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# Relational Misperceptions in the Workplace: New Frontiers and Challenges

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**Abstract.** Understanding the social landscape at work helps employees accomplish organizational goals. A growing body of evidence, however, suggests that people are fallible perceivers of their work relationships. People do not always know how much others trust (or distrust) them, consider them a friend (or enemy), or rely on them for advice or information at work. Such relational misperceptions may be especially likely in the context of work organizations. Here, we develop theoretical accounts to explain how and why employees misinterpret the nature of their relationships with others at work—and what consequences ensue when they do. We direct attention to five key opportunities for future research on when and why relational misperceptions occur and matter in organizations. Building on the small body of organizational research and larger body of nonorganizational research on relationship misperception, we also identify areas that may be fruitful for exploration, highlighting several topics in the organizational literature that could be enlivened by considering the role of relational misperceptions. For example, we consider how employees' relational misperceptions may affect how influential they are at work, how effectively they lead others, and how they navigate the social landscape in organizations.



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**Keywords:** work relationships • misperceptions • perceptual errors • work friendships • trust

## Introduction

Organizational relationships—work friendships, mentor-mentee relationships, buyer-seller relationships, supervisor-subordinate relationships—are integral to getting work done and accomplishing organizational goals (e.g., Liden et al. 2000, Carmeli et al. 2009, Byron and Laurence 2015). People rely on their understanding of their relationships with others, but when organizational members misinterpret the nature of their relationships, working together to accomplish organizational goals is likely made more difficult. For example, leaders who believe that they are more trusted by their subordinates than they are may fail to convince their subordinates to adopt their proposed changes. Employees who incorrectly believe that a coworker considers them a sage advisor may expect indebtedness and attempt to call in favors. Employees who incorrectly believe that a coworker does not consider them a friend may miss opportunities to ask for support or other help. Similarly, subordinates who underestimate the extent to which they are trusted by their supervisor will likely be overly cautious and take fewer risks.

Although understanding what others at work think about the nature of the relationship between themselves and others is arguably important, a growing body of evidence from diverse literatures suggests that—both at work and outside of work—people do not always know how others conceive of the relationship between them (e.g., Krackhardt 1987, Lusher et al. 2012, Brion and Anderson 2013, West et al. 2014, Brion et al. 2015, Almaatouq et al. 2016). Furthermore, such misperceptions may be especially likely in the context of work organizations. Work relationships are complex and sometimes ambiguously defined (e.g., Gibson 2018, Pillemer and Rothbard 2018). They are embedded within organizational hierarchies, governed by sometimes conflicting norms, and often involuntary. For example, employees often do not have a say about whom they work with and must interact with those that they do not even like. For these reasons, work friendships, mentoring relationships, manager-employee relationships, and other types of relationships at work are often complicated and difficult to manage (e.g., Sias et al. 2004), making discrepancies in our understanding of them more likely. In addition, organizational members are increasingly

likely to be geographically dispersed and use electronic means of communication, and fewer face-to-face interactions can make it more difficult to accurately ascertain how others feel about us (Byron 2008). Finally, given impression management concerns at work (Bozeman and Kacmar 1997), organizational members may be motivated to send false signals about how they feel about others. For example, in many organizations, it would be unwise to openly acknowledge to leaders that you do not trust them.

Our understanding of how employees may misperceive their relationships at work remains limited, despite initial indications that organizational members’ perceptions of their relationships are often inaccurate and consequential (e.g., Brion et al. 2015, Eisenkraft et al. 2017). The aim of this paper is to focus attention on relational misperceptions at work and explicate their potential antecedents and consequences. In doing so, we offer several contributions to the literature. First, we define relational misperceptions using a common approach of defining perceptual (in-) accuracy, thus tethering relational misperceptions to the broader literature on social perception. Second, we review previous literature establishing that people are fallible in their perception of their relationships with others—both at work and outside of work. In doing so, we bring together and organize a previously disconnected and scattered set of studies from diverse literatures. Third, we explicate the theoretical mechanisms that explain why employees misperceive their work relationships and to what effect—thus developing a coherent conceptual framework of relational misperceptions’ antecedents and consequences. Finally, we provide a roadmap for future research on relational misperceptions—directing attention to five key opportunities for additional study. For example, employees’ relational misperceptions may explain why some employees overlook opportunities to act as brokers, why knowledge flows are impeded at work, why some leaders make crucial missteps, and why incivility does not always spiral.

### Defining Relational Misperceptions

We define *relational misperceptions* as occurring when a focal person’s perception of how another person thinks of his or her relationship to the focal person differs from the way that the other person actually thinks about it. For example, if Tom believes that Juanita considers him a better friend than Juanita does, a relational misperception has occurred, because Tom’s perception of how much Juanita considers Tom a friend is discrepant with Juanita’s perception.<sup>1</sup> To provide an example, Table 1 takes a simplified approach to show the different ways that an employee can incorrectly or correctly perceive another’s friendship to him or her; however, we note that misperceptions need not be binary—people can misperceive relationships to varying degrees of magnitude (as illustrated in Figure 1).

We take a consensus approach to defining perceptual accuracy (e.g., Campagna et al. 2014, Eisenkraft et al. 2017). That is, we consider relational misperceptions as lacking consensus or entailing disagreement between two perceivers about a common target (Kenny 2004), which in this case, is the coworker’s relationship to the employee. The consensus approach has been used in a wide variety of organizational research on topics, such as interpersonal communication (e.g., Byron 2008), trust (Lusher et al. 2012), and leadership (e.g., Livi et al. 2008). The focal person is inaccurate when he or she incorrectly predicts how the other person conceives of his or her relationship with the focal person. We acknowledge, however, that either party could be responsible for this inaccurate perception. For example, the other person may have forgotten about times when she asked for advice from the focal person, or the other person could intentionally deceive the focal person about the nature of their relationship. We make no claims about whether there is a way to divine the “truth” about the relationship; instead, we argue that discrepant perceptions matter, because the person with the inaccurate metaperception of the relationship will act consistently with his or her incorrect understanding of it.

**Table 1.** Example of Accurate and Inaccurate Relational Metaperceptions for Friendship

Focal employee’s metaperspective	Coworker’s perspective	
	I consider this person a friend	I do not consider this person a friend
This coworker considers me a friend	I. Accurately perceived, present relationship: focal employee accurately perceives that the coworker considers him or her a friend	II. Imagined positive relationship: focal employee believes that the coworker considers him or her a friend when the coworker does not
This coworker does not consider me a friend	III. Overlooked positive relationship: focal employee believes that the coworker does not consider him or her a friend when the coworker does	IV. Accurately perceived, absent relationship: focal employee accurately perceives that the coworker does not consider him or her a friend

*Note.* Given that relational misperceptions reflect inaccuracy, we focus on cells II and III.

**Figure 1.** (Color online) Example of Varying Magnitudes of Discrepancy of a Relational Misperception of Enmity



Notes. Accurate relational perceptions are along the diagonal. Discrepancies of greater magnitude are farther from the diagonal. This example is for illustration purposes and does not account for raters' response tendencies.

Research on relational misperceptions has occurred under various terms, including dyadic meta-accuracy and metaperceptions (e.g., Malloy and Janowski 1992, Kenny 2004, Carlson 2016) and in the social network literature, the perception of incoming ties (Casciaro et al. 1999). Relational misperceptions can be differentiated from meta-accuracy in general. Whereas meta-accuracy typically refers to the extent to which a person correctly predicts how others see him or her, usually in terms of traits (e.g., how warm, gregarious, or argumentative he or she is) (Vazire and Carlson 2011), relational misperceptions refer to the meta-accuracy of relationships (i.e., the extent to which a person correctly predicts what others would say about their relationships to him or her). These may overlap (e.g., people who correctly predict that someone would say that they are very kind may also correctly predict that that same person would consider them a good friend) but not always. For example, we are not friends with all kind people, and we do not consider all difficult people as our enemies.

