Received: 26 November 2021 | Revised: 21 November 2023 | Accepted: 5 December 2023

DOI: 10.1002/job.2769

WILEY Journal of Organizational Behavior

REVIEW ARTICLE

Resetting relationship trajectories: A reconceptualization of the relationship repair process

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Funding information
The authors do not have any funding sources to declare.

Summary

Negative events within and outside of work can disrupt coworkers' relationships, triggering a re-evaluation of relationship quality. The subjective experience of these events – which we term relationship threats – harms relationships, resulting in long-lasting negative interpersonal and organizational consequences. Coworkers' responses to a relationship threat determine whether relationships are repaired or whether the threat leads to a loss of commitment, lowered satisfaction, and increased negative affect. Because of the critical role that relationships play in organizational life, it is vital that we have a comprehensive understanding of the repair process. To date, researchers have focused on one of three repair processes: trust repair. In reconceptualizing relationship repair, we flesh out the remaining two processes: relationship work and sensemaking. Our reconceptualization balances the restorative actions that mitigate in-the-moment harm with those that sustain these benefits over time. We expand our understanding of relationship repair by highlighting the role that narrative foundations play in determining a relationships' vulnerabilities and determining effective repair processes. We highlight the importance of considering relationship threats as events embedded within a relationship's history; identify narrative foundations as a bridging mechanism between disrupted relationships and their repair; and expand our conceptualization of the processes that repair relationships.

KEYWORDS
affect/mood/emotions, conflict/conflict management processes, intergroup relations, social construction (sensemaking, social information processing), stress/strain, workplace health and well-being

1 | INTRODUCTION

Dyadic relationships play a critical role in organizations, both in their own right and as building blocks for teams and organizational networks. Under the right circumstances, dyadic relationships allow workers to feel embedded in the connective tissue of the organization. The quality of workers' social connections influences organizational performance and individual well-being (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2020). Organizations and workers reap benefits when relationships are experienced positively, that is, characterized by high levels of satisfaction, commitment, and positive affect. These ties energize and motivate coworkers, encourage them to form

productive emotional attachments, and enhance their performance (Chancellor et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2020). When relationships are experienced negatively, characterized by low levels of satisfaction, commitment, and negative affect, coworkers are demotivated, hold negative perceptions of, and feel emotionally distant from, each other (Dirks et al., 2009; Parker et al., 2013). More generally, deteriorating work relationships contribute to negative interpersonal behaviors such as incivility and rivalry (Byron & Landis, 2020), and poor organizational outcomes such as absenteeism, poor job performance, reduced organizational citizenship behavior, and higher turnover (Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010; Sias et al., 2014).

Although it can be tempting to sort relationships into broad categories of "positive" or "negative", this would create an unrealistically binary and static view of relationships. Rather, the trajectory of relationships is defined by the accumulation of positive and negative events over time (Gibson, 2018; Hinde, 1979). As Gibson (2018) notes, how partners relate to and evaluate each other fluctuates, and relationship trajectories capture their experiences from the beginning to the end of their relationship. Not only can individuals feel simultaneously positive and negative emotions towards each other (Melwani & Rothman, 2021) but the defining characteristics of relationship quality – satisfaction, commitment, and affect – can fluctuate over time. These fluctuations mean that relationships are not necessarily held in a steady positive or negative state. Instead, critical events create a temporal split (Methot et al., 2017) that triggers a re-evaluation of the relationship and changes its trajectory. We focus on the consequences of one such event, a relationship threat, that has the potential to change a relationship's trajectory when it is appraised as potentially harmful.

Our focus on relationship threats – the subjective appraisal of potential relationship harm – is based on well-documented findings that, across a broad range of interpersonal phenomena, bad events loom larger than good events (Baumeister et al., 2001). Because of this, they are likely to gain traction more quickly (Gibson, 2018) and overshadow a relationship's future (Wiechers et al., 2022) unless their impact can be overcome. This shift to a negative state, even if it is temporary, has the potential to threaten a relationship's stability and longevity. As one organizational example, negative relationship events are more predictive of protégé outcomes than positive relationship events (Eby et al., 2010). The temporal split that follows a relationship threat may be a short-lived shift to a negative experience of the relationship, or may result in longer-term relational decline as partners struggle to overcome the immediate negative experience. Whether, in the wake of a split, the relationship grows stronger or disintegrates depends on how partners appraise and respond to each other at the point of the split.

Violations of psychological contracts, interpersonal conflicts and incivility, trust breaches, and perceived injustice are all examples of events within a work relationship that may be appraised as harmful (Olekalns et al., 2020). Events external to a work relationship, such as serious illness, strained home relationships, anticipated job loss, or economic uncertainty, can also disrupt a relationship and trigger a threat appraisal (Bhattarai & Bensinger, 2019; Crosina, 2020; DeCelles et al., 2020; Elejalde-Ruiz, 2020). Once a relationship threat becomes salient, it breaks the flow of a relationship, calling into question its viability, placing the relationship in a negative state, and necessitating repair actions (Olekalns et al., 2020). Although coworkers' actions can return relationships to a positive state (Dirks et al., 2009; Thompson & Ravlin, 2016), it is also possible that post-threat actions sustain or even exacerbate a negative state. How co-workers manage the disruption caused by a relationship threat is consequential for individual, relational, and organizational health.

In this article, we present a reconceptualization of the relationship repair process. We argue that existing conceptualizations constrain our understanding of how relationships are restored because they take a short-term, often even cross-sectional, view of relationship threat, focusing on the immediate aftermath of a harmful event. Because of this perspective, they offer in-the-moment actions such as apologies and explanations for repairing relationships but overlook how the benefits of these actions can be sustained going forward. Our reconceptualization of the relationship repair process offers a longitudinal perspective that both highlights the interpersonal processes that sustain (or impede) relationship repair in the aftermath of a relationship threat, and links their effectiveness to a relationship's history.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Dirks et al.'s (2009) theoretical discussion of relationship repair and Olekalns et al.'s (2020) integrative review of relationship fractures and relational resilience provided the starting point for our reconceptualization of relationship repair. While each review identifies multiple mechanisms for relationship repair, neither fully elaborates on them. Our reconceptualization of relationship repair mechanisms looks beyond trust repair and in-the-moment restorative actions to a broader set of sustained interpersonal processes whose success is shaped by a relationship's past history. By drawing on multiple disciplinary perspectives, each of which addresses one or more components of the relationship repair process, we provide a more holistic understanding of this process. We searched two databases, EBSCO Business Source Complete and ProQuest (ABI/Inform, PsycArticles, PsycInfo) to identify relevant articles. To ensure we provided a multidisciplinary perspective, we conducted a broad search using the terms "relationship threat" and "relationship repair". This initial search identified several concepts relevant to our reconceptualization of relationship repair – relationship trajectories, relationship narratives, and shared meaning, and emotion – that we included in follow-up searches. These searches yielded 1972 articles that we then screened for relevance to relationship repair. The final set of 114 articles that we drew on to develop our reconceptualization of relationship repair was restricted to the adult population, and to those articles that give us insight into the interpersonal processes underlying relationship repair.

Based on our targeted literature review, we organized our reconceptualization of relationship repair around three dominant themes:

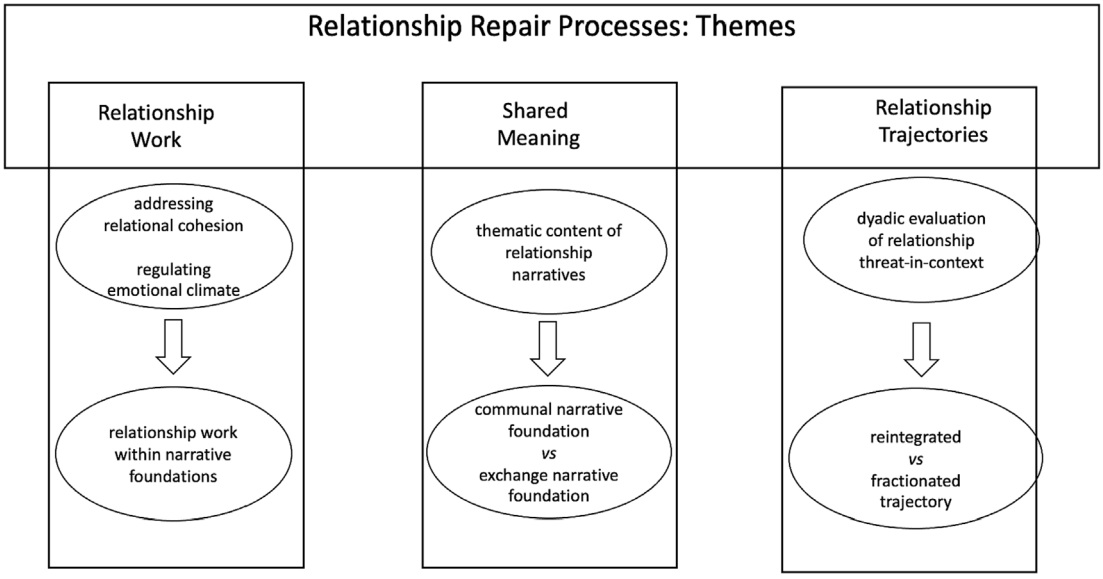

FIGURE 1 Overview of relationship repair processes.

relationship work, shared meaning, and relationship trajectories (shown in Figure 1). By making implicit assumptions about workplace relationship repair explicit, we push the scholarly understanding of relationship repair in new directions. *First*, we discuss the relationship work that returns relationships to a positive state or holds them in a negative state. *Second*, we link a relationship's history (its narrative foundation) to the post-threat actions that will most effectively repair a relationship. *Third*, we identify four post-threat relationship trajectories based on the relationship work undertaken to repair a threat.

