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[−] Abstract and Keywords

High-quality connections (HQCs) are short-term, dyadic interactions that are positive in terms of the subjective experience of the connected individuals and the structural features of the connection. Although previous research has shown that HQCs are associated with individual and organizational outcomes, we advance theory by identifying cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms and aspects of the context that build and strengthen HQCs in organizations. We discuss the implications of uncovering these mechanisms for understanding processes such as relational formation and relational resilience, relational theories such as exchange theory, organizational moderators for these mechanisms, and the implications for individual agency. We close the chapter with suggestions for selecting methods and research designs that will enhance our understanding of the development and impact of HQCs at work.

Keywords: Keywords: , Connections, relationships, mechanisms, cognition, emotion, behavior, organizational context

Our chapter explores the theory and research behind the building of high-quality connections (HQCs) at work. *High-quality connections* is the term we use to designate short-term, dyadic, positive interactions at work. The positivity of HQCs is known by how they feel for both persons involved, what HQCs do, and the beneficial outcomes they produce. The feeling of an HQC can be experienced as the uplift felt when encountering someone who expresses genuine concern for how you are doing after a grueling meeting or work shift. The way in which HQCs function can be understood through how you think more clearly and act more competently after a particular conversation with a colleague before entering a meeting. A focus on these kinds of quality connections is part of a broader interest in understanding the foundations and impacts of positive interrelating at work (Dutton & Ragins, 2007), which include individual and collective flourishing and thriving (Dutton & Glynn, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2000).

We begin our chapter by reviewing the definition, assumptions, and theoretical motivation behind focusing on HQCs. We then move to laying the groundwork for a research review through a discussion of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms that explain how HQCs are formed, and illustrate how features of the organizational context shape how these causal mechanisms work. Considering these causal mechanisms leads to suggestions for future research and a discussion of methods that can help us better understand connections in work organizations.

Foundations of High-quality Connections Research

Building on previous research (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), we define work connections as the dynamic, living tissue (Berscheid & Lopes, 1997) that exists between two people at work when some interaction occurs that involves mutual awareness. Connections direct researchers' attention to the experience of discrete interactions that transpire on a single occasion or within the context of an ongoing relationship between two people (e.g., a

conversation, hallway (p. 386) interaction, or apology). Although relationships refer to an enduring association between two persons (Reis, 2001), our definition of connections does not assume that the two people have a prior history or ongoing bond. Instead, exploring connections involves a focus on the micro-bits of interrelating at work that can contribute to a relationship over time, but are important in and of themselves.

Our assertion that connections are worthy of greater theoretical attention rests on four assumptions. First, we assume that humans are intrinsically social and have a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968), thus making connections an important aspect of people's social experience in organizations. Second, we assume that connections are dynamic and change as individuals alter how they are feeling, thinking, and behaving while interrelating with another person (Gable & La Guardia, 2007; Reis, 2007). Third, the work of organizations is performed through social processes, and connections are key elements for understanding how work is accomplished. Fourth, we assume that connections vary in quality. Differences in quality reflect variance in how healthy and well-functioning the living tissue (in this case, the dyadic connection) is at a particular point in time.

We are particularly interested in two clusters of connection-quality indicators (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). One cluster focuses on the positivity of the subjective and emotional experience of each individual in the connection. The second taps structural features of the connection that enhance the potentiality and responsiveness of the connection.

Connection quality is marked by three subjective experiences. First, connection quality is sensed by the feelings of vitality in connection. People in an HQC are more likely to feel positive arousal and a heightened sense of positive energy (Quinn & Dutton, 2005). Second, the quality of a connection is also felt through a sense of positive regard (Rogers, 1951). Being regarded positively denotes a sense of feeling known and loved, or of being respected and cared for in the connection. Finally, the subjective experience of a connection's quality is marked by the degree of felt mutuality. Mutuality captures the feeling of potential movement in the connection, born out of mutual vulnerability and responsiveness as both people experience full participation and engagement in the connection at the moment (Miller & Stiver, 1997). These three subjective markers help to explain why HQCs are experienced as attractive and pleasant, but also as life-giving. Literally and figuratively, one senses life or being more alive in these kinds of human-to-human connections.