### Different Types of Relational Misperceptions

We anchor our discussion of misperceptions in the established literatures on positive and negative relationships, considering that valence is a common dimension used to describe and categorize relationships (e.g., Labianca and Brass 2006, Heaphy and Dutton 2008). We acknowledge that some relationships—mentoring relationships, leader-member relationships, or rivalries—can range in terms of how positive or negative they are (e.g., Ragins and Verbos 2007, Tepper 2007) and that some relationships can be

ambivalent (e.g., Methot et al. 2017), but we focus on this distinction for the sake of simplicity.

We define *positive relationships* as relationships that are a source of positive emotions, such as joy, happiness, or contentment, and/or desired resources (such as emotional or instrumental support) (Ragins and Verbos 2007, Heaphy and Dutton 2008). Positive relationships at work can, for example, provide friendship or help employees to accomplish their work and flourish in their careers (Colbert et al. 2016). Positive relationships that scholars frequently study are the extent to which a coworker considers an employee a friend, advisor, confidant, mentor, idea provider, or leader. Although some characterize acquaintances as “indifferent” or “neutral” relationships (Umphress et al. 2003, Methot et al. 2017), we consider acquaintances to be weakly positive relationships, consistent with research that distinguishes acquaintances from friends in terms of relationship strength (not valence) and that considers the positive resources that acquaintances offer (e.g., Granovetter 1973). We define *negative relationships* as relationships that elicit negative emotions, such as anger, disgust, and fear, and/or actual or anticipated undesirable costs, such as unpleasant interactions or conflict (Labianca and Brass 2006). For example, negative relationships that scholars frequently study are the extent to which a coworker considers an employee an enemy, distrusted person, conflict partner, or rival.

Relative to how the other person actually conceives of his or her relationship, the focal employee can either over- or underestimate (or correctly estimate) how the other person conceives of his or her relationship



to the focal employee. Although our earlier example in Table 1 takes a binary approach (i.e., the person is either a friend or not), research can also take a more nuanced view of relational misperceptions and consider the extent to which the relationship is misperceived. To illustrate, we consider an advice relationship (a positive relationship) and a conflict relationship (a negative relationship). For relational misperceptions regarding an advice relationship, Danielle could believe that Bob relies on her for advice more than he actually does (an imagined positive relationship) or that Sumeet relies on her for advice less than he actually does (an overlooked positive relationship). For relational misperceptions regarding conflict, Carlos could believe that Jill considers him more of a conflict partner than she does (an imagined negative relationship) or that Rebecca considers him less of a conflict partner than she does (an overlooked negative relationship). Consistent with this continuous approach, Almaatouq et al. (2016) examined how much someone was a friend and believed by the other to be a friend (ranging from not knowing the person to being “best friends”). Alternately, depending on the researcher’s aims, the magnitude of the discrepancy could be a function of characteristics, such as affective experience, frequency of contact, amount or quality of resources received or provided (e.g., advice and ideas), or amount or degree of harm experienced or intended (e.g., insults and interruptions). For example, Eisenkraft et al. (2017) measured rivalry by considering both how much a person sees someone (or is seen by someone) as a rival and how much a person feels competitive toward someone (or is seen by someone else as competitive).

Employees can misperceive the relationships that other people have with them in four basic ways depending on the valence of the relationship under investigation and whether they overestimate or underestimate the strength of the relationship. Together, this means that there are four basic types of relational misperceptions. Imagined positive (negative) relationships exist when employees *overestimate* another person’s conception of his or her positive (negative) relationship to them to a varying degree; overlooked positive (negative) relationships exist when employees *underestimate* another person’s conception of his or her positive (negative) relationship to them to a varying degree (see Figure 1 for an example regarding enmity). We discuss each of these—overlooked positive, overlooked negative, imagined positive, and imagined negative relationships—in turn. It is worth noting that these basic types of relational misperceptions can be further distinguished in other ways. For example, because different types of relationships have different expectations, misperceiving friendships

may have different effects than misperceiving acquaintanceships. Thus, although we focus on the valence and direction of the relational misperception, we sometimes additionally consider whether different positive or negative relational misperceptions will lead to different results.

As we discuss in more detail later, in some—but not all—cases, two types may simultaneously exist (i.e., someone could have an imagined positive and overlooked negative relationship or an overlooked positive and imagined negative relationship). For example, if Carlos believes that Jill trusts him very much when she, in fact, distrusts him, both an imagined positive and an overlooked negative relationship exist—he thinks that she trusts him more than she does, and he thinks that she distrusts him less than she does. We focus on these four types of relational misperceptions individually, because most of the positive relationships that have been studied do not have a negatively valenced counterpart (e.g., advice giving and information providing) and some of the negative relationships studied do not have a frequently studied positive counterpart within the relationship literature (e.g., conflict). Furthermore, even seeming opposites—for example, trust and distrust—are considered distinct albeit related constructs that do not lie along a single continuum (Lewicki et al. 1998).

### The Prevalence of Relational Misperceptions

A growing body of work indicates that we do not always know how much others trust or distrust us (Lusher et al. 2012, Campagna et al. 2014, Brion et al. 2015, Marineau 2017), consider us a friend (Krackhardt 1987, Brion and Anderson 2013, Han and Van Dongen 2015, Almaatouq et al. 2016), or accord us power or status (Anderson et al. 2008, study 3) at work. The prevalence of relational misperceptions is perhaps not surprising given that, rather than being dispassionate observers, people are both motivated to construct their realities in line with their world views and are cognitive misers in devoting effort to understanding their social environments (Taylor and Brown 1988, Fiske and Taylor 1991, Swann 2012). For example, research suggests that people incorrectly assume reciprocity in relationships—believing that they are liked and desired by people who they like and desire (e.g., Kenny and DePaulo 1993, Kumbasar et al. 1994, Koenig et al. 2007, Almaatouq et al. 2016) and trusted by those that they trust (Weber et al. 2005, Korsgaard et al. 2015). In addition, people sometimes incorrectly assume that others perceive them as they perceive themselves (Kenny and DePaulo 1993)—believing, for example, that others consider them as much of a leader as they consider themselves a leader (Malloy and Janowski 1992).

## Theoretical Framework: Expectancy Violations Theory

What happens when employees misperceive how others view their relationship to them? We believe that employees will behave in a way that is consistent with their misperception—and may thus violate the others' expectations. To articulate the possible consequences of relational misperceptions, we rely on expectancy violations theory (EVT) (Burgoon and Hale 1988, Afifi and Burgoon 2000)—a theory of interpersonal relations that explains how people respond to deviations from expectations—as our theoretical framework.<sup>2</sup> Although originally a theory of non-verbal communication, EVT has been extended to include verbal communication, and it has been used in a variety of literatures, including psychology (e.g., Greitemeyer and Sagioglou 2018), management (e.g., Graffin et al. 2016), medicine (e.g., Jay et al. 2000), and education (e.g., Anderson 2010). EVT is particularly relevant to this paper, because we focus on expectation violations due to employees' relational misperceptions—when a coworker experiences behavior that deviates from what he or she expects, because an employee misunderstands how the coworker conceives of his or her relationship to the employee.

