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Distancing from Problematic Coworkers

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Distancing from Problematic Coworkers

Abstract

Troublesome relationships are a universal aspect of human social interaction (Levitt, Silver, & Franco, 1996). Perhaps nowhere besides the family are problematic relationships so commonplace as in the workplace. Although relationship research primarily focuses on positive relations and thorny problems that occur even in the best of relationships, virtually everyone who has worked in an organization can relate stories of problematic relationships. The challenges these relationships pose resonate with people's deepest feelings and most significant experiences at work. Problematic work relationships are often as memorable as they are challenging. Workplace relations are largely nonvoluntary relationships. They are created when people with diverse backgrounds, reasons for working in a company, different work styles, values, and incompatible personal and career goals must all work with each other. Such an environment should create conditions where personal differences and conflicts are commonplace. If negative relationships had little impact on workers, they would not be of much concern to researchers despite their prevalence. Unfortunately, these relationships have significant negative effects on those who experience them. Fritz and Omdahl (1998) found that the greater the proportion of negative peers people have at work, the greater their workplace cynicism and the lesser their job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Furthermore, problematic relationships can have detrimental effects on people's well-being. ... If people are to be successful at work and find their jobs satisfying, they must learn how to deal with these difficult relationships.

One of the most important ways people cope with negative relationships is by distancing themselves from the problematic partner (Hess, 2002a). In this chapter, I provide a detailed review of what distance is, the role it plays in problematic workplace relationships, how the organizational setting may impact people's use of distancing tactics, and why people use distance in such relationships. A careful reading of the literature suggests that underlying the act of maintaining relationships with problematic coworkers is a more general process of using affiliation (closeness and distance) to regulate arousal in personal relationships. The end of the chapter delineates this model and discusses its implications for problematic relationships in the workplace.

Disciplines

Communication | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Other Communication

Comments

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Troublesome relationships are a universal aspect of human social interaction (Levitt, Silver, & Franco, 1996). Perhaps nowhere besides the family are problematic relationships so commonplace as in the workplace. Although relationship research primarily focuses on positive relations and thorny problems that occur even in the best of relationships, virtually everyone who has worked in an organization can relate stories of problematic relationships. In class, students usually talk more enthusiastically about these difficult workplace relations than about positive and easier to manage relationships. The challenges these relationships pose resonate with people's deepest feelings and most significant experiences at work. Problematic work relationships are often as memorable as they are challenging.

Workplace relations are largely nonvoluntary relationships. They are created when people with diverse backgrounds, reasons for working in a company, different work styles, values, and incompatible personal and career goals must all work with each other. Such an environment should create conditions where personal differences and conflicts are commonplace. If negative relationships had little impact on workers, they would not be of much concern to researchers despite their prevalence. Unfortunately, these relationships have significant negative effects on those who experience them. Fritz and Omdahl (1998) found that the greater the proportion of negative peers people have at work, the greater their workplace cynicism and the lesser their job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Furthermore, problematic relationships can have detrimental effects on people's well-being. In Kinney's (1998) study of graduate students as well as the study presented in the preceding chapter, respondents who experienced negative interactions with their advisors reported that they experienced more aches and pains, anxiety, depression, and trouble in concentrating than did those who reported no such negative experiences.

If people are to be successful at work and find their jobs satisfying, they must learn how to deal with these difficult

relationships. One of the most important ways people cope with negative relationships is by distancing themselves from the problematic partner (Hess, 2002a). In this chapter I provide a detailed review of what distance is, the role it plays in problematic workplace relationships, how the organizational setting may impact people's use of distancing tactics, and why people use distance in such relationships. A careful reading of the literature suggests that underlying the act of maintaining relationships with problematic coworkers is a more general process of using affiliation (closeness and distance) to regulate arousal in personal relationships. The end of the chapter delineates this model and discusses its implications for problematic relationships in the workplace.

Distance in Problematic Workplace Relationships

Nonvoluntary Relationships

In the workplace, problematic relationships are almost always nonvoluntary relationships. The term "nonvoluntary relationship" is normally used to describe relationships that people wish they did not have and would discontinue if given the opportunity. Typical of this approach was Thibaut and Kelley's (1986) classic definition. They described a nonvoluntary relationship as "a relationship in which the person is forced to stay even though he [or she] would prefer not to" (p. 169). Using their social exchange theory, they defined the nonvoluntary relationship in terms of comparison level (CL, what a person believes he or she is entitled to get out of a relationship) and outcomes (O, what costs and rewards a person is actually getting out of a relationship). Thibaut and Kelley formulated a nonvoluntary relationship as a relationship in which $CL > O$.

The prevalence of this definition is based upon its intuitive appeal. Thibaut and Kelley (1986) further noted, "[if] a person would... voluntarily choose the very relationship to which he [or she] is constrained, it does not seem reasonable to describe it as nonvoluntary" (pp. 169-170). Yet, it is reasonable to describe such a relationship as nonvoluntary. That definition confounds choice and satisfaction. A person who cannot afford a new car retains her present vehicle nonvoluntarily, even if she does like it. And while her positive feelings toward that vehicle make her satisfied, the fact that she cannot replace it may still be relevant to the way she maintains the

automobile. Likewise, a person's happiness in a relationship does not make the relationship voluntary in nature.

A more accurate definition of a nonvoluntary relationship disentangles choice and satisfaction. One such definition states that a nonvoluntary relationship is "a relationship in which the actor believes he or she has no choice but to maintain it, at least at present and in the immediate future" (Hess, 2000, p. 460). In Thibaut and Kelley's (1986) terms, this means that $O > CL_{alt}$ (CL_{alt} , comparison level of alternatives, is the level of costs and rewards that a person would get from any available alternative to that relationship, which can range from a relationship with someone else to no relationship at all).

