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Bridging positive relationships at work: Crossing literatures and building connections
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PDW Organizers (in alphabetical order)

Melissa Chamberlin

PhD Student, Organizational Behavior
W.P. Carey School of Business
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287
Email: mchamberlin@asu.edu

Lyndon Garrett

PhD Student, Management & Organizations
Stephen M. Ross School of Business
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
Email: lyndon@umich.edu

Kerry Roberts Gibson

PhD Candidate, Organizational Behavior
Scheller College of Business
Georgia Tech
Atlanta, GA 30308
Email: kerry.gibson@scheller.gatech.edu

Beth Schinoff

PhD Student, Organizational Behavior
W.P. Carey School of Business
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287
Email: beth.schinoff@asu.edu

Presenters (in alphabetical order)

Sally Maitlis

Professor of Organizational Behaviour &
Leadership
Saïd Business School
University of Oxford
Oxford OX1 1HP
Email: sally.maitlis@sbs.ox.ac.uk

Wendy Murphy

Associate Professor
Management Division
Babson College
Babson Park, MA 02457
Email: wmurphy@babson.edu

Lloyd Sandelands

Professor of Management &
Organizations/Professor of Psychology
Stephen M. Ross School of Business
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
Email: lsandel@umich.edu

Panelists (in alphabetical order)

Sigal Barsade

Joseph Frank Bernstein Professor of
Management
The Wharton School
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104
Email: barsade@wharton.upenn.edu

Rick Cotton

Assistant Professor
Peter B. Gustavson School of Business
University of Victoria
Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2
Email: rcotton@uvic.ca

Emily Heaphy

Assistant Professor, Organizational Behavior
School of Management
Boston University
Boston, MA 02215
Email: eheaphy@bu.edu

ABSTRACT

The PDW “Bridging positive relationships at work: Crossing literatures and building connections” strives to continue the energy and success of similar PDWs supported by the Positive Relationships at Work (PRW) Microcommunity (an outgrowth of the Positive Organizational Scholarship – POS – community) during the past three Academy of Management Meetings. In particular, the proposed session aims to connect relationships at work concepts and scholars from across literatures. The session will focus on (1) what relationships are (i.e., the philosophy of relationships); (2) how relationships feel (i.e., emotions in relationships); and (3) what relationships do (i.e., developmental networks). The proposed PDW is a hybrid session design and includes three presentations from scholarly experts in each of the three relationships domains, followed by an organizer-led panel discussion comprised of three different expert scholars on the same topics. Participants will also have the opportunity to get to know each other and share ideas related to their own research or practice in small group breakout dialogues.

OVERVIEW OF THE WORKSHOP

Positive relationships at work have the potential to enhance individuals' physical well-being (Heaphy, 2007; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008), their capacity to engage more fully in their work (Kahn, 2007), and their identity (Roberts, 2007). Recognizing the energy around this particular topic, the Positive Relationships at Work (PRW) Microcommunity, an off-shoot of the broader Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) community, was revitalized in 2011 to develop and disseminate research on the theory, practice, and teaching of positive relationships in the workplace. Since 2011, the Microcommunity has facilitated three separate PDWs, each eliciting over 60 participants and suggesting considerable interest in this topic among Academy of Management attendees. The proposed session for 2015 builds on the success of previous years and is unique in that the scope of the PDW has broadened to bridge multiple lenses on relationships at work. We have taken this direction based on feedback from past participants, and recognition from current literature that "research has not always progressed in ways that fully captured the relational linkage between individuals" (Ferris, Liden, Munyon, Summers, Basik, & Buckley, 2009: 1396). Our goal in this PDW is to take a step toward understanding the nature and dynamics of relationships at work in a more holistic manner.

Relationships at work in general are important. Individuals' interpersonal interactions shape how they see themselves and their work, guiding workplace attitudes and behaviors (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007, 2008; Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2014; Dutton & Ragins, 2007). Not surprisingly, then, empirical work has found that the quality of individuals' relationships at work is positively related to a variety of beneficial outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (e.g., Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Methot & LePine, 2014). In addition, recent work on job design has highlighted the

importance of taking the social characteristics of work into account (Grant, 2007; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007).

