Relationship Development and Workplace Integration: An Evolutionary Perspective

In this article, the authors argue that recent scholarship emanating from the field of evolutionary psychology (EP) promises to further current understanding of relationship development processes in organizations. To this end, they briefly review EP’s core assumptions about human nature and behavior and then examine three adaptive mechanisms that underlie close relational functioning in the workplace. Specifically, the authors describe how reciprocal altruism and preference for similarity, coupled with sensitivity toward prestige hierarchies, underscore the exchange and coordination activities of employees’ relationships at work. The proposed model of relationship development is discussed in terms of employee adjustment and integration processes. In conclusion, the authors highlight the potential of EP as both (a) a metatheoretic framework through which seemingly disparate areas of scholarship can be unified, and (b) a vehicle for theoretical development, a catalyst of novel predictions about communication in organizations, grounded in ultimate, rather than proximate, causation.

[Over millions of years] natural selection slowly sculpted the human brain, favoring circuitry that was good at solving the day-to-day problems of our hunter-gatherer ancestors—problems like finding mates, hunting animals, gathering plant foods, negotiating with friends, defending ourselves against aggression, raising children, choosing a good habitat, and so on. Those whose circuits were better designed for solving these recurring problems left more children, and we are descended from them. (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997, Principle 5, par. 3)

Recent challenges to conventional standard social scientific views of brain and behavior suggest that human beings are born “hardwired” for content (e.g., Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Over the past decade, the field of evolutionary psychology (EP) in particular has effectively demonstrated
that the human brain is more than a general-purpose mechanism, ready for social programming at birth. Rather, supported quite consistently by a growing body of scholarship originating in fields as varied as primatology, anthropology, neuroscience, comparative zoology, behavioral genetics, and paleontology, evolutionary psychologists have described the brain as a collection of highly specialized, content-laden information-processing algorithms designed during our environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA) to resolve recurring survival and reproduction problems for members of our species (e.g., Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Erlich, 2002; Pinker, 2002). With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Cappella, 1995; Cole & Teboul, 2004; Reeves & Nass, 2003; see also Beatty et al., 1998; Beatty & McCroskey, 2000; McCroskey & Beatty, 2000), the emergent “conscilience” between the natural and the social sciences has gone largely unnoticed within our discipline. In fact, much work examining the relationship between evolutionary processes and human behavior of interest to communication scholars has actually arisen outside of our field. For instance, Hauser (1996), a biologist, has described the evolution of communication as a signaling system. In turn, relational psychologists have revised their views on attraction, attachment, and bonding processes in light of evolutionary principles (Kenrick & Trost, 1997; Taylor, 2002; Zeifman & Hazan, 1997). Organizational scholars have drawn on EP to explain workplace motivations (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002), the relationship of status to well-being (e.g., Ellis, 1994; Lawrence & Nohria, 2002), the emergence of large-group social structures (Pierce & White, 1999), gossip (e.g., Barkow, 1992), absenteeism, risk behavior, trade union politics and career development (Nicholson, 2001, 1997b), the glass ceiling, and the wage gap (Browne, 1998).

In this article, we highlight the potential evolutionary psychology holds in furthering theoretical development within our discipline. As a test case, we draw on research in evolutionary psychology to explain how relationships develop in modern organizations. More specifically, we argue here that reciprocal altruism, preference for similarity, and sensitivity toward prestige hierarchies largely underscore the exchange and coordination activities inherent in employees’ relationship development, workplace adjustment, and integration. First, though, and at the risk of boring those readers familiar with EP, we review a few central assumptions about the human brain and behavior that set this perspective apart from more conventional scholarship.

**Evolution and the Adapted Mind**

Evolutionary psychologists see the human brain as a collection of content-specific functional modules designed by evolutionary pressures to help our Paleolithic ancestors resolve adaptive problems (e.g., language
acquisition, mate selection, infant nurturing, in-group cooperation) related to survival and reproduction (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992; Wilson, 1975). Abundant evidence of the brain’s content-dependent hardwiring exists throughout the animal kingdom (e.g., frogs’ and rabbits’ bug and hawk detection mechanisms; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). In what concerns humans specifically, Chomsky (1975) has long pointed to the innate grammatical structures of the human mind. In turn, Buss (1989) has documented identical mate attraction and selection patterns across 37 cultures. Of particular interest to human communication scholars is the work of Cosmides and Tooby (1992), who have more recently confirmed that humans come hardwired for reciprocation. Neuroscientists’ (e.g., see Damasio, 1999; Gazzaniga, 1998) fruitful mapping of the architecture of the human brain points to highly specialized information-processing machinery as well.

All psychological adaptations are encoded at a genetic level (e.g., Dawkins, 1976). This means that our genes do much of our “thinking” for us, that is, our behavior need not occur within our awareness; it is largely automatic (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 1997; Gazzaniga, 1998; Kellermann, 1992). As neuroscientists remind us, “[B]y the time we think we know something—it is part of our conscious experience—the brain has already done its work […]. The brain finishes the work half a second before the information it processes reaches our consciousness” (Gazzaniga, 1998, p. 63). Consequently, people are not the rational decision makers they pretend to be (i.e., they are not completely in touch with what prompts their actions). Accordingly, interpretations or explanations for human behavior are often really alignment moves, designed to keep conscious thoughts consonant with behaviors (e.g., Damasio, 1999; Festinger, 1957; Gazzaniga, 1998). Quite predictably, perceptions and interpretations are invariably made in the direction of self-interest and not against it (Haselton & Buss, 2000; Krebs & Denton, 1997).