It is important to note that in this definition perceptions about choice refer to a *reasonable* degree of confinement to a relationship. While a person could leave a job to escape a problematic workplace relationship, other comparable jobs may not be available or might require unacceptable compromises in other facets of that person's life (e.g., relocating a family or losing pension benefits). As long as the alternatives feel sufficiently unacceptable, the relationship is nonvoluntary to that person.

One way to discern reasonable degree of confinement is to consider a person's choices based on factors intrinsic and extrinsic to the relationship. If people feel that factors unrelated to the relationship itself preclude the relationship's dissolution, then the relationship is nonvoluntary (Hess, 2002a). Obviously, most germane to this discussion is the factor of working together in an organization. Unless a person feels he or she could easily get another job and is willing to do so, any relationship made necessary by a person's job is a nonvoluntary relationship.

Although the majority of nonvoluntary relationships are entirely satisfactory, those relationships that are unsatisfactory are the ones that become problematic workplace relationships. Because of their nonvoluntary nature, workers must find ways to deal with the other person. Success in the workplace requires that people not let bad relationships prevent them from accomplishing their goals (Poitras, Bowen, & Byrne, 2003). Thus, the challenge for workers is how to keep these relationships from being obstructive. With regard to interpersonal communication with problematic coworkers, one of the most common ways people cope is by distancing themselves from the other person.

The Nature of Distance

Definition of distance. The term "distance" has been used many different ways throughout the literature. For example, it has been used in some cases to refer to physical space between people (e.g., Hall, 1959) and in other cases to refer to perceptual judgments of affiliation (e.g., Jacobson, 1989; Johnson et al., 2004). Some literature uses the term to refer to both physical and perceptual qualities (e.g., Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Furthermore, among the articles which use distance to refer to perceptions of affiliation, the referents have varied from relational partners (e.g., Salzman & Grasha, 1991; Pistole, 1994) to a quality of the organization or even the organization itself (e.g., Fink & Chen, 1995). Micholt (1992) used "psychological distance" to refer not only to perceived affiliation, but also to "clarity in the relationship" between parties. Park (1924) and Bogardus (1925) included "degrees of understanding" as part of their definition of distance. Goffman (1961) used the term "role distance" to refer to a person's ability to separate her- or himself from a social role. Somewhat similarly, Delsol and Margolin (2004) used psychological distance in the context of adults who grew up in violent families to describe the ability of some people to be more disengaged from their parents and from the conflict they had, so that they do not perpetuate that cycle in their own families.

The conceptual confusion resulting from the inconsistency in definition makes it difficult to acquire a coherent picture of what distance is and what role it plays in relational communication. Because scholars have studied different, but often overlapping, constructs using the same term, readers must go beyond the label and look at what specific construct was studied and what the study found. The commonality shared by most of these definitions is the idea of distance being a sense of separation from someone, or a rift in the relational ties that bind people together. Thus, the definition of distance I use in this chapter is "a feeling of separation from another" (Hess, 2002b, p. 664). Distance is a perceptual judgment, which is "a subjective measure, of sociometric origin, as experienced by each person" (Micholt, 1992, p. 228). Although distance is created by a specific set of interactive behaviors, it is how people interpret these actions that creates the perception of distance.

Aside from how this definition seems to encompass the most common uses of the term, the definition also fits well with prevalent

definitions of closeness (e.g., Kelley et al., 1983). The conceptual fit with closeness is important, because closeness and distance are both part of the same relationship quality, affiliation. The inherent link between closeness and distance are reflected in Helgeson, Shaver, and Dyer's (1987) observation that "distance, in contrast with obliviousness, arises from closeness or expected closeness and requires some prior connection that is noticeably strained" (p. 199). Kelley et al. (1983) defined closeness as resulting from relational ties that are strong, diverse, and frequent. In like manner, distance results from relational ties that are weak, limited in scope, and infrequent in occurrence (Hess, 2003).

Distancing strategies: Types of distancing behaviors. One way to understand distance better is to examine the ways people distance themselves from others. Several studies have examined these processes. Work by Kreilkamp (1981) and Helgeson et al. (1987) formed the foundation for comprehensive studies done more recently (Hess, 2000, 2002b). The cumulative result of these studies is a complete yet parsimonious typology of distancing strategies people use in personal encounters. Although closeness and distance are opposite ends of the same continuum, they are not simply the absence of one another. Instead, a different set of behaviors seems to cause closeness and distance (Hess, 2002b). Thus, when a person reduces distancing behaviors, that change can move the relationship toward a neutral mid-point, but the relationship will not become "close" until that person enacts closeness-enhancing behaviors.

Distancing can be divided into general strategies that people employ to separate themselves from others, and the specific tactics they use to accomplish their strategies. There are three general strategies available to people who wish to make a relationship more distant (Hess, 2002b):

Avoidance. This strategy entails behaving in ways that prevent an interaction from happening, or if interaction is inevitable, minimizing the amount of contact between the two people. Interactions can be prevented by avoiding contact (such as not being where the other person is) or simply ignoring the other if the two people do end up in the same place. If the two do interact, there are three basic tactics people can use to reduce the amount of interaction: being reserved (not say much); shortening the duration of the interaction (such as by not asking unnecessary questions); and getting others involved with the interaction, thus avoiding one-on-one time.

Disengagement. A second strategy for distancing oneself from others does not entail any reduction in interaction but instead functions by communicating in a less personal way. When using this strategy, people hide some of who they are by not making themselves fully present in the encounter. There are three basic methods that can be used. First, people may hide information about themselves, either by restricting conversation to more superficial topics, or by deceiving others about personal qualities or intentions. Second, people can use a disengaged communication style. This method may involve less immediate verbal and nonverbal messages (decreasing eye contact, standing further away, smiling less, etc.) or paying less attention to the other person (focusing on someone else, or just "zoning out" during conversation). Third, people can be disengaged by interacting less personally. This method might involve withholding social pleasantries that are part of relationship building (e.g., joking with the person or using nicknames), treating the other impersonally, or treating her or him as a lesser person who is merely an object to be tolerated.