Yet, despite the vast extant literature on relationships at work and the progress that has been made in recent years on the topic, there are clear divides in how scholars study relational phenomena, including the assumptions scholars employ and the dimensions of relationships they stress (Ferris et al., 2009). For example, some researchers study the nature of interpersonal relating, or what relationships are (e.g., Sandelands, 2003), and what constitutes a high quality connection (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). This work often takes a theoretical or even philosophical approach to address this question. To make relationships more concrete and understandable, many relationships researchers focus on how relationships feel among participants, or the affect relationships include and/or produce. Domains involved in this work include positive relationships at work in general (Dutton & Ragins, 2007) and the flourishing literature on compassion at work in particular (see Dutton, Workman, & Hardin, 2014 for a review), as well as the vast body of research on LMX, which looks specifically at how relationships induce positive or negative affect between managers and subordinates (e.g., Sparrowe & Liden, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Others (e.g., network scholars) take a less affective stance, focusing instead on what relationships do for people, or what people do in relationships, by analyzing primarily instrumental, task-based ties (Ferris et al., 2009) or developmental networks (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Murphy & Kram, 2014). Resultantly, as Kahn noted, “concepts involving work relationships are generally scattered across different literatures” (2007: 189).

The goal of this PDW is to connect multiple lenses of relationship research through a hybrid session format (described in more detail in the “Description of Workshop Format” section below). Understanding the assumptions behind each theory and method are important in order to

have a holistic understanding of the social landscape in the workplace, including its impact on work-related outcomes. In particular, we will focus on three critical facets of relationships at work – what they are (i.e., the philosophy of relationships), how they feel (i.e., emotions in relationships), and what they do (i.e., developmental networks). The expert scholars (see biographies below) who have agreed to participate as either presenters or panelists represent the foremost thinkers in their respective fields. We will now provide a brief overview of the three content areas our PDW will examine in detail, as well as insight into why connecting them will enhance our understanding of each individual literature as well as the relationships at work literature more generally.

What relationships are: The philosophy of relationships at work. What relationships are has been a surprisingly elusive question in organizational studies, and this lack of clarity has been echoed across many fields that use relationships as a central concept, including public relations, family relations, interpersonal communication, and psychotherapy. What each field has in common is “the absence of a precise and widely used definition of relationships, as well as a paucity of systematic theory construction based on a commonly accepted definition of relationships” (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997: 7). Different fields vary even on the most fundamental definitional aspects of relationships, such as whether relationships are a subjective reality (e.g. reciprocal feelings and attitudes), an objective reality (e.g. patterns of exchange or interaction), or a combination of both. They also vary in terms of whether relationships are a process (e.g. feelings/ attitudes that result from recurrent patterns of events), a state (e.g. feelings/attitudes that produce a patterns of interaction), or both.

Within the field of organizational studies, the domain of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) calls us to think of relationships not just in terms of empirically observable

attributes or causal events (i.e. feelings or actions associated with the relationship), but in terms of spirit and life (Sandelands & Worline, 2011), akin to the way social life is viewed by the humanities (e.g., Zald, 1993). This view considers relationships as “the dynamic, living tissue that exists between two people when there is some contact between them involving mutual awareness and social interaction” (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003: 264). Relationships have life, and in turn give life to those involved. As such, the knowledge and understanding of relationships is not an empirical induction or a logical deduction, but an intuition or inclination (Sandelands & Worline, 2011) that rises to the level of conscious awareness by abduction (Pierce, 1955; Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008). This view of relationships relates directly to the aim of POS, which is “the study of that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations” (Cameron & Caza, 2004: 1). With this new lens in organizational studies, much work remains to be done to explicate and add conceptual clarity to the nature of relationships, and our hope is that this PDW will contribute to the process by bridging literatures and scholars across disciplines.

How relationships feel: Emotions in relationships at work. Emotions are a fundamental part of all relationships. As described earlier, relationships remain difficult to define despite the central role they play in the very existence of social life (Broom et al., 1997; Sandelands & Worline, 2011). One way in which this challenge has been addressed by scholars is through research on the critical role emotions play in how relationships develop and unfold. For example, early work on emotional contagion highlights how the emotional experience of one member of a dyad may extend to impact the emotional experience of the relational other (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). Researchers have also shown how positive emotions such as gratitude and compassion can serve as relational resources that enable employees to develop desired life-giving, thriving relationships (Emmons, 2003; Lilius et al., 2008). Other research

that uncovers the role of toxic emotions in decision making processes enables scholars to identify the underlying relational practices to be avoided in order to maintain relationships as positive, life-giving components of work (Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004). Research at the intersection of emotions and relationships shows the power that emotions have within workplace relationships to impact both the individual members of a given workplace and the organization more generally, even becoming institutionalized in an organization's culture (Barsade, 2002; Barsade & Gibson, 2007; e.g., Barsade & O'Neill, 2014).