High-quality connections are also defined in terms of three structural features. These three features capture the structural capacity of the connection. First, a higher connection quality implies greater emotional carrying capacity, which is evidenced by the expression of more emotion, both positive and negative, when in the connection. The tensility of the connection captures the connection's capacity to bend and withstand strain and to function in a variety of circumstances. It is the feature of the connection that indicates its resilience or its capacity to bounce back after setbacks. The third characteristic of a connection's quality is its connectivity. Connectivity describes a connection's level of openness to new ideas and influences. The three structural features help specify why connections of higher quality between two people foster beneficial outcomes.

Our conception of positive connection quality originates in relational theory, with its focus on the human growth and development that can occur while in connection with—rather than separation from—others (Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). On the other hand, relational concepts important to organizational research, such as trust and social support, are based in exchange theory, which emphasizes the instrumental exchange of resources between people (e.g., Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Trust, for example, is defined in terms of how one expects another to act (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; McAllister, 1995). Similarly, social support describes the amount and content of care and aid exchanged between people at work, and how these resources buffer negativity (Uchino, 2004). Although these relational phenomena can be positive (or at least lead to positive outcomes), we believe that taking a different theoretical starting point broadens our understanding of relational phenomena in two ways. First, our theorizing about HQCs emphasizes the positive, mutually developmental experience of being in a connection, rather than the exchanges of resources and rewards. Second, by attending to the structural qualities of connection quality, we highlight how HQCs are associated with capacities that affect individual and dyadic performance, helping to explain why HQCs are associated with positive outcomes.

Why Do They Matter Theoretically? Impacts of High-quality Connections

Since HQCs are shorter-term moments within ongoing relationships or encounters between strangers, (p. 387) the

traces of their impact have received less research attention compared to ongoing relationships. Meta-analyses of the impact of relationships at work on a variety of outcomes suggest HQCs should be impactful (e.g., Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008), and we briefly summarize other pieces of evidence that point to their value.

Evidence suggests that HQCs improve individual functioning through affecting cognitive, physiological, and behavioral processes. For example, experimental studies suggest that small amounts of interaction with others can improve both persons' cognitive performance in terms of speed of processing and working memory performance (Ybarra et al., 2008). Furthermore, in their review of medical evidence, Heaphy and Dutton (2008) show how brief interactions at work can have salutary effects on individuals through affecting the cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and immune systems. Research also suggests that HQCs facilitate individual employees' recovery and adaptation when they are suffering from loss or illness (e.g., Lilius, Worline, Maitlis, Kanov, Dutton, & Frost, 2008), undergoing transitions in their careers or jobs (e.g., Ibarra, 2003) or need task-related help (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). High-quality connections are important means by which individuals develop and grow (Ragins & Verbos, 2007), enhance and enrich identities (Roberts, 2007), and form attachments to work organizations or to communities (e.g., Blatt & Camden, 2007). They can also create moments of learning and mutual inquiry in contexts as varied as negotiations (Kolb & Williams, 2003; Putnam, 2004) and organizational change (Creed & Scully, 2000; Meyerson, 2001).

At a more collective level, there is also evidence that HQCs can have beneficial effects. For example, HQCs among members of organizational units are associated with greater levels of psychological safety and trust. Higher levels of psychological safety, in turn, contribute to greater unit-level learning from failures (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Higher levels of interpersonal trust can spawn spirals of increasing cooperation and trustworthiness (Ferrin, Bligh, & Kohles, 2008). Finally, HQCs are also associated with improving organizational processes such as coordination (e.g., Gittell, 2003) and error detection (e.g., Vogus, 2004).

Given the evidence for the value of HQCs to individual and organizational functioning, it is important to understand how such connections are built and strengthened. We use the terms "building" and "strengthening" to refer to the initiation of an HQC and the movement toward a connection of greater quality, respectively. We aim to further theory development by proposing mechanisms that help to build HQCs, rather than replicate research linking HQCs to positive outcomes (e.g., Carmeli, 2009; Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009). In an effort to make our theory more flexible and precise (Elster, 1998; Stinchcombe, 1991), we explain how cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and organizational mechanisms build and strengthen HQC connections. For the most part, these are "action formation" mechanisms, in which one micro-component (e.g., cognition, emotion, or behavior) influences another (Hedstrom & Swedberg, 1998). Yet, since these connections are described within the work context, we also outline how this context shapes our action formation mechanisms.