Cognitive dissociation. The final strategy involves changes in perception, rather than interactive behaviors. These changes generally involve a negative judgment of the other person and their actions, or just a sense of detachment from that individual. The result of the negative attributions is that the other person cannot be strongly associated with the self because of the difference in personal characteristics between that individual's negative qualities and the actor's own more positively perceived qualities (an explanation for this effect can be found in Heider's (1958) Balance Theory, described later in this chapter). People cognitively dissociate themselves from others by discounting others' messages (that is, interpreting a message in a way to minimize its importance), mentally degrading the other person, or simply feeling a sense of separation, such as by reducing emotional involvement in the relationship.

Behaviors or strategies? One question that naturally arises about affiliation is the degree to which people are consciously strategic in their interactions. Much of the early work on distancing uses language that describes it as a generalized behavior more than as a premeditated strategy. Descriptors for distancing included "processes" (Kreilkamp, 1981), "features" of a distant relationship (Helgeson et al., 1987), and "behaviors" (Hess, 2000).

There are reasons to believe that at least some, if not much, of

people's distancing messages are subconscious responses rather than carefully crafted plans. Given that disclosure and openness involves risk (Altman & Taylor, 1973), it seems plausible that people who were acting strategically might hold back a little more in nonvoluntary relationships than in those relationships they could easily exit. However, one comparison in a study of distancing in different relationships showed that there was no difference in how much people distanced themselves from liked partners based on relational choice (Hess, 2000). It appears that affiliative choices were governed by affect rather than strategy.

Nonetheless, it is also clear that a substantial amount of people's distancing behavior is intentional. Affiliation is a subjective experience that exists only in people's perceptions of the relational messages they or others are sending. Thus, there has to be a conscious component to it, and people's accounts of how they maintain nonvoluntary relationships with disliked partners and their explanations for why they act as they do show a conscious intent to distance themselves (Hess, 2000). In this chapter, I use both terms. The term "behavior" is more inclusive, because it does not address whether or not a person acted with intent. However, the term "strategy" is used whenever it is the term used in literature cited or whenever I want to focus on mindful choices.

Why People Distance Themselves From Problematic Coworkers

If we accept the fact that people distance themselves as much as possible from problematic coworkers, the natural question is why. Research on psychological distance suggests a number of reasons why people distance themselves in workplace relationships. Three reasons that seem most prevalent are reviewed in this section: differences in status; face management; and stress reduction.

Status differences. Salzman and Grasha (1991) studied psychological size (a reflection of a person's status within an organization) and psychological distance, and found that lower and middle level managers saw those above them in the organizational hierarchy to be of greater stature within the company. They also found that managers perceived a degree of distance between themselves and their higher-ups relative to their difference in authority.

What is interesting about their findings was that this perception of distance was not equally reciprocated. The managers who were

lower in the hierarchy saw a greater distance between themselves and their supervisors than the supervisors saw in those same relationships. So, it is clear that people who are lower in organizational rank perceive that power differential as something that inherently decreases closeness between two people. One possible explanation is that the subordinate's lack of authority and the lack of access to some information that superiors have creates anxiety and insecurity that can inhibit the subordinate's ability to feel close to the superior. After all, this uncertainty makes trust difficult, and whenever one person cannot fully trust another, he or she is likely to feel distant. Although this dynamic is not inherent in all negative relationships, it has the potential to problematize any hierarchical relationship in the workplace.

Face management. A second reason why people distance themselves from problematic coworkers has less to do with the target person and more to do with other peers in the workplace. If the person believes that others in the organization also hold a negative opinion of the problematic coworker, then that person may try to avoid close personal ties to prevent "guilt by association." Thus, people may distance themselves from unpopular coworkers not for reasons relating to the relationship with the coworker, but for reasons pertaining to relationships with others in the organization.

The theoretical explanation for this involves a combination of facework (Goffman, 1967) and balance theory (Heider, 1958). Research is clear that people are generally motivated to maintain face with those who are important to them (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Close ties with unpopular members of an organization can hurt both positive face and negative face. Positive face (the desire to be liked and respected) can be damaged because others may interpret an association with someone as endorsement of that person's views, work habits, or other personal qualities. Thus, the negative affect that people hold towards an unpopular coworkers may also transfer to those close to that individual. Heider's balance theory explains why this transfer of judgment may happen. Balance theory explains how people form perceptual units involving the relationship between two people (the person, *p*, and the other, *o*) and some other entity (*x*). That entity can be anything, including attributes of *o*'s personal qualities. Balance theory posits that people are motivated to make their perceptions fit together harmoniously. Because the relationship between *o* and *x* is positive by definition (an individual is assumed to

positively associate with her or his own personality), then the relationship between *p* and *o* determines others' perceptions of *p*'s personality. If *p* has a close relationship with *o*, then the triad can only be balanced by assuming that *p* shares or endorses those same attributes as *o* has. Conversely, if *p* is distant from *o*, then the triangle is better balanced by assuming that *p* does not share *o*'s qualities. Thus, *p*'s distancing can prevent *o*'s unpopularity from extending to *p* as well.

Negative face refers to the desire to have autonomy. It stands to reason that the threat to positive face posed by a close relationship with an unpopular coworker will also threaten a person's negative face. One of the most important sources of power within an organization is the support of others. Bormann (1990) characterized agreement as the "currency of social approval" (p. 141), because people will often agree with others' ideas not so much out of sharing a similar perspective but as a way to support that individual's initiative. Likewise, group members will often disagree with or fail to support a person's ideas as a means of preventing that person from assuming power within the organization. If a person loses positive face, then that person may also find that loss of social approval to be an impediment to accomplishing her or his goals within the organization. Thus, disapproval from others can also result in loss of negative face.

