

“A LITTLE EVIL MAKES THE DAY GO FASTER”: CONSEQUENCES,
MITIGATION AND THE REASONS FOR DYSFUNCTIONAL COWORKER
RELATIONSHIPS.

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of BRIAN
E LEMPKE find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Chair

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Abstract

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This study seeks to create a framework for understanding dysfunctional peer coworker relationships. While relationships are becoming increasingly recognized for their impact on employee satisfaction, retention, and performance, little work has been done in examining dysfunctional coworker relationships. Specifically, this study examines the understanding that individuals have for why a peer coworker relationship is dysfunctional, how the dysfunctional relationship inhibits progress towards work goals, and the strategies employed by coworkers to mitigate the relationship's effect on their work goals.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of researchers have noted the importance of relationships in the workplace (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Fine, 1986; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Rawlins, 1992; Sias & Cahill, 1998). In addition to the conceptualization of relationships as crucial to organizations, many scholars have argued that it is through the exploration of systems of relationships that researchers can understand the processes through which organizations become organized (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Wheatley, 1994). This increased attention to the relational dimension of the workplace has yielded several studies on the different types of workplace situated relationships: friendships (e.g., Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Sias et al., 2004; Sias & Cahill, 1998; Sias & Jablin, 1995) romances (e.g., Dillard & Miller, 1988; Dillard & Witteman, 1985; Quinn, 1977), and relationships with individuals viewed as negative or unpleasant (Fritz, 1997; Fritz, 2002; Monroe et al., 1992).

Much of the extant literature on workplace relationships has focused on either the pleasantness/enjoyableness of relationships, or those of unequal status such as supervisor-subordinate relationship. Researchers (e.g., Chapman, 1993; Cooper & Cartwright, 1994) have found that coworker functional relationships can reduce the stress experienced by employees thereby reducing turnover while simultaneously increasing work performance and attendance. Given the impact that coworker relationships can have on both individual and organizational productivity, it is surprising how little we know regarding the formation of dysfunctional relationships.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationships as Socially Constructed

Exploring relationship development from a social construction perspective requires conceptualizing relationships as created, maintained, and recreated through communicative acts (Sigman, 1995). Furthermore, this study conceptualizes relationships as a recognizable pattern of interactions between a minimum of two people over a period of time and acknowledges three distinct dimensions of relationships: status, intimacy, and choice (Sias et al., 2001). The dimension of status refers to the level of legitimate power possessed by each individual in the relationship. This study examined the perceptions that individuals have regarding the reasons their peer coworker relationship became dysfunctional and will limit the scope of analysis to relationships among dyads of equivalent status, neither having legitimate power or authority over the others.

Intimacy is characterized by the relationship involving communication of more personal topics rather than the relatively superficial impersonal topics which characterizes less intimate relationships. The dimension of choice describes the level of voluntarism involved in the formation and maintenance of the relationship. For example, Sias and Cahill (1998) describe peer workplace friendships as being unique in two respects. The first pertains to the aforementioned dimension of intimacy; the peer workplace friendship participants interact with each as whole persons as opposed to more superficial topics that isolate a particular identity of the individuals. The second involves the dimension of choice; individuals maintaining peer workplace friendships have a high level of choice with regards to the frequency of interactions they have with each other beyond that required to complete formal tasks.

The scope of this study is not constrained by the dimensions of intimacy or choice. Dysfunctional peer relationships neither require the inclusion nor necessitate the exclusion of the discussion of personal topics. Coworker relationships differ from workplace friendships in that the superset of coworker relationships are not narrowed by individual choice. While coworker friendships are chosen (Sias & Cahill, 1998), other coworkers are not.

Dysfunctional versus Functional Relationships

Within the context of interpersonal relationships, functional relationships are characterized by their ability to facilitate (as opposed to interfere) with the accomplishment of individual as well as joint goals, needs, and desires (Christensen, 1983). In contrast, dysfunctional relationships are characterized by interference of individual or joint goals, needs, and desires. As Christensen (1983) notes, according to this conceptualization, those involved in the relationship determine the levels of interference and facilitation for their own individual hierarchy of goals, needs, and desires in order to assess the extent to which the relationship is functional or dysfunctional. For example, it is conceivable that individuals will allow some goals to be interfered with in order to facilitate the accomplishment of other more important goals. As such, many relationships simultaneously possess functional and dysfunctional elements, and without insight into how an individual prioritizes their goals, needs, and desires, it is impossible to characterize a relationship accurately.

Christensen (1983) elaborates that dysfunctional relationships need not be symmetrical. The prioritized needs of one individual within a relationship can be facilitated, while those of another individual are meeting interference. Thus, the relationship would both be functional and dysfunctional depending upon the individual's perspective. Within this study, relationships that, from the perspective of the individuals, interfere with their work goals, needs, and desires are

viewed as dysfunctional. In contrast, relationships that are beneficial to the success of the goals of the organization as well as those of the employee are viewed as functional within this research.