3 | RELATIONSHIP THREAT AND RELATIONSHIP REPAIR

The experience of relationship threat is highly subjective. For an event to meet the threshold of becoming a relationship threat, it needs to be appraised as potentially harmful to the future and/or quality of the relationship (Gibson, 2018; Lazarus, 1991; Wiechers et al., 2022). Including appraisal in a conceptualization of relationship threats highlights their subjective nature, shifting our attention from a focus on the specific qualities of an event to its perceived harmful impact on a relationship. Lopez-Kidwell et al. (2018) note that relationship-defining events generate intense feelings that cause individuals to re-evaluate their relationships (also, Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010; vanDellen et al., 2011). This perspective is consistent with the conceptualization of relational injury as a shock to the system (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) that prompts coworkers to reappraise relationships. However, even small triggers – everyday events – can accumulate in such a way that coworkers begin to see their relationship as being potentially harmed (Wiechers et al., 2022).

Acknowledging the subjective nature of relationship threats, we define relationship threat as an event that at least one of the relationship partners appraises as potentially harmful to the relationship. This definition parallels definitions of other experiences of psychological threat. For example, identity threat is defined as experiences that are appraised as indicating potential harm to the meaning, value, or enactment of one's occupational identity (Petriglieri, 2011). Similarly, we propose that relational threats are triggered either because the experience of an event devalues the relationship or diminishes partners' commitment to the relationship. Recognizing that relationship threat is the result of individuals' subjective appraisal expands the range of potential events that can be catalysts for relational breakdown. An important implication of acknowledging the subjective nature of relationship threat is that, regardless of the specific nature (individual, interpersonal, organizational, or societal) or origin (within or outside of the relationship) of the event, once a threat perception is triggered the consequence is the same: it disrupts the smooth flow of a relationship and challenges its foundations (Gibson, 2018; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018).

An immediate symptom of a relationship threat is turbulence. According to relational turbulence theory, when relationships are disrupted and partners encounter turbulence, individuals respond more intensely to an event than might be expected given the nature of the event. Turbulence triggers high degrees of uncertainty: individuals experience a heightened sense of threat, doubt is seeded about partners' intentions, and individuals reduce their relationship maintenance efforts (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a, 2002b; Knobloch & Thiess, 2010; Park, 2010). Relationship threats trigger an attentional shift from relationship maintenance to crisis management (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Because relationship threats are appraised as negative violations of relationship expectations, they elicit negative emotions that most likely sit in the activated unpleasant quadrant of the emotion circumplex (Larsen & Diener, 1992) and may include anger, anxiety, or sadness. These negative emotions shift individuals' focus to self-protective cognitions and behaviors (Chen et al., 2011), pushing them apart as they process the implications of the relationship

threat and strive to appraise the event in its specific context (Gibson, 2018; Knobloch & Thiess, 2010; Park, 2010).

Relationship repair is required to address the turbulence created by a relationship threat. In the management literature, relationship repair has been defined as the stabilization of the relationship in the aftermath of a transgression or conflict. Prior research in management suggests that stabilization is often signified by feelings of resolution, especially from the injured relational partner. Most often, in the management literature, researchers have focused on repairing trust violations. As a result, definitions of relationship repair emphasize the actions that partners take to restore trust (Dirks et al., 2009; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2014). These characterizations of relationship repair reflect the dominant assumption that relationship threat is the result of one partner, the transgressor, harming the other, the victim. However, because not all relationship threats are characterized by asymmetrical responsibility and blame, there is a need to expand our understanding of the key mechanisms of relationship repair.

3.1 | Trust repair and beyond

Although our focus is on actions other than trust repair that can return a relationship to a positive state, we recognize that the paths to relationship repair and trust repair are interconnected. Here, we offer a brief overview of trust repair because it provides the starting point for a broader understanding and reconceptualization of the relationship repair process.

According to a recent review of the trust repair literature, apologies are the most commonly studied individual repair strategy (Kahkohnen et al., 2021). Together with other verbal responses such as explanations, excuses and denials, apologies are short-term forward-looking strategies that aim to reduce concerns about the future (Kim et al., 2009; Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2017). While apologies may mitigate a trust violation (Dirks et al., 2009), they may not be sufficient to fully repair a damaged relationship (Kahkohnen et al., 2021). To this point, Kim et al. (2009) write "Trust repair cannot simply focus on re-establishing seemingly trusting behaviors … .. trust repair ultimately involves the interaction of the trustor and trustee as they attempt to resolve discrepancies in their beliefs (p.404)".

While the most commonly investigated and theorized trust repair mechanisms may reduce concerns about future behavior, theorizing suggests that more is needed to restore and maintain positive relationships in the longer-term. Bachmann et al. (2015), for example, draw attention to the important role played by sensemaking, defined as a co-construction of the trust violation that paves the way for restoring a positive relationship. Similarly, in discussing long-term trust repair strategies, Lewicki and Brinsfield (2017) identify reframing – the reinterpretation of a trust violation – as a critical repair strategy. One example of this process is interaction reframing, which occurs when partners converge to a shared interpretation of an event (Dewulf et al., 2009). In summary, while the most commonly discussed and researched trust repair strategies stabilize relationships, theorizing suggests that additional relationship work may be needed to fully restore damaged relationships.

4 | THE NEED TO RECONCEPTUALIZE RELATIONSHIP REPAIR AT WORK

Because we know that organizational relationships can and often do break down, the notion of relationship repair is an intuitively appealing construct. However, at present, we have an incomplete understanding of the ways that relationships can be effectively repaired. These limits arise in part because much of our understanding of relationship repair in workplaces stems from the trust and conflict management literatures, which assume that relationships are disrupted by the harmful actions of one party in the relationship. The foundations for a broader understanding of relationship threat and repair are identified in Olekalns et al.'s (2020) integrative review of the management and close relationships' literatures. This review highlighted that the actions that individuals take following a relationship threat are critical to relationship repair (also, Dailey et al., 2013; Koenig Kellas et al., 2008) because they determine whether coworkers can rebuild dyadic cohesion, increase relational commitment, and build resilience against future threats (Ferris et al., 2009; Kahn et al., 2013; Stephens et al., 2012). It also highlighted that we currently know little about processes other than trust repair, and called for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship repair process at work.

Our reconceptualization of the relationship repair process answers this call. Adopting a narrative lens enables us to develop a more holistic model of this process by highlighting the shared expectations that individuals have about how they will interact (Baldwin, 1992). These shared expectations establish a narrative built on a relationship's history and, by establishing common ground, facilitate smooth and predictable interactions. This stability is disrupted by a relationship threat. To more fully understand the impact of a relationship threat, we turn to research on close relationships, emotion regulation, and sensemaking to provide a holistic picture of relationship repair in work contexts. Although we draw insights from the trust repair and conflict management literatures, these literatures are not our main focus. Both literatures are mature and offer considerable insight into how to manage relationship threat in the moment through strategies that stabilize the relationship by mitigating harm. Viewing relationship threats as subjective harm appraisals broadens the set of restorative actions available to coworkers. We theorize that, in addition to trust repair, there are two important repair processes that explain if and how the relationship is likely to be impacted by a threat perception: restoration of social equilibrium and narrative sensemaking.

Relationship threats disturb a relationship narrative's coherence and disrupt the norms that govern it — their social equilibrium. The restoration of these norms is an essential part of the relationship repair process (e.g., Dirks et al., 2009). Relationship work enables the restoration of social equilibrium by targeting disrupted interpersonal processes, and striving to return these processes and associated affect

to a positive state (Bachmann et al., 2015; Dirks et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2023). Narrative sensemaking addresses the negative cognitions that are triggered by relationship threats. To counter negative attributions, partners need to work together to restore a shared understanding of their relationship and the impact of the relationship threat (Bachmann et al., 2015; Dirks et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2015; Olekalns et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2023). Whether partners can successfully repair their relationships is determined by their ability to restore social equilibrium and re-interpret the threat in a positive light.

Our expanded model of relationship repair highlights the critical roles that relationship work and narrative sensemaking play in shaping post-threat trajectories. Re-conceptualizing relationship repair as a return to social equilibrium and shared positive affect addresses three constraints to the understanding of workplace relationship repair actions inherent in the trust repair and conflict management literatures.