It is certain that people do indeed distance themselves from unpopular coworkers as a way of winning or maintaining the approval of others. Anecdotally, I have seen references to such tactics in accounts that participants in some of my studies have written. However, what is not known is the extent to which this strategy is prevalent or the relationships among the colleagues when it occurs. The desire for approval from others is a powerful form of motivation (Schutz, 1958), and it may be the case that approval from certain others is a more powerful motivator than the approval of others. It is plausible such actions are commonplace, and that the opinions of those who have more status or are better liked engender more of these actions. However, in the absence of empirical data, we can only speculate whether this strategy is the exception or the rule.

Stress reduction. The most common reason why people distance themselves in the workplace is to cope with the stress of a difficult relationship. Interacting with a problematic coworker is a stressful situation, so people need to find ways of reducing the stress to a more

comfortable level. Again, Heider's (1958) balance theory provides an explanation. Balance theory can be applied not only to a triadic relationship of two people and an entity as discussed previously, but also just to the two people. Assuming that problematic coworkers elicit negative feelings from a person, then a close relationship (positive unit formation) matched to negative sentiment produces an unbalanced situation. This imbalance creates stress that people are motivated to reduce. The way people can reduce this stress is by changing the unit-formation to a weaker connection—that is, by distancing themselves from the other person. Evidence from studies of nonvoluntary relationships with disliked partners shows that distancing is a primary means of coping with the stress created by such relationships and it is used nearly universally (Hess, 2000). So, distancing is an active strategy used as a way of reducing the stress caused by working with troublesome coworkers.

Impact of Workplace on Distance in Problematic Relationships

Because the organization is a unique environment, it is likely that some aspects of people's behavior will be different in organizational settings than in other contexts. Thus, scholars must ask what specific impact the workplace has on how people respond to problematic relationships, and how these responses may differ from interaction in non-work environments. The sections that follow address that issue.

Distancing in the workplace versus distancing in social settings. Almost no research has directly compared people's distancing behaviors in the workplace with their distancing behaviors in non-work settings. However, there is one data set that allows such a direct comparison. A secondary analysis of data (Hess, 1996) shows one interesting difference in distance between work and social relationships. In this study, participants ($n = 94$) were asked to respond to questions about two nonvoluntary relationships with disliked partners: one in a work setting and one in a social setting. The order of relationship context was counter-balanced to prevent order effects. One of the questions asked respondents to rate the frequency of 26 distancing behaviors, using a 9-point Likert-type scale. Of those 26 distancing behaviors, there were significant differences in amount of distancing across the contexts in 14 of them.

For 13 distancing behaviors, the reported use was greater in the workplace relationships, while only one behavior was reported as

being used significantly more in social settings. Distancing tactics reported more in workplace relationships than social relations were as follows: acting strictly according the social norms rather than personalizing the interaction, perceiving no association between the self and other, using a less immediate channel, describing self and other as separate, avoiding asking questions, excluding the other from a gathering, ignoring the other when in each other's presence, treating the other impersonally, perceiving the other as less than human, avoiding touch or eye contact, avoiding jokes or intimate conversation, ignoring the other's thoughts or feelings, and using superficial politeness. The only distancing tactic for which respondents reported greater use in social relations was deceiving the partner about personal information.

Finding patterns in the types of distancing behaviors proved more difficult than discerning overall difference in use. In general, the highest *t* values were for tactics that fit into the disengagement strategy, followed by the avoidant tactics, followed by the one cognitive dissociation tactic, but there were many exceptions to this pattern. Furthermore, the one tactic reported more in social settings was also from the disengagement strategy. So, little can be concluded about patterns of specific tactics.

In general, we can conclude that these data showed people using distance as a coping strategy even more in the workplace than they did in non-work relationships. While these data do not indicate why people distanced themselves more or why they relied more on certain tactics than others, the results speak to the importance of examining distance in problematic workplace relationships.

Eliminating non-work interactions. Although many problematic relationships came into existence as negative relations, some problematic relationships were desirable relations at some point in their existence. In fact, it is sometimes the fact that such relationships used to be close that causes them to be problematic later. For example, friendships that have deteriorated or romantic relationships that have been broken off are often problematic *because of* the awkwardness two people feel in encountering their former friend or lover.

In a study of workplace friendships gone awry, Sias et al. (2004) found that when workplace friendships deteriorated, people minimized their time together by eliminating interaction outside the workplace. Although they could not necessarily reduce contact in the

workplace, reducing contact outside of the workplace helped people distance themselves and de-escalate the intensity of the relationship. This change in interaction patterns distances people in two ways. Obviously, the decreased contact is avoidance (strategy one, discussed previously). Furthermore, by redefining the relationship as strictly a task-oriented interaction, the partners were distanced through disengagement (strategy two).

Norms for appropriate behavior. In any profession and in any organization, unwritten norms emerge that govern behaviors in the workplace. Norms are assumptions or expectations held by members of the organization about what behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate (Schein, 1969). In some cases, norms are not entirely clear or strongly enforced, but in other cases, norms can be very strong and powerfully enforced. Wahrman (1972) noted that with some norms, "members of a group...believe that they have a right to demand that other people abide by them" (p. 205). Regardless of how clear or how strong the norms are, they impact the range of behavior choices that an organization's members can choose from.

Clarity of relational definitions. One way in which norms may impact relationships in the workplace is in how clearly relationships are defined. Although workplace relationships exist for the purpose of accomplishing a task, the task and social dimensions of group work are inseparable (Bormann, 1990). Thus, every relationship has a social dimension. In many cases, the social nature of friendships in the workplace is clearly defined, but in some cases there may be more ambiguity as to the exact nature of two people's relationship.