Friendship Deterioration

While workplace friendships can enhance the organizational environment, they also can detract from an employee's ability to function in a productive manner. Bridge and Baxter (1992) note that the dialectical tensions created by the blending of work and friendship roles can increase the stress experienced by individuals. The following five dialectical tensions are noted by Bridge and Baxter (1992): *Instrumentality versus Affection*, *Impartiality versus Favoritism*, *Closedness versus Openness*, *Autonomy versus Connectedness*, and *Judgment versus Acceptance*. Each of these five dialectical tensions describe contradicting expectations for coworker relationships and friendships.

The *Instrumentality versus Affection* dialectical tension refers to the contradiction between individual's expectations of coworkers to be task oriented as opposed to individual's expectations for friendships to be more concerned with the feelings of the other. The *Impartiality versus Favoritism* dialectical tension refers to the expectation for coworkers to be unbiased toward each other acting in opposition to the expectation that friends should favor them over all others. *Closedness versus Openness* refers to the contradiction between individual's expectations that friends share unabridged information with each other; however, individuals also expect to be able to keep certain workplace information confidential. *Autonomy versus Connection* refers to the contradiction between individual's desires for autonomy of decisions allowed with friends and the connectedness that occurs between coworkers sharing tasks. The *Judgment versus Acceptance* dialectical tension refers to the expectation for coworkers to make

critical evaluations of coworkers which contrasts with an individual's expectation to have our deeds accepted and reinforced by our friends. These dialectical tensions arise from the blending of an individual's personal life and their work life along with the individual's desire to maintain boundaries between these two lives. The formation of personal relationships within the context of a workplace bridges these two previously separate lives making it more difficult to maintain them as distinct.

Dysfunctional workplace relationships may form for a variety of reasons. It is reasonable to expect that the deterioration of a friendship may be one set of explanations of dysfunctional relationship formation, and as such may parallel the explanations given for the deterioration of a workplace friendship. Sias et al. (2004) identified five emergent reasons why workplace relationships deteriorate; among them, four may be particularly pertinent to the formation of dysfunctional peer relationships¹. These four themes describe the following narratives: betrayal, problem personality, distractive life events, and conflicting expectations.

The betrayal theme refers to situations in which the trust between friends is damaged, leading to a deterioration of the relationship into one that is more dysfunctional. While all of these themes arose from a relationship which was presumably functional at one point, this narrative in particular would necessitate a relatively functional relationship in order to facilitate the formation of trust between individuals.

The problem personality and the distracting–life–event themes mirrored exigencies identified by Sias and Cahill (1998) through which workplace friendships form. In the problem personality narratives, the friendship deteriorated after the participant had an epiphany with regard to the severity or duration of a personality trait that reversed their perspective on their once friend (Sias et al., 2004). The primary difference between the distracting life event and the

problem personality narratives is the reason the respondent attributes for the other's behavior. In the problem personality narrative, the respondent accepts the other's behavior as an aspect of their being which makes it impossible to continue a friendship with them. The distracting life event attributes the reason for the friendship deterioration to external influences on the other individual. The distracting life event does not cause friendship deterioration until it interferes with the ability of the individual to work. This interference requires coworkers to expend more effort in order to compensate.

The conflicting expectations theme involves the two individuals within the dyad having different ideas about what constitutes appropriate friendship behaviors. The majority of the individual accounts within this theme revolved around individuals trying to maintain a friendship while also holding other relationships. An example given by described a coworker holding a friendship and a supervisor-subordinate relationship with the same person. Another example involved a coworker being unwilling to compromise their external to work activities for their workplace friendship. While this article informs this research in terms of offering a description of one way dysfunctional relationships form, it is not necessary for individuals to have once had a functional relationship prior to the formation of a dysfunctional one.

Typologies of Troublesome Others

Fritz (2002) constructed a typology of eight clusters of communication behaviors of peers as perceived by their coworkers. These eight types describe a variety of personalities all stemming from a common basis, someone with whom the participant had "unpleasant or negative experiences" (Fritz, 2002, p. 415). While it is possible for unpleasant and negative experiences to lead towards the formation of a dysfunctional relationship, they could also lead toward a functional relationship just as pleasantness and positive experiences could result in a

dysfunction relationship. As a hypothetical example, a comedic individual who is frequently telling jokes would result in many pleasant experiences, but may ultimately interfere with an individual's organizational goals of completing work assignments in a timely fashion.

Fritz examined these communication behaviors as a reflection of personality traits. The categories identified by Fritz are as follows: (emphasis added)

The Soap opera star is a peer who is focused on personal problems (talking about non-work-related problems and bringing personal problems to work), distracting, somewhat incompetent, self-centered, and a busybody. *The bully* is a hustling (i.e., getting others to do one's work), controlling, and rebellious peer determined to get the job done the way he or she wants it to be done (even if it involves using other people) and to take credit for it. *The adolescent* is fearful that someone will take his or her job, unprofessional (screaming and yelling), distracting, demanding, controlling, and self-promoting – the prototype of an employee who has not reached professional maturity as a functioning member of an organization and whose focus is on the security and comfort of the self rather than on the community. *The self-protector* is a job-protecting self-promoter, concerned with his or her own self-interest and advancement. *The mild annoyance* is the least problematic coworker, scoring below average on all negative attributes. *The rebellious playboy or playgirl* is sexually harassing, tends to ignore the orders of coworkers who have authority over him or her, and has an unprofessional focus of attention (e.g., bringing personal problems to work and talking about non-work-related topics). *The abrasive, incompetent harasser* describes a sexually

harassing, incompetent, unprofessional peer who is fearful for his or her job, distracting, and bossy. (Fritz, 2002, p.427).