Several theoretical tenets of EVT (see Burgoon et al. 1995, Afifi and Burgoon 2000) are particularly useful to the study of relational misperceptions. First, according to EVT, people form expectations of how others will act based on the norms that govern the situation and their knowledge of the other person and the relationship between them. For example, we form expectations about how our manager should act toward us in different situations based on norms regarding manager-employee relations, our understanding of how that manager feels about us, and how that manager has behaved toward us in the past in similar situations. Second, people experience notable deviations from expectations (whether positive or negative) as physiologically arousing and cognitively salient. We pay attention to situations when a fellow employee is, for example, friendlier or ruder than we expected. Not all deviations, however, capture our attention; larger deviations—more dissimilar from what was expected—are especially likely to be salient, be arousing, and lead to more extreme outcomes. Third, whereas some research and theory consider deviations to be inherently negative, EVT predicts that deviations can be evaluated positively or negatively depending, for example, on how much the person desires to interact with the other and how the intent of the behavior is interpreted. For example, when an employee unexpectedly touches a coworker on the arm, the coworker may interpret this as display

of dominance if he or she dislikes the employee or as a display of affiliation if he or she desires a relationship with the employee. Fourth, the valence of the deviation (whether evaluated as more positive or more negative than expected) helps determine how people will feel about and respond to the other person. In general, “positive violations produce more favorable outcomes and negative violations produce more unfavorable ones relative to expectancy confirmation” (Burgoon et al. 1995, p. 97). Moreover, EVT predicts attraction to the other person as a key outcome, which has been operationalized as relationship quality in some research (e.g., Bachman and Guerrero 2006). Extending the example above, how the employee interprets the coworker's arm touching as a display of either dominance or affiliation will help determine how he or she feels toward the other person and—combined with his or her response—affects the quality of the relationship between them. Violations influence affective and behavioral responses, because violations have both symbolic (i.e., conveying information about one's value) and relational (i.e., conveying information about the relationship) meaning.

## Opportunities for Research on Relational Misperceptions

We contend that considerable opportunities for research on relational misperceptions exist. To prompt future research on relational misperceptions, we offer theoretical accounts for when, why, and how relational misperceptions occur and matter in organizations and identify research areas as examples of where each opportunity could be generative. We focus on the expectancy violations that are likely to occur when the focal employee acts on his or her flawed meta-perception of a coworker's relationship to him or her. Because the extent to which employees misperceive their relationships is likely to have the most proximal effects on their relationship, we focus our attention on how relational misperceptions subsequently affect relational outcomes—and extend our consideration to more downstream effects when we consider exemplary research topics. More specifically, we often focus on the relationship quality as felt by the coworker whose relationship to the employee has been misperceived—their affective evaluation of the relationship as being more or less positive and negative (Eby et al. 2008). Because relationships offer both benefits (e.g., positive emotions and support) and costs (e.g., negative emotions and relationship-induced stress) (Thibaut and Kelley 1959), higher-quality relationships offer relatively more benefits than costs, whereas lower-quality relationships offer relatively more costs than benefits.

## Opportunity #1: Considering the Consequences of Overlooked Positive Relationships

The limited work on relational misperceptions in organizations has focused on how people overestimate the extent to which they are liked, trusted, etc. (referred to here as imagined positive relationships); considerably less research has considered how people underestimate the extent to which they are liked, trusted, etc. (referred to here as overlooked positive relationships). We have reason to believe that overlooked positive relationships occur: Campagna et al. (2014) found that managers were only slightly less likely to underestimate—than to overestimate—how much they are trusted by their employees. In addition, in a study of people requesting donations for a nonprofit, Flynn and Lake (2008, Study 3) found that people tended to underestimate the extent to which those in their personal networks would be willing to help them in meeting their fundraising goal. In fact, overlooked positive relationships may be especially likely to occur in a relatively common condition in organizations—when people feel that they lack power (Anderson and Berdahl 2002).

We expect that employees who overlook positive relationships will fail to realize the potential benefits associated with these relationships and may even inadvertently damage them by behaving in ways that violate the other party's expectations. Although these ideas may seem straightforward, their novelty may be more apparent when contrasted with how relationships are often measured in social network research (i.e., as incoming ties) without consideration of whether people are aware of the claimed relationship (e.g., Wasserman and Faust 1994, Borgatti et al. 2013). Ignoring the possibility that employees may overlook some positive relationships means that existing research may underestimate the real value of positive relationships at work.

Because relationships are believed to provide social capital as the result of goodwill created by the relationship (Burt 2000, Adler and Kwon 2002), the more employees overlook a positive relationship, the more they may squander the opportunity to capitalize on it. Overlooked positive relationships constitute an untapped resource for employees in workplace social networks—employees who underestimate the extent to which others consider them to offer useful advice, be a friend, or be an “honest broker” are not making use of the resources at their disposal. For example, the research on trust implies that the benefits of being trusted are contingent on knowing how much you are trusted (e.g., Brower et al. 2009). Even worse, it seems likely that these overlooked positive relationships will wither over time—because of negative expectancy

violations. First and more generally, people like to feel understood and tend to avoid interactions with those who do not make them feel understood (Swann 2012). This seems to be an especially likely outcome when the interactions that they encounter are less positive than they expected. Thus, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, an employee with an overlooked positive relationship will likely find that the relationship withers over time as the other party to the relationship redefines it consistently with the way that the employee has enacted it. For example, people who think that they are less trusted than they are will engage in more self-protective behaviors (Williams 2016), and such behaviors are likely to be negatively evaluated by a coworker who has placed his or her trust in them. That is, because they fail to nurture these relationships and because others avoid those who misunderstand them, the more employees overlook their positive relationships, the more they cause the overlooked relationship to decrease in quality over time, thereby losing out on any potential benefits associated with the once more positive relationship.

Second, a large literature examining different types of relationships, including romantic partners, friends, and work colleagues, suggests that investments in time and energy are crucial to relational maintenance (e.g., Dindia and Canary 1993, Ellison et al. 2014). Failure to engage in relational maintenance behaviors often leads to deterioration of the relationship (e.g., Ogolsky and Bowers 2013), perhaps because the failure to do so is evaluated as a negative expectancy violation. That is, the other party expects relational maintenance behaviors, which the employee with the overlooked positive relationship fails to deliver. Additionally, the more the employee overlooks the positive relationship (i.e., the more he or she underestimates the positive relationship), the more he or she will behave in ways that the coworker will evaluate negatively (e.g., will experience disappointment, frustration, or even anger). These negative expectations are more likely when the type of relationship—such as a friendship—carries expectations of mutuality and reciprocity. Such expectations may explain why unreciprocated friendships tend to wither over time (Mollica et al. 2003).

However, some types of overlooked positive relationships—such as those involving weak ties or relationships characterized by infrequent interactions, low emotional intensity, and little or no reciprocity (Granovetter 1973)—may not decrease in relationship quality over time. Compared with friendships, acquaintanceships are governed by different rules; for example, people do not expect much at all from their acquaintances (Jehn and Shah 1997). Employees who overlook some weak ties, such as acquaintanceships, may be able to maintain the



relationship in its current state without engaging in any maintenance behaviors. Although people are unlikely to invest in relationship maintenance when they are not thinking about a relationship's existence, weak ties, such as acquaintance relationships, may require little maintenance—and may not decrease in relationship quality despite being overlooked. Looked at through an expectancy violations theory lens, it seems that acquaintanceships come with few expectations that could be violated. Thus, although the other person believes that an acquaintanceship exists between them, the focal person may not harm the relationship by not devoting effort and time to it. Therefore, we propose that employees with overlooked weak positive relationships—regardless how much they are overlooked—will not decrease in relationship quality.

**Proposition 1a.** *For overlooked positive relationships, the larger the discrepancy, the more the relationship quality decreases.*

**Proposition 1b.** *For overlooked acquaintanceships, the magnitude of the discrepancy is unrelated to maintenance of relationship quality over time.*

## Implications for Social Capital and Knowledge Sharing

To illustrate the pivotal role of overlooked positive relationships in organizations, we offer several opportunities for future research on social capital and knowledge sharing. Considering overlooked positive relationships in social network studies can offer insight into why people fail to avail themselves of the opportunities offered by their positions in a network. For instance, research shows that brokers (people with relationships to others who are not directly connected to each other) have an advantageous network position, allowing them to move information or ideas between people who are not directly connected (Burt 1992, 2005). Brokerage positions are associated with higher performance and greater career success (Fang et al. 2015) as well as increased individual creativity (Burt 2005, Baer et al. 2015). However, there is considerable variability in how much those who occupy brokerage positions experience their benefits (Burt 2005). We contend that overlooked positive relationships may help to account for some of this variability, because those with overlooked positive relationships may fail to capitalize on the opportunity to broker information—overlooking one positive relationship with someone means that a broker loses the opportunity to perceive possible brokerage opportunities between this person and others in the broker's network.