The first constraint that we address is a neglect of the give-and-take of interpersonal interaction. The trust and conflict management literatures emphasize the use and effectiveness of restorative actions such as explanations, apologies, penance, and reparation (Dirks et al., 2009; Ren & Gray, 2009). Each of these strategies is a concrete and time-bounded action, intended to assuage the harm caused by one individual to the other and expected to elicit forgiveness (Kim et al., 2009). While these actions may stabilize a relationship, they leave open the question of how partners work together to return their relationship to a positive state and sustain it into the future (Kim et al., 2009). To address this limitation, we integrate insights from the close relationships and emotion regulation literatures to identify the relationship work needed to restore social equilibrium (Dirks et al., 2009; Olekalns et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2023).

The second constraint that we address is the decontextualization of the threat, that is, the failure to acknowledge the relational history within which a threat is embedded. Although many of our organizational relationships span time (Ferris et al., 2009; Gibson, 2018), empirical studies most often focus on stable and aggregated assessments of relationship quality made at a single point in time (Melwani & Rothman, 2021; and see below for two exceptions). Adopting a temporal perspective captures the dynamism inherent in our work relationships (Wiechers et al., 2022), highlighting the role that past history plays in the interpretation and response to a relationship threat.

The third constraint is a focus on positive, relationship building events that represent relationships as growing ever stronger. For example, analyses of mentoring relationships and early trust development focus on relational growth (Kram & Isabella, 1985; van der Werff & Buckley, 2017). A notable feature of this research is that – unlike close relationships' research – it does not focus on how relationship threats such as trust violations disrupt relationships over time. The other side is told by close relationships research, which draws attention to negative events such as relationship threats that result in deteriorating relationships. Studies of psychological contract breaches over time provide an organizationally-relevant example of the darker side of relationships (Solinger et al., 2016; Wiechers et al., 2022). We focus on the actions that enable or impede recovery from a relationship threat.

We argue that the full potential of the relationship repair concept can be unlocked by taking a narrative approach to the topic. This approach recognizes that relationship threats are one moment within a relationship's history, and refocuses theorizing to the long-term actions that shape a relationship's future trajectory. It allows us to focus on repair actions that are not only intended to stabilize a relationship (addressing it in the present) but also actions that proactively strengthen the relationship for the future. A narrative approach also alerts us to the dark side of relationship threats, that is, the possibility that coworkers' actions, rather than restoring social equilibrium, exacerbate the disequilibrium created by a relationship threat. Our reconceptualization provides a broader view of relationship repair by tying together three interrelated components– relationship work, relationship narratives, relationship trajectory – of the relationship repair process (Figure 2).

5 | RELATIONSHIP WORK: INTERPERSONAL RESPONSES TO RELATIONSHIP THREAT

Restoring social equilibrium – re-establishing the norms that govern the relationship – is a key part of the relationship repair process (Bachmann et al., 2015; Dirks et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2023). Together with trust repair, Dirks et al. (2009) identify the restoration of a positive exchange and the reduction of negative affect as critical components of relationship repair. To achieve these goals, partners need to supplement trust repair with actions that rebuild and sustain relational cohesion (interdependence) and restore positive affect. The close relationships and emotion regulation literature enabled us to identify the relationship work that supports a longer-term repair process and re-establishes a routine of positive interpersonal exchanges, and also to identify the processes that lead to a deteriorating relationship.

5.1 | Re-establishing social equilibrium

Coworkers re-establish social equilibrium when they act to rebuild relational cohesion and to reinstate a shared positive emotional climate. *Relational cohesion* describes the extent to which coworkers perceive themselves as mutually dependent. High relational cohesion is reflected in a strong sense of "we-ness", compatible goals, trust, and shared positive expectations about the relationship (Cupach & Metts, 1986). *Emotional climate* refers to collective emotions, that is, emotions shared by dyads or groups (Brown et al., 2021; Goldenberg et al., 2020). Shared positive affect results in stronger relationships (Brown et al., 2021), a greater sense of connection between partners, and increased cognitive flexibility (Reina et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2020).

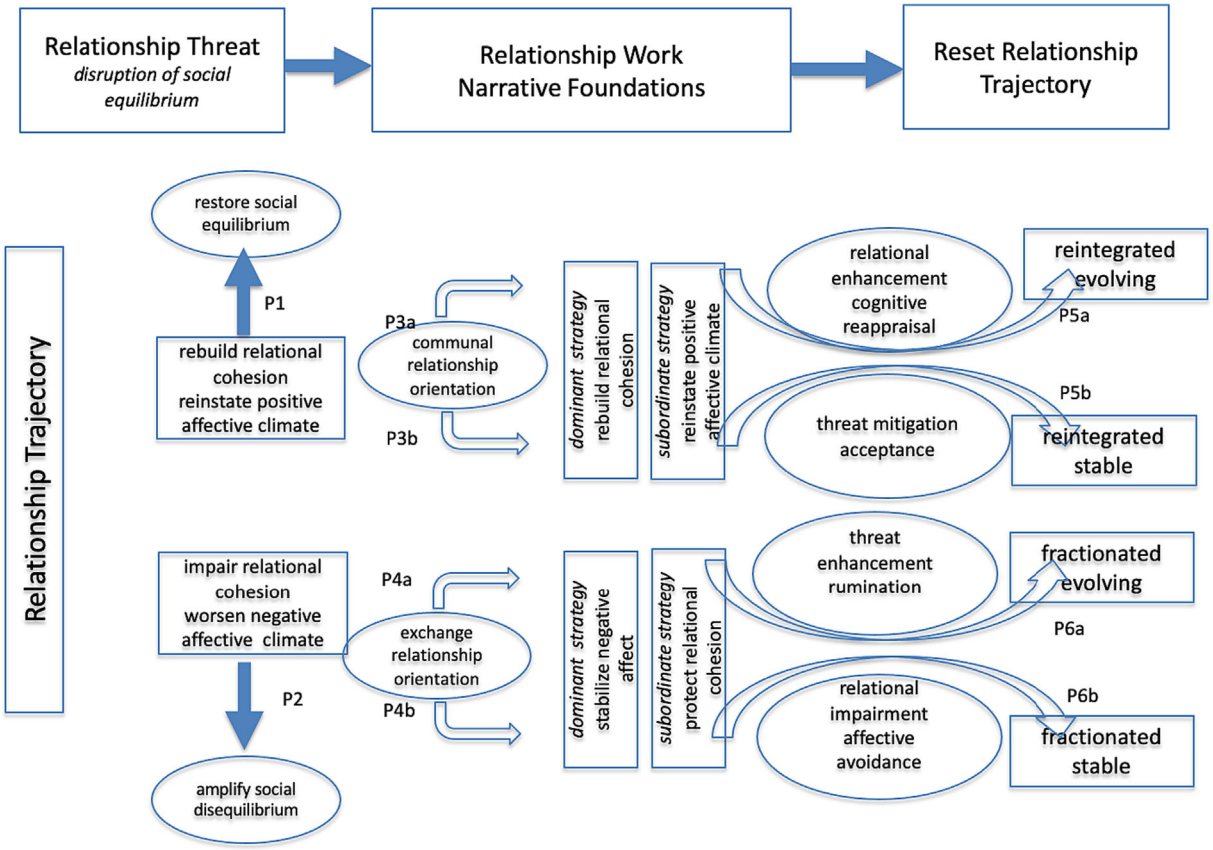

FIGURE 2 Reconceptualization of relationship repair processes.

5.1.1 | Rebuilding relational cohesion

Relational cohesion is rebuilt through threat mitigation, which offsets the loss of relational cohesion, and relationship enhancement, which preserves a positive perception of the relationship (Ogolsky et al., 2017). A meta-analysis showed that behaviors exemplifying these strategies are positively correlated with relationship outcomes such as commitment, affection, liking, and a positive emotional tone (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012).

Threat mitigation strategies, because they address the damage incurred by a relationship threat, restore social equilibrium and satisfaction (Ogolsky et al., 2017) through any of three pathways. First, threat can be mitigated through partners' attributions. Positive attributions can be made at the individual level, as suggested by the trust repair literature (see Sharma et al., 2023 for a review). Attributions can also be made at the dyadic level, for example by attributing the loss of relational cohesion to a disrupted relationship process (Eberly et al., 2011) rather than to a partner's actions. Second, facilitative behaviors – those that support partner's goals and rebuild positive affect – reduce uncertainty and relational turbulence (McLaren et al., 2011; Ogolsky et al., 2017). Expressions of agreement or approval, positive affect, or mutual support are examples of facilitative behaviors (Beuhlman et al., 1992; Gottman et al., 2015; Madhyastha et al., 2011; Ogolsky et al., 2017; Rivers & Sanford, 2018; Sanford et al., 2016) Third, relationship threat is mitigated through positive dyadic coping (Ogolsky et al., 2017), that is, partners can overcome stress by engaging in problem-solving and providing emotional support to each other.