By opening up the "black box" of how HQCs are built, we hope to provide a stronger foothold for scholars interested in developing and testing theory about how to build and strengthen the connections that aid individual (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000) and collective functioning in organizations (e.g., Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Quinn & Dutton, 2005). For example, these mechanisms can help us understand key relational processes, including relational initiation and resilience, and deepen our understanding of relational theories such as exchange theory. Our discussion of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms behind connection quality uncovers the myriad ways in which individuals can shape interactions more positively. Finally, describing how the connection building process is further shaped by the organizational context presents potentially significant contingencies for how we are to understand the role of these mechanisms. Substantial contributions to both scholarship and practice can thus be gained by our exploration of how cognition, emotions, behavior, and organizational context spur and strengthen HQCs.

Explaining High-quality Connections: Three Sets of Mechanisms
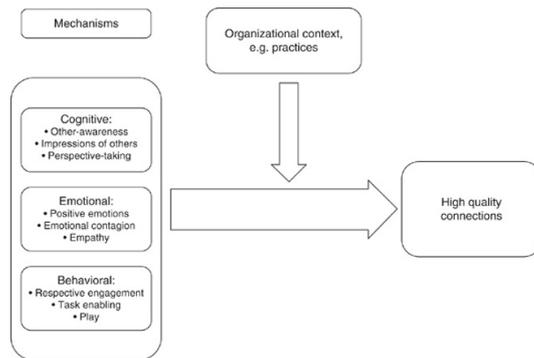
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Fig. 29.1 Conceptual model of the mechanisms for building high-quality connections.

We focus on three major categories of contributors—cognitive, emotional, and behavioral—because they are basic social-psychological pathways through which HQCs at work are built and strengthened. Cognitive mechanisms highlight how conscious and unconscious thought processes predispose people to building HQCs. Emotional mechanisms point out how feelings open people up to connection and are shared between people in ways that build HQCs. Finally, behavioral mechanisms showcase the role of different kinds of moves (Goffman, 1959) and **(p. 388)** modes of interrelating that explain the quality of connection that two people form. By surveying key examples of each kind of mechanism, we aim to seed future research, rather than provide an exhaustive account of mechanisms leading to HQCs. Our overall conceptual model is summarized in Figure 29.1.

Cognitive Mechanisms

Individuals' cognitions are key building blocks for connections because the mental processing of information about others shapes people's orientation toward forming connections with others. Although cognitions ultimately inform actions (Gibson, 1979), we outline how mental processes, such as other-awareness, impression-formation, and perspective-taking, matter in the formation of HQCs.

Other-awareness

A primary mechanism for establishing connection is being aware of another person's presence and behaviors, and recognizing that the other is a salient aspect of the environment (Davis & Holtgraves, 1984). As a basic human cognitive ability, other-awareness refers to the capacity to distinguish between the behavior, cognitions, and emotions of the self and that of others (Asendorpf & Baudonniere, 1993; Asendorpf, Warkentin, & Baudonniere, 1996). Other-awareness is necessary for accurately recalling the characteristics and behaviors that identify particular others (Overbeck & Park, 2001). Being aware of others (viz. supervisors) at work has also been linked with intentions to stay at a particular job (Gardner, Dunham, Cummings, & Pierce, 1987), further suggesting that some sort of focus on others fosters an orientation toward connecting and a willingness to maintain current connections. Other-awareness involves being aware of what others are doing, and this is especially important for providing some context for one's own actions. For example, in a study of students in short-term, geographically distributed groups, other-awareness was displayed in requests for and the provision of information about what group members were doing or would do (Weisband, 2002). Even through e-mail, groups with members that were more aware of each other were able to better coordinate their actions, suggesting that other-awareness fostered the formation of higher-quality connections.

Impressions of others

Although being aware of others, who they are, and what they do fosters interrelating in a more mutual and other-regarding way, the quick impressions we form about others can also shape how connections develop. People can make rapid judgments of whether particular others are accepting, supportive, and warm, based on observing "thin slices" (less than 5 minutes) of their nonverbal behaviors, such as **(p. 389)** gestures and facial expressions (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000; Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). These initial impressions of warmth and acceptance attract individuals to each other, shaping the choice of who to connect with and thereby increasing the chances of selecting someone who is able and willing to be mutually engaged.

Sensing who might be warm and accepting can aid both connection-building and strengthening. For example, for any new employee trying to get "on board" with her organization, gauging who will most likely be accepting and open to connection helps to determine who she initially approaches for information and help (Rollag, Parise, & Cross, 2005). These judgments can potentially help one select someone to connect with who will be most likely to provide positive regard, and thus be a good bet for a HQC. At the same time, these impressions can also inform how connections are undertaken within the context of longer-term relationships. Perceptions of how warm or supportive someone is based on his or her current posture and facial expression can guide the decision to interact with that person at that time (cf. Elfenbein, 2007). For example, perceiving that someone is anxious and unable to provide support could either limit requesting help from them, which might further add to their frustration, or motivate providing support to them. On the other hand, sensing that the person is accepting and able to offer support could allow for a timely request for care and support (see Baron & Boudreau, 1987).