To offer another example of how overlooked positive relationships may play out in organizations,

researchers should also consider their likely role in theories of learning and knowledge sharing at work. One recent perspective on knowledge sharing emphasizes that there is considerable “friction” between individuals in their work relationships—accounting for the failure of knowledge to be freely shared between individuals (Ghosh and Rosenkopf 2015). This friction-based view of the network challenges the notion of unrestricted knowledge flows in social networks and allows us to understand why knowledge does not always pass from one person to the next. Our analysis here suggests an additional avenue of research for scholars adopting the friction-based view. People may misperceive who relies on them for advice and knowledge in the workplace, leading them to offer advice and knowledge to people who they believe depend on them but do not (imagined advice relations) and to refrain from providing advice and knowledge to people who they believe do not depend on them but actually do (overlooked advice relations). Relational misperceptions could explain why people share knowledge with unexpected people (e.g., people who they imagine are more their friends than they are) or fail to share knowledge with people who could use it (e.g., people who they overlook as friends). Thus, misperceptions constitute another source of friction in the nodes of a network, which may help advance theory and research on why information flows across some nodes and not others.

Our theorizing about overlooked positive relationships may also speak to the large body of work on weak ties (Granovetter 1973, Marsden 1990). Weak ties, such as acquaintances, can benefit people by providing access to benefits, such as jobs (Granovetter 1973). However, misperceptions can make it difficult for people to realize these benefits. People may not realize who their weak ties are. Understanding the network is a precondition for mobilizing its resources (Smith et al. 2012). Therefore, although the nature of the relationship may remain unchanged, people may fail to benefit from weak tie networks—not because of the lack of actual weak ties but because they misperceive these connections at critical moments, such as during job search (e.g., Smith et al. 2012).

## Opportunity #2: Considering the Consequences of Overlooked Negative Relationships

In addition to opportunities for examining how employees misperceive *positively* valenced relationships, such as friendships or trust relationships with others, we also see significant research opportunities in considering how people misperceive their *negative* relationships—how much someone is considered an enemy, rival, distrusted party, or conflict partner—at



work. As Labianca and Brass (2006, p. 596) argued, examining negative relationships at work allows us to understand “the complete social ledger”—and examining *misperceptions* related to negative relationships further extends our understanding of the social ledger at work. Although negative relationships may be less common than positive relationships at work (see Labianca and Brass 2006), negative relationships may be more likely to be misperceived (Eisenkraft et al. 2017). As we discuss later, employees may be motivated to view others’ relationships to them in a more positive (less negative) light, and others may take measures to prevent those they claim negative relationships to from knowing this information (e.g., our coworkers may not want us to know when they dislike or distrust us). We contend that there are likely both advantages and disadvantages to knowing who distrusts us, avoids us, dislikes us, or considers us an enemy—and by how much. We focus first on the potential consequences of *overlooked* negative relationships—when employees underestimate the extent to which others claim a negative relationship to them.

There may be advantages conferred on those who fail to recognize when or how much another claims a negative relationship with them. Because an escalation process characterizes many negative workplace behaviors, such as incivility, aggression, and conflict (e.g., Andersson and Pearson 1999, Aquino and Bradfield 2000, Glomb and Laio 2003), overlooked negative relationships—especially as employees are increasingly unaware of the negative relationship—may experience less escalation over time. The more an employee underestimates the extent to which a coworker considers him or her an enemy, a rival, or a conflict partner, the more the employee will behave in a way that may disarm the coworker and stop the escalation process. In contrast, the more accurate the employee is (i.e., the less an employee underestimates) about how much a coworker claims a negative relationship to him or her, the more the relationship will worsen over time. When an employee is more aware of how much a coworker considers him or her an enemy, for example, the more likely it is that the employee will evaluate ambiguous acts negatively. As such, being less aware of the full extent to which someone claims a negative relationship to you may curtail these negative relationship spirals. Research suggests that employees’ attributions regarding a perceived harm or offense by a coworker help to determine whether employees retaliate against the coworker or attempt reconciliation with the coworker (Aquino et al. 2001). Additionally, employees who underestimate the extent to which another claims a negative relationship to them may be less likely to blame and make other negative attributions regarding a

possible harm or offense. In this way, employees with overlooked negative relationships of greater magnitude—behaving consistently with their understanding of the relationship as being less negative than it is—may thus prevent the relationship from worsening. The greater the discrepancy, the less negatively the employee is to interpret ambiguous acts and the less negatively the employee is to respond. In this way, greater discrepancies in overlooked negative relationships mean that employees may prevent the relationship from worsening over time—and perhaps even improve it—because the employee behaves consistently with his or her understanding of the relationship as far less negative than the coworker perceives it. Whereas smaller discrepancies in terms of overlooked negative relationships may tend to worsen over time, the larger the discrepancy, the less likely the negative relationship is to worsen over time.

**Proposition 2.** *For overlooked negative relationships, the larger the employee’s discrepancy, the less coworker-perceived relationship quality decreases.*

However, there may also be disadvantages for employees with overlooked negative relationships. We found only one study that considers the role of negative relational misperceptions (although we caution against putting too much stock into any single study): Marineau (2017) found that call center employees who did not know who distrusted them were less likely to be promoted at work. Here, we propose a possible reason for this finding. Employees who overlook negative relationships cannot prevent the reputational harms associated with those relationships. Consequently, we expect that employees who overlook negative relationships will experience lower relational quality with other coworkers (other than the coworker with whom the overlooked negative relationship exists).

If the coworker who has a negative relationship with the employee (e.g., considers the employee an enemy or as someone to avoid) is willing to harm the employee (for example, by sharing malicious gossip about the employee), the employee who is more unaware of this negative relationship cannot take steps to counter this. For example, people who overlook negative relationships may be the unwitting recipients of social undermining, behavior intended to hinder the ability of someone to build and maintain positive relationships (Duffy et al. 2002). Without knowing that others undermine them at work, employees are unable to attempt to undo the damage caused by undermining behavior. This may be especially likely given that some counterproductive behaviors, such as social undermining, can be difficult to ascertain, because these behaviors can be subtle and engaged in surreptitiously (Duffy et al. 2002).

Moreover, because the magnitude of the discrepancy represents how much the employee is “in the dark” about his or her coworker’s true (negative) feelings, we expect that overlooked negative relationships of greater magnitude will be associated with greater reputational harm, and thus, the employee will have lower relationship quality with other coworkers. In short, we propose that employees’ overlooked negative relationships of greater magnitude will tend to cause greater harm to employees, because their lack of awareness means that they will be able to take fewer steps to curtail any negative relational outcomes that may go along with the negative relationship.

**Proposition 3.** *For overlooked negative relationships, the larger the employee’s discrepancy, the more reputational harm occurs and the lower his or her relationship quality with others.*

### Implications for Incivility and Rivalry

Overlooked negative relationships may be critical to understanding low-intensity negative behaviors, such as incivility. Incivility spirals often occur when a coworker behaves in a way that an employee perceives as poor treatment, thus prompting the employee to experience a negative affect and a desire to respond (Andersson and Pearson 1999). Overlooked negative relationships may prevent incivility spirals when the coworker attempts to hide his or her true feelings for the employee or the employee assigns a benign interpretation to his or her uncivil act (that is, gives the coworker the “benefit of the doubt”) (Andersson and Pearson 1999, p. 461). Thus, incivility spirals may be less likely to occur when the employee does not know how much the coworker dislikes or distrusts him or her, because the intent of the coworker’s behavior is more ambiguous than it would be if the coworker was a known enemy or rival of the employee. In such cases, the employee—in acting on his or her understanding of the relationship of the coworker to him or her—may prevent an incivility spiral.