A situation in which this ambiguity has been documented is when workplace friendships deteriorate. Sias et al. (2004) found that when friendships in the workplace deteriorated, people tried to avoid talking about non-work topics. But, in contrast with social relationships where taboo topics might sometimes be negotiated, coworkers simply stopped talking about such topics without explicitly acknowledging the change. In fact, they generally avoided talking about their relationship as well. Sias et al. (2004) found that concerns about the ability to do their job created a "chilling effect" which led to a reduction in the communication, and they concluded that this "chilling effect may be unique to the workplace" (p. 336). The study by Sias et al. (2004) suggests that some relational variables may be left more implicit or ambiguous in work settings than might be the case in relationships emerging in social settings.

Emotion management. Another area in which norms play an important role is the display of emotions in the workplace. Problematic workplace relationships create a range of emotions for those involved, and this leads to the issue of which emotions are appropriate to display and which emotions must be concealed. Because people must decide whether to reveal, mask, or change a felt emotion, emotion management is an important issue people must address in problematic workplace relationships (Hochschild, 1983).

A recent study revealed a variety of display rules that could have bearing on emotion management in problematic work relationships. Kramer and Hess (2002) found that employees are expected to display emotions professionally, in ways that improve situations and help others, and that negative emotions are most often expected to be masked rather than directly expressed. Because these display rules are more restrictive of emotion expression than what people sometimes experience in personal and family relationships (where people may feel more free to show their felt emotions as they experience them), it seems likely that coping with problematic workplace relationships may be more difficult. The results from this study suggests that the ability to effectively use distancing behaviors may be highly important in work settings as a socially skilled method of reducing unpleasant arousal arising in problematic work relationships. Those who are more adept at distancing may find themselves better able to control arousal, and thereby, be more effective in the workplace.

Questions Yet Unanswered

The foregoing review shows that people in problematic workplace relationships use distance as a means of coping with the stress these nonvoluntary relations place on them. Although the research reviewed thusfar offers clues as to why people select strategies and what impact the workplace context has on these relations, the answers are far from definitive.

A close examination suggests that distancing strategies use affiliation (either distance or closeness) as a means of regulating arousal in personal relationships. A closer look at this process of regulating arousal sheds light on questions yet unanswered. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to offering a preliminary sketch of a model which explains distancing in terms of intimacy regulation.

The model proposed is in the initial stages of its development and is designed to offer only a general overview.

The Underlying Process: Distancing as Arousal Regulator

The basic premise of this theory is that distancing is used to regulate a person's arousal in a relationship. The idea of arousal impacting relational behaviors has been explored in many studies, and the model presented in this chapter has much in common with previous arousal models, particularly Cappella and Greene's (1982) and Patterson's (1973) models. It should be noted that the model presented in this chapter is meant to explain people's behavior during the maintenance phase of a personal relationship. Although these same processes may take place during relationship development or dissolution, these stages of the relationship life course may differ in significant ways. Such differences are beyond the scope of my initial overview of this theory.

Existing Equilibrium or Arousal Models

Three models of equilibrium or arousal in personal relationships provide the conceptual foundation for the regulatory theory of affiliation in this chapter. These models are Argyle and Dean's (1965) Equilibrium Model, Patterson's (1976) Arousal Labeling Model, and Cappella and Greene's (1982) Discrepancy-Arousal Model.

Argyle and Dean (1965) were interested in explaining how people use nonverbal cues to maintain equilibrium in intimacy in any given interaction. In particular, Argyle and Dean focused on gaze and physical distance, finding that when people sense too much or too little intimacy in one of those channels, that they compensate with the other. Argyle and Dean's equilibrium model has gained much attention from researchers, and its basic idea is sound. However, Argyle and Dean's model made no attempt to explain people's use of matching responses (to move away from the set equilibrium point to a new level of intimacy), nor did they consider speech or other nonverbal channels such as touch or body movement.

To address these and other limitations, Patterson (1976) proposed an Arousal-Labeling Model. This model introduced arousal as the critical factor in causing people to behave in the way they did. His idea was that both compensation and matching responses were driven by the type of arousal that people experienced from their

relational involvement. He believed that when people detected a change in their partner's intimacy level, that they experienced a noticeable change in their own arousal level. Depending upon what attributions the person made, this arousal might be viewed as either positive or negative. If the arousal elicited a positive emotion, then the people would reciprocate the partner's behaviors to create more intimacy; if the arousal elicited a negative emotion, the person would compensate to offset the change in intimacy.

In response to this model, Cappella and Greene (1982) proposed the Discrepancy-Arousal Model. They were concerned that Patterson's model required too much cognitive load and was not able to account for non-conscious, micro-momentary responses across the age spectrum. In Cappella and Greene's Discrepancy Arousal model, the process begins with an expectation for the other's behavior which arises from norms, preferences, and experiences. Insofar as the other's behavior is consistent with that expectation, there is no arousal. However, when the other violates that expectation, the person experiences a discrepancy. The magnitude of the discrepancy determines the level of arousal, and the arousal level determines affect (positive or negative). Positive affect results in reciprocation of the intimacy of the other, while negative affect engenders compensation for the other's intimacy.

Arousal Regulation Theory of Distancing

Using some of the key principles for the aforementioned theories, I propose a model to explain how people use distancing to manage relationships with difficult others. I offer an overview of the model followed by a discussion of how it differs from prior theories and the implications it has for interactions with problematic others in the workplace.