Perspective-taking

Although employees form impressions about someone's disposition based on brief glimpses of their behavior, they also imagine themselves in another person's shoes, which is called perspective-taking. Perspective-taking goes beyond other-awareness in not only recognizing another's distinct behavior and internal state, but also in mentally representing the other's experience as one's own (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004; Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). Perspective-taking has been conceptualized as the cognitive component of empathy, which, in combination with empathy's affective component, motivates altruistic behavior and helping (Batson, Dyck, Brandt, Batson, Powell, McMaster, & Griffitt, 1988; Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). Perspective-taking facilitates predicting another person's behavior and reactions (Davis, 1983) and the shaping of one's own behaviors in ways that demonstrate care and concern, and that can facilitate a positive response from the other. In one work example, being more adept at perspective-taking would have helped a consultant anticipate how developing changes to a project without involving his client could have threatened the client's sense of competency and made him angry (Williams, 2007). Being predisposed to imagine how the client might feel might have led the consultant to present his suggestions in ways that affirmed the client's abilities and invited further improvement, ultimately building the connection.

This description of the role of cognitive mechanisms in building HQCs reveals two key points. First, certain cognitions can predispose people to be more or less open to connect with others at work, as is the case with other-awareness and perspective-taking. Second, only small pieces of information are needed for cognition to shape organizational members' sensitivity to whether others are open to connection. In the following section, we build on these points by describing how emotions strengthen and build HQCs by altering individuals' orientations toward others and opening up and inviting in further interaction.

Emotional Mechanisms

Emotions are part of people's everyday experience in organizations (Fineman, 1993), and they help us know we are in connection with others (Sandelands & Boudens, 2000). Some psychologists argue that emotions help people navigate relationally by facilitating both their responses to problems they confront in their social worlds and the maintenance of social order (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Morris & Keltner, 2000). We focus on three areas of emotions research useful for understanding how emotions explain the building of HQCs. Research on positive emotions, emotional contagion, and empathy provides theoretical accounts for how emotions travel between people, building and strengthening connections in the process.

Positive emotions

Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) research on positive emotions has built evidence to support her hypothesis that positive emotions broaden our thinking and help build durable, social resources. This broadening and building includes the development of greater relationship closeness (self–other overlap) in new relationships (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006) and the perception of intergroup similarity (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005).

Positive emotions vary in their relationship consequences, and one such emotion, gratitude, may be particularly relevant for building HQCs. Gratitude, or (p. 390) thankfulness, occurs when an individual perceives that someone intentionally provides something valuable to another (e.g., Emmons & Shelton, 2001; Fredrickson, 2004).

Feeling grateful toward others boosts attention to the positive qualities of the benefactor and the motivation to relate to the benefactor (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). There is also evidence that gratitude has both immediate and enduring effects for both members of a dyad. When one person experiences gratitude, both members of a dyad experience greater connection over time (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, in press; Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). In an example from a product innovation firm, when design team members enthusiastically demonstrated gratitude for each other's contributions in brainstorming sessions, this thankfulness, and the connection itself, was reinforced by inviting those particular team members to future meetings (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006).

Emotional contagion

Emotional contagion refers to the family of phenomena that describes the interpersonal influence of emotions (Elfenbein, 2007), or more specifically, how a person or group unwittingly or explicitly influences the emotions and attitudes of another person or group (Schoenewolf, 1990). Through emotional contagion, individuals can share similar emotional experiences as they unconsciously mimic each other's facial expressions, movements, and vocalizations (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992). This increased mimicry, in turn, has been linked to greater liking and rapport (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Lakin, Jefferis, Cheng, & Chartrand, 2003).

Emotional contagion can also occur through the conscious management of emotional displays through surface or deep acting, which may or may not be concordant with their underlying emotional experience (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). These emotional displays influence how positive emotions travel between people. Researchers have studied these emotional displays in boundary spanning positions, such as customer service, and find that emotions do travel between employee and customer (Pugh, 2001). This contagion positively affects the quality of the connection, as rated by peers or customers, when the emotional display is viewed as authentic (Grandey, 2003; Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006).