It is important to highlight that natural selection would have favored the development of psychological adaptations capable of reading cues in the environment and acting in the direction of self-interest. For EP scholars, the built-in “crib sheets” or “reasoning circuits […] about the nature of the world and human action” (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997, The standard social science model, par. 5) that all humans share,² are flexible algorithms designed to interact with the environment so as to maximize fitness and allow for behavioral adjustment, given specific socioecological conditions (e.g., Pierce & White, 1999). This behavioral adjustment is likely made possible through superordinate program switches—our emotions (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 2000). For evolutionary psychologists, the emotions (e.g., fear, love, anger) that all humans come equipped with, are designed to regulate the activation and deactivation of our
Many of the cognitive adaptations that emotions regulate were designed for social interaction. In the remainder of this article, we will review a few of these adaptations and argue that they can assist us in theorizing about relationship development, employee adjustment, workplace integration, and attendant communication processes in the modern organization. More precisely, drawing on the work of evolutionary scholars (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 1992), as well as on a recent model of close relational functioning (Cole & Teboul, 2004), we argue that early humans’ close contact and mutual interdependencies in hunter-gatherer groups led to the emergence of cognitive adaptations enabling resource exchange and intragroup coordination, both ubiquitous processes in present-day relational, group, and organizational settings. At this juncture, all evidence suggests that reciprocal altruism (i.e., an act of altruism carrying the expectation of repayment in kind) and a preference for similarity took hold because they resolved the problem of resource variability (i.e., the constant and unpredictable surplus and shortage of important resources) and the challenge of complex task achievement for our hominid ancestors. Ultimately, these adaptations were selected for and became part of the modular architecture of the human mind because the human enterprises that they oversaw led to the creation of non-zero-sum outcomes and produced greater survival and reproductive benefits than costs for their originators. A third adaptation, sensitivity to prestige hierarchies (i.e., attention to group member status distribution), likely took hold because it helped early humans become particularly selective about whom to target for relationship-building activity (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

Human Adaptations for Relationship Development Processes

Reciprocal Altruism and Social Exchange
Early hominids’ close contact and mutual interdependencies in hunter-gatherer societies would have led to the development of cognitive adaptations that functionally resolved the problem of resource variability for members of our species (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Reciprocal altruism (i.e., tit for tat; Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Trivers, 1971) and a cast of supporting adaptations like memory systems (i.e., mechanisms facilitating humans’ ability to distinguish between others based upon complementary interests and past reciprocations), deception (i.e., for advantageous exchange), deception detection (i.e., to detect default in exchange), and self-deception (i.e., to fuel delusion regarding a cheater’s
intentions when in our self-interest) have all been advanced as evolved universal mechanisms underscoring exchange activity among modern humans (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Kiyonari, Tanida, & Yamagushi, 2000; Krebs & Denton, 1997). In effect, it is through reciprocal exchange that individuals acquire the variety of resources (i.e., information, love, status, money, goods, and services; Foa, Converse, Tornblom, Foa, 1993) that they need in everyday social life. Perhaps more importantly however, reciprocity facilitates the creation of non-zero-sum (i.e., synergistic) gains through the exchange of complementary resources with others (e.g., Wright, 2000). Not surprisingly, social exchange has been found to underscore relationship development processes in both interpersonal (e.g., Gouldner, 1960; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000; Roloff, 1981) and organizational (e.g., Berman, West, & Richter, 2002; Boyd & Taylor, 1998; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) contexts. In turn, mechanisms consonant with deception detection are also well documented in the interpersonal communication literature (e.g., Andersen et al., 1998).

Notwithstanding, while reciprocal altruism drives much human interaction, a logical cost–benefit analysis of social exchange processes reveals that reciprocity cannot explain some resource transactions that occur within close relationships (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). Namely, individuals often provide resources to close partners in times of great need, without expecting an equivalent investment return (also see communal relationships, Clark & Mills, 1993). EP scholars have labeled this adaptive problem the “Banker’s Paradox” (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). The conundrum lies in the fact that helping a close partner in dire need appears to be a risky investment strategy, and one not likely to take hold, from an evolutionary standpoint. Clearly, the more desperate a partner is for help, the greater the odds of default on payback. Consequently, from a social exchange perspective, it appears wise (i.e., in one’s self-interest) to turn one’s back on a partner facing tremendous adversity. Yet, in close relationships, humans often do not follow this course of action.

Preference for Similarity and Coordination

Taking into account both the strengths and weaknesses of a social exchange model, Cole and Teboul (2004) have recently argued that our evolutionary ancestors’ pressing and recurring survival needs extended beyond the management of variable resources, which a tit-for-tat model of reciprocity (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981) so aptly resolves. Early humans faced the problem of complex task achievement as well. Clearly, many essential and complex human activities required coordinated effort (hunting, gathering, fending off attacks, etc.). As such, adaptive solutions to the problem of coordinating complex collective endeavors were needed (Alvard & Nolin, 2002; Taylor, 2002). Cole and Teboul (2004)
have proposed a preference for similarity as an adaptive solution to the problem of coordinating joint complex activities in hunter-gatherer groups. According to Cole and Teboul (2004), preference for similarity matches individuals around common values, interests, or goals and facilitates development of mutual knowledge, which is essential to joint coordination (e.g., Chwe, 2001; Clark & Marshall, 1981). Further, preference for similarity promotes greater non-zero-sum gains between partners at reduced costs (e.g., defending a territory in a band is less risky than doing so alone). Thus, solutions to the problem of coordination, not exchange, can underlie communal giving in close relationships (Cole & Teboul, 2004). That is, individuals provide assistance to intimate partners in times of need, based not on principles of social exchange, but as a means of protecting an investment in mutual knowledge—a resource that is critical when solving complex coordination problems efficiently.