What relationships do: Developmental networks. Functionally, relationships can accomplish many things. For instance, relationships can build trust among individuals (e.g. Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) and facilitate teamwork and coordination among team members (e.g. Crawford & LePine, 2013). In addition, relationships help individuals construct meaning in their social world (e.g. Coordinated Management of Meaning; Pearce, 2005) and influence how individuals define themselves (e.g. relational identification; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007, 2008 and personal identification; Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2014). Relationships clearly play an important functional role in many aspects of social and organizational life.

Recent scholarly work has highlighted the role of developmental networks in understanding what relationships “do” for individuals at work as well as what individuals do in relationships at work. Developmental networks include the set of people named by the focal individual as taking an active interest in and action to advance the focal individual's career by providing developmental assistance (Higgins & Kram, 2001: 268). This set of individuals - or developers - can include those within the work context and also individuals outside of work who positively influence career successes (e.g. Cotton, Shen, Livin-Tarandach, 2011; Murphy & Kram, 2010). Developers provide both career support, such as coaching or providing challenging

assignments, as well as psychosocial support like counseling or role modeling (e.g. Kram, 1985). Both roles have implications for protégé outcomes, such as extrinsic career success and job performance, as well as intrinsic career success, work satisfaction, and optimism (Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy, & Kram, 2012). Most importantly, these outcomes are often influenced by the strength and structure of one's developmental network (Dobrow et al., 2012), suggesting that bridging levels and literatures (e.g., a focus on positive dyadic relationships or individual emotions) can enhance our understanding of the creation, maintenance, and impact of developmental networks.

By incorporating research on the philosophy of relationships, emotions, and developmental networks within the workplace relationship conversation, relationship scholars will be better positioned to build upon the work of earlier scholars. Additionally, our current understanding of how interpersonal workplace relationships develop and are maintained will be enhanced by a richer understanding of relational dynamics across perspectives. These three areas (i.e. relationship philosophy, emotions, and developmental networks) represent the diversity of research on different, yet related, components of interpersonal workplace relationships. Therefore, connecting prominent scholars from each of these distinct research areas with those interested in workplace relationship research enables workplace relationship scholars to better integrate and extend the variety of dimensions that exist within workplace relationship research. As such, our PDW has both short and long-term goals:

Short-term goals of the PDW:

1. Generate dialogue on relationships at work among scholars whose work spans a diverse set of topics, theoretical lenses, methodological approaches, and disciplines.

2. Provide a rewarding, interactive, and stimulating session situated in the relationships at work domain.
3. Expand thinking about important topics relevant to relationships at work.

Long-term goals of the PDW:

4. Energize a more strongly connected community of scholars interested in positive relationships at work.
5. Develop lasting partnerships and collaborations on research projects, publications, and conference presentations.
6. Provide opportunities to develop connections with and facilitate contributions to the relationships at work literature and the Positive Relationships at Work Microcommunity.

INTEREST TO DIVISIONS

Primary: Organizational Behavior Division (OB)

This PDW aligns with the Organizational Behavior division's mission in numerous ways. First, research on relationships at work informs many of the topics included in the division's domain statement, most notably interpersonal and organizational processes and outcomes, such as leadership, teamwork, managerial practices, and human resource management. This array of topics will also help serve to fulfill the OB division's mission of fostering cross-topic collaboration. By inviting scholars from a broad range of disciplines, this PDW will attract a diverse audience (as it has in the past), leading to unique interactive dialogue that generates novel ideas.

Other potential sponsors: Managerial and Organizational Cognition (MOC) and Careers (CAR)

We believe this PDW also fits well with the Managerial and Organizational Cognition (MOC) and the Careers (CAR) divisions. This session may be of interest to the **MOC Division** because work relationships play an important role in how individuals come to socially construct their jobs (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002), the meaning of their work (e.g., Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2011, and their personal identities (Ibarra & Barrbulescu, 2010). Moreover, MOC's focus on mental models is an important overlap with this session as work relationships serve as relational schema that guide individuals' social expectations (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). This PDW also supports the **CAR Division's** focus on individual career development and career management strategies. More specifically, workplace relationships play a key role in how individual careers develop (Murphy & Kram, 2014) and career strategies often reciprocally influence relationships at work (Murphy, 2012). As one of the sessions' core areas, developmental networks in particular have been linked to individual career success. Therefore, we believe our PDW can serve as a link between workplace relationship research and the CAR division given that work relationships are integral to many career management strategies.