Empathy

Empathy occurs when a person vicariously experiences another's emotion (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Empathy is viewed as the basis of human connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997). When people feel empathy for another, they experience warmth, compassion, and concern for the other, which, in turn, motivates altruistic (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; Davis, 1983) and prosocial behavior (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986), which are markers of higher-quality relationships (Reis & Collins, 2000). In one example, McNeely and Meglino (1994) found in a study of secretaries that self-reported empathy was correlated with higher levels of prosocial behaviors toward others.

Empathy can also be skillfully enacted to facilitate quality connecting. Therapists such as Carl Rogers (1951) and Jean Baker Miller (Miller & Stiver, 1997) view empathy as an essential component in creating a relationship that can engender a feeling of interpersonal support and promote growth and change. Empathy is also considered a core part of emotional (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) as well as social intelligence (Goleman, 2006). Studies have found, for example, that when one is skilled at understanding another's emotions, the other person reports greater liking (Mueller & Curhan, 2006). In caregiving organizations, service providers are trained to provide an experience of empathy to their clients (Kahn, 1992), while managers in all types of organizations express empathy for their colleagues and employees (Frost, 2003). Through the skillful use of empathy, HQCs can be built and strengthened.

In sum, emotions powerfully influence how people at work connect with others in a range of ways, from the unconscious nonverbal communication of emotional contagion, to the felt experience of empathy. In addition, positive emotions promote more openness toward others. Emotion-based mechanisms highlight how emotions coordinate the mind, body, and feelings, orienting individuals toward others, and simultaneously inviting others to engage, build, and strengthen HQCs. We now turn to perhaps the most observable of the three mechanisms, the behaviors that bring us together.

Behavioral Mechanisms

Behaviors are observable elements of interpersonal communication and are critical means for the building of HQCs in the workplace. Research suggests that demonstrating respect, task enabling, and playing each facilitate the building of HQCs.

Respectful engagement

Respectful behaviors are defined by how they show esteem, dignity, and care for another person (p. 391) (e.g., Ramarajan, Barsade, & Burak, 2008). Research on civility (and incivility, e.g., Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2000; Pearson & Porath, 2009), dignity (e.g., Hodson, 2001), and respect (e.g., Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000) suggest that everyday behaviors and small moves communicate how one person values another. Research in the traditions of symbolic interactionism (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1967; Mead, 1934) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) describes how gestures, talk, and bodily postures convey and are interpreted as respect. Since the provision and interpretation of communicative behaviors occur through interaction (Sennet, 2003), when these behaviors demonstrate the basic human entitlements of respect and dignity (Rawls, 1971), they foster peoples' chances of experiencing an HQC.

We see the link between respectful engagement with others and HQCs in several research domains. First, psychological presence or being engaged with others displays respect and encourages continued interaction (Kahn, 1992). When presence is lacking, such as when communication modes like electronic mail limit access to nontextual cues or when multitasking limits attention to the other, connection suffers (Hallowell, 1999). Second, actions that communicate affirmation and reflect respect and worth can potentially enable connections and make interactions quite meaningful. This was the case for hospital cleaners who felt respected by how they were spoken to by patients; these cleaners derived meaning and satisfaction from such interactions (e.g., Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Third, respect is important for the connections involved in recruitment and selection, in which information is exchanged between those inside and outside of an organization. In a video analysis of interview conversations, LeBaron, Glenn, and Thompson (2009) detail how micro-behaviors convey respect in interaction, which in turn shapes the possibility of the interviews' outcomes. Fourth, expressions of gratitude or thanks also affirm a recipient's worth and value. In turn, this affirmation fosters a motivation to help others, and thus increases connection quality (Grant & Gino, 2010).

Task enabling

A second form of behavior important for HQCs is task enabling, or interpersonal actions that help someone complete or perform a task (Dutton, 2003b). Research on interpersonal helping (e.g., Lee, 1997), interpersonal citizenship (e.g., Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000; Williams & Anderson, 1991), and prosocial motivation (e.g., Penner, 2002) all suggest that the interpersonal provision of information, emotional support, and other resources can cultivate perspective-taking and gratitude, which fosters connection quality. Researchers tend to examine how the quality of a relationship enables helping (e.g., Settoon & Mossholder, 2002), and not the reverse. However, the role of reciprocity would suggest that acting generously toward another would encourage the same in return (Gouldner, 1960), engendering the mutuality, vitality, and positive regard that define an HQC. Receiving help in a way that ensures fairness, dignity, and respect elicits positive responses from recipients, such as increased commitment to the overall relationship (e.g., Flynn & Brockner, 2003). In turn, if recipients feel that help is being provided for some instrumental purpose, they are less likely to experience an HQC (Ames, Flynn, & Weber, 2004).