Whereas the prediction that preference for similarity is panhuman remains to be confirmed empirically, evidence already suggests it is a human adaptation. For one thing, a case can be made for its functionality from an evolutionary standpoint. Second, humans seem to appreciate preference for similarity at an emotional level in both interpersonal (e.g., Byrne, 1971) and organizational (Glaman et al., 1996) settings. Third, preference for similarity is consistent with other well-documented human universals like in-group/out-group categorization and biases (see, e.g., Brown, 1991). Fourth, it is consonant with adaptive mechanisms that have been proposed as functional in the coordination of complex collective activity. For instance, EP scholars have highlighted the likely selection of mechanisms designed to placate defection strategies from developing higher inclusive fitness than cooperative designs (e.g., moralistic aggression, Trivers, 1971; or norming, Axelrod, 1986), as well as adaptations impelling collective action toward those who fail to retaliate against free riders (e.g., punitive sentiment, Price, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2002).

**Sensitivity to Prestige Hierarchies**

As we have already suggested, repeated exchange (and coordination) activity between early humans would have favored the development of monitoring and recall systems (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Trivers, 1971) capable of differentiating between prospective relational partners based on likely returns on investment (i.e., prospective future non-zero-sum gains). Those equipped with the greatest skills at helping the group overcome recurring ecological problems (e.g., hunting, protecting the group) would necessarily have received from others preferential access to desirable resources (e.g., mates, choice food, shelter). Deference to more valuable members of the group based on demonstrated “excellence in valued domains of activity” (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001, p. 394).
would thus have emerged over time as a valuable commodity in reciprocation and the coordination of joint action. In sum, prestige and deference hierarchies likely began to emerge in early hunter-gatherer societies in step with our hominid ancestors’ ability to extend valuable benefits to other in-group members on a consistent basis (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

Sensitivity to prestige and deference hierarchies likely became particularly functional for humans as it eliminated the costs associated with rank-ordering neighbors based solely upon direct exchange and coordination experience. Further, because prestige “brings fitness enhancing deferential clients,” the copying of successful group models (i.e., successful others) would have emerged as an effective vehicle for in-group upward mobility (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001, p. 168). In other words, prestige-deference dynamics would have facilitated the coordination of exchanges and joint activities in early hunter-gatherer groups by creating common knowledge of valued resources and by allowing group members to copy the sorts of behaviors and corollary normative parameters that led to favorable non-zero-sum outcomes, in accordance with others’ patterns of deference (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Axelrod, 1986). Consequently, sensitivity to prestige hierarchies likely became an expedient mechanism for the development of in-group socialization processes in early hunter-gatherer groups as well. Perhaps not surprisingly, human social asymmetries appear to be endemic to human social groups across time and space (e.g., Brown, 1991). Indeed, careful examination of the anthropological and ethnographic records suggests that social groups completely devoid of prestige hierarchies of some sort have likely never existed (Ellis, 1994; Pierce & White, 1999; Wright, 2000). Consistently, status has been identified as central to relationship development processes (Sias, Krone, & Jablin, 2002) and group decision making (Hollingshead, 1996).

Exchange, coordination, and status hierarchies play a key role in shaping present-day workplace relationships. Drawing upon a recently developed model of close relational functioning (Cole & Teboul, 2004), we next describe relationship development processes in terms of the benefit-to-cost structures of the exchange and coordination activities occurring within an organization’s prestige hierarchies. The dynamic model of workplace relationship development that we propose at once draws from the literatures on friendship development in both relational and organizational contexts, as well as on the adaptations reviewed above. This model illustrates why both supervisor–subordinate and coworker relationships intensify or fail to develop. Further, it suggests that rather than progress in linear fashion though stages of intensification and eventual disengagement, relationships in organizations often fluctuate de-
pending upon the particular configuration of relational opportunities available to employees. In the last section of this article, we extrapolate from the model and discuss how the adaptations underlying relationship development in organizations can explain communication processes related to new hire adjustment and minority employee workplace integration.

**Relationship Development in Organizations**

Relationship development processes are central to both organizational and individual goal accomplishment in the workplace. Ultimately, it is through exchange interdependencies and coordinated joint member efforts that organizations are able to realize the non-zero-sum gains that allow for system survival (e.g., Katz & Kahn, 1978; Senge, 1990). In like fashion, through relationships, employees achieve overall well-being and are able to realize synergies they could not attain alone (e.g., Kram & Isabella, 1985; Tepper, 2000).

Traditionally, organizational relationship development scholars have emphasized the importance of exchange rather than coordination processes in workplace relationships (e.g., for review, see Berman, West, & Richter, 2002). Further, much of the literature on relationship development has tended to privilege superior–subordinate relationships and the documentation of work characteristics in relationship development (e.g., Boyd & Taylor, 1998; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Perhaps impelled by research suggesting that workplace friendships can be extremely consequential for improved workplace performance (Ross, 1997), reduced stress (Lu, 1999), favorable social support, the creation of a positive workplace atmosphere, and the management of organizational change (e.g., Berman, West, & Richter, 2002), among others, researchers have recently begun to turn their attention to the documentation of non-work-related characteristics, underlying friendships. As such, workplace friendships have recently been defined as “nonexclusive . . . relations that involve mutual trust, commitment, reciprocal liking and shared interests or values” (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002, par. 5; Sias & Cahill, 1998).

The model of relationship development we propose below highlights the importance of both reciprocation and shared similarity to relationship development processes. Further, it emphasizes the role of prestige in the formation of relational partnerships at work. Essentially, we suggest that within modern organizations, employees develop relationships with the highest complements available (HCA) and with the highest similars available (HSA). The reason for this is fourfold. First, complements are likely to hold resources for exchange. Second, similar individuals are
easy to coordinate with. Third, high status individuals are likely to hold the highest value for games of exchange and coordination; yet, desirable prospective exchange and coordination partners are not necessarily available for relationship development. The principles of HCA and HSA apply equally to superior-subordinate, as well as coworker dyads.