These descriptions of troublesome others lay the responsibility for the relationship solely on the other. While this typology aids in differentiating between troublesome others in terms of their communicative behavior, it does not help to reveal why a relationship became dysfunctional. Fritz's study correlates various communication practices with each other and then attributes them to a personality trait of one member of a dyad rather than examining the relationship between individuals. It is unlikely that the relationships held by a single individual are all the same; the quality of a relationship is determined not by any single participant, but the interactions of all participants. This study focused on the relational dyad and not on individuals as Fritz's study examined.

Examining dysfunction in terms of dyadic relationships allows for the reasons of dysfunction to be more subtle and complex than they would be in an examination of dysfunctional individuals. The study of relational dysfunction places emphasis on the perceived behaviors of coworkers as well as how they are interpreted. Examining dysfunctional individuals only emphasizes perceived behavior of coworkers, and not how they are interpreted. Assuming that dysfunction occurs due to a single person's communicative behavior would not yield reasons indicating that the dysfunction is a result of the unique history of interaction between people. It is also important to consider that the solutions to a dysfunctional individual are to alter that person, whereas changing a dysfunctional relationship into a less dysfunctional or a functional relationship would require recreating the relationship and not necessarily changing either individual within the relationship.

The Relational Impact

Workplace relationships have the potential to contribute to the overall health of the organization in which they are embedded. Kram and Isabella (1985) argue that peer relationships can reduce job turnover by providing employees with additional emotional support structures. In addition, these relationships can serve as a knowledge system parallel to the organization's formal training programs. Rawlins (1992) adds that friendships can lead to increased commitment to the organization. This sentiment of commitment also serves to decrease employee turnover.

The deterioration of a relationship can impede the smooth operation of organizations by removing "an important source of support and intrinsic reward" (Sias et al., 2004, p. 322). In addition to erasing the functional contributions of a relationship, the now more dysfunctional relationship can lead to the use of avoidance strategies further impeding individuals ability to work collectively on shared tasks (Sias et al., 2004, p. 322). Given the potential impact that relationships have within organizations, it is reasonable to posit that dysfunctional relationships may have an equal impact even if of opposite valence.

Employees often negotiate relationships that are less than comfortable and may adopt a variety of coping strategies designed to maintain their relationship. Topic avoidance as discussed by many researchers (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Dailey & Palomares, 2004) is one such strategy. However, the potential exists for employees to choose to cope with their uncomfortable relationships in a way that does not maintain their relationship, but instead escalates it to a more strongly dysfunctional relationship or in a manner that is parallel to the relationship and focuses on mitigating the effect of the relationship.

The intent of this study is to examine the reasons that individual's give for why their coworker relationship is dysfunctional, the ways in which the dysfunctional relationship interferes with their personal and work goals, and finally, how individuals attempt to manage their relationship in order to continue to work effectively.

RQ1: What do coworkers perceive as being the reasons for the formation of their dysfunctional peer coworker relationships?

RQ2: How do dysfunctional peer relationships impede employees from achieving individual or work goals?

RQ3: How do employees attempt to mitigate the effects of dysfunctional relationships?

Investigating these research questions will provide a more clear understanding of how this type of relationship forms. Because this relationship is potentially very harmful for both the organization as well as the individuals involved in the relationship, understanding its formation should help prevent the development of such a relationship. This study may also yield strategies employees utilize to navigate dysfunctional peer relationships which could be used to better equip employees with the ability to work in spite of dysfunctional relationships.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Data Collection and Participant Description:

I selected initial participants through convenience sampling; additional participants were found through snowball sampling practices. I obtained data through in-depth interviews. I conducted a total of 24 interviews by the completion of this study. The study reached theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) after 18 interviews after which no new theoretically relevant information was identified.

The participants' average age was 27 years (range = 21-41) and they held a variety of jobs including: medical technician, financial coordinator, commission and non-commission retail, financial planning, restaurant service, lawyer, web design, warehouse, and banking. Fourteen of the participants were male and the remaining 10 were female.

Participants described that the job they held while experiencing the dysfunctional relationship involved coworker interaction ranging from loosely structured and occasional interaction to mandated and frequent interaction. Eleven of the 24 participants were known to the researcher prior to interviewing; however, no conversations were held with these 11 participants regarding this study prior to the interview. I conducted face-to-face interviews with five of the participants; the remaining 19 were interview through either telephone or interactive voice computer software. No observable difference was identified between the data obtained through face-to-face interviews and those At the time of the interview the participants lived in different areas of North America including: Indiana, Washington, Illinois, Massachusetts, Texas, Wisconsin, Ontario, Nebraska, New Jersey, and California.