DESCRIPTION OF WORKSHOP FORMAT

As illustrated in Table 1, the proposed PDW structure includes multiple activities to approach the session theme from various scholarly angles. By blending scholarly presentations, a panel, and small group breakouts, our hybrid session design allows for stimulating learning and interactive discussions in a variety of different contexts throughout the PDW. There are three main components to the session: (1) presentations from scholarly experts on three current topics in the relationships at work literature, (2) a panel discussion with three additional expert scholars discussing the assumptions of each literature and how scholars might think about studying work

relationships in the future, and (3) small-group breakouts in which individuals apply the content of the session to their own research stream combined with a large group report-out. This hybrid design allows us to lay the theoretical and empirical foundation of each area of research through presentations, and then discuss and bridge across the various domains through both a panel discussion and small-group discussions. Each portion is discussed in more detail below.

Presentations from scholarly experts

Our PDW will begin with a brief overview of the session and an introduction to the PRW Microcommunity. This introduction will create a knowledge bridge between PRW Microcommunity members and, since we anticipate this year's theme will draw relationship scholars from various disciplines, those individuals who are unfamiliar with the Microcommunity. We will also facilitate an icebreaker to both infuse energy into the room as well as to provide a brief opportunity for participants to engage with each other.

Following the icebreaker, three scholars with extensive knowledge of their respective relational research domains will present an overview of the major topics we will explore throughout the session. Our presenters include:

- *Lloyd Sandelands, University of Michigan.* Lloyd will present on the philosophy of relationships, or the “what relationships are” theme of our workshop. Professor Sandelands teaches business administration and psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. His research centers on the social and spiritual aspects of life in organizations. He is the author of several books, most recently *Being at Work* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2014) and his work has been published in many journals, including *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization Science*, and *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

- *Sally Maitlis, University of Oxford.* Sally will present on emotions in relationships, or the “how relationships feel” theme of our worship. Professor Maitlis’s research examines how people make sense of important, challenging, and sometimes painful issues at work and highlights the emotional side of organizational life for individuals, work groups, top management teams, and boards of directors. Sally is particularly interested in processes of suffering, care, compassion and growth in the workplace, and has explored how sensemaking and relationships jointly shape people’s capacity to deal with adversity. Her work has been published in a variety of journals, including the *Academy of Management Annals*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Human Relations*, *Organizational Science*, and *Organizational Studies*.
- *Wendy Murphy, Babson College.* Wendy will present on development networks, or the “what relationships do” theme of our worship. Professor Murphy’s research is at the intersection of careers, mentoring, and work-life issues, with particular attention to nontraditional developmental relationships and learning. She has published her work in a range of journals, such as *Human Resource Management*, *Gender in Management*, *Journal of Management*, and the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, among others. Her book with Dr. Kathy Kram, *Strategic Relationships at Work: Creating Your Circle of Mentors, Sponsors, and Peers for Success in Business and Life*, bridges mentoring scholarship and practice.

Panel discussion with scholarly experts

Building on the presentations, the session will continue with a panel discussion featuring three additional scholars who have a vast amount of knowledge in the same research areas. By

introducing a new set of individuals, our participants will have exposure not only to six individuals with a vast amount of research studying relationships between them, but also to six different viewpoints on the current state of relationships research, its future, and the potential created by bringing together experienced scholars with similar yet divergent research interests.

The panel discussion will be facilitated and moderated by two members of the PDW organizing team. Potential questions for the panelists include:

- Share an exemplar – what is a classic study in your relationship domain that exemplifies your domain and its potential for generating insight into relationships at work?
- How can a holistic understanding of the various theoretical lenses of relationship research help strengthen research in each research domain?
- When/how would you encourage relationship scholars to choose their theoretical lens? Are there research questions more appropriate for one theoretical lens over the other? When could a scholar utilize multiple relational theories?
- Where do you see relationships at work research heading? What excites you about being a relationship scholar?

Like our team of presenters, our panelists are leading scholars in the field of relationships at work. They are:

- *Emily Heaphy, Boston University.* Emily will be the panelist counterpart to Professor Sandeland’s presentation on “what relationships are.” Professor Heaphy’s areas of expertise include positive work relationships and relational processes more broadly, situated embedded agency, and the role of the body in work. Emily specializes in qualitative work, with an interest in understanding situations in which people need bureaucratic organizations to respond flexibly, such as when people encounter problems when receiving healthcare and need to negotiate for time off from work in time-hungry occupations. Her research has appeared in the *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization Science*, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Hormones and Behavior*, as well as several edited collections. She is a co-founder

and Steering Committee Member of the Positive Relationships at Work Microcommunity.