Here, we have focused on how coworkers reevaluate their relationship to the employee due to expectancy violations. We have not considered how employees themselves may reevaluate relationships based on expectancy violations—focusing on how employees may persist in having overlooked negative relationships, because coworkers may not openly betray their true feelings about the employee. In some cases, coworkers will exhibit negative behaviors that are higher in intensity and less ambiguous in their intent—abusive supervision, workplace bullying, and others (Tepper 2007). According to expectancy violations theory, such unambiguously

negative behaviors would create a violation that is very likely to be negatively evaluated. As such, the employee with the overlooked negative relationship may alter his or her understanding of the coworker’s relationship to him or her so that the overlooked negative relationship is no longer overlooked. In addition, because of this large negative expectancy violation, the employee with the overlooked negative relationship may become especially angered by this mistreatment from someone who he or she thought, for example, liked or trusted him or her.

Another research topic that could be considered in relation to overlooked negative relationships is rivalry. Rivalry is known to be a subjective relationship between competitors (Kilduff et al. 2010). By increasing the perceived stakes of competition, perceptions of rivalry toward another person can lead to unethical behavior, such as being unsportsmanlike and deceptive (Kilduff et al. 2016). However, current conceptualizations of rivalry, although acknowledging that rivalry can be one sided (Kilduff et al. 2010), focus on the perception that the other person is a rival, leading to higher perceived stakes of competition. If one overlooks a rival at work, then the negative consequences of rivalry may not ensue. In this way, overlooked negative relationships may allow individuals to experience positive outcomes that result from rising above the competitive relationship as it is defined by the other party or experience negative outcomes if the rival exploits the overlooked negative relationship.

### Opportunity #3: Considering the Consequences of Imagined Positive Relationships

We expect people who we believe consider us a friend to confide in us, expect those who we believe trust us to take greater risks, expect indebtedness from people who we believe rely on us for useful advice and information, and anticipate deference from those who we believe accord us power and status. Thus, imagined positive relationships—when employees overestimate the extent to which they are liked, trusted, relied on for advice, or considered to be a leader—are likely to lead to expectation violations when the employee acts consistently with his or her inaccurate understanding of the other’s relationship to him or her.

The coworker-perceived relationship quality between these two people could improve or worsen depending on whether the coworker evaluates the expectancy violation as positive or negative. If the coworker evaluates this violation positively, it may improve the quality of their relationship. In this way, people can enact relationships through their

expectations via a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the coworker evaluates this violation negatively, it may worsen the quality of their relationship. How people respond (positively or negatively) to imagined positive relationships is likely to be determined by the expectations that are associated with different types of relationships. That is, the type of relationship being misinterpreted is likely to determine whether the expectancy violation is evaluated positively or negatively and thus, lead to different effects. More specifically, we expect that the more one imagines a positive relationship regarding friendship or trust relationships among peer coworkers, the more the relationship quality will *increase* over time, because this misperception is likely to lead to behaviors that the other person will positively evaluate. In contrast, because people are expected to defer to those with more power or status, we expect that the more one imagines a positive relationship regarding leadership or power, the more the relationship quality will *decrease* over time, because this misperception is likely to lead to behaviors that the other person will negatively evaluate. Lastly and similarly, because people do not like to feel obligated when they are not, we expect that the more one imagines a positive relationship regarding advice or helping, the more the relationship quality will also decrease over time.

Employees who believe that they are liked or trusted by a coworker more than they are—by acting on these beliefs—may make the coworker like or trust them more, thus improving coworker-perceived relationship quality. By behaving as though the coworker considers them a friend or trusted ally, they are likely to behave in ways that the coworker will evaluate positively. For example, guided by their (incorrect) belief that they are liked or trusted more than they are, employees may encourage others to reciprocate by doing favors, being generous, and behaving warmly. Research on felt trust has found that the extent to which employees believe that they are trusted by others elicits positive affective evaluations and affects employee behavior (e.g., Salamon and Robinson 2008, Lau et al. 2014). Thus, when employees believe that they are trusted or liked by a coworker, they may feel obligated to reciprocate that coworker's trust and liking, which in turn, obligates reciprocity from the coworker (Gable et al. 2003, Weber et al. 2005), thus improving the quality of the relationship over time. Indeed, the tendency of people to be liked by those whom they like and whom they assume like them may be explained by this enactment over time (Elfenbein et al. 2009, Olk and Gibbons 2010, Eisenkraft et al. 2017). Moreover, we anticipate that the more an employee overestimates friendship or felt trust (i.e., the greater the magnitude of the discrepancy), the more he or she will engage in

behaviors that will be positively evaluated relative to expectations. Additionally, such positive evaluations are likely to encourage reciprocity from the coworker. Indeed, research and theory on trust development have found that large acts of initial trust are more likely to be reciprocated than small acts of initial trust, and as such, they accelerate development of trust between two people (see Weber et al. 2005). Other research also suggests that people can enact such positive misperceptions. When people anticipate acceptance from others, they behave warmly, are more expressive, and engage in more disclosure, which can prompt others to accept them (Stinson et al. 2009, Gaucher et al. 2012).

**Proposition 4.** *For imagined positive relationships involving friendship and trust among peers, the larger the employee's discrepancy, the more coworker-perceived relationship quality increases.*

However, people find some expectancy violations as off putting and aversive, and thus, they evaluate and respond to the violator negatively. That is, by acting on his or her misperception, the employee with some imagined positive relationships may worsen the relationship when the coworker evaluates the employee's behaviors as negative violations. Research examining interpersonal consequences in the aggregate is consistent with our theoretical contention that some expectancy violations can worsen relationships (Anderson et al. 2008, Brion and Anderson 2013, Campagna et al. 2014, Brion et al. 2015). In contrast to our predictions regarding friendship and trust relationships, we expect a negative relationship between the magnitude of the discrepancy and relationship quality for relationships regarding leadership, power, advice, and helping.

Consider first imagined positive relationships for leadership and power. People desire autonomy and status (Lammers et al. 2016), and although acknowledging that others may be more powerful or have a higher status is a fact of organizational life, employees are likely averse to consent to power and status differences that they believe do not exist (Lammers et al. 2008). Managers who act as though they have more status or power than others believe them to have may be considered “petty tyrants”—seen as forcing their will on others and deterring dissent (Ashforth 1997). Thus, employees who believe that they are considered more of a leader than they are or to have more power than they do may be more likely to lower the coworker's perception of relationship quality. People's resistance to delusions of leadership and power may explain why Brion and Anderson (2013) found that people who overestimated the extent to which others considered them an ally obtained fewer resources and tended to lose power over time.



Similarly, employees who overestimate the extent to which another relies on them for advice or help may also be more likely to experience lower relationship quality. Because offering advice or help generates feelings of obligation (e.g., Agneessens and Wittek 2012), employees who overestimate the extent to which another relies on them for advice or help will tend to believe that this other person is obligated to them and will act as such. In general, people find feelings of obligation unpleasant (Uehara 1995)—and this may be especially true when these feelings are unwarranted. Moreover, asking for help or advice, especially when this help or advice is seen as unreciprocated, may carry costs, such as being seen as less competent (DePaulo and Fisher 1980). Thus, we propose that, for imagined power, leadership, advice, and helping relationships, the greater the magnitude of the discrepancy, the more relationship quality decreases.

**Proposition 5.** *For imagined power, leadership, advice, and help relationships, the larger the employee's discrepancy, the more coworker-perceived relationship quality decreases.*

### Implications for Leadership and Power

Although we envisage several ways in which imagined positive relationships could stimulate other research areas, we highlight leadership and power as examples. Scholars have long observed that leadership is a relational phenomenon (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995, Balkundi and Kilduff 2006, Carter et al. 2015). For example, leader-member exchange (LMX) research emphasizes that high-quality relationships between a leader and a subordinate are characterized by an exchange of mutual trust, respect, and obligation (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). However, research examining the dyadic exchanges between leaders and followers tends to focus primarily on the follower's perspective of the exchange (Schyns and Day 2010). Because leaders and their followers exhibit only moderate agreement about the quality of the exchange (Sin et al. 2009), studying imagined positive relationships may provide added insight into these leader-follower dynamics. For instance, leaders who imagine positive relationships could cause follower-perceived LMX quality to reduce over time. People may react negatively to people who overclaim status or have illegitimate power (e.g., Lammers et al. 2008), and the same may be true for followers who experience leaders who believe that they think their followers trust or respect them more than they do.