**Phases of Close Relationship Development at Work**

**Exploration.** All human relationship development commences with a period of exploration (Cole & Teboul, 2004) during which individuals monitor and assess the potential value others hold for profitable games of exchange and coordination. New hires are no different in this regard. Upon entry, newcomers are keen to differentiate among role set members on the basis of both complementary and similar interests, as these offer important clues regarding both potential gains-in-trade and ease of coordination in joint activities. Individuals occupying favorable positions in the work group’s prestige and deference hierarchy (e.g., Henrich & Gil-White, 2001) are, no doubt, particularly choice targets for the exploration of relational opportunities, as they have much to offer in the way of resource exchange. Similar others, in turn, who are easy to get along with and consequently easy to learn key normative standards from also become targets of early relational investments. It is these early exchange and coordination partners whom new hires begin to like and who form the basis for early workplace collaboration.

Of course, newcomers are far from trustful of all role set members. Those who offer few prospects of productive complementary exchanges get little attention, as do those failing to reciprocate in early exchange activity. In like fashion, individuals with dissimilar interests, personal values, and organizational experiences, or those with whom communication is challenging (e.g., due to cultural or language proficiency differences) typically make poor candidates for early relationship investment. Such individuals are especially ignored if they occupy a relatively weak position within the existing role-set network. The emotions that accompany newcomers throughout relational exploration are functional for two reasons. First, they likely prime individuals to either invest in or divest from particular relational opportunities in the workplace (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998). Second, they signal to prospective relational partners that their originators are either open or closed to the possibility of escalated relational development (Cole & Teboul, 2004). The intensity with which employees experience such emotions is likely to be determined largely by the prospective stakes of the relational opportunities that develop. This would explain why newcomers can feel particularly giddy over attention conferred by (or despondent over being snubbed by) a powerful organizational veteran, but quite dispassionate about
equal initiatives from “lesser” coworkers. As we have stated earlier, these emotional states and their consequent behaviors need not occur within one’s awareness (e.g., Damasio, 1999).

This early relationship development process, of course, depends as much on the new hire as it does upon the existing configuration of established relationships within the role-set group and beyond. In other words, although a new hire may identify good candidates for further relational investment during exploration, these individuals may not themselves be available to invest in an additional relationship without defaulting on existing relational obligations and synergies with their own relational partners. Not surprisingly, new hires often experience considerable relational isolation during early tenure (e.g., Teboul, 1994).

Additionally, although the HCA and HSA principles explain the relationship development initiatives of lower prestige individuals (e.g., new hires), they also describe the relational target choices of higher prestige employees. Specifically, after relational development opportunities with higher-up complements and similars have been exhausted, higher status coworkers and supervisors will likely prefer to develop relationships with the higher prestige, lower status complementary and similar employees available to them.

Considerable research has lent support to this view of early relational development. Scholars in the field of relational dynamics have long pointed to the importance of both reciprocation and shared similarity in relational development (e.g., Berg, Piner, & Frank, 1993; Newcomb, 1961). For instance, research has suggested that in the early stages of relationship formation, individuals are attracted to others who are responsive in kind and manner to their own interaction initiatives and with whom they experience favorable interactions (e.g., Albada, Knapp, & Theune, 2002; Bersheid, 1985). In the field of organizational communication, less is known about early relationship formation (Jablin, 2001). However, organizational scholars have documented the importance of both demographic and perceived similarity in the exploration phase of coworker (e.g., Sias & Cahill, 1998) and superior–subordinate (e.g., Boyd & Taylor, 1998) relational development. In turn, workplace adjustment studies have suggested that exchange and coordination are very much on the mind of newcomers. For instance, all new hires seem to be concerned with violating the formal contractual obligations established during early meetings with the organization’s representatives (i.e., employment interviews) and reinforced through various formal and informal socialization initiatives (e.g., Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Teboul & Cole, 2003; Van Maanen & Schein, 197). It seems reasonable to assume that newcomers are concerned about violating normative expectations and being branded a poor reciprocator or someone difficult to coordi-
nate with, as such a reputation can effectively shut down future relational development avenues. Not surprisingly, new hires seem to monitor whether their performance matches up to role set members’ expectations on a consistent basis (e.g., Teboul, 1994, 1999). Further, new hires carefully weigh the social costs (e.g., incurring too many IOUs or being perceived as a high maintenance coordinator) and benefits of relying on (e.g., seeking information) others (e.g., Miller & Jablin, 1991; Teboul, 1995).

Finally, leader-member exchange research (e.g., Bauer & Green, 1996; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) has lent some support to our analysis of early relationship development processes. That work suggests that high status employees (e.g., supervisors) hold in- vs. out-group relationships with their subordinates based upon exchange history. Our own work suggests that similarity likely plays an equally important role in the preferential selection of relational partnerships between higher and lower prestige employees. Perhaps more importantly, our view of early relational exploration would predict that all employees differentiate between high preference partners (HPPs) and low preference partners (LPPs) during exploration and beyond.

Development. Successful initial interactions fuel relational development in the workplace. Early profitable reciprocal and joint activities likely engender feelings of trust and in-group categorization among interactants. In turn, positive emotions toward early exchange and coordination partners serve to step up relational investment. Those with whom new hires have had successful early interaction experiences become the object of more sensitive and valuable exchanges and more complex coordination activities. This is because increased interdependence between relational partners generates idiosyncratic knowledge that is unique to a relationship (Cole & Teboul, 2004). These “transactive memories” (e.g., Hollingshead, 1998, 2001), shared understandings, or common histories render further exchange and coordination more efficient and trigger a cadre of perceptual and emotional biases designed to protect future non-zero-sum gains. For instance, idiosyncratic mutual knowledge may underlie “the feeling of being understood, an important indicator of intimacy and relational satisfaction” (Cole & Teboul, 2004, p. 153; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Further, such feelings often engender loyalty toward others who are in no position to reciprocate. Positive illusions about relational partners facilitate relational stability (e.g., Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Murray, 1999). Ultimately, these individuals become our HPPs. This, of course, is a best-case scenario. Individuals likely close off relational development avenues when the costs associated with exchange and coordination initiatives outweigh the benefits. Clearly, most employees can readily identify individuals they would stay away from at work, if given the choice. Most organizational members have had to
work with a difficult supervisor, one who complicates the simplest task. On the other hand, one can always find colleagues who freeload off the work of others. Indeed, employees can try to stay away from LPPs in organizations, but formal exigencies can also preclude them from doing so (e.g., Sias, Krone, & Jablin, 2002). Such relationships are pursued out of obligation and are fueled by formal exchange contracts and collective coordination mechanisms (e.g., formal status structures, task-related duties, or group norms). At work, employees pursue with zeal only those relationships where the benefit-to-cost structure of exchange and coordination result in non-zero-sum gains.