The nature of the research questions necessitated an understanding of the interviewee's perceptions and judgments on events and, because people are narrative creatures (Sarbin, 1986), I encouraged the participants to respond in the form of narratives. One way in which this was done was by asking participants to remember a specific peer coworker. This helped them recall details of specific historical interactions as opposed to vague summary impressions or an amalgam of many different experiences. To further encourage the collection of narratives, I frequently asked the participants for examples or stories that illustrated or characterized the relationship.

The interviews progressed in a manner described by the attached interview protocol. (see Appendix A.) The first series of questions began with a request for the individuals to *Tell me about their job*. This was done in order to collect general information about the work the individual does and the setting in which they do it in as well as to ease the participant into the interview. Specifically, the sub-questions regarding the work environment, the amount and types of interaction that is typical provide a context for understanding the remainder of the interview.

I then instructed the participants to recall an individual with whom they “did not work well with.” This phrase was chosen due to the conceptualization of a dysfunctional work relationship as being one that inhibits work. This phrase also allowed for participants to describe dysfunctional relationships with individuals with whom they were friends or liked.

The *second* question, “tell me about your relationship with this person,” asked the participants to give their interpretations of the nature of this relationship as it exists currently. I then asked the participants to “tell me about the first time they met this person.” This pair of questions allowed me to compare and contrast the start of their relationship with how it exists now. The *third* question, “what does it mean when you say you have trouble working with this person?” elicits

the participant's definition of dysfunction. This question was central to understanding the effects of dysfunctional relationships as well peripheral to understanding the varying mitigating tactics used by the participants. The *fourth* question, "at what point did your relationship start interfering with your work?" formed the basis for addressing the reasons that individuals give for the formation of the dysfunctional relationships. Responses to this question generated the bulk of the themes and categories addressing the first research question. The *fifth* question, "how do you cope with the relationship" and the follow up question "How do you get your work done in spite of your relationship with this person?" elicited the responses that addressed the third research question. The initial question is broader than the second and allowed for responses that were not focused on the achievement of work goals, but mitigated the emotional impact of the dysfunctional relationship such as alleviating stress. The follow up question more directly addresses mitigating the dysfunctional effects of the relationship on the participants ability to achieve work goals. The *sixth* question, "how does this person work with other people at your workplace?" investigated the assumption that the dysfunction is a result of the dyad and not a trait-like feature of the other person. The *seventh* question indicates that the interview is nearing completion and allows for participants to add anything they believe to be important to the conversation we have had as well as allowing for them to solicit information from me.

Analysis

All but one of the participants related narrative accounts of their dysfunctional relationships. After transcribing the interviews I preformed a preliminary analysis within one week of the interview. This preliminary analysis began with an examination and identification of the elements within individual narratives and then identifying common themes among many

stories. I parsed the narratives into the six elements as identified by Labov (1972): *Abstract*, *Orientation*, *Complicating Action*, *Resolution*, *Evaluation*, and *Coda*.

The abstract of a narrative provides a summary of the story as a whole and typically frames the story for the audience. Orientation contextualizes the story with reference to time and space as well as identifying the characters involved. The complicating action is characterized by the plot of the narrative. The resolution describes events that take place after the climax of the narrative. The evaluation involves the assignment of emotional value, or what the story meant to the teller. The coda is used to signify that the narrative is over. The narrative elements that were relevant to this study were: complicating action, resolution, and evaluation.

The initial intent was to use a narrative analysis similar to that described by Hones (1998) and construct master narratives that generalized typical themes addressing each of the three research questions. However, after analyzing several interviews and attempting to generate typical narratives for the construction, effects, and mitigation of dysfunctional peer coworker relationships the variation among the interviews was too great. Each interview yielded a unique combination of complicating action, evaluation, and resolution. So, while the vocabulary of narrative structure was employed to differentiate between themes and later categories, a narrative analysis was not the final analytic method used. However, parsing narratives into their component parts was a useful and valuable first step in organizing the vast quantity of text obtained in the interviews. Specifically, complicating actions and evaluations were used to identify relevant portions of text to address the first research question, evaluations for the second, and resolutions for the third.

After labeling each of the components of the narratives, I parsed the transcripts into phrases. The phrase constituted a unit of analysis. Phrases were defined as a group of words that

shared a common thought. I flagged the phrases for relevance to each of the three research questions. By the end of this process there were a total of 440 phrases marked as relevant to the first research question, 153 phrases for the second research question and 337 for the third research question. Some phrases were relevant to multiple research questions and so were flagged for each research question. Then I compared and contrasted the phrases with each other in a manner consistent with the constant comparison method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This process consisted of the identification of as many themes as was possible. Within each new interview, I found additional themes and examples of themes were identified and compiled into a list corresponding to each research question. I determined that theoretical saturation had been achieved once interviews ceased yielding additional themes and only provided more examples of previously identified themes. I manufactured a listing of all of the identified emergent themes; these themes were compared and contrasted. A rigorously investigation of the themes for quintessential similarities and differences led me to develop thematic categories. These thematic categories are mutually exclusive of each other and all encompassing.