More generally, future research on relational misperceptions may help scholars understand who attains power, who keeps power, and how power changes hands over time. For instance, imagined positive relationships may cause leaders to overestimate the

amount of support that they have within their informal network for important initiatives or convey illusions of alliance that lead to a loss of power (e.g., Brion and Anderson 2013). In particular, imagined positive relationships involving power are likely to engender expectancy violations, which could lead followers to react negatively to leaders believing that they have more support than they actually do. In turn, followers may withhold support and effort from leader initiatives, limiting the leader's ability to wield power over the follower in the future. Incorporating theory concerning relational misperceptions into research on power and influence could shed light on how the powerful lose their capacity to influence others.

Another key area in which imagined positive relationships may play a role is in social network approaches to leadership, which document how leaders' informal ties with others in the organization can lead to positive work outcomes for themselves and their followers (e.g., Balkundi and Kilduff 2006). A leader often has several followers, and given the difficulty in learning even small social networks (Kilduff et al. 2008, Brands 2013), there is likely to be meaningful variance in how accurately leaders perceive the nature of their relationships with each of their followers. Leaders may enact relationship-building behaviors that promote relationship quality when they misperceive the extent to which followers consider them a friend. Whether leaders misperceive their friendships with followers or others in the organization may be a key to building social capital in leader friendship networks, with implications for group performance and increased reputation for leadership (e.g., Mehra et al. 2006).

### Opportunity #4: Considering the Consequences of Imagined Negative Relationships

Imagined negative relationships—when employees overestimate the extent to which another dislikes them, distrusts them, or otherwise claims a negative relationship with them—are also likely to be consequential. In fact, the negativity effect—the tendency for negatively evaluated stimuli to have greater effects than equally positively evaluated stimuli (Peeters and Czapinski 1990)—is well established in psychology. For this reason, employees who believe that others claim more of a negative relationship with them than they do may enact this by treating the person cautiously or even aggressively. For example, an employee who incorrectly believes that a coworker dislikes him may respond by ignoring the coworker or behaving uncivilly, which seems likely to garner dislike from the coworker. In his work on paranoid cognition, Kramer (1998) describes how distorted perceptions of others'



behavior are enacted over time: “[T]he paranoid perceiver’s behavior ends up eliciting the sort of uncomfortable, distant interactions that reinforce mutual wariness and suspicion and discomfort” (Kramer 1998, p. 268). Thus, in general, the more imagined the negative relationship (i.e., the greater the discrepancy between the employee’s metaperception and the coworker’s perception of the relationship), the lower the subsequent relationship quality. Alternately and perhaps less likely, imagined negative relationships may stimulate employees to attempt to repair the relationship by being affiliative and conciliatory. For example, an employee who incorrectly believes that a coworker dislikes her may respond by making overtures to the coworker—flattering or doing favors for the coworker—which may cause the coworker to reciprocate this kindness and feel more favorably about the employee.

What explains whether an employee responds to an imagined negative relationship negatively (e.g., cautiously or aggressively) or positively (e.g., with kindness and generosity)? We propose that ego threat may predict which response is more likely. For example, a narcissistic leader may lash out at those who he believes dislike him, but a more confident and self-assured leader may devote time to nurturing relationships with those who she believes dislike or distrust her.

Consider first employees who experience ego threat by the imagined negative relationship. Research provides some indirect support for the idea that employees who experience ego threat from imagined negative relationships will behave in ways that cause the coworker to negatively reevaluate his or her relationship to the employee. Those who are psychologically vulnerable to threat (e.g., low in self-esteem or chronically insecure) are more likely to both have negative perceptions of how their relationship partner views them and engage in behavior that could damage the relationship (Leary et al. 1995, Murray et al. 1998, Lemay and Dudley 2009)—people sometimes sabotage relationships when they believe that the other has less positive regard for them than they would hope. When an employee with an imagined negative relationship responds this way to the coworker, the coworker—who does not feel as negatively and may even feel neutral about the employee—is likely to experience this as a negative expectancy violation. The employee and his or her behavior are likely to be evaluated negatively, and this seems likely to harm the coworker’s relationship to the employee. The more the employee experiencing ego threat imagines a negative relationship to the coworker (i.e., a discrepancy of larger magnitude), the worse the employee behaves, and the more likely the coworker will experience a large expectancy violation that he or she negatively evaluates.

However, we expect that imagined negative relationships may be less likely to lead to decreased relationship quality when employees do not experience ego threat. These employees may be more likely to seek to repair the presumed negative relationship, and such attempts at relationship repair seem likely to be positively evaluated by the coworker. People high in self-esteem feel less threatened and vulnerable to interpersonal rejection (Leary et al. 1995). Because they are less psychologically vulnerable to threat, those high in self-esteem are more likely to respond to doubts about how another feels about them by reflecting on their own good nature and anticipating future acceptance from the other (Murray et al. 1998). To the extent that they anticipate future acceptance, they seem likely to engage in behaviors that could be positively evaluated by the other. Indeed, when led to believe that their partner had problems with them, those high in self-esteem engaged in behaviors to enhance closeness (Murray et al. 2002). Similarly, because they are more motivated to have positive interpersonal relationships and less reactive to negative situations, such as conflict (Jensen-Campbell and Graziano 2001), employees who are high in agreeableness may be less likely to feel threatened by a presumed negative relationship and may be more likely to engage in affiliative acts to repair the presumed negative relationship. Such responses may be perceived by the coworker as a positive expectancy violation, and he or she may respond in kind. Because larger discrepancies between the employee’s metaperception and the coworker’s perception of the relationship afford the potential for more positively valenced violations, we propose that the greater the discrepancy, the more relationship quality will increase.

**Proposition 6a.** *When employees experience ego threat owing to an imagined negative relationship, the larger the employee’s discrepancy, the more the coworker-perceived relationship quality decreases.*

**Proposition 6b.** *When employees do not experience ego threat owing to an imagined negative relationship, the larger the employee’s discrepancy, the more the coworker-perceived relationship quality increases.*

### Implications for Distrust

Our theorizing about imagined negative relationships points to interesting possibilities with respect to the effects of these misperceptions on distrust and workplace relationship trajectories. Distrust occurs when employees have “confident negative expectations regarding another’s conduct” (Lewicki et al. 1998, p. 439). Indeed, research on trust underscores the importance of expectations for trust or distrust to develop: “numerous empirical studies have shown

that interactions that reinforce individuals' expectations about other's trustworthiness increase trust, whereas interactions that violate these expectancies undermine trust" (Kramer 1998, p. 252).

When employees incorrectly think that a coworker distrusts them, it may set into motion a self-fulfilling prophecy, making the coworker distrust them. They may look for evidence of such distrust and seek confirmation of their expectation that the coworker distrusts them. As such, they may misinterpret cues as evidence in support of the belief that the other person mistrusts him or her. We would expect such effects to be likely to occur when employees are especially insecure—where such anticipated distrust would arouse their suspicion and heighten the chances that they maintain a vigilant watch for any behavior that may validate their expectations of the coworker's distrust. Feeling distrusted is also likely to change employees' behavior: for example, feeling distrusted can undermine intrinsic motivation (Enzle and Anderson 1993). It does not seem difficult to imagine that those who are less intrinsically motivated may, in turn, prompt distrust. For example, an employee who believes that his manager distrusts him may become less motivated and demonstrate less initiative, thus prompting the manager to further distrust him and eliciting additional discomfort from the employee, who may bristle at future attempts to monitor him. In keeping with our logic, however, the effect may vary for employees who are more secure, because they may be more likely to interpret this felt distrust as an opportunity to build and restore trust via conciliatory and cooperative actions toward the coworker. Thus, one way to understand how workplace relationships vary in their trajectories over time is to examine how initial misperceptions of distrust breed suspicious (or conciliatory) behavior, which changes the nature of the relationship over time.