Play

A third form of interaction conducive to building HQCs is play. Play is a distinctly human capacity that develops over a person's lifetime (Huizinga, 1950), and it is seen by some as a direct expression of human community (Sandelands, 2010). Specifically, playful activities provide goods internal to the activities (e.g., skills and pleasures that are only available when participating in a playful activity; MacIntyre, 1981), are actively engaged in, contain social rules, are learned through participation, contain elements that are repeated, transcend the individual self, and involve risk (Stone, 1989). Accordingly, play enables connection at work in at least two important ways. First, play enables variation in response patterns during interaction, promoting learning about another that is less possible or likely in a work or nonplay mode. For example, in a community hospital billing department, employees developed extensive playing routines that involved squirt gun fights, elaborate play with a mascot, and routinized sunshine breaks. These instances of connection-as-play were useful for reducing stress, taking people outside their normal roles and behaviors, and thus allowing employees to see and know each other differently (Dutton, 2003a; Worline, Lilius, Dutton, Kanov, Maitlis, & Frost, 2009).

Second, as is the case with games, being fully engaged with others in the rules that set play apart from the "real

world" can encourage more interpersonal risk taking, and a loss of self-consciousness (Czikszentmihalyi, 1975; Eisenberg, 1990). Through developing a concern for both self and other, and being fully present in the moment, people experience (p. 392) a sense of freedom and happiness. These positive feelings help open people up to connecting with others they may otherwise not know. For example, in a regional unit of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, playing is seen as an important means for cultivating connections among employees, as well as between employees and the clients they serve (Grant & Berg, 2009). Playfulness broke down hierarchy and a sense of bureaucracy, creating a different form of connection between employees used to being separated through formal roles and helping to develop rapport with donors, volunteers, and families who were being served (Make-A-Wish families).

These behavioral mechanisms all suggest that what we do and how we do it in our interactions with others at work are important for changing the possibilities for and means of connecting. The focus on respectful engagement, task enabling, and playing shows us that small moves matter for building connection and that modes of interacting can transform people's understandings of how they relate to others. Since this all occurs within the context of work, we now examine how features of the workplace would further modify these basic causal mechanisms.

The Role of the Organizational Context

The work context is likely to moderate how and to what degree these mechanisms influence connection quality (Mischel, 1977) as context alters the opportunities, forms, and meaning of connecting. Although many aspects of the organizational context are relevant for building connections, we focus on organizational practices, or the recurring bundles of behavior at work (Orlikowski, 2002) that enable or limit the opportunities or motivation to connect with others (Baker & Dutton, 2007; Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002; Fletcher, 1998). Practices can be both formal (e.g., human resource practices, such as selection and evaluation) and informal (e.g., turn-taking at meetings). We focus on practices of selection and communication in meetings that foster the HQC mechanisms outlined above. We illustrate these practices with examples from Menlo Innovations, a small software design firm in Ann Arbor, Michigan, that relies on pairs of programmers to develop computer code (DeGraff & Lawrence, 2002). By doing so, we aim to demonstrate how the organizational context moderates how connection building processes are likely to work.

Organizational practices and cognitive mechanisms

Practices have the potential to shape what people know about each other (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002), and about the organization (Vogus & Welbourne, 2003). In the case of Menlo, the practice of "extreme interviewing" allows for the acquisition, sharing, and building of information between people. In this process for selecting new employees, 50 candidate programmers directly interact and work with the entire staff. This kind of interviewing allows potential hires to demonstrate skills like perspective-taking as they develop, correct, and share code with other interviewees and current staff. Through observing and reporting on the candidates, Menlo staff actually test out their initial perceptions and impressions of job candidates in the context of a participatory hiring process (Baker & Dutton, 2007). By selecting on demonstrated skills, Menlo increases the likelihood that employees will have perspective-taking capabilities that allow them to build HQCs, and also ensures that current staff involved in the selection process are more aware of new hires, their capabilities, and thus their potential for connection (see Prusak & Cohen, 2001).