Relationship enhancement strategies go beyond restoring social equilibrium, strengthening the relationship against disruption by future relationship threats. In comparison to threat mitigation, which seeks to neutralize relational turbulence, relationship enhancement strategies focus on creating an overall positive perception of the relationship even in the face of threat. A core component of these strategies is relationship- or partner-oriented thinking. These ways of thinking are characterized, respectively, by positive reflections about a partner and a consideration of both partner's feelings (Cate et al., 1995; Ogolsky et al., 2017; Reina et al., 2022). These strategies are supported by the prompt re-instatement of an interdependent self-construal, that is, a representation of the relationship that highlights mutual dependence and promotes actions that strengthen relationships (Cross et al., 2002). This reinstatement can start with a simple shift in the language that coworkers use, specifically, a shift from "I" and "me" to "us" and "we" (Agnew et al., 1998). Following an initial assessment of threat, relationships are also enhanced through open communication processes that strive to improve and repair the relationship by encouraging self-disclosure and affirming future commitment to the relationship. Constructive conflict management falls

within this broader set of communicative processes (Ogolsky et al., 2017). Relationships are further boosted when partners engage in affiliative humor: humor aimed at lowering interpersonal tension and fostering positive affect (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Huo, et al., 2012; Ogolsky et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2022).

5.1.2 | Affective up-regulation

As Dirks et al. (2009) note, restoring positive affect is also essential to the relationship repair process. The ease with which negative emotions take hold highlights how critical it is to implement affective up-regulation strategies. In disputes, expressed anger from one party elicits anger from the other party and results in a downward spiral (Friedman et al., 2004; Olekalns & Rees, 2020). In close relationships, an individual can experience emotional flooding when confronted by their partner's negative emotions, and may consequently withdraw from the relationship (Gottman, 1994). We propose that averting this negative cycle is a key element of relationship repair.

Affective up-regulation strategies enable coworkers to limit the impact of negative emotions, either by avoiding emotional spillover from the relationship threat to the relationship (acceptance) or by restoring a positive affective climate (cognitive reappraisal). Acceptance, in McRae and Gross' (2020) model, describes a process in which individuals notice but do not evaluate their emotions. Acceptance draws on the general idea of affective self-distancing, in which individuals become impartial observers of their negative emotions (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross et al., 2005; Reina et al., 2022). The ability to step back from negative emotions and to view them from the perspective of an external observer enables a more adaptive response to the situation.

Cognitive reappraisal, defined by McRae and Gross (2020) as a re-evaluation of the emotional situation, initiates an affective shift from negative to positive emotions. Benefit-finding, in which individuals focus on the benefits and opportunities offered by a negative event, is one example of this strategy. Resilience researchers show that it enables individuals to disengage from negative information and to more effectively overcome adverse life events (e.g., Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Helgeson et al., 2006). Focusing on general lessons to be obtained from a negative experience or embracing the opportunity to transform the relationship (Bauer et al., 2005) supports the restoration of positive affect. In a recent review, Troy et al. (2023) highlighted the role that reappraisal plays in simultaneously decreasing negative affect and boosting positive affect. Relevant to relationship repair, these authors report a positive impact on social processes such as forgiveness (also vanOyen Witvliet et al., 2019).

> **Proposition 1.** Social equilibrium is re-established through actions that rebuild relational cohesion (threat mitigation, relationship enhancement) and reinstate positive affect (acceptance, cognitive reappraisal).

5.2 | Amplifying social disequilibrium

Not all relationship work is effective in stabilizing or repairing relationships. When partners fail to re-establish pre-threat relationship norms, their relationship remains in a state of social disequilibrium. Research highlights the inclination for partners to drift apart in the aftermath of a threat, shifting their attention from relationship maintenance to crisis management (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and self-protection (Chen et al., 2011). The social disequilibrium triggered by a relationship threat will be amplified if, as a result of this attentional shift, coworkers are unable to re-establish an interdependent self-construal – a sense of "we" and "us" – or if the relationship threat results in hostility and antagonism (Agnew et al., 1998; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018; Ogolsky et al., 2017; Sanford et al., 2016). Following a relationship threat, individuals can take actions that impair relational cohesion by acting in ways that further push away their coworker. They can also fail to repair or even worsen negative affect if they implement one of three emotion regulation strategies: distraction, suppression, or rumination (McRae & Gross, 2020).

5.2.1 | Impairing relational cohesion

Threat enhancement occurs when coworkers' cognitions and behaviors amplify the uncertainty and turbulence created by a relationship threat. Their focus on harm further destabilizes the relationship and decreases the possibility of restoring the relationship to its pre-threat state. Threat enhancement strategies include negative rather than positive attributions, negative rather than positive facilitative behaviors, and negative rather than positive dyadic coping. The first of these strategies means that, rather than looking for a positive explanation for the threat each individual forms negative attributions of the other's behavior (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018). The uncertainty triggered by a threat is further amplified by negative facilitative behaviors such as criticizing each other and striving to block each other's goals (Ogolsky et al., 2017; Sanford et al., 2016). Finally, relational turbulence after a threat will be worsened if coworkers respond to the stress and uncertainty of a relationship threat with negative (rather than positive) dyadic coping. In this style of coping, partners are reluctant to engage in problem-solving, respond to each other in a hostile manner, and fail to provide the emotional support associated with positive dyadic coping (Ogolsky et al., 2017).

Relational estrangement strategies also exacerbate the rift that has developed between coworkers. The behaviors that contribute to relational estrangement, by increasing the salience of self over relationship, reduce individuals' motivation to rebuild their relationship (Agnew et al., 1998). First, the high level of self-concern triggered by relationship threat is incompatible with the relationship- and partner-oriented thinking that we described above. Coworkers are more inclined to focus on their individual outcomes, and their own feelings (Crandall, 1978; De Dreu, 2006; Ogolsky et al., 2017). As a result, relational cohesion is reduced. Second, the increased social distance and negative affect generated by a relationship threat will shut down the

constructive communicative processes described earlier, including the problem-solving that exemplifies constructive conflict management. Instead, partners are likely to engage in conflict avoidance and antisocial behavior (Ogolsky et al., 2017). Finally, given the now damaged relationship, partners may also communicate hostility through negative humor such as ridicule (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Madhyastha et al., 2011; Ogolsky et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2022). Collectively, these behaviors increase the salience of self over relationship, and further reduce individuals' motivation to rebuild their relationship.

5.2.2 | Affective down-regulation

Troy et al. (2023) link two emotion regulation strategies – distraction and suppression – to a lack of psychological resilience. Building on this, we propose that the affective strategies of distraction and suppression can halt interpersonal repair processes. Distraction temporarily directs attention away from negative affect by shifting attention from a specific event, in this case a relationship threat (McRae & Gross, 2020). Although this strategy can provide temporary relief from negative emotions, Troy et al. (2023) report that in the longer term distraction blocks both problem-solving and social processes. Suppression describes an emotion regulation strategy in which individuals block the expression of emotions (McRae & Gross, 2020). Not only does this strategy fail to reduce negative affect it may also reduce positive affect (Troy et al., 2023). Like distraction, suppression disturbs social processes. The relationship work that enables individuals to overcome relationship threats is impeded because neither strategy allows for the processing of negative emotions (McRae & Gross, 2020). Unresolved negative affect spills over to future interactions.

A third emotion regulation strategy, rumination, enhances negative affect because it encourages individuals to further focus on the negative consequences of a relationship threat. It is a dysfunctional strategy that fosters a repetitive focus on negative thoughts and feelings (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2015; Nolen-Hoeksma et al., 2008) causing individuals to dwell more deeply on their negative feelings and on the harmful consequences of the relationship threat (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross et al., 2005). Ruminating enhances negative affect, in turn reducing the problem-solving (Gorlin & Teachman, 2017; Nolen-Hoeksma et al., 2008) necessary for relationship repair.

> **Proposition 2.** Social disequilibrium is amplified through actions that impair relational cohesion (threat enhancement, relationship estrangement) and amplify negative affect (suppression, distraction, rumination).

6 | SHARED MEANING: REBUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP NARRATIVE

Shared meaning, defined as "the experience of having in common with others inner states about the world (Echterhoff & Higgins, 2018: *v*)", provides coworkers with common ground for interpreting events that affect the dyad. In the first instance, relationship threats push coworkers apart, fueling egocentric interpretations of the relationship threat. A first and critical step towards relationship repair is the sensemaking needed to create a shared narrative of the relationship threat within the context of the longer-term relational history. Sharma et al. (2023), for example, highlight the role of sensemaking in organizational trust repair processes (also Bachmann et al., 2015). How this process of sensemaking develops is dependent on the more enduring story that coworkers tell about their relationship: their relationship narrative. This narrative provides an account of how a relationship has unfolded over time, the moments that have in some way disrupted it, and whether this disruption has been successfully repaired (Beuhlman et al., 1992). This shared meaning provides the framework for interpreting relationship threats, and determines the resources available for repairing the work relationship.