The exception to participants responding in narrative format noted above was dealt with in a slightly different manner. This interview contained many evaluations, but very little detailed complicating actions. When asked for examples or elaboration, the participant claimed to be unable to remember details. I decided to omit the vague complicating actions and resolutions and only include the evaluations in further analysis. As such, this interview did not contribute to the understanding of the first or third research questions, but did provide a relatively minimal contribution to the second research question.

Finally, I tested the results for each of the three research questions for inter-coder reliability and consistency of coding throughout the 24 interviews by using Scott's Pi. I randomly selected three of the 24 interviews from each third of the process (i.e. one from the first 8 interviews conducted, one from the second 8 and one from the final 8.) and marked phrases relevant to each of the three research questions. Among these three interviews, 53 phrases were marked as relevant for the first research question, 20 for the second research question and 41 for the third. Phrases were marked as relevant to the different research questions in order to establish a fixed number of units of analysis. After the phrases were marked for relevance another researcher analyzed these interviews and attempted to place the marked phrases within one of the thematic categories. This process resulted in a Scott's Pi of 82% for the first research question, 70% for the second research question, and 76.7% for the third research question. These Scott's Pi scores indicate that coding was relatively consistent throughout all 24 interviews and demonstrates that another individual with training can identify which of the thematic categories a relevant phrase belongs.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

First Research Question

The first research question sought to identify the reasons that employees perceived for their coworker relationships becoming dysfunctional. The reasons that were given were addressed by the participants fell along three thematic categories: *Personal Idiosyncrasy*, *Work Effectiveness*, and the *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives*. These three categories were recognized by identifying differences among the complicating actions. Within these three categories different aspects were identified based upon differences among the participants' *evaluations* of the actions. (see Table 1 – Reasons for Dysfunctional Relationships).

Personal Idiosyncrasy

The first thematic category drawn from the complicating actions of participants, *Personal Idiosyncrasy*, was comprised of narratives that described the construction of the dysfunctional peer coworker relationship in terms of *how* the coworker and the participant interacted with each other. These descriptions did not mention their own nor their coworker's ability or willingness to perform work related tasks. Four different aspects of this thematic category were identified: *Incompatible Personality*, *Prejudice and Language Barrier*. With each of these aspects, the manner in which the participant described the construction of the relationship indicated that the work setting was incidental to the relationship. These four aspects were separated by differences in the evaluation of the narratives and what the participant found objectionable regarding the way they and their coworker interacted.

Incompatible Personality. The *Incompatible Personality* aspect describes general statements evaluating a coworker's personality or the way he/she interacts with others. The

descriptions do not necessarily highlight differences between the participant's and coworker's behavior, instead the combination of personalities repelled each other

One participant (Interviewee 4) described a new coworker whom she had attempted to befriend as having an incompatible sense of humor. The complicating action she described was a gathering of coworkers outside of work in which it became "immediately apparent through the night, within the casual banter of friends, that this guy had a very odd sense of humor." She gave an example to demonstrate this odd sense of humor that illustrated there was something about his personality that resulted in the humor not translating effectively. Her evaluation of the encounter indicated that it was an irreconcilable difference in personalities fueling the dysfunctional relationship. "Anyone who is not a fucking retard would realize that this is totally not funny, however, since E.D. is indeed a fucking retard, he would laugh hysterically..." So, if the participant had also been "a fucking retard" the coworker's sense of humor would not have resulted in a dysfunctional relationship. The participant later revealed that there were other coworkers who were friends with this person and seemed to appreciate his sense of humor.

Another participant (Interviewee 20) described her coworker as having a "really strong personality." She admitted personality similarities with her coworker such as both of them being "over-achiever types," but also having differences in how they choose to interact with others. The participant described her personality as being "very non-confrontation" and that she tended to "give people the benefit of the doubt even when they don't deserve it." She described her coworker as being "pretty much the opposite and frequently goads me into giving up on [other people]." Like the previous example, this dysfunctional stemmed from different personalities; however, unlike the previous example, the two coworkers had similarities in their personality. This highlights that incompatible personalities are not necessarily just differences in personality

and that dysfunctional relationships can originate from personalities which have common ground.

Prejudice. The *Prejudice* aspect encompassed narratives in which the participants evaluated the complicating action leading into a dysfunctional relationship as involving either the participant or his/her coworker possessing a trait (such as gender, sexual orientation, religious preference, or ethnicity) viewed as being unacceptable by the other. One participant (Interviewee 5) described that he was the victim of sexual-preference discrimination. He said that because of his declared music preferences his coworkers formed the opinion that he was homosexual. “I was informed that there are very few clubs that play techno music that are not primarily gay/lesbian.” The participant described later interactions involving a specific coworker making derogatory and harassing comments towards him. “He began making comments about various things, saying that I looked like a faggot, the way I was sitting on the stool where I worked...” Ultimately, the participant believed that the dysfunctional relationship formed due to his coworker’s evaluation that he was homosexual.