Considerable evidence supports our views on development as well. For instance, interpersonal scholars (e.g., Buunk & Prins, 1998; Ybema et al., 2002) have long pointed to the centrality of social exchange processes throughout the life span of a relationship. With regard to the role of shared understandings and joint activity in relational development, far less direct evidence exists. However, Planalp (1993) has argued that friends are able to communicate efficiently when they share mutual assumptions. In turn, Hollingshead (1998, 2001) has documented the increased task group efficiencies associated with different forms of transactive memory systems. Also, in what concerns the subject of loyalty in friendships, we have recently argued (Cole & Teboul, 2004) that friends can behave altruistically toward relational partners who are in no position to reciprocate (see Banker’s paradox, Tooby & Cosmides, 1996) to protect a vital resource—the mutual knowledge.

Similarity appears to play a critical role in the intensification of workplace relationships. Sias and Cahill (1998), for instance, have found that coworkers are most likely to move from an acquaintance to a close or even best friend relationship when they share similar demographic characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as common experiences (e.g., both social and work-related problems and activities). Trust and intimacy are common experiences for coworkers who see their relationships develop (Sias & Cahill, 1998). In fact, these relationships can become so important to employees that their value can override the costs of an unfavorable formal exchange contract with the organization and become the principal reason an employee does not pursue other employment opportunities (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Exchange and coordination appear to be important to supervisor–subordinate relationship development as well. Several scholars (e.g., Boyd & Taylor, 1998; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1991) have proposed that physical, attitudinal, and demographic similarity, and later, value congruency, all play a role in the development of supervisor–subordinate relationships. These relationships can culminate in close friendships, in which both partners exhibit high levels of trust, affection, mutual recip-
ocation, shared understandings, and efficient communication (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). This model has yet to be tested. However, leader–member exchange research (e.g., Bauer & Green, 1996; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) has intimated that supervisor–subordinate relationships solidify especially following favorable work-related interactions and experiences.

**Maintenance and fluctuation.** The relational development phase model we propose is dynamic. This signifies that, although many relationships may progress from lesser to greater intimacy (e.g., Knapp, 1978), they need not. To the extent that prospective relational partners perceive they have little to gain from investing in exchange and coordination attempts, relationships fail to develop. On the other hand, relationships can improve, stall, or deteriorate at any given point in time. Several factors related to exchange and coordination activity can account for this. First, resources available for exchange may vary over time. For instance, an individual’s access to and interest in a given set of resources can change. Also, because relational partners’ interests and goals can vary over time, shared understandings may oscillate, and relational partners might experience periods of relative ease in coordination or times of great difficulty in this regard. For this reason, individuals likely monitor their relationships with others for indications of deviation from relational expectations (e.g., see Andersen et al., 1998, for a review of detection mechanisms).

When infractions are detected, individuals are inclined to forgive as long as the benefit accrued from exchange and coordination outweighs the cost of continued investment in such a relationship. Self-deception in the form of positive illusions about others often sustains relationships with still-productive partners. When the costs begin to outweigh the benefits, individuals are alerted to the emergence of these unfavorable relationship development conditions. We suspect that emotions (e.g., anxiety) related to such relational uncertainty prompt humans to seek information in order to determine the nature of the problem or discrepancy between expectation and reality (e.g., Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Consequently, individuals either change their behavior, intensify their efforts to change their partners’ digressions, or pursue relational opportunities elsewhere (Cole & Teboul, 2004).

In organizational settings, relationships do not necessarily develop in linear fashion (e.g., Boyd & Taylor; Berman, West & Richter, 2002; Lee & Ja blin, 1995). First, the composition of role-set members can change considerably over time through new hiring, transfer, promotion, or termination. As our closest associates either temporarily or permanently leave the work group, the benefit-to-cost structure of our relationships with them and others changes also. Specifically, as physical proximity between relational partners at work decreases, so do available resources
to exchange and opportunities for joint action. Under such circumstances, a reshuffling or recalibration of relational priorities likely ensues. Consequently, employees and others in their work group likely turn to role-set HCAs and HSAs best positioned to fill in for lost synergies. Second, changes in work-group status dynamics also necessarily lead to a reevaluation of work relationships. For instance, recently promoted individuals are likely to reconsider the value of the resources their former peers still hold for them. Recently promoted employees also become privy to new information, problems, and issues that are better understood or of interest to same-status others. Here, new relationship development opportunities are pursued and old role-set relationships fade. Third, even employees of the same formal rank can reevaluate their exchanges and coordination activities when in-group projects, interests, and goals change. As a result, relationships with close associates can suffer for a time, over a major coordination difficulty (e.g., disagreement surrounding work unit goals), only to be reactivated or intensified later when other similar or complementary interests can be pursued.

In sum, we suggest that HPPs and LPPs are not immutable. The varying subjects of gossip and the irregular composition of coalitional alliances in workplace settings are suggestive of continuous revision activity in employees’ assessment of the benefit-to-cost structures of the relationships they hold with others at work. This fluctuation is perhaps more characteristic of workplace relationships than of traditional friendships because, in the case of the latter, more choice exists over whether a relationship is worth pursuing. In an organizational setting, employees often have little choice over changes to work group composition and employee mobility.