Relationship narratives incorporate both a general meaning assigned to the relationship and a set of relationship scripts that define expectations about how partners will interact (Baldwin, 1992). In normal circumstances the ascribed relational meaning and relationship scripts allow interactions between coworkers to be smooth and predictable. Relationship threats disrupt coworkers' assumptions about their relationship. If coworkers reach a shared understanding of the threat and what it means for their relationship (Olekalns et al., 2020), they will restore social equilibrium by strengthening social bonds, enhancing emotional well-being, and increasing future commitment to the relationship (Agnew et al., 1998; Andersen & Pryzbylinski, 2018; Echterhoff & Higgins, 2018; Echterhoff et al., 2009). Restoring shared meaning builds future relationship capacity (Kahn et al., 2013; Neff & Broady, 2011; Stephens et al., 2012; Thompson & Ravlin, 2016), predicts satisfaction in families (Kellas, 2005; Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003), and effective relationship repair in organizations (Petriglieri, 2015). However, if coworkers fail to converge to a shared understanding of the relationship threat, they will amplify social disequilibrium, causing relationships to further break down (Dailey et al., 2013; Kellas, 2005). How the story ends depends on the way in which the loss of relational cohesion and the shift to a negative emotional climate are addressed by coworkers (Brown et al., 2021; Cupach & Metts, 1986; Friese & Grotevant, 2001; Goldenberg et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2017). It also depends on a relationships' narrative foundations, which we explore in the next section.

6.1 | Narrative foundations

Although relationship narratives are disrupted by a relationship threat, they nonetheless provide the foundation for interpreting relationship-specific events, and shape how partners respond to any specific relationship threat (Olekalns et al., 2020; Park, 2010). This narrative foundation, which captures co-workers accumulated relationship experiences up to the point of threat, is defined by the degree of relational cohesion and emotional climate. Research

suggests that these core elements establish one of two relationship orientations: communal or exchange (Clark & Reis, 1988; Li & Fung, 2019). The dimensions that underpin these relationship orientations define the axes of the interpersonal circumplex model (Wiggins, 1992), are seen in the definition of four discrete relational models (Fiske, 1992), and are evident in theorizing about leadership styles (Batson, 1993). Recent research identifies two career narratives that align with these relationship orientations: belongingness narratives, which emphasize collaboration, and achievement narratives, which emphasize expertise (Fetzer et al., 2023).

We focus on how relationship orientations determine the ways in which relationships are vulnerable to threats, shape and support responses to relationship threats, and also steer coworkers to specific relationship repair strategies. We propose that, in the long-term, the narrative foundations of coworkers' relationship trajectories will be skewed towards a communal or an exchange relationship orientation. The research that we compiled suggests that this long-term interaction script offers coworkers different relational and emotional resources, and sets the scene for resolving disrupted relationships.

6.1.1 | Communal relationship orientation

A communal orientation emphasizes interdependence (high cohesion), primes altruistic tendencies, increases relationship commitment, and encourages coworkers to build positive emotional reserves (Afifi et al., 2016; Clark & Reis, 1988; Li & Fung, 2019). The high degree of relational cohesion that underpins these relationships means that individuals think in terms of "who we are", and their shared reality emphasizes goals of affiliation, belonging and communion (Flynn, 2005; McLean et al., 2019; Moskowitz et al., 1994; Shapiro, 2002; Wiggins, 1992). The characteristics of a highly cohesive relationship foster positive evaluations of the relationship and positive attributions about partners' intentions (Arriaga et al., 2019; Eastwick et al., 2019; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018), and support high levels of the threat mitigation and relationship enhancement behaviors that are fundamental to constructive relationship behavior (Ogolsky et al., 2017). The fundamental connection between coworkers is characterized by mutual dependence and positive regard (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Rousseau, 1998), promoting more generous attributions about each other in the face of relationship threat.

This orientation is also characterized by a positively skewed shared emotional climate: positive emotions outweigh negative emotions. The affective component of a communal orientation traces a history of successfully overcoming relationship threats, one that offers coworkers a positive emotional bank account to buffer the relationship from new threats (Beuhlman et al., 1992; Gottman et al., 2015; Madhyastha et al., 2011). This positive skew – and the associated positive emotional bank account – is important because positive affect is associated with greater relational stability (Smith et al., 1990; Waldinger et al., 2004) and an increased likelihood of surviving relationship threats (Feeney & Lemay, 2012).

6.1.2 | Exchange relationship orientation

An exchange orientation emphasizes independence (low cohesion), reduces the intention to help others, and primes a concern for equity and fairness. These relationships are less cohesive than communal relationships: coworkers perceive themselves as independent of each other, autonomous individuals brought together to achieve specific work goals, leading to a tit-for-tat exchange of resources (McLean et al., 2019; Moskowitz et al., 1994; Rousseau, 1998; Shapiro, 2002; Wiggins, 1992). Coworkers retain distinct identities, thinking in terms of "who you and I are together" (Flynn, 2005). Their evaluations of each other and the relationship – as well as their evaluation of relationship threats – are less likely to align because they act as individuals. This greater level of autonomy and the accompanying lower levels of off-task communication will result in a negative evaluation of the relationship threat that contaminates general perceptions of the relationship (Arriaga et al., 2019; Eastwick et al., 2019; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018), and pushes coworkers further apart.

Coworkers' strong sense of autonomy suggests that, at best, their relationship will be characterized by emotional neutrality. The greater equity sensitivity that is associated with autonomy (Li & Fung, 2019) increases their susceptibility to the negative emotions associated with a relationship threat: inequity predicts negative affect (Sprecher, 1986) and triggers brain regions associated with negative affect (Guroglu et al., 2014). This susceptibility means that, as negative events accumulate, exchange-oriented relationships will be defined by a negatively skewed emotional climate in which negative emotions outweigh positive emotions (Rusbult et al., 1986). When coworkers operate with a negative emotional bank account they are less resilient in the face of relationship threats (Nabi, 1999; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

6.2 | Relational vulnerabilities

While communal relationships may seem better able than exchange relationships to withstand the stress of relationship threats, research suggests a different possibility: communal- and exchange- oriented relationships will be subject to different vulnerabilities, and so will require different repair strategies. Limited research suggests that communal relationships will be more vulnerable to the loss of cohesion whereas exchange relationships will be more vulnerable to the impact of negative emotions (Li & Fung, 2019; Thompson & Ravlin, 2016).

Summarizing our earlier discussion, we propose that *communally-oriented* relationships are likely to be more vulnerable to a loss of relational cohesion than to a change in emotional climate because the uncertainty associated with a relationship threat pushes coworkers apart (Gibson, 2018; Knobloch & Thiess, 2010). The move from an interdependent (we, us) to an independent (me, I) construal of the relationship undermines the relational cohesion that characterizes communally-oriented relationships. Although the loss of relational cohesion also elicits negative, event- specific emotions (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018), the positive emotional bank account that is characteristic

of communally-oriented relationships reduces the affective impact of a relationship threat. Nonetheless, coworkers need to take action in response to the threat to avoid depleting this emotional reserve. We propose that addressing a relationship's dominant vulnerability is a necessary condition for effective relationship repair. Because, in communal exchange relationships, the dominant vulnerability is the loss of relational cohesion, rebuilding relational cohesion becomes the dominant repair strategy and restoring positive affect is a subordinate repair strategy.

> **Proposition 3a.** Rebuilding relationship cohesion is the dominant repair strategy for relationships with a communal orientation.

> **Proposition 3b.** Restoring positive affect is the subordinate repair strategy for relationships with a communal orientation.

Because *exchange-oriented relationships* are defined by a strong sense of independence, they are less vulnerable to loss of cohesion than communally-oriented relationships. Instead, an emotional climate that ranges from neutral to negative increases their vulnerability to the situation-specific negative affect associated with a relationship threat (Jarvis et al., 2019; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018). Coworkers' negative emotional bank account means that threat-specific negative affect serves to worsen a neutral emotional climate or to amplify an already negative emotional climate. Without the buffer provided by an overall positive emotional climate, coworkers with an exchange orientation have few emotional resources for constructively responding to the negative affect triggered by relationship threats. We propose that, because the primary vulnerability in these relationships is a post-threat surge in negative affect, the emotion regulation strategies that stabilize negative affect provide the dominant mechanism for repairing relationships. Averting further loss of relational cohesion is a subordinate strategy.

> **Proposition 4a.** Stabilizing negative affect is the dominant repair strategy for relationships with an exchange orientation.

> **Proposition 4b.** Preventing further loss of relational cohesion is the subordinate repair strategy for relationships with an exchange orientation.

7 | RELATIONSHIP TRAJECTORIES: RELATIONSHIP THREATS AS EMBEDDED EVENTS

The close relationships literature shows that there is an ebb and flow in how partners assess their relationships. Specific events anchor partner's assessments of their relationship over time (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018), and any single event can result in either a positive or negative shift in a relationship's trajectory (Gibson, 2018) by increasing or decreasing overall satisfaction, commitment and positive affect. Management scholars have theorized that these same dynamics are evident in workplace relationships (e.g., Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010). For example, analyses of mentoring relationships, over time, focus on the tasks to be accomplished in each phase of a relationship (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Following this line of inquiry, Humberd and Rouse (2016) argue that the quality of mentoring is determined by shifts in personal identification as the relationship progresses. Similarly, van der Werff and Buckley (2017) demonstrate a pattern of increasing trust during early organizational socialization.

Despite these parallels, the focus of the close relationships and mentoring/trust literatures diverges. Both the mentoring and trust literatures place emphasis on growth in relationships: the factors that boost trust over time, or the actions that create positive experiences at each stage of the mentoring relationship. These two literatures are yet to integrate a developmental perspective with research on how negative events, including trust violations, shape a relationship's overall trajectory. The goal of our theorizing is to provide this more comprehensive perspective.