Perceptions about relationship. As shown in Figure 1, this process has four basic steps. The process begins at the very top when a person, *P*, has a perception about the nature and quality of the relationship with another person, *O*. These perceptions are influenced by at least three factors. First, *P*'s personality traits influence the perception he or she has of the relationship with *O*. Specifically, such qualities as extraversion, self-esteem level, and exchange orientation (e.g., Murstein, Cerreto, & MacDonald, 1977) will affect perceptions of a relationship. Second, the frequency with which two people interact

is likely to influence perceptions about the relationship. For example, if two people rarely see each other, they are likely to perceive a distant and impersonal relationship as appropriate. However, if organizational changes bring them into constant contact, the distance and impersonality may be perceived as unnatural. Third, the nature of the situation will affect relational perceptions. For example, the type of behaviors expected (normed) at that time, in that setting, and the configuration of people in the context in most cases will impact perceptions of the relationship. Greeting another with a hug when they meet at church might be appropriate, but it might be perceived as problematic in the workplace. With the combined influence of personality traits, frequency of interaction, the situation, the person observes the behavior of the other and notes deviations from a satisfactory relationship.

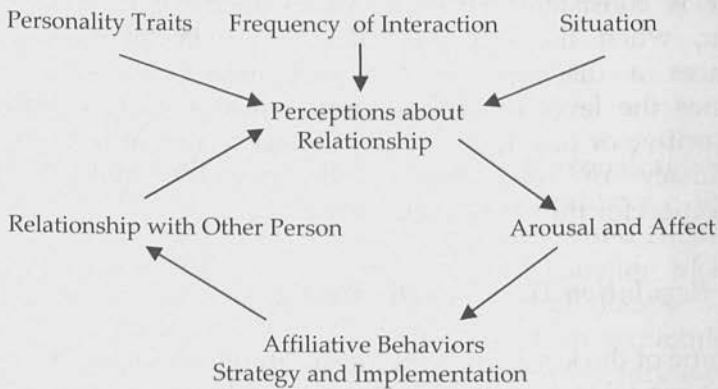


Figure 1. Arousal Regulation Model of Distancing

Arousal and affect. The assessment of level of deviation determines affect. Two aspects of the experienced arousal are significant in understanding *P*'s affiliative reaction (discussed in the next step). The first of these is the valence of the affect produced by interacting with the partner. Consistent with Patterson's (1976) and Capella and Greene's (1982) models, the arousal regulation model suggests that the valence of the affect determines the nature of the response (increased or decreased affiliation).

The second important aspect is the magnitude of the arousal. The magnitude of arousal determines the degree of impact it has on *P*, and thus, the extent of *P*'s response. The size of the discrepancy between perceived and desired relationship definitions is proportional to the amount of arousal. If the difference between these two perceptions is small, the situation will not lead to much arousal and *P* will minimally adjust existing patterns of affiliation. On the other hand, if the difference is considerable, then *P* will enact changes that he or she sees as more significant in order to move the relationship to a status that will allow *P* to restore optimal arousal.

Another factor influencing the magnitude of arousal is the importance of the relationship to *P*. If the relationship is of little importance, then it will lead to less arousal than if the relationship is very important. For example, a subordinate who a supervisor rarely sees, a client with a very small account, or a coworker from another unit that a person spends a day with at a company training seminar but who will not be seen much after that day, are all examples of people who are of little relational significance. In contrast, a direct supervisor, a client whose account keeps the company afloat, or a coworker with whom *P* has a strong romantic attraction are all examples of people who are of great relational significance. For these relationships, the magnitude of arousal will be significantly greater.

Affiliative response. Once people have perceived the relationship and assessed arousal and affect, they respond to that assessment through affiliation strategies. If the degree of arousal evokes unpleasant feelings, then people will respond with changes in affiliation in attempt to reshape the nature of the relationship and thus, to restore a comfortable level of arousal from interactions with *O*. If the arousal engenders positive affect, then *P* will respond by reciprocating the affiliative behaviors of the other.

If people experience a generally comfortable level of arousal, then they can be expected to continue enacting the same affiliative behaviors as they have been doing recently. Readers should keep in mind that because affiliation is a relational message, it is impossible for people to stop communicating closeness or distance. Thus, people will still respond to desired arousal (neither under-aroused nor over-aroused) with affiliative messages; these messages will simply communicate the same amount of closeness or distance as before.

Factors impacting affiliative strategy choices. When people make affiliative changes to attenuate unpleasant arousal, many factors influence which tactics are used. The specific tactics people use may vary dramatically based on personality traits, their relationship with the other person, and the situation. Although further research is needed to determine which qualities are most influential, some factors can be anticipated based on extant research. Figure 2 illustrates the key factors.

Personality characteristics. Whenever people change the nature of a relationship, they take some degree of risk. In the case of making a relationship closer, the risks often involve the possibility that the other person could hurt them (Altman & Taylor, 1973) or that they may be violating an organizational boundary (e.g., Peterson, 1992). In the case of making a relationship more distant, the risk is that such a move could increase conflict or create antagonism from the other. Thus, it stands to reason that people who are more self-confident would be more likely to enter such transitions boldly than people with high social anxiety (Leary, 1991) or risk aversion (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). These more anxious people might even rely on more of the cognitive tactics, and less obvious behavioral tactics. For example, someone with high social anxiety might be more likely to derogate a message as a means of distancing than to actively ignore that person when in the same location.

Relational factors. Among the many relational factors that could influence the types of messages people send, foremost is the person's relationship history with the other. The past experiences the two have shared and the perceptions *P* has of *O* provide the background that *P* takes into account when selecting strategies and messages. In group settings, norm violations are met with corrective actions from other group members first with subtle hints, then with gradually more explicit and blatant messages if the hints go unheeded (Bormann, 1990). This progression gives the offending person a chance to change behaviors and still save face. The same type of progression should be evident in dyadic relations as well. People would be expected to begin with subtler relational messages, and move to more explicit directives only as needed. *P*'s past encounters with *O* and *P*'s perceptions of how socially sensitive and responsive *O* is may dictate what tactics *P* is most likely to use.