Given the shifting nature of workplace relationships, one might expect an abundant body of literature documenting relational maintenance and fluctuation processes in organizations. However, such work is limited. We thus echo Jablin’s (2001) call for the timely longitudinal testing of relationship development processes in organizations. Only longitudinal research will ultimately offer evidence for the fluctuating dynamics of high and low preference partnerships.

### Implications for Organizational Communication Research

We believe that the dynamic phase model of relationship development that we have posited here can help us rethink, both theoretically and pragmatically, areas of organizational communication inquiry, as well as generate novel and testable propositions about human communication in workplace settings. For instance, we have already proposed that
leader–member exchange researchers consider the importance of similarity relative to exchange in both supervisors’ and coworkers’ relational preference groupings. To this end, we have argued that relationships develop in organizations in accordance with the principles of highest complement and highest similar available. Further, we have suggested that at any given time all employees view their cohorts as either high or low preference partners. Our phase model intimates also that in organizational settings, relational landscapes are in constant flux. In the final part of this article, we explore how the relational phase model we have proposed can assist theoretical development in two areas of—organizational socialization and workplace diversity.

Organizational Socialization and Employee Adjustment Processes
Our views on relationship development processes in organizations have strong implications for both how the organization and its members indoctrinate new hires and for how new employees strive to adjust to a novel workplace setting. For instance, the socialization strategies (e.g., Ashforth & Saks, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) that an organization deploys may result as much from the particular array of relational partnerships between newcomers and veterans as from any deliberate planning on the organization’s part. In effect, although collective and formal socialization initiatives are likely to target all new hires equally, newcomers seen by veterans as HPPs will likely be singled out for individualized, informal communication. In like fashion, tournament socialization (e.g., fast tracking) is likely reserved for entrants earmarked early by high-status group-set members (e.g., supervisors or team leaders) as HPPs. It is these neophytes who are most likely to experience both serial socialization (e.g., informal mentoring) and investiture (e.g., skill set application) as well. Concurrently, the reverse is probable for LPPs. In effect, those rookies who offer fewer commodities for exchange and with whom coordination is perceived by role-set members as challenging, are likely to experience organizational socialization as both divesting and disjunctive. Further, newcomers viewed as LPPs by a majority of their role set are likely forced to contest their upward mobility with other same-status cohorts.

Viewing socialization from a relational development standpoint can assist us in better understanding new hire adjustment processes as well. For instance, information-seeking behavior during organizational encounters is likely shaped by the configuration of relational partnerships between new hires and veterans. As research suggests, newcomers are most likely to resort to overt information seeking when they perceive the social costs of seeking information to be relatively low (e.g., Miller & Jablin, 1991; Teboul, 1995). In contrast, covert mechanisms are pre-
ferred when more is at stake. From our vantage point, the social costs of seeking information will be highest for those new hires in low preference partnerships. In fact, the same may be true for unreciprocated newcomers (i.e., those who have identified others as HPPs but discover that the feeling is not mutual). Accordingly, it is in mutual high-preference partnerships that new hires are likely to experience the low social cost environment that prompts overt information seeking.

These notions also invite encounter scholars to consider that the traditional information-seeking targets (e.g., supervisor vs. coworker), as objects of research, may be less powerful in predicting patterns of new hire information-seeking behavior than are the categories of relational preference articulated here. For instance, a coworker will not always prompt overt information seeking on the part of a neophyte, whereas a mutual high-preference partnership might. Future research should strive to bear this out.

Further, given the dynamic and transitory nature of relationships in the workplace, one might expect many of the communication processes that typify organizational encounter to extend beyond the first 6 months of organizational tenure as well. For example, we suspect that new hires experience relational uncertainty during exploration, as they work to differentiate between high and low preference partners. Yet, this type of uncertainty might equally be experienced in established relationships between organization veterans. Here, relational uncertainty serves to alert employees to potential “cheating” (i.e., defaulting) behavior in relational partners or their pursuit of better relational opportunities with ever more prestigious complementary and similar others. Given the shifting nature of HPP and LPP configurations, one might well imagine that the information-seeking patterns reported above extend throughout organizational tenure, as employees forge new alliances and manage relational partnerships over time (e.g., Jablin, 2001; Lee & Jablin, 1995; Sias & Wyers, 2001).

Beyond encounter (e.g., throughout individualization; Jablin, 2001), relationship preference patterns may affect other important communication processes as well. For instance, the upward influence strategies (e.g., Cable & Judge, 2003) to which employees resort once they become comfortable with their immediate work environment may very well depend upon the type of relationship employees hold with influence targets. Given the model of relationship development we have proposed here, it stands to reason that employees probably resort to using exchange (i.e., “offering an exchange of favors with a target”), personal appeal (i.e., “appealing to a target’s feelings of friendship and loyalty”), inspirational appeal (i.e., “arousing a target’s enthusiasm by appealing to values, ideals, and aspirations”), ingratiation (i.e., “seeking to get the
target in a good mood or to think favorably of the sender before asking the target to do something”), and consultation (i.e., “seeking a target’s participation in planning a strategy . . . for which the target’s assistance is desired”; Cable & Judge, 2003, p. 199) when striving to influence HPPs. On the other hand, rational persuasion (i.e., “using logical arguments and factual evidence to persuade a target”), coalition building (i.e., “seeking the aid of others to get the target to do something”), legitimizing (i.e., “seeking to establish the legitimacy of a request by claiming the authority to make it”), and pressure (i.e., “using demands, threats, and persistent reminders”; Cable & Judge, 2003, p. 199) are likely saved for upward influence with LPPs. Future research would do well to test these possibilities.

In sum, our model of relationship development calls into question the efficacy of extant organizational socialization models, constructs, and research boundaries. Indeed, our analysis intimates that stages of relational development and attendant processes could be more important than stages of socialization to our understanding of new hire adjustment and social influence processes at work.