7.1 | Mapping relationship trajectories

To date, scholars have taken several approaches to studying relationship events and their unfolding impact. Daily diary studies (e.g., Conway & Briner, 2002; Goldring & Bolger, 2022; Johnson et al., 2022; Perelman et al., 2022) and event sampling methodologies (e.g., Hui & Kogan, 2018; Rinner et al., 2022) most often focus on how relationship satisfaction and commitment waxes and wanes over time without necessarily documenting relationship threats or their impact. Marriage and close relationships researchers, in comparison, use retrospective interviews to identify both positive and negative key events, and model their cumulative impact on fluctuations in commitment and satisfaction over time. Buehlman and Gottman's (1996) Oral History Interview, for example, guides couples through a discussion of their marital history including the good and bad times in their marriage.[1] Other researchers focus more specifically on eliciting the positive and negative events that have punctuated a relationship, either by asking partners to recall critical events in their relationship (Baxter, 1984) or by prompting them with an experimentally derived list of relationship events (Eastwick et al., 2018). This qualitative data forms the basis for plotting relationship trajectories, and for linking

[1]The Oral History Interview establishes a baseline for marital quality. In their research, Gottman and colleagues then monitored marriages over several years. Couples who participated in the initial Oral History Interview were intermittently recalled to the Gottman laboratory and asked – in order – to discuss the events of the day, an areas of continuing disagreement in their marriage, and a mutually pleasant topic. These discussions were coded for positive behaviors such a task-oriented relationship behavior, negative behaviors such as criticism, as well as expressions of positive and negative affect (e.g., Driver & Gottman, 2004; Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Over several rounds of interviews, Gottman and colleagues determined that stable and happy marriages have five or more positive interactions for every negative interaction the so-called "magic ratio", https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-magic-relationship-ratio-according-science/

the positive-to-negative event ratio of accumulated events to relationship outcomes such as commitment, closeness and trust.

Longitudinal analyses of relationship trajectories draw attention to the dynamic nature of relationship quality, highlighting the possibility that even positively-evaluated relationships can be derailed by relationship threats. Our re-conceptualization of relationship repair starts at the point of threat. A relationship threat de-stabilizes a relationship regardless of whether it is on a positive or a negative trajectory (Arriaga et al., 2019; Baxter et al., 1999; Eastwick et al., 2019). The momentary downturn in positive affect in a positive trajectory, or the amplification of negative affect on a negative trajectory, offers coworkers the opportunity to transform their relationships but carries the risk that the relationship will deteriorate. How coworkers respond to this opportunity determines a relationship's post-threat relationship trajectory. Our goal is to identify the strategies that effectively repair relationships, and those that may do further harm.

7.2 | Relationship trajectories: trends and fluctuations

Relationship trajectories are built on the accumulation of positive and negative turning points, that is, events that create moments of change within relationships. Positive turning points such as quality time, prosocial actions, and reconciliation build commitment to the relationship whereas negative turning points such as unmet expectations, conflict, and disengagement decrease commitment (Baxter et al., 1999; Koenig Kellas et al., 2008; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018). Broadly, these turning points accumulate to either build or diminish partners' satisfaction with and commitment to the relationship (Eastwick et al., 2019). In the workplace, the accumulation of positive or negative critical events affects coworkers' satisfaction (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018), and the accumulation of relationship conflicts decreases team members' satisfaction (Johnson & Avolio, 2019). These organizationally-relevant findings are among the few that analyze trajectories in the context of work relationships. Because there is limited analysis of relationship trajectories within the organizational behavior literature, much of our insight on this theme is derived from close relationships' research.

Upward trajectories are characterized by a linear increase in relationship commitment (Koenig Kellas et al., 2008), increasing closeness, and high trust (Baxter et al., 1999; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018). They develop when the number of positive events that occur in a relationship outweighs the number of negative events[2] (Baxter et al., 1999). *Downward trajectories* develop when negative relationship events outnumber positive events (Baxter et al., 1999). In downward trajectories partners drift apart over time (Dailey et al., 2013), commitment and closeness drop at each negative event (Koenig Kellas et al., 2008), and partners distrust and avoid each other (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018). Trajectories may also be *stable* over time, that is, they show no change in either cohesion or commitment (Baxter et al., 1999; Koenig Kellas et al., 2008). Although researchers suggest that this stability is the result of a low positive-to-negative event ratio that does not create impetus for change, we suggest that a low negative-to-positive event ratio will have the same consequences. The key difference is the affective tone of, and degree of commitment to, the relationship.

A longitudinal perspective highlights not only whether trajectories grow or decline, but also the speed with which these changes take place (Eastwick et al., 2018, 2019). We incorporate this idea into the description of post-threat trajectories below, linking relationship work to the speed with which relationship trajectories grow or decline.

7.3 | A taxonomy of post-threat relationship trajectories

Any specific experience of a relationship threat disrupts a relationship trajectory, and what happens next is determined by how coworkers respond to the threat. While the specifics of each relationship are unique, they are likely to be placed on one of four post-threat trajectories. These post-threat relationship trajectories are broadly aligned with the after-effects of other types of adversity or threat. For example, within the broader resilience literature, Richardson (2002) describes four distinct post-adversity life trajectories: resilient reintegration, reintegration of status quo, reintegration with loss, and dysfunctional reintegration. In an organizational context, Solinger et al. (2016) identify four similar patterns of relationship recovery following a psychological contract breach: psychological thriving, reactivation, impairment, and dissolution. Building on this research, we develop a typology of post-threat relationship trajectories.

Following Richardson (2002) we refer to relationships that are returned to a positive state as reintegrated relationships. To capture the less cohesive nature of relationships on a downward trajectory, we refer to them as fractionated relationships. Recognizing the speed with which trajectories change may vary, we also distinguish between those that show a rapid change in the post-threat evaluation of a relationship (evolving) and those that show a slow change (stable). We propose that the trajectory that emerges following a relationship threat is determined by the relationship work strategies that coworkers implement (see Figure 3, Table 1).

7.3.1 | Reintegrated trajectories

The defining characteristic of a reintegrated trajectory is that, following a relationship threat, partners successfully place the relationship on an upward trajectory. To reintegrate the relationship, coworkers need to capitalize on the turning point offered by a relationship threat to rebuild a stronger relationship (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Dailey et al., 2013). This reintegration is most likely to occur if coworkers are able to refocus on achieving common goals and overcoming the relationship threat (Koenig Kellas, 2005), paving the way for restoring

[2]The classification of trajectories as upward or downward is most often a qualitative one. Two exceptions to this qualitative assessment are Baxter et al. (1999), who define an upward trajectory as one in which the positive-to-negative event ratio is 3.6:1. A similar approach by Driver and Gottman (2004), as described above, sets this ratio at approximately 5:1.

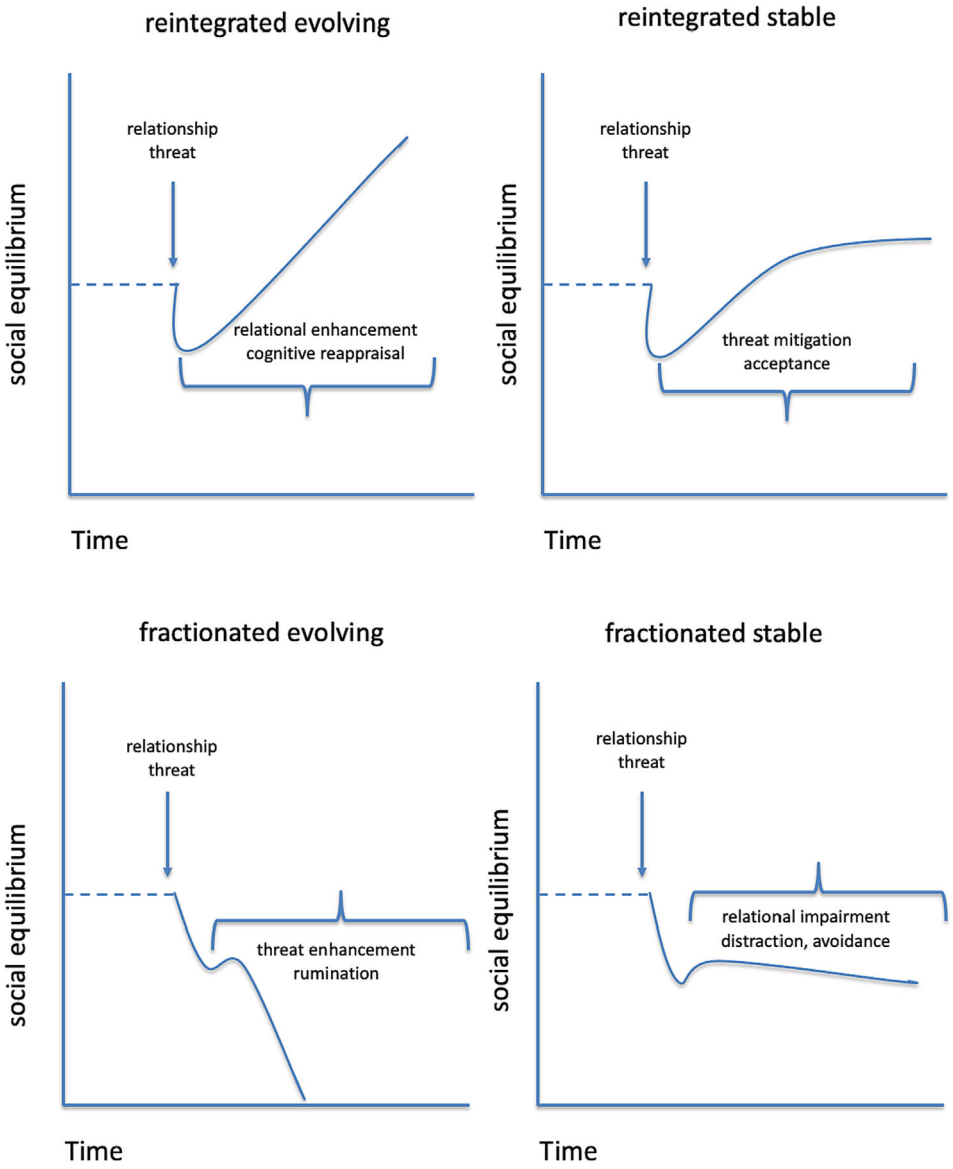

FIGURE 3 Schematic representation of post-threat trajectories.