Research also suggests *P*'s relational goals and perceptions of *O*'s orientation toward the relationship might influence strategy choice.

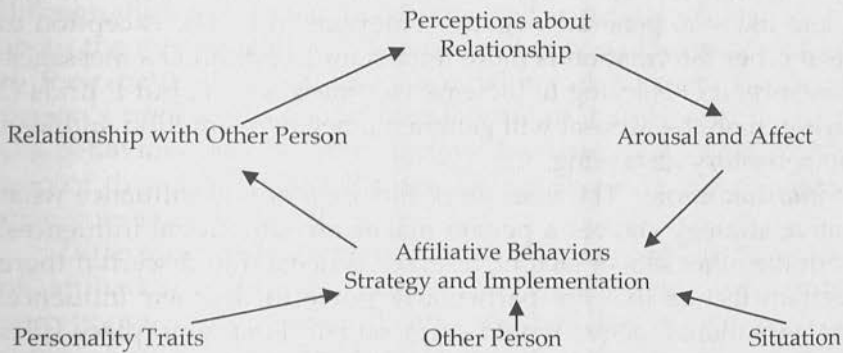


Figure 2. Regulatory Model of Relational Affiliation

Fritz (1997) found that if a person wanted a problem to be solved and perceived that the other wanted the same, then the person was more open to discussion about the issues. Likewise, if a person sees a problematic coworker as sharing the same goals, that person may be more likely to initially use subtler distancing tactics to reduce arousal and try to work through the issue with that individual.

Another significant relational factor that will likely impact strategies is the power differential between the two people. Power is an omnipresent aspect of organizational interactions, and a considerable amount of organizational involvement is affected by people's quest for and exercise of power (Frost, 1987). Thus, it is likely that power will impact many interactions between members of an organization. However, the impact of different types of influence and magnitudes of power may require further research. Evidence suggests that people of lower power are likely to amplify their closeness responses and mitigate their distancing tactics where possible, as a way of strengthening their ties with people who have the ability to offer rewards and punishments to them (Berger, 1985). However, the impact on people who are higher in power or on those with equal power is less certain.

More clear in the nature of its impact on affiliation tactics is the perception a person has of the other person's affiliation behaviors. People tend to reciprocate the relational messages that others send.

We tend to like those who like us, and dislike those who dislike us (Backman & Secord, 1959). Thus, *O*'s messages of closeness are more likely to generate positive arousal in *P* and *O*'s distancing messages are more likely to generate negative emotions in *P*. The exception to this is if other information is more important to *P* than *O*'s messages. For instance, if *O* is trying to increase closeness with *P*, but *P* finds *O* annoying, then the arousal will generate a negative emotion and lead to compensatory distancing.

Situation norms. The final set of factors that will influence what affiliative strategy choices a person makes are situational influences. As with the other sets of factors, research is needed to discern if there are certain factors that are particularly powerful in their influence. Several situational factors would seem salient. First, workplace rules and norms concerning behavior. For closeness behaviors, organizational rules placing limits on personal relationships (e.g., limits on gift-giving, restrictions on romantic relations, etc.) may affect people's behaviors in some situations. For distancing, such factors as norms for emotion displays (e.g., Kramer & Hess, 2002) seem relevant.

In addition to rules and norms, the presence or involvement of other people may influence what messages a person sends. For example, the presence of a third party may make people more reluctant to send certain relational messages (perhaps showing less affection when others are around and flirting more when they are not) or more inclined to send certain messages (e.g., dissociating her- or himself from someone as a display to a third party).

Other person's responses. Once people have maintained or changed affiliative behaviors, then they monitor the partner's behaviors to see how they respond. If *P* does not make any changes, then a similar lack of affiliative changes from *O* would be expected; any changes on *O*'s part are a stimulus for *P*'s reflection on the relationship. However, if *P* makes changes, *O*'s responses are very important. In the language of Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), *O* may choose to confirm, reject, or disconfirm *P*'s new definition of the relationship. That is, *O* may choose to accept the new level of affiliation and reciprocate such behaviors (confirm), he or she might attempt to compensate by reacting in the opposite way (e.g., meeting increased closeness with distancing tactics; reject), or *O* might simply ignore *P*'s changes and continue behaving in the same way (disconfirm).

All of these responses are significant stimuli for *P*'s ongoing assessment of the relationship. It is important to bear in mind, of course, that people process their perceptions of the other's response through their own perceptual filters, and so people's new perceptions about the relationship will be based not only on the other's responses to their behaviors, but also on anything else that might impact a person's preferences about the relationship. In other words, not only *O*'s behaviors but the other factors discussed in reviewing the first step of this cycle impact *P*'s perceptions about the relationship, and thus, subsequent arousal.

Differences from previous models. The arousal regulation model of affiliation I propose shares the basic notion that people's perceptions lead to arousal, and the resulting affect motivates a response from that individual. However, there are some differences from the models reviewed above. In general, the previous models are more focused on micromomentary nonverbal behaviors, whereas the model I propose addresses global communication strategies, for both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Rather than focusing on specific nonverbal cues that people enact during a conversation, this model explains people's general relationship strategies which may be enacted through many difference tactics that can be played out over lengthy periods of time. What are pertinent in these strategies are not only the behaviors people do, but also the behaviors they do not do. For instance, a decision *not* to talk about a particular topic with a certain person can be very significant, even though it does not result in any observable behavior changes to the relational partner or a researcher.