Minority Status and Network Integration

The model of relationship development we have proposed in this article has implications for how one might view informal network development and integration processes in the organization as well. First, we would suggest that informal networks are the collective and dynamic expression of high and low preference partnerships at work (see also Monge & Eisenberg, 1987). Ultimately, the configuration of who talks with whom at work will depend upon both the relational opportunities employees pursue and those they are able to capitalize upon out of interest, and the obligatory interactions they must engage in with less desirable others. As such, one can easily imagine that each employee holds both a network of HPPs (i.e., coalitions or alliances with highly complementary and/or similar others) and one regarded as low preference (i.e., made up of relationships pursued out of obligation). It appears plausible to imagine that HPP network ties are both stronger (e.g., reflective of greater exchange and coordination activity) and more multiplex (e.g., producing synergies across a variety of content areas) than LPP network links (see, e.g., Monge & Eisenberg, 1987).

Humans’ penchant for pursuing relationships with the highest complements and highest similars available to them highlights important differences in the network integration of both numerical majority and minority members. Majority members in any organization have more like-minded individuals with whom to pursue games of exchange and coordination. In comparison, minority members find fewer HPPs worth pursuing. Likewise, they are themselves targets of fewer relationship devel-
opment initiatives on the part of more established members of the organization. Consequently, they belong to comparatively smaller HPP networks. Research on minority integration processes supports this view. For example, Kanter (1977) explored the vicissitudes associated with being a minority working in an organization with skewed population ratios. Empirical work has found that minority newcomers frequently experience a sense of social isolation in the workplace (Ibarra, 1995; Teboul, 1999). Additionally, they are more likely than their majority counterparts to be acutely aware of the relational avenues that are closed to them (Teboul, 1999). These obstacles likely arise because minorities are unable to locate others with whom to exchange complementary favors and pursue joint interests. As a result, they never achieve the relational intimacy (i.e., trust or affinity toward others) that is characteristic in more developed, mature relationships at work (e.g., Sias & Cahill, 1998). Research has suggested that, because they have rather limited HPP networks, minorities experience less informational, emotional, and instrumental support (e.g., House, 1981) at work than do other employees. Ibarra (1995), for example, found that minorities are able to develop fewer instrumental and expressive relationships with others at work than are their majority counterparts.

Those minorities who are successful in integrating the organization’s social fabric appear to be able to navigate both their own minority networks as well as those of the majority group (Ibarra, 1995). Viewed another way, these individuals are able to broaden their HPP networks because they are able to exchange and coordinate easily with diverse workplace populations (i.e., perhaps akin to a “biculturalism” of sorts). Recent work by Feeley (2000), which has suggested that employees most centrally positioned in an organization’s network (i.e., those involved in the greatest number of HPPs) are least likely to leave, can help us further understand why turnover rates in organizations are highest among minorities (e.g., Cox, 1994). More explicitly, we contend that minorities are most likely to turn over in organizations because of the limited gains in trade opportunities they encounter and because of the consistent stresses associated with having to coordinate with a majority of dissimilar others (read LPPs). In this regard, language proficiency, ethnic and cultural background, gender, and age are all probable determinants of relational compatibilities (e.g., Teboul, 2002; Tsui et al., 1992). Although research has suggested that organizations can do much to alleviate integration obstacles for minority members (for example, through mentoring initiatives), such programs are most likely to meet with success when participants or partners see themselves in mutual HPPs (e.g., Noe, 1988).

Our model of relationship development suggests an alternative and perhaps more consequential way of gauging minority employee work-
place adjustment and integration. Indeed, the number of individuals that employees feel affinity toward at work (those whom they would classify as HPPs) may tell us more about the ease or difficulty individuals experience in adjusting to or becoming integrated into a work group than do traditional outcome variables like job satisfaction, commitment, and intention to quit (e.g., Morrison, 1993; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992).

Further, novel predictions regarding minority integration processes can be extrapolated from the relationship development processes proposed here. For instance, one might expect more favorable joint coordination activity and attendant synergies to accrue in work groups and organizations with predominantly homophilous populations than with heterophilous populations (e.g., Tsui et al., 1992). On the other hand, minority employees are likely to find themselves in fewer HPPs, but in more LPPs than their majority counterparts are at any given time. This is likely to have some impact upon their socialization and adjustment. For instance, they probably experience greater divestiture on the part of the organization and more relational uncertainty and higher social costs for seeking information throughout their tenure in an organization than their majority counterparts do. Relational fluctuation processes are also more consequential for them.

Finally, to date, the systemic integration obstacles (e.g., Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990) that minorities face in organizational settings have been explained in terms of restricted access to informal networks (e.g., Ibarra, 1995), few mentor–protégé relational opportunities (Ragins & Cotton, 1991), tokenism (Kanter, 1977), and limited challenging work (Mainiero, 1994). None of these perspectives have examined the relational development mechanisms underlying such difficulties. The model of workplace relationship development that we propose herein suggests that adjustment and integration processes in organizations can also be facilitated by relationship development opportunities. Given the universality of the adaptive mechanisms that underscore the relationship development processes described here, we believe these adaptation and integration dynamics are apt to be the same the world over. Future research will no doubt test this model and derivative adjustment and integration dynamics across cultures.

Conclusion
The phase model of relationship development in the workplace that we have proposed is grounded in an evolutionary perspective of human psychology and communication. This standpoint holds that much human enterprise can be explained in terms of the information-processing adaptations that were functional in facilitating the survival and repro-
duction of our hominid ancestors. Viewed another way, evolutionary psychology can help us understand current issues in terms of old solutions.

