andrew had used the exact format and organization that Josh planned to use for his presentation the very next week! Josh couldn’t believe it when later that day, Andrew came by with a big smile on his face and asked Josh if he wanted to go out for a drink after work, saying, “I’ve had a great day; wanna go celebrate?” Josh just glared at Andrew and said, “No, I’m busy tonight.”

Josh is extremely frustrated and angry by what happened. And he doesn’t know who to talk to, and what to do. He’s concerned that if he tells Sara, he’ll appear self-serving or, even worse, she may think he is trying to steal Andrew’s ideas. He doesn’t know his other coworkers well enough to know who he can trust with this information or who might actually be able to help him. So far, all he’s done is stop talking to Andrew, which has done little to improve his mood or the situation.

Discussion Questions

1. What factors have impacted Josh’s relationships with his coworkers? Why doesn’t he know much about them? Why does it matter? Which functions of coworker relationships are effective in Josh’s department? Which are not?
2. This case presents Josh’s side of the story; in other words, the “reality” that Josh perceives. What might Andrew have to say about this situation? What factors might suggest he perceives a different reality?
3. Consider this case from a critical perspective—how are management and employee interests attended to at Strata? How do these biases impact the individual employee’s experiences? How do the employees consent to management interests? How might they overcome these biases?

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4. Consider this case from the four theoretical perspectives discussed throughout this book. How would you conceptualize Josh's relationships with his colleagues and supervisor from each perspective? What advice would you give Josh for dealing with this situation, guided by the different perspectives?
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