Additionally, the arousal regulation model is less focused on the partner's behaviors than the previous models. Although the nuances are complex and beyond the scope of this chapter, the existing models generally focus more on how people respond to changes in the partner's behaviors. That is not the case in this model. Although changes in partner behavior are sufficient to cause arousal, they are not necessary. A person may undergo a change in perceptions or expectations related to the relationship, which are independent of anything the partner does. One situation leading to this would be changes in a relationship with a third party. For example, if an individual is rejected by one dating partner, then he or she might suddenly begin to see another person, who had previously just been

an acquaintance or friend, as a potential romantic partner. Another way that a person might change expectations for a relationship independent of anything that partner does would be the discovery of new information about the partner. Learning of an impressive talent or past accomplishment might make an individual a more appealing relational partner than he or she had previously been seen.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The foregoing review suggests several implications for theory and practice, as related to problematic workplace relationships. These implications focus on the centrality of affiliation in understanding workplace relationships, the role of social skills in career success, and the conceptualization of organizational communication competence.

Centrality of relational affiliation. The processes of relational affiliation--enhancing closeness and increasing distance--may be the most fundamental quality of personal relationships, in the workplace or outside of work. These processes are perhaps *the* essential barometer of how people feel about a relationship. It is through affiliation that people regulate arousal, and thus, affiliative behaviors are the key indicator of how a person feels about a relationship at any given point in time. Although affiliation garners considerable attention in the research on personal relationships (e.g., Dillard, Solomon, & Palmer, 1999; Mashek & Aron, 2004), it has not been given much attention in the organizational literature. Organizational communication scholars should find it valuable to pay more attention to those processes and their outcomes than has been done in the past.

Social skills and career success. One of the business world's worst kept secrets is the importance of good social skills in career success. People who excel at their tasks but cannot get along with others are rarely successful in their professions. Research has shown that people with better developed socio-cognitive abilities are more successful at work, getting more frequent and higher promotions than less developed peers (Sypher & Zorn, 1986; Zorn & Violanti, 1996). This finding is intuitive. People with strong social skills are more likely to make friends and garner support from those with whom they work, and such positive relationships often pay dividends in evaluations, promotions, and leadership ability. Furthermore, such people are more likely to cope successfully with problematic relationships, preventing such interpersonal problems from becoming

a major career obstacle. People with less social abilities are more likely to mishandle such relationships and increase the problematic nature of the relationship.

Another benefit gained by people with better social skills is that dealing with problematic relationships can be easier and less stressful for them, leaving more cognitive resources available for other tasks. Those with lesser social skills are likely to invest more of their cognitive resources to dealing with and worrying about such relationships, or simply be overwhelmed by such relations sufficiently that the situation impedes their ability to be effective. These negative situations can also lead to further problems for people who have difficulty handling them constructively. In their study of troublesome relationships, Levitt, Silver, and Franco (1996) found that people sometimes reported dysfunctional ways of coping, such as use of alcohol or drugs. In cases like these, what began as one problem can then lead to further problems that may also be detrimental to one's career.

Organizational communication competence. A third implication of this regulatory theory is the need to expand the conceptualization of organizational communication competence. Although scholars are widely aware of the importance of interpersonal skills in the workplace, studies of communication skills required for competence in the workplace typically focus on task-related communication. For example, Jablin and Sias (2001) summarized the communication skills most often discussed in the organizational competence literature as follows: "listening, giving feedback, advising, persuading, instructing, interviewing, and motivating" along with "enhanced self-confidence, persuasiveness, ability to clearly express ideas, and control of [speech] communication anxiety" (p. 822). Although some of these can go beyond task communication (e.g., listening, giving feedback, motivating), in general these communication skills are related to transmitting information, rather than building and maintaining personal relationships. Non-task relational skills need to be added to the list of essential elements of organizational communication effectiveness. It is not hard for most people to think of a person who can clearly express ideas, control speech anxiety, and craft a persuasive argument, but who is abrasive enough to others that the individual has not achieved the workplace success he or she might otherwise have.

Directions for Future Research

The arousal regulation theory offers an explanation of how people use distance as a means of dealing with problematic coworkers. Although the purpose in delineating this process was to explain how people cope with problematic coworkers, the model is equally adept at explaining people's maintenance of less problematic relations as well. Furthermore, it is not bound by negative affect in defining problematic relationships. A relationship that is problematic for positive reasons (e.g., a relationship in which two people are romantically attracted to each other but prohibited from engaging in such relations due to organizational restrictions) fits with the processes described in this model as well. Duck (1994) argued that scholars studying personal relationships need to do a better job of integrating the positive side and dark sides of personal relationship by advancing perspectives that apply to both extremes. This model does that task.

What is needed in future research is to further refine the model and test the premises posited in this article. Although there is plenty of corroborative evidence from other studies that support the ideas proposed in this theory, the theory itself has not been directly tested. Such tests would provide valuable support or refutation for the model as a whole, or for parts of it. Furthermore, the list of personality, relationship, and situation variables that influence people's perceptions and strategy choices is preliminary and needs closer examination. Clarifying those factors would refine the model as presented in this chapter, and better help us understand how and why people act as they do in these difficult workplace relationships.

Another research focus needed is to examine applied questions related to this model. What types of distancing or closeness-enhancing strategies are most effective in dealing with various workplace relational challenges? Can people be trained to recognize these behaviors and use them to increase their effectiveness at work? What other strategies (such as assertiveness) might be used in conjunction with affiliation to further improve a person's workplace success? These and other questions could provide valuable information.

Problematic workplace relationships pose a major source of stress and difficulty for almost all people working in organizations. Although problematic relationships often need to be addressed with in some task-related manner, the distancing reactions that people

have are the "first line of defense" people take in such relationships. Furthermore, the degree of closeness or distance in a relationship not only impacts how people deal with the task issues at hand, but can also impact future responses by people involved. Thus, any study of problematic relationships would do well to take affiliation into account in its explanation of communication dynamics and suggestions for how to manage or improve the situation.

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