Another participant (Interviewee 6) represented the other half of this aspect as the discriminator. While a specific complicating action could not be drawn out from the participant many evaluations were offered up. He declared the problem with his coworker was that “Her black-ass pisses me off.” When asked what she does to piss him off, he replied, “acts black” which from his definition included: “Lower economic background, slight lack of morals, grunts when unhappy, waves fingers when confused, and repetitive usage of clothing due to poverty level.” He also claimed to be the victim of her discrimination saying that “she didn’t like me because I’m an affluent white male.” He was able to tell that she did not like him because, “she

gave me the shifty niglet eyes and snarled up her lip.” Both the participant’s belief in being discriminated against and the reasons for his inability to function with his coworker rely on race.

Language Barrier. The *Language Barrier* aspect refers to evaluations that illustrated the dysfunctional relationship existed (at least in part) due to the coworker and the participant not being able to understand one another. While the example of this found in the interview involved a difference in language, physiological processes such as not being able to hear the other person could also contribute to this aspect. This aspect was shown most clearly in a narrative of a participant (Interviewee 16) who worked with several Hispanic workers. He claimed that he and other workers were unable to work effectively with the Hispanic workers because they could not speak their language and that the dysfunction was He evaluated an aspect of their dysfunction as being “mostly due to the language barrier, and only a few cases due to prejudice.”

Work Effectiveness

The second thematic category, *Work Effectiveness*, was identified through the complicating actions of the narratives. In these complicating actions the participants emphasized that the dysfunctional relationship was due to work task-related issues and did not pivot on personality. Four aspects were identified within this thematic category: *Incompatible Work Styles*, *Work Efficiency and Competition*. These different aspects all contained similar complicating actions, but different in the participants’ evaluation of the actions.

Incompatible Work Styles. The *Incompatible Work Styles* aspect, like the above *Incompatible Personality* aspect, is not necessarily describing evaluated differences between the work styles of the participant and the other member of the dysfunctional relationship. This aspect was identified through the evaluation of the interaction of the participant and his/her coworker’s work style without placing a negative evaluation on their ability or willingness. For

example one participant (Interviewee 1), “She would ask you to do things for her or a certain way when the way you did them was correct but not her way.” This evaluation indicated that there is not a problem with ability or willingness to work, but that there are different irreconcilable differences in how both people choose to work.

Another participant (Interviewee 8), originally from Japan, indicated that she was unable to work efficiently with her coworker because of differences how they preferred to work. Part of this dysfunction stemmed from cultural differences in how the work environment is structured. She described her current work environment as being

unlike [a] Japanese company, everyone is either in the office or in cubicles. You see, in Japan we have [an] open space concept in the company. Each department actually sits together face-to-face. So logistically, communication is much more efficient. Work has [an] activities flow and so does communication.

The participant had the ability to restructure her department to be more similar to one in which she was more comfortable; however, her coworker styled her department differently. This difference in how each coworker structured her department contributed to their dysfunction

Work Efficiency. The *Work Efficiency* aspect was identified through the participant’s negative evaluation of his/her coworker’s ability or willingness to work. For example, one participant (Interviewee 7) described her coworker as being incompetent in that she was unable to read his handwriting on sales slips. “My first real dealing with him was when I couldn’t read his writing on one of the orders and I had to ask him what he wrote.” This relationship decayed further when she deemed other parts of his job as being done incompetently. “...and he got even worse when I’d hand him a small stack of things that had errors of varying kinds that he’d marked as okay.”

This theme also includes narratives in which the participant indicates that they believed their coworker had evaluated them as being incompetent.

Well, I recapped the syringe with my hand, and she was like ‘you are supposed to leave the cap on the counter when recapping’ I told her that was with an already used patient needle not a clean one with the only thing it has touched is the medicine vial. She was like ‘No, you must do that with all syringes’

This example shows that the participant’s (Interviewee 1) coworker held differing views of how a work task was supposed to be performed and that he was doing it wrong. At the most basic level believing someone to be incompetent is the belief that they are doing it wrong.

Explicit evaluations of the coworker being lazy were the most easily identifiable such as “..but there were just others that go on my nerves or were just lazy” (Interviewee 14). However, less explicit examples that describe situations in which the coworker is able, but unwilling to perform work related tasks also constitute *Work Efficiency*. For example, “And of course during this work, he tried to get away with not signing his paperwork, and not filling out the correct paperwork that everyone is supposed to...” (Interviewee 7). This narrative fragment demonstrates that the participant’s coworker is not accomplishing the work tasks and coupled with the following quote illustrates that the participant attributes it to laziness and not incompetence. After confronting his coworker about his lack of completing the necessary paperwork the participant related that, “he complied as far as signing the paperwork went, but that’s because my boss specifically told everyone that every time it happened, and he knew he would get in trouble for it.” So since his coworker is able to perform the work tasks when properly motivated, it is not incompetence, but laziness that results in the work not being completed.

Competition. The *Competition* theme encompassed narratives indicating that a scarcity of resources creating competition or conflict caused the dysfunctional relationship. Competition resulting from the scarcity of tangible resources is the easiest to identify. One participant (Interviewee 3) related a story in which a fellow server “poached a table.” In this example the participant believed that his coworker “knew that their tip would be better than the smaller tables we were working with at the time, so she selfishly jumped in there.” Over the course of a night there are a finite number of customers and therefore a finite amount of tips. Competing with other coworkers to gain more customers and potentially more tips is a logical conclusion.