social equilibrium. However, as we have described, there are variations in the velocity of an upward trend following a relationship threat (Eastwick et al., 2019). We propose that the velocity with which relationships are repaired will depend not only on partners' ability to utilize the opportunity presented to them, but also on the relationship work that they undertake following the threat.

A *reintegrated evolving* trajectory is defined by growth (Richardson, 2002), that is, a high velocity return to a positive trajectory. Coworkers will place their relationship on this trajectory if they use relational enhancement strategies and engage in cognitive reappraisal (e.g. Bauer et al., 2005; Dailey et al., 2013; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018). These strategies, because they support open communication and restore positive affect, provide assurances about relational commitment and rebuild relational cohesion (Bauer et al., 2005; Beuhlman et al., 1992; Gottman et al., 2015; Madhyastha et al., 2011; McAdams & Guo, 2015; Ogolsky et al., 2017). The rapid return to a positive trajectory is further supported through cognitive re-appraisal of the threat as offering benefits, a strategy that enables coworkers to re-establish a positive emotion climate (Bauer et al., 2005; McRae & Gross, 2020).

> **Proposition 5a.** A reintegrated evolving trajectory is established if relationship partners implement relationship enhancement strategies and engage in cognitive reappraisal.

In contrast, a *reintegrated stable* trajectory is defined by a low velocity return to a positive status quo (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018; Richardson, 2002). Threat mitigation and acceptance strategies may not improve a relationship but nor do they worsen it. Instead, coworkers stabilize their relationship by attributing the loss of cohesion to disrupted relational processes, and bolstering the relationship through the facilitatory and positive dyadic coping behaviors that we described earlier (Eberly et al., 2011, 2017; Knobloch & Solomon, 2004; Ogolsky et al., 2017). These actions restore but do not build relational cohesion. Acceptance, which distances coworkers from

TABLE 1 Overview of post-threat relationship repair and post-threat relationship trajectories.

Post-threat relationship repair	Post-threat relationship trajectories			
	Reintegrated evolving	***Reintegrated stable***	***Fractionated evolving***	***Fractionated stable***
Repair actions	*Relational enhancement* through relationship-oriented thinking, interdependent self-construal, open communication, affiliative humor *Affective up-regulation* through cognitive appraisal	*Threat mitigation* through positive attributions, positive facilitative behaviors, positive dyadic coping *Affective up-regulation* through acceptance	*Threat enhancement* through negative attributions, negative facilitative behaviors, negative dyadic coping *Affective down regulation* through rumination	*Relational estrangement* through conflict avoidance, antisocial behavior, negative humor *Affective down regulation* through affective avoidance (suppression and denial)
Subjective experience	Rapid restoration of relational cohesion and strengthening positive emotional climate	Slow restoration relational cohesion and stable positive emotion climate	Rapid deterioration of relational cohesion and worsening negative emotional climate	Slow deterioration of relational cohesion and stable negative emotion climate
Post-threat trajectory form	High velocity, upward	Low velocity, upward	High velocity, downward	Low velocity, downward

negative emotions, prevents the damage that might flow from dwelling on negative emotions but does not replenish their positive emotional bank account.

> **Proposition 5b.** A reintegrated stable trajectory is established if relationship partners implement threat mitigation strategies and regulate emotion through acceptance.

Fractionated trajectories develop when coworkers, following a relationship threat, take actions that place their relationship on a downward trajectory. Coworkers miss the transformational opportunity presented by the relationship threat, instead dwelling on the chaos and negative consequences that it creates (Dailey et al., 2013; Koenig Kellas, 2005). Adopting this perspective pushes coworkers apart and further destabilizes social equilibrium, resulting in losses of cohesion and commitment (e.g., Eastwick et al., 2018, 2019). In this case, the velocity with which relationships deteriorate will depend on the relational impairment and affective down-regulation behaviors that coworkers implement.

A *fractionated evolving* trajectory develops when coworkers magnify the threat, initiating a high velocity deterioration of their relationship (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018; Richardson, 2002). This rapid deterioration is the result of rumination, which amplifies the negative emotional impact of the relationship threat and causes individuals to further distance themselves from each other (Gorlin & Teachman, 2017). The implementation of interpersonally destructive behaviors associated with threat enhancement (hostility, criticism, negative attributions) will further hasten the deterioration of the relationship (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018; Ogolsky et al., 2017).

> **Proposition 6a.** A fractionated evolving trajectory is established if relationship partners implement threat enhancement strategies and engage in rumination.

A *fractionated stable* trajectory is characterized by a sense of loss (Richardson, 2002), and associated with a slow velocity return to a negative status quo. Although distraction or suppression (McRae & Gross, 2020) enable coworkers to stabilize the emotional climate, their failure to acknowledge negative emotions spills over to future interactions (Troy et al., 2023). Relational impairment behaviors such as person-centric attributions impede the return of the relationship to a workable level of cohesion, instead ensuring the relationship maintains pre-threat levels of disengagement (Agnew et al., 1998; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018; Ogolsky et al., 2017).

> **Proposition 6b.** A fractionated stable trajectory will be established if relationship partners implement relational impairment strategies and engage in affective avoidance (suppression, distraction).

8 | NARRATIVE FOUNDATIONS AND POST-THREAT TRAJECTORIES

The four post-threat trajectories that we described either reintegrate (evolving, stable) or fractionate (evolving, stable) relationships in the aftermath of a relationship threat. In this section, we highlight the links between relationship work, relationship foundations and post-threat trajectories. Our longitudinal perspective embeds relationship threats within the history of the relationship. One implication, for our reconceptualization of relationship repair, is that how coworkers respond to and repair relationships is contingent on the context within which threats are embedded (also, Carrere et al., 2000). Our broad proposition is that, because they offer coworkers different relational resources, communal- and exchange-oriented relationships influence whether relationships reintegrate or fractionate in the aftermath of a relationship threat.

Communally-oriented relationships, as we described earlier, are characterized by interdependence and a shared positive emotional climate. Individuals have a fundamental connection to their coworkers (Afifi et al., 2016; Clark & Reis, 1988; Li & Fung, 2019; Rousseau, 1998) that is characterized by high levels of cohesion, and a shared positive emotional climate. As we argued earlier, coworkers in communally-oriented relationships have the resources to place their relationships on a reintegrated trajectory, that is, one in which relational cohesion and a positive affective climate are restored. The velocity with which post-threat relationships grow will be determined by which set of strategies partners implement: addressing the loss of relational cohesion will lead to a more rapid return to social equilibrium than addressing the loss of positive affect (P3a, P3b).

Exchange-oriented relationships are characterized by independence. Relationships are built on loose and context-specific ties: coworkers' sense of "we" is constrained to their shared tasks and goals (McLean et al., 2019; Rousseau, 1998). Because of these characteristics, exchange-oriented relationships are more susceptible to the downward spiral that a relationship threat triggers. They lack the emotional resources to counteract the temporary negative affect triggered by a relationship threat, and without reversing this negative affect are poorly equipped for addressing the loss of relational cohesion. As a result, they are more likely than partners in communally-oriented relationships to implement strategies that worsen the relationship, placing it on a fractionated trajectory. The velocity with which relationships deteriorate will be determined by which of the strategies is enacted: social equilibrium will deteriorate more rapidly if coworkers fail to stabilize negative affect than if they fail to stem further loss of relational cohesion (P4a, P4b).

9 | IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The three core themes that we drew from our targeted literature review – relationship work, shared meaning, relationship trajectories – highlight the cognitive and behavioral actions that either facilitate or interfere with relationship repair following a relationship threat. In developing our reconceptualization of relationship repair we have identified new directions for organizational relationship research. We organize our discussion of future directions around these core themes, and conclude with recommendations for methodologies to advance our understanding of the relationship repair process. Before we address these three core themes, we consider the nexus between ambivalence and relationship threat.