- *Sigal Barsade, University of Pennsylvania.* Sigal will be the panelist counterpart to Professor Maitlis’s presentation on “how relationships feel.” Professor Barsade’s expertise is in group emotion, emotional intelligence, organizational culture, leadership and top management teams, emotions in the workplace, and group dynamics. Her work has been published in numerous top management journals, such as *Administrative Science Quarterly* and *Journal of Applied Psychology*, and she serves on the editorial boards of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, and *Organization Science*.
- *Rick Cotton, University of Victoria.* Rick will be the panelist counterpart to Professor Murphy’s presentation on “what relationships do.” Professor Cotton’s research centers on how human capital and social capital foster career development and career success. He is particularly interested in how network relationships correlate to objective and subjective career success, in particular extraordinary career achievement. His articles have appeared in the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Career Development International*, and *Academy of Management Proceedings* and he has an upcoming co-authored article slated for publication in the *MIT Sloan Management Review*.

Following the formal panel discussion, we will open the dialogue up to all participants in a Q & A format. Our intention is that both the presentations and provocative panel discussion will stimulate questions and interest from others in the audience, creating an interactive portion of the session between PDW attendees and all six of our expert participants.

Small group breakouts/large group report-out

The final major component of the proposed session is small group-breakouts and a large group report-out. We anticipate allowing individuals to choose their own breakout group, and are optimistic that each group will consist of a diverse set of relationship scholars. This design will allow the session to truly live into its theme of bridging across relationship research domains.

Each group will have a series of prompts that they may choose to discuss, such as:

- Based on the relational phenomenon studied by those in your group, are there theoretical lenses that have not been or are rarely connected? How can we reconcile these, and how could they enhance our understanding of relationships at work themselves and the other phenomenon of interest?
- As a group, choose one area of the literature that has been studied from a relational perspective (e.g., socialization, leadership, identity, team processes). How do the various theories behind relationships at work help us understand this phenomenon in different ways? How can we reconcile them?

At the end of small-group discussions, contributors of each group will report to all participants the “highlights” of their discussion. After the PDW, members of the organizing committee will assemble these “highlights” and distribute them to participants in a follow-up email. Attendees will thus have a tangible take-away list of learnings from their discussions.

ORGANIZER’S DECLARATION

We, Melissa Chamberlin, Lyndon Garrett, Kerry Gibson, and Beth Schinoff, certify that all organizers and speakers have stated that they agree to participate in this workshop if it is accepted, and that they are not in violation of the Rule of Three + Three. We understand that if this submission is accepted, all of the listed participants must be registered for the meeting to fulfill their role in the session. We understand that the scheduling and audio-visual requests are requests only. If our proposal is accepted, the PDW chair will let us know whether our requests are approved.

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Table 1: PDW Format

Session overview and Estimated Timing (Total time: 180 min.)

| Topic | Description | Time Allocation |
|---|---|------------------------|
| 1. Welcome, introductions, and overview of Microcommunity | | 5 minutes |
| 2. Icebreaker | Individuals will get to know each other and their respective research interests | 10 minutes |
| 3. Presentations (including introduction and transition time) | Introduction of three expert scholars and 15 minute presentations by each on one of the various relationship literatures we are bridging (i.e., emotions in relationships, developmental networks, and the philosophy of relationships) | 53 minutes |
| 4. Panel discussion | Based on the groundwork laid by the presenters on the three topics, three other expert scholars will discuss the major assumptions of their research area and how we can integrate them. | 20 minutes |
| 5. Interactive Q & A | Based on provocative presentations and panel discussions, participants will have the opportunity to interactively ask questions of our experts. | 20 minutes |
| 6. Small group breakouts | Individuals will break out into small groups and discuss the given prompts. | 40 minutes |
| 7. Large group report-outs | Groups will report highlights from their discussion | 25 minutes |
| 8. Closing | Presenters will briefly summarize themes heard across report outs and thank presenters, panelists, and participants | 7 minutes |
| 9. Post-PDW follow-up | An organizing committee member will contact all attendees with opportunities for continued association on positive relationships at work | 2 weeks after AOM |