Less tangible resources such as prestige or respect can also lead to competition and the formation of a dysfunctional relationship. For example, the desire to be the boss’s favorite or most trusted employee. Specifically, one participant (Interviewee 2) explained that because of her work ability she rapidly gained respect and renown.

So the cops started to love me and wanted me to handle cases instead of him and he started having a very poor record with jury trials so I went from doing traffic to doing everything, including felonies. He didn’t like that power struggle.

In this example, the competition among the lawyers regarding who was going to do a better job did not specifically involve struggling over a promotion or money although those things may result from more prestige, but revolved around influence.

Interaction of Work and Personal Lives

The third and final thematic category, *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives*, was identified through the complicating actions containing elements of both personality and work differences. Specifically, this category is comprised of narratives in which the complicating action involves conflicting expectations of appropriate coworker behavior. These conflicting

expectations center around the dysfunctional union of what is appropriate for extra-work relationships and what is appropriate for work relationships.

The evaluation that the participants gave of the complicating action was also crucial in identifying narratives within this category. Evaluations within this category make reference that the behavior was “just not appropriate for work” (Interviewee 17) or that it is “not how you treat coworkers” (Interviewee 9). These statements indicated that the complicating action contributed to the dysfunctional relationship not solely because of different personalities or work styles, but rather a combination of personality and its embedded nature within a work environment.

Expectations of Friendship. One such violation of expectations involved a coworker friendship. The evaluation given by the participant (Interviewee 11) indicated that her coworker violated the expectation that the information being shared was to be kept private.

When you tell her something you need to make sure that it's something you don't mind everyone else finding out about. Even if you ask her not to say anything... We were, at one point, friends, but I don't tell other people about her life and she does about mine. Makes the context of trust a hard thing.

This evaluation contains elements of both the personal life, friendships, embedded with the context of a work environment. The complicating action given by the participant vividly demonstrated her coworker's willingness to immediately breach the expectations that the participant had of privileged information not being shared with others.

We were talking about Valentine's Day and what people were doing – I had just ended a relationship so no date for that day and when Carla asked. I said I didn't. She then proceeded to ask a security guard and two customers if they had dates for Valentine's Day because I was available.

The participant described this event as having an immediate effect on her day and ability to work functionally and as an example of the behavior that led to their friendship deteriorating. The participant ultimately evaluated that she thought “that Carolina and I have had trouble because we were friends and we know each other more so than our other coworkers.”

Prioritization of Work vs. Private Life. Another expectation that was revealed through narratives was how coworkers prioritize their work and their private lives. The complicating action given by one participant (Interviewee 3) illustrated that he held the expectation that a coworker would not sacrifice the completion of work goals for her personal life.

She never offered to help us. She did, however, continue talking about her personal life, stand around, and take a smoke break... Toward the end of the shift she told us that she had to leave early and wouldn't be able to clean her part of the section before she left. She had to do something pertaining to her personal life.

The evaluation given by the participant highlighted that this behavior was dysfunctional in that it violated his expectation of not prioritizing her private life over work life. “She is always talking about her personal life during work, not pulling her weight and getting in the way.” The complicating action includes the same characteristic blending of the private life within a work environment. Had the coworker not offered to help due to other work responsibilities, the dysfunctional relationship may have centered on a *Work Effectiveness* theme such as *Lazy Incompetence*.

Overly Affectionate. The final expectation seen to have been violated resulting in a dysfunctional relationship involves expectations of how much affection is appropriate for

coworkers. The evaluations describing this violated expectation contain phrases such as “too friendly” (Interviewee 4) or “overly affectionate” (Interviewee 2). This expectation is at the core of sexual harassment.

The complicating action of a narrative demonstrating a violation of this expectation expressed the breaking point of an already dysfunctional relationship as being an unacceptable display of sexual desires.

He came on to me at a conference we were at. I said no. He asked again, I said no again and then he went off on me. [He] told me he knew that I always wanted him and why am I fucking with his mind.

The participant (Interviewee 2) believed that “up till the sexual harassment part, I could have made it better.” Her evaluation of this narrative was that “it was horribly unprofessional and shitty.” This evaluation demonstrates that not only was it a problem of personality, but that it violated her expectation of what she considered professional behavior. A much less elaborate example was given by another participant (Interviewee 4) who described her coworker as seeming “friendly enough, although he persisted in speaking to my breasts as opposed to my face.”

In addition to the above findings, participants indicated that conversations with others influenced their relationship with their coworker. Specifically, this was done through coworkers sharing that they had dysfunctional relationship with the coworker named by the participant. Most clearly a participant (Interviewee 3) reenacted a conversation held between several coworkers that demonstrated they all had dysfunctional relationships with the same coworker. “Coworker1: ‘I was in here with Rachel the other day.’ Coworker2: ‘Man that must have sucked’ Coworker3: ‘Does she ever shut up?’ Coworker4: ‘She was in here talking about her

stupid house again.” While this example does not include the participant specifically acknowledging that conversations with other coworkers either contributed to or reinforced the formation of the dysfunctional relationship, the fact that he volunteered other coworkers’ perceptions of Rachel when asked about the first problem he had when working with Rachel indicated that it contributed to his own perception of her.