### **Opportunity #5: Understanding When Relational Misperceptions Occur**

Having discussed the potential relational consequences of employees' relational misperceptions, we now consider their antecedents—what makes employees less accurate in their metaperceptions of others' relationships to them. Consistent with the idea that the motivational significance of the judgment and the informational perspective of the judge relative to the target influence perceptual accuracy (e.g., Dunning 2005, Vazire 2010), we propose three motivational or informational factors that increase the extent to which employees misperceive a relationship at work: instrumentality, obscurity, and desirability. People rely on cues—verbal or nonverbal—from others

to determine what others think of them, but these cues can be deceptive (instrumentality), ambiguous (desirability), and sometimes missing (obscurity) (Carlson and Kenny 2012).

First, individual or situational conditions that increase *instrumentality* or how much the other employee (coworker) is motivated to send false signals about his or her relationship to the employee are likely to lead to greater relational misperceptions. Because work behavior is often strategic (Gardner and Martinko 1988, Bozeman and Kacmar 1997), relational misperceptions may be more likely and of greater magnitude when others engage in behaviors meant to mislead employees about the nature of their relationships with them. For example, followers are known to ingratiate themselves with upper management to receive preferential treatment (Ralston 1985), and upper management is known to engage in impression management to garner political support for their course of action (Pfeffer 1981). Because of power and status differences and the quest for resources in organizations, employees may engage in impression management regarding their relationships with others—for example, sending out false signals about how much they like, trust, or respect others. Weber et al. (2005, p. 97) argue that people may find it “strategically advantageous” to get another person to believe that they trust him or her to, for example, elicit reciprocity. These false signals may cause more and greater relational misperceptions. Some research has found that powerful people overestimate the extent to which others trust them, want to work with them, and are willing to help them (Lusher et al. 2012, Brion and Anderson 2013)—perhaps in part because those with less power falsely convey their trust in, liking of, or willingness to help more powerful others. Given ample evidence supporting the idea that a significant amount of individual behavior in organizations is influenced by impression management concerns (Bozeman and Kacmar 1997), it seems plausible that people at work intentionally mislead others to believe that they consider them a friend, are trusted, or are a valued advisor and do not consider them rivals or enemies. The more a coworker is motivated by instrumental concerns to deceive another employee about the nature of his or her relationship to the employee, the greater the relational misperception—particularly for imagined positive or overlooked negative relationships.

Second, another individual or situational factor that may lead to greater relational misperceptions is *obscurity* or how much an employee lacks information about his or her social relationships through observation. The physical design of workplaces—cubicles, meeting rooms, and office walls—makes it difficult

for employees to observe others and gain information about their social relationships. For example, work from home arrangements, distributed work teams, and the ubiquity of online communication mean that many interactions now occur out of sight. This creates a challenge for employees wishing to make accurate inferences about how their coworkers view their relationships, because their “experience of others is dominated by what can be observed externally” (Pronin 2008, p. 1177). Because we often lack access to others’ thoughts and feelings, we must depend on our observations to guide our relational perceptions—and yet, there are limits to what we can actually observe. For example, an employee may think that a coworker considers him or her a friend, because the coworker is friendly to him or her. If the employee saw the coworker interact with others—to see whether the coworker is more or less friendly to others—the employee would be able to calibrate his or her perception of how the coworker views the relationship. The more an employee lacks observable cues about the relationship, the more he or she will misperceive the relationship.

The third individual or situational factor that may lead to greater relational misperceptions is *desirability* or how much it helps employees’ self-views and how motivated employees are to believe certain things about a relationship. People generally want to maintain a positive self-view, and their relationships with others influence those self-views (Wills 1981, Church et al. 2014). Because our relationships inform our self-views (Sluss and Ashforth 2007), employees may be motivated to have a distorted view of others’ relationships to them. For example, people may be motivated to believe that a coworker considers them more of a friend than he or she does, because that friendship reflects well on them. Likewise, people may be motivated to believe that others do not dislike them when it would be damaging to their self-view. The more an employee is motivated to distort his or her own perception of the relationship, the more he or she will misperceive the relationship.

**Proposition 7.** *With more instrumentality, obscurity, or desirability, the larger the employee’s magnitude of his or her relational misperception.*

### Implications for Personality and Workplace Design

Throughout organizations, these three factors—instrumentality, obscurity, and desirability—help shed light on the extent to which relational misperceptions are likely to be present. For example, people who are higher in self-monitoring—the extent to which people monitor and adjust their self-presentations to the situation (Snyder 1974)—may be more likely to send

false signals about their views of the relationship. People who interact with high self-monitors may have difficulty discerning the high self-monitors’ underlying attitudes and opinions, because they adjust their self-presentations to the situation. To wit, one item used to measure this personality variable is “I may deceive people by being friendly when I really dislike them” (Snyder 1974). Self-monitors are also known to be attuned to “status-oriented impression management motives” (Gangestad and Snyder 2000, p. 547) and may, therefore, send false signals to people who they feel they should impress, such as high-status coworkers. Thus, employees are likely to have greater relational misperceptions when those relationships concern coworkers who are higher in self-monitoring.

In the case of obscurity, an interesting question is whether reducing obscurity can improve relational misperceptions. If a lack of information about social relationships via observation increases relational misperceptions, then open plan office layouts (and other modifications to the physical context of the work environment) may allow employees to observe each other’s interactions more often and therefore, judge their relationships more accurately. In a similar vein, other work conditions—virtual teams or an overreliance on electronic communication—that limit face-to-face contact are likely to increase relational misperceptions. Less face-to-face contact means that employees will have fewer cues to determine how others view their relationship, thus creating a condition of obscurity. Thus, employees are likely to have greater relational misperceptions when the work environment provides fewer opportunities for employees to observe their own and others’ relationships.

Desirability is likely to be widespread in organizations and a major factor underpinning relational misperceptions. For example, popularity may influence how desirable it is for people to feel connected to more popular others, leading employees to overestimate their relationships with popular others and underestimate their relationships with unpopular others. This notion is consistent with evidence showing that people desire friendships with popular people—unreciprocated friendships tend to be aspirational in the sense that lower-status people claim ties to higher-status people (Ball and Newman 2013). Moreover, people tend to claim higher-status people as rivals and underclaim lower-status people as rivals, perhaps because it is desirable to consider a higher-status person a rival and undesirable to claim a lower-status person as a rival (Eisenkraft et al. 2017). Thus, employees are likely to have greater relational misperceptions depending on the popularity and relative status of the coworker in question.



## Discussion

We identify a topic—relational misperceptions—that has been largely overlooked in the organizational literature, despite indications from research in other fields that people are prone to misunderstanding how others conceive of the relationship between them. Our analysis advances the possibility that employees who misperceive how another person conceives of the relationship between them will experience important consequences to their reputation, the quality of their work relationships, and additional downstream consequences, which could include their power, influence, negotiation outcomes, and more. Moreover, going beyond work that establishes that people are fallible in perceiving their relationships with others, we identify when relational misperceptions are more or less likely to occur.

By establishing relational misperceptions as an important but overlooked workplace phenomenon, we make several contributions to the organizational literature. First, we call attention to an often-neglected topic and call into question research that assumes that employees accurately report on their relationships with others. Second, by offering theoretical accounts of how, why, and when employees misperceive their relationships with others, we guide future research on the potential antecedents and consequences of relational misperceptions. Third (and relatedly), by offering exemplars for potential future research within each of the five research opportunities that we addressed, this paper contributes to a variety of topics in the organizational literature. Considering the extent to which employees inaccurately (or accurately) perceive others' views of their relationships at work offers new opportunities for research in diverse literatures, such as leadership, power and influence, knowledge sharing, social networks, teams, and more.