In this article, we have described a cluster of cognitive adaptations that can further our comprehension of relationship development in organizational contexts. Specifically, we argue that reciprocal altruism, preference for similarity, and sensitivity to prestige hierarchies, took hold because they helped early humans in hunter-gatherer bands resolve problems associated with resource scarcity and complex problem resolution. Yet, exchange and coordination activities are negotiated across the status hierarchies of modern organizations as well. The relationship development model that we advance suggests that in organizational settings, humans strive to develop relationships with the highest complementary and highest similar (partners) available. Consequently, they classify other employees at any given time as high and low preference partners. Essentially, our view maintains that relationships in organizations result from automatic, yet measured assessments of non-zero-sum exchange and coordination opportunities with available others. From these relatively parsimonious principles, we construct a dynamic phase model of relationship development. Further, we intimate that viewing relationship development from the vantage point of evolved adaptations contributing to exchange and coordination activity between humans, allows for an integration of seemingly disparate areas of inquiry. For instance, research on superior–subordinate and coworker relational trajectories (see also equivalent and different status, Sias, Krone, & Jablin, 2002), when viewed in terms of ultimate rather than proximate explanatory mechanisms (e.g., Kurzban, 2002; Pinker, 2002), appear to have much to say to each other. The axioms of relationship development proposed here can also be used to explain in novel ways processes as varied as network development, organizational socialization and new hire adjustment, as well as minority workplace integration difficulties.

In closing, we hope that this article calls communication scholars’ attention to the growing body of work from other disciplines explaining why and how humans behave the way they do. An evolutionary perspective affords (organizational) communication scholarship the opportunity to broaden associations with other researchers across traditional disciplinary boundaries. Of equal importance, though, an evolutionary perspective invites curricular reorganization within the field of communication. New interdisciplinary programs could help this discipline regain some ground lost to fields examining communication processes from an evolutionary perspective, while allowing communication scholars to participate more actively in the emergent conscilience (Wilson, 1998) between the natural and the social sciences.
Relationship Development and Workplace Integration

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Notes

1 We can differentiate here between two recent “biological” approaches to the study of communication. Evolutionary psychologists explain human behavior in terms of evolved specialized mental programming, or cognitive adaptations. Although these mechanisms are encoded at a genetic level, they remain flexible algorithms allowing humans to adjust behavior to varying ecological conditions. Noteworthy exemplars of this work within our own discipline include Cappella’s (1995) examination of Grice’s maxims in terms of reciprocal altruism; Reeves and Nass’s (2003) explanation for how and why humans often equate media with reality; and Cole and Teboul’s (2004) evolutionary model of friendship development. A somewhat different biological perspective is that put forth by communibiologists (e.g., Beatty et al., 1998). These scholars emphasize the neurobiological basis of human interaction, arguing that communication is much a function of biological predispositions (i.e., traits) that remain immutable across varying environmental conditions (Watson, 2003).

2 Given that the environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA) is unlikely to have varied significantly for hominid groups, this programming is common to all members of our species. As a result of this common mental architecture, one finds great similarities across social groups in how human beings see and organize the world and how they relate to others. Brown’s *Human Universals* (1991) is summative of the body of anthropological and ethnographic work unearthing evidence of recurring psychological, behavioral, and cultural practices and themes (see also Buss, 1989; Ekman, 1973). Planning, promise, insulting, nouns, rhythm, and rites of passage are just a few of the over 350 human universals that scholars have identified to date (Pinker, 2002). Curiously, scholarship emanating from the fields of cross-cultural psychology, communication, and management continues to produce lists of dimensions around which cultures can be found to vary (e.g., for recent review, see Stohl, 2001). Evolutionary psychology invites us to turn our attention to the similarities that bind us as a species.

3 Humans’ environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA) was largely characterized by a hunter-gatherer way of life in small clans of 30–50 members (Nicholson, 1997). The amount of time spent in these relatively small collectives—approximately 99%, or 10 million years, of homo sapiens’ evolutionary history—was enough to facilitate the development of the information-processing mechanisms for social interaction humans hold today (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997).

4 Any proposed adaptation must fulfill essential prerequisites. First, it must be common to all social groups across space and time. Second, in each case, it must stand as a cognitive solution to a selection pressure faced by our hominid ancestors. Third, the characteristics that the solution needs to possess to overcome selection obstacles can be readily identified. Finally, experimental research must confirm that humans have these specialized design features for survival and reproduction (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Krebs & Denton, 1997). The adaptive mechanisms that we discuss in this paper (e.g., reciprocal altruism) are human universals (e.g., Brown, 1991; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Foa et al., 1993) and are found in other primate groups as well (e.g., see DeWaal, 1998). The emotions related to these adaptations appear to be panhuman as well.

5 In a joint-action setting, to cheat is to simultaneously renounce on potential gains. Also, here, reciprocation (i.e., repayment in kind) is a relatively useless detection deterrent mechanism.

6 Viewed this way, uncertainty is consonant with many of the other feelings or emotions people experience at work that can be tied to resource exchange (e.g., guilt, gratitude, betrayal, and trust) and coordination (e.g., frustration with others hard to understand). It seems reasonable to surmise that early hominids equipped with emotional programming guiding exchange and coordination efforts with others would have had huge survival and reproductive advantages over those without it. The aforementioned emotions appear to be universal (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 2000; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984), thus suggesting functionality from an evolutionary standpoint. Yet, we realize that equating uncertainty with emotion in this manner is a controversial theoretical move. Consequently, we relegate its discussion to this footnote and look forward to exploring in the near future the implications it holds.

7 The relational isolation that minority new hires experience is perhaps illustrated most dramatically in the sojourner adaptation literature (e.g., Ady, 1995). It appears self-evident that the “culture shock” that new expatriate employees experience is particularly pronounced because of their need to construct an exchange network from scratch (i.e., both outside and within the organization) in an environment in which limited common knowledge is shared with the local population and with whom the coordination of joint action is extraordinarily laborious. Interna-
tional manager repatriation statistics highlight the consequences of being unable to exchange and coordinate well across cultures (e.g., Bird & Dunbar, 1991). In turn, Bantz (1993) highlights the sorts of joint coordination difficulties often found in intercultural work groups.

References