9.1 | Ambivalent relationships

Relationships can be ambivalent either because partners simultaneously hold positive and negative evaluations of each other (Methot et al., 2017), or because they oscillate between positive and negative evaluations of each other (Melwani & Rothman, 2021). This oscillation over time is especially relevant to a longitudinal analysis of relationships. An implication is that the stable relationships identified by researchers – those in which positive and negative turning points are almost equal over time – may be an example of temporal splitting, implying that so-called stable relationships may need to be recast as ambivalent relationships. Supporting this possibility, Li and Fung (2019) show that relationship orientations can fluctuate from day-to-day. This recasting of stable relationships suggests that the impact of a relationship threat may vary depending on which relationship orientation is dominant when a relationship threat occurs. Research is needed to determine whether partners are better placed to repair their relationship if a threat occurs in a positive cycle (is in a communally-oriented phase) than if it occurs in a negative cycle (is in an exchange-oriented phase).

It is also possible that the narrative foundations undergirding a relationship are ambivalent. The definitions of communal- and exchange-oriented relationships are built on the assumption that relational cohesion and affective climate align to create a coherent narrative foundation for relationships. Ambivalent narrative foundations are created when relational cohesion and affect are misaligned: high relational cohesion is offset by a negative emotional climate, *or* low relational cohesion is offset by a positive emotional climate. When relationships have an ambivalent foundation, relationships will be subject to multiple vulnerabilities. Research is needed to determine whether, under these conditions, effective relationship repair requires a dual repair pathway that addresses both relational cohesion and affective climate.

9.2 | Relationship work

We theorized that whether relationship work reintegrates or fractionates relationship trajectories is contingent on the relationship orientation at the point of threat. This contingent link, although theoretically plausible, lacks empirical evidence. Fruitful avenues for further investigation are whether the effectiveness of relationship work is invariant across communal and exchange orientations or whether, as we suggest, it is contingent on relationship orientation. Extending this idea, we would also gain deeper insight into repair processes by testing whether the processes that lead to reintegration or fractionation following a relationship threat are dependent on relationship orientation.

Future research should also seek to understand the organizational conditions that may support coworkers in (re)establishing positive relationship dynamics. For example, organizations might define how coworkers should re-engage with each other by outlining interaction scripts, including the restoration rituals identified by Ren and Gray (2009), that help coworkers to navigate relationship threats (Lee et al., 2020). Future research could usefully test whether interaction protocols that set out the principles of open communication, make restoration rituals normative, and foster joint reappraisal of a relationship threat, assist coworkers to reintegrate their relationships.

9.3 | Shared meaning

Because of the critical importance of relationship narratives, we call on researchers to explore interaction framing (Dewulf et al., 2009) as a mechanism for restoring shared narrative foundations. While there is a rich literature on narrative construction at both the individual and organizational levels of analysis (Maitlis, 2005; Sonenshein, 2010), dyadic processes are poorly understood. Close relationship and sense-making research suggests that this process may be dominated by one coworker (McCoy et al., 2017), or that it may be a dyadic process in which coworkers jointly reconstruct their narrative (e.g., Grant et al., 2008; Petriglieri, 2015; Wright et al., 2000). Research needs to resolve when and how these dynamics emerge, and what relational actions enhance or inhibit the construction of shared meaning.

Recognizing that relationship threats can trigger short-term fluctuations in a more stable and long-term relationship orientation (Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010; Li & Fung, 2019; Marks et al., 2001), we need to better understand the tipping point at which a temporal split occurs. An unanswered question is whether there is a threshold effect (Driver & Gottman, 2004; e.g., Eastwick et al., 2019), that is, whether relationship threats need to reach a critical level before they disrupt pre-existing relationship orientations; and, whether these thresholds differ depending on whether the relationship has a communal or an exchange orientation.

A longitudinal perspective also implies relationship orientations can fluctuate over time (e.g., Li & Fung, 2019). Building on the temporal splitting construct, this fluctuation over time suggests that a relationship's vulnerabilities and the necessary repair processes will be contingent on the dominant relationship orientation at the moment of threat. Exploring this cyclical relationship between relationship orientations and relationship repair processes identifies a further avenue for research.

9.4 | Relationship trajectories

The trajectory-based perspective that we brought to bear on relationship repair processes encourages scholars to more explicitly incorporate relationship history in their own models. A more nuanced tracing of relationship trajectories might consider whether the impact of threats is influenced by a trajectory's valence (the rate at which evaluations change) and the degree to which coworkers have a shared (synchronous) evaluation of the relationship (Arriaga et al., 2019) at the point of threat. Research might also consider whether not just the occurrence of a relationship threat, but also its magnitude, significantly impacts its trajectory, and shapes how and whether coworkers can effectively repair relationships (see Tomlinson et al., 2004 for an example on trust violations). Building these factors into models of relationship repair will add insight into how satisfaction, commitment and cohesion play out over time. Our focus on shared meaning (synchrony) highlights the need to better understand whether, if relationship evaluations are asynchronous at the point of threat, relationship repair becomes a more complicated two-stage process in which coworkers must converge to a shared evaluation of their relationship before addressing the relationship threat.

Our reconceptualization of relationship repair made salient the absence of research on longer-term outcomes of relationship repair processes. We would benefit from studies that examine how post-threat trajectories and coworkers' actions during the repair process relate to coworkers' satisfaction with their relationship in the months following the threat, and to consider the ramifications that coworkers' post-threat relationship satisfaction has for career attitudes and organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, absenteeism and turnover intentions.

9.5 | Methodology

Our emphasis on relationship trajectories calls for a shift from cross-sectional to longitudinal methods. Methods such as event sampling (e.g.,. Hui & Kogan, 2018; Rinner et al., 2022), diary studies (e.g., Conway & Briner, 2002; Goldring & Bolger, 2022; Johnson et al., 2022; Perelman et al., 2022), and the narrative interview protocols used by close relationships researchers (Baxter, 1984; Buehlman & Gottman, 1996; Eastwick et al., 2018) would better equip us to trace the formation of relationship trajectories, and the impact of relationship threats. These methodological tools would position researchers to trace long-term relationship trends, map the impact of relationships threats and relationship repair actions, and link these to broader interpersonal and organizational outcomes.

To gain insights into key mechanisms such as shared meaning requires a shift to dyad level theorizing and methodology. This shift also allows us to identify a potentially important factor in effective relationship repair: whether both coworkers take an equal part in the repair process or whether one coworker leads the way. Analyses need to be conducted at the dyadic level to allow for the development of multi-level models that account for the interplay of individual- and dyad-level processes. In this context, the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model offers a useful tool for analyzing relationship repair processes (e.g., McCoy et al., 2017).

Discussions of relationships, and their repair, traverse individual and dyadic levels. The multi-level nature of relationship appraisal is most evident in theorizing about relationship trajectories by Eastwick et al. (2019), who focus on the individual, and Arriaga et al. (2019), whose discussion of synchrony shifts attention to the dyad. Ogolsky et al. (2017) similarly identify both individual and dyadic actions that maintain (or threaten) relationships. Finally, recent research on positivity resonance (Brown et al., 2021) shifts attention from individual to co-created affect. Our understanding of these processes is in its infancy, and identifying the mechanisms by which synchrony is achieved is critical to gaining deeper insight into the relationship repair process.

Complementing quantitative methodologies with qualitative approaches would further deepen our understanding of shared meaning and relationship work. Researchers can conduct semi-structured interviews to closely examine how workers come to assign meaning

to their relationships, and compare these across co-worker dyads to understand the points of commonality and difference in how coworkers view their relationships before, during, and after a relationship threat (for example, see Adler et al., 2017). In doing so, researchers can better understand the process and determinants of building shared meaning.

10 | CONCLUSION

Coworker relationships play a vital role in organizational life and, like other relationships, they can and often do breakdown. Events both within and outside of the relationship can culminate in a perception of relationship threat, triggering negative affect, a loss of relational commitment, and detrimental interpersonal and organizational outcomes. Such negative consequences necessitate a better understanding of when and how coworkers are able to "right the ship" in spite of relationship threats, acting in ways that heal the relationship. Yet, our literature previously lacked a holistic account of the relationship repair process. To address this issue, we reconceptualized coworkers' relationship repair process by integrating insights from the trust repair, emotion regulation, close relationships, and work relationships literatures. Looking across these literatures, we identified the restoration of social equilibrium and shared meaning as key components of relationship repair, and as central to the quality of a post-threat relationship. We highlighted the role of narrative foundations – communal vs exchange – in determining the ways in which relationships might break down and most effectively be repaired. We offer this reconceptualization in an environment characterized by increasingly complex work relationships: workers are gaining more autonomy and choice in their work relationships while navigating the more complicated relationships that define an era of increased flexibility, mobility and virtuality. Even as their importance increases, so does the complexity and challenge of building and maintaining strong positive relationships. In this context, the insights that we provide about relationship repair processes are both timely and relevant.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Melbourne, as part of the Wiley - The University of Melbourne agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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How to cite this article: Olekalns, M., & Caza, B. B. (2024). Resetting relationship trajectories: A reconceptualization of the relationship repair process. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *45*(2), 313–332. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2769