In striving to offer a coherent framework, we focused this paper on the relational outcomes that are likely to occur when an employee acts on his or her relational misperception—thus causing the coworker who is party to the relationship to experience an expectancy violation. We recognize, however, that theorizing about the effects of relational misperceptions at work could be extended to incorporate many additional factors. For example, we did not consider the possibility that both parties to the relationship could simultaneously have relational misperceptions. Such a possibility would likely cause both parties to violate the other's expectations—thus having complex effects on their relationships to each other.

As another example, we did not fully incorporate the role of power and status dynamics into our theorizing. We urge researchers to more closely examine how power and status differences may interact with

relational misperceptions at work—both because issues of power and status are highly relevant at work and as we predicted earlier, because power and status differences are likely to be laden with expectations. According to expectancy violations theory, people with more power are likely to be considered “high reward value”—making their expectancy violations more likely to be evaluated positively (Burgoon et al. 1995). We, however, disagree with this claim, and as such, earlier argued that high-power employees may be especially likely to be evaluated negatively when they violate expectations, because those in power are expected to take care in their exercise of it. For example, leaders who overestimate the extent to which their followers trust them are likely to be evaluated negatively by overclaiming power or status. Moreover, people may have rigid role expectations for leaders. For example, a leader who behaves as though he or she is friends with one of his or her employees may be evaluated negatively for behaving in a way that is inconsistent with his or her role as a leader. This speculation maps onto a more general idea that we outlined earlier: the same behavior is likely to be evaluated differently when enacted by different people. Whether a given behavior violates expectations or not and whether it garners a positive or negative evaluation are likely to vary based on the person engaging in the behavior—his or her role and status in the organization, the observer's role and relative status, and the organization's norms.

We also did not consider the more complex possibility that an employee could simultaneously misperceive different types of relationships for a particular coworker. For example, in a mentoring relationship, a mentee could overestimate the extent to which the mentor considers the mentee a friend and underestimate the extent to which the mentor considers him or herself as a source of advice. Given the potential for relationships to be multiplex (Methot et al. 2016), we urge researchers to empirically examine the within-person complexity that is potentially inherent with organizational relationships. Lastly, because we focused our theorizing on the effects on the employee's relationships with others, we did not fully consider the other types of effects that relational misperceptions could have. Given that some research suggests that perceived relationships with others affect our feelings about ourselves and our performance on the job (e.g., Salamon and Robinson 2008, Lau et al. 2014), researchers should consider other potential consequences to self-esteem or job performance for the employee who misperceives the relationship. Likewise, the other party whose beliefs are being misperceived may also demonstrate consequences of relational misperceptions. For example, employees with a leader who was inaccurate in his or her trust



perceptions reported greater emotional exhaustion and had more physical symptoms of exhaustion, perhaps because the employees had to expend more resources to understand and manage their relationship with their leader (Campagna et al. 2014). Future research should examine the psychological and performance effects for those whose relationships are misperceived by others.

### Addressing Measurement Issues

To guide future research on relational misperceptions, we discuss two methods of analyzing data on relational misperceptions using a consensus approach. Then, we suggest an alternate approach to measuring relational misperceptions and offer an extension to our model that incorporates the precision of employees' metaperceptions.

### Two Existing Approaches to Measuring Relational Misperceptions

There are two primary ways that relational misperceptions and similar topics can be studied: a social relations model (SRM) and a cognitive social structure (CSS) approach. Both of these approaches entail collecting similar data, but they originate from different disciplines, are analyzed in slightly different ways, and have different features.

The SRM approach—most often used in social psychological research on person perception—can be extended to consider relational misperceptions (for more information about SRM, including macros and other data analysis tools, see Kenny 2004, Kenny et al. 2006, Back and Kenny 2010). The SRM approach requires asking research participants to report on their relationships to and from others using a continuous scale (e.g., “How much do you trust Person A?”) and to indicate what they believe others would say about them (e.g., “How much does Person A trust you?”) in round robin fashion (or alternately, block fashion) (see Back and Kenny 2010).

The CSS approach—used in cognitive network research on relationships (see Krackhardt 1987, Brands 2013)—requires asking people to indicate their direct ties (e.g., “Who do you trust?”), their beliefs about incoming ties (e.g., “Who trusts you?”), and their beliefs about others' ties (e.g., “Who does Person A trust?”). Although the full CSS method can be time consuming and mentally taxing for respondents because it requires each person to provide a cognitive map of who they think each person is connected to in the network, this drawback does not apply to imagined and overlooked relationships, because these misperceptions only refer to the immediate relationships between a focal person (ego) and others (alters). That is, scholars can focus exclusively on how a focal person perceives other people and how other

people perceive the focal person (without also asking the focal person to indicate how other people perceive other people). Unlike the SRM approach, the CSS approach is not an analytic strategy but a measurement strategy.

### An Alternate Approach: Using Correspondence

Although we earlier defined relational misperceptions using a consensus approach, another approach to defining relational misperceptions—a correspondence approach—could also prove fruitful in organizational research. Whereas the consensus approach entails comparing a focal person's metaperception of his or her relationship with another person with the other person's perception of the relationship, a correspondence approach entails a different comparison (Kruglanski 1989): how much the focal person's perceptions of the relationship correspond to some established criterion. More specifically, the employee's perception of a relationship (e.g., how much he believes that Brittany trusts him) could be compared with multiple others' (third-party) perceptions of it (e.g., how much others believe that Brittany trusts him) or observational or other behavioral data regarding actual interactions (e.g., how much Brittany behaves as though she trusts him). For example, wearable sensors or behavioral records could provide a useful referent (e.g., Kim et al. 2012), because research has found considerable discrepancy between people's reports of their interactions and their actual interactions (Killworth and Bernard 1974).

Researchers need not choose one approach or the other. In fact, combining these two approaches may yield useful insights. Namely, considering both the extent to which employees know how others conceive of the relationship between them and the extent to which these employee beliefs correspond to actual behavior would reveal why an employee holds those beliefs. For example, it may be that the other party to the relationship seeks to intentionally mislead the employee or that the other party to the relationship has forgotten about the relationship or is embarrassed to admit to it. That is, as implied earlier, either party to the relationship could be responsible for the perceptual discrepancy; by additionally comparing these perceptions with third-party perceptions or actual behavior, it may be possible to uncover the source of the discrepancy in perceptions.

### Overprecision and the Role of Confidence

Thus far, we have focused our concern on the extent to which employees overestimate or underestimate the nature of their relationships with others. However, another important consideration is the extent to which employees are confident about these claims or how certain they are that their beliefs are accurate.

In general, research has found that people tend to be “overprecise”—feeling more certain about their beliefs than is warranted (Moore and Healy 2008; see Swift and Moore 2011 for reviews). The extent to which employees are certain (or uncertain) about their metaperceptions of their workplace relationships is likely to have important implications. For example, this certainty is likely to covary with the extent to which employees seek additional evidence and are willing to reevaluate their existing beliefs about their relationships. As such, certainty is likely to moderate many of the relationships presented earlier, because when employees are more certain, their beliefs are more likely to lead to the expected consequences that we proposed—rather than to predict information search.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we have highlighted five opportunities for future research on relational misperceptions. We suggest that future research should examine factors that predict how much employees misperceive their relationships and what consequences are likely to ensue when they do. Our aim was to shift scholars’ attention toward areas in relational research—ushering in an era of exploration of the direct, consequential, multidimensional, and dynamic nature of relational misperceptions. In doing so, we can better understand how work gets done and how organizational goals are accomplished through relational processes at work.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We note that relational misperceptions are distinct from whether a given relationship is symmetric or not: that is, whether relationships are two sided and mutual or one sided and nonmutual (see Carley and Krackhardt 1996). Whereas relational misperceptions concern predictions of what others think, symmetry refers to whether the two parties in the relationship feel the same way about each other.

<sup>2</sup> Expectancy violations theory is distinct from expectation violation theory (Jussim et al. 1987), which focuses on the role of stereotypes in setting expectations rather than on the role of many different factors (such as past experience or role prescriptions) in setting expectations.

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