Organizational practices and emotional mechanisms

Menlo's use of daily stand-up meetings is a practice that allows employees to express needs, gratitude, and admiration for others in a public, group setting on a regular basis. Meetings matter, since they serve as arenas for situating others in their relative roles, and are where the various elements of the organization converge (Boden, 1994; Pomerantz & Denvir, 2007; Van de Ven, Delbecq, & Koenig, 1976). Every day, at approximately 10 a.m., the staff, programmers, and directors working in the Menlo office gather in a circle to each give a 20- to 60-second report on the status of their current project. Standing in a circle puts each person on an equal footing, thus decreasing status differences that can get in the way of building HQCs (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2002). These meetings give each individual the opportunity to express his or her concerns, advice, offers of assistance, and gratitude for help received. Such meetings allow people to collectively and publicly express the positive emotions of gratitude and admiration that affirm others' contributions, and foster higher-quality connections (see Dutton, 2003b).

Organizational practices and behavioral mechanisms

Respectful communication is routinized through the practice of the stand-up meeting as well. The turn-taking that is enforced as part of these meetings allows for mutual and collective engagement as each (p. 393) individual or pair of programmers speaks out on their current needs (Schegloff, 2000). People only speak up when a Viking helmet (with two horns) is passed to them. This allows members of pairs to both signal that they "hold the floor" as a unit, delimiting who speaks when. These kinds of rituals for turn-taking can be very important for shaping interaction dynamics (Collins, 2004; Tannen, 2001). In this context, using the helmet also makes the meeting more playful; as in other contexts of play, people accept the common rules of passing around the helmet and using that to determine turn-taking. Although meetings allow for the development and dispersion of organizational knowledge (Hargadon & Sutton, 1997; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996), playful meetings help people know each other in different ways, and the fun invites a focus on the actual process of interrelating with others, and not just on the information being exchanged (Dougherty & Takacs, 2004). This play encourages people to open up even more about their struggles and successes, thus facilitating higher-quality connections.

Taken together, these intersections among the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms and the practices of the organization provide an illustration of how social psychological mechanisms can be amplified (or diminished) through the conditions of the organizational context. Creating and sustaining HQCs at work are contingent upon the organizational context and how people engage that context—or possibly shape it in their own ways—to facilitate connection.

Future Directions

It is exciting to consider the insights revealed by the elaboration of mechanisms that help to explain how HQCs at work are built and strengthened. Using a mechanisms lens makes at least four contributions toward how we understand the role of generative micro-units of interrelating within dyads.

First, at a basic level, articulating the mechanisms underlying the building and strengthening of HQCs highlights the variety of internal and overt social psychological processes that contribute to quickly forming positive connections. The focus on connections, as opposed to relationships, emphasizes the importance of short interactions in work organizations. The elaboration of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms further emphasizes the fast-acting causes of connecting dynamics in organizations. We live in a work world that relies increasingly on temporary collaborations (Faraj & Xiao, 2006; Lewin & Regine, 2000) and swift coordination (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996). Accordingly, individuals have to build HQCs quickly within and across organizational boundaries and understanding the "nuts and bolts, cogs and wheels" (Elster, 1989, p. 3) that help to explain the creation and strengthening of connection in work-based interactions is theoretically and practically useful.

Theoretically, the mechanisms-based approach to elaborating the causes of HQCs enriches theories of relational processes in organizations, such as relational formation and relational resilience. In the case of relational formation, the quality of mutual awareness in initial connections shapes how newcomers learn and are assimilated into organizations (e.g., Ashforth, Saks, & Lee, 1998; Louis, 1980; Morrison, 2002). Similarly, initial connection quality influences the development of longer-term relationships in the case of business relationships (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987), negotiations (McGinn & Keros, 2002), and mentorship (Kram, 1988; Thomas, 1993), which are all critical relational formation domains. In the case of relational resilience, researchers studying how relationships change or adapt to setbacks can use our approach to advance theory on how the connective tissue of a relationship can be strengthened in the face of incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2009), trust violations (Pratt & Dirks, 2006), offences (Bright, Fry, & Cooperrider, 2006), or poor communication (cf. Gittell, 2002a, b). For example, perspective-taking might inform an offender in an uncivil situation that the other party feels wronged; coupled with practices set in place to address grievances, the offender can begin on the path of relational repair. In this way, our approach specifies new theoretical pathways and linkages.

Second, understanding the mechanisms of HQCs also enriches our understanding of how relationships impact people at work. For example, social exchange theory describes how people engage in relationships to exchange resources (Homans, 1974; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). However, theories of social exchange say less about what social-psychological conditions encourage engagement in exchange relationships. Our mechanism-based approach suggests that engagement in relationships for valuable resources is facilitated by, for example, accurate

other-awareness (who has what I need?), gratitude (to ensure continued exchange), and respect (demonstrating that the other is valuable). Thus, our mechanisms approach for HQCs enriches perspectives that explain how and why people in organizations engage in relationships based on exchange.

(p. 394) Our third contribution stems from attending to the organizational moderators arising from the organizational context in our account of the causes of HQCs. For our theory of HQC initiation and strengthening to be more flexible and precise, we have outlined how the presence of certain organizational practices is a contingency for the development of HQCs. Although we have focused on organizational practices as potential moderators of connecting mechanisms, many other important contextual features of organizations should be considered (e.g., Baker & Dutton, 2007; Rollag et al., 2005). Through a more complete articulation of contextual features, researchers are better able to see the organizational embedding of relational processes that begin with the building and strengthening of HQCs.

Fourth, and finally, a mechanisms approach exposes multiple avenues for organizational members to exercise agency in the building HQCs. Each of the mechanism clusters reveals different possible pathways for how people can proactively shape themselves and their work environment (Grant & Ashford, 2008) to foster the building of HQCs. Considering a cognitive route, for example, suggests that organizational members can shape connecting possibilities through actively judging the presence of qualities such as warmth, support, and acceptance in others. Using the emotions pathway, employees might intentionally cultivate a capacity for gratitude for the contributions of others to their success. From the behavioral pathway, individuals might experiment with different methods of playing with their work colleagues. Each option broadens the repertoire of possibilities for how individuals can actively participate in cultivating possibilities for HQCs at work for self and for others, by attending to the engines of connection-building identified in each of the mechanism discussions.

Despite these contributions, HQC research faces a number of challenges. First, although we have separated these mechanisms into discrete categories, they clearly interrelate in important ways. Future research should address how these mechanisms relate to one another. Second, as organizational researchers, it will be important to understand which mechanisms are particularly potent in specific kinds of organizational contexts, and in different forms of social relationships (e.g., those based on communal sharing, or gift exchange; Fiske, 1992). Third, more empirical work is needed to develop and validate measures of HQCs from the perspectives of both persons in a dyad, instead of from just one individual or an entire collective, although researchers have already demonstrated the applicability of HQCs to the study of teams and units as a whole (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Carmeli et al., 2009). Finally, researchers of HQCs need to continue pushing the theoretical frontier on the full range of mechanisms, including further cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms, as well as additional types, such as motivational or physiological mechanisms, that explain HQC-building. This is important, as there is growing recognition of the potency and practical impact of these micro-bits of human-to-human interrelating at work.

Given these research limitations, it is important to use research methods designed to capture the core characteristics of HQCs, such as both individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions of the interaction, and their momentary as well as dynamic nature. Although Carmeli and his colleagues have developed measures of the quality of connections at the unit level, we need valid measures at the level of the dyad. This means considering a within-person approach that maps changes in each dyad member's thoughts, feeling, and behaviors over time (Gable & La Guardia, 2007). One method that might be particularly appropriate is daily diary or experience sampling (see Reis & Collins, 2000, for a review). In these approaches, dyad members synchronously complete multiple surveys over time, revealing how dyad members respond to each other, and how both intrapersonal and interpersonal associations among things like values, personality, behaviors, and the immediate context influence dyadic outcomes (e.g., Crocker & Canevello, 2008). A second approach involves the use of direct observation of interrelating (for reviews, see Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Reis & Collins, 2000). Analyzing detailed transcripts and video recordings of dyads in conversational analysis (e.g., Hopper, 1992; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) and micro-ethnography (LeBaron, 2005) could reveal how verbal and nonverbal behavior situated in a particular context constitute a given interaction (see Goodwin, 2000; LeBaron, 2005; Streeck & Mehus, 2005). These methods reveal insights about the observable behaviors that are constructed between a pair of actors.

Conclusion

Methodological, theoretical, and practical implications are of concern to any scholar, and we hope that our framework is a useful starting point for those interested in digging deeper into how connections help individuals and organizations flourish. A complete picture of how connections are built and strengthened will be a hard-won accomplishment. However, with (p. 395) our initial sketch, our aim is that others will broaden and refine the picture of how people initiate and skillfully cultivate HQCs, and ultimately, positive relationships with others at work.

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