Another participant (Interviewee 22) responded that she “talked to other employees, and found out they all disliked him and had the same problems with him that I did.” She reported that after an instance of her coworker “has overreacted, or just reacted totally weirdly and defensively to something someone has said that wasn’t even about him” that she and other coworkers would “all get together later and go ‘now, did I miss something?’ and they go ‘nope, that was totally weird and random.’” Like the previous example, these conversations with other coworkers contributed to the social construction of the relationship as dysfunctional. These conversations helped the participant “feel like [she] wasn’t the problem.” The shared placing of blame on another displaces responsibility for changing the relationship and aids in perpetuating the dysfunction. This potential reason for dysfunctional relationships was not included with the main findings because these conversations are outside of the dyadic relationship and it is unclear whether or not these third party conversations form or only reinforce perceptions that the relationship is or ought to be dysfunctional.

Second Research Question

The second research question defines dysfunctional relationships by investigated the ways in which dysfunctional peer coworker relationships interfered with employees achieving individual or work goals. The ways dysfunctional peer coworker relationships affected

participants formed two distinct categories. These categories are *Direct Work Repercussions* and *Indirect Work Repercussions*. The narratives' evaluations were analyzed to identify these categories. (see Table 2 – Effects of Dysfunctional Relationships).

Direct Work Repercussions

The first thematic category, *Direct Work Repercussions*, includes two aspects *Work Efficiency* and *Extrinsic Reward Loss*. Narratives within these two aspects were identified by examining the evaluation and identifying tangible effects to the completion of work tasks or the associated reward from the tasks.

Work Efficiency. The first aspect, *Work Efficiency*, describes direct repercussions of the dysfunctional relationship on the ability to complete an individual's work goals either through a drop in the quality or quantity of work able to be done. Specifically, the work could be made sloppy or require more time or work to complete.

Participants related that their dysfunctional relationships had adverse effects on their ability to achieve their work goals at a level with which they were happy. Specifically, one participant (Interviewee 1) described that because of the relationship he would try to work faster to avoid his coworker so that he “wouldn't have to deal with her.” This behavior “sort of directly affected performance, faster meant more of a chance to create an error.” The drop in quality of work resulted in the amount of work being done either taking longer or requiring more work. One participant (Interviewee 19) described that due to the sloppy work he would “have to redo some things or rewrite some things I was trying to do fast.” Dysfunctional relationships created situations in which employees had to take on more work to compensate for his/her coworker. One participant (Interviewee 3) described that due to his coworker not “pulling her

weight, then I have to work harder.” Compensating for coworkers is discussed in more detail under the third research question.

In addition to affecting how much work there is, how long it takes to do the work, and how good the work is that has been done; dysfunctional relationship can stop the work from being able to be completed. Coworkers that are “getting in the way” (Interviewee 22) impede work. One participant (Interviewee 7) described that she “would have to stand there for 10, 15 minutes sometimes, waiting for him... because even late the day’s work was not checked over and I couldn’t begin.” In this example the participant demonstrates that their relationship completely impeded the completion or even progress toward completion of a work goal.

Extrinsic Reward Loss. The other aspect within this category, *Extrinsic Reward Loss*, encapsulates the impediment dysfunctional relationships have on individuals’ goals that include extrinsic rewards. Specifically, monetary loss was the described extrinsic reward lost due to dysfunctional relationships. One participant (Interviewee 3) described that because of his dysfunctional relationship “I have to waste time on tables that aren’t even going to tip me.” Additionally, this participant described that, “at the end of the shift she took off early and did not split her tips with us. That directly affected how much money I made that day.”

Another participant (Interviewee 13) described a scenario in which his coworker took a more active role in effecting the loss of his extrinsic reward. He described that “whenever a customer would come into the store she would tell me to go fold shirts in the back so that she could get the commission from the sales.” Both of these examples are evaluations that form a direct link between the dysfunctional relationship and the loss of fiscal compensation.

Indirect Work Repercussions

While *Direct Work Repercussions* have empirically observable and tangible effects on an individual's work goals, they also have less observable effects. This thematic category, *Indirect Work Repercussions*, includes narratives which reveal indirect effects on work goals. *Indirect Work Repercussions* often lead to *Direct Work Repercussions*; however, they are separate effects and not inexorably entangled and so, are described separately. Two aspects to *Indirect Work Repercussions* were identified, *Advancement* and *Emotional Arousal*. *Indirect Work Repercussions* were identified through an examination of the narrative's evaluation. Evaluations containing repercussions not of the individual's work, but of the individual him/herself were interpreted as being of this thematic category.

Advancement. This aspect represents loss of intrinsic motivation due to the dysfunctional relationship such as diminished prestige or sense of accomplishment. Narratives within this aspect were identified through an examination of the evaluation. Evaluations containing descriptions of effects not on the participant's work, but rather on the participant him/herself with the effects not being solely emotional comprise this aspect.

One participant (Interviewee 2) explained that her dysfunctional relationship interfered with her ability to work such that it resulted in a loss of respect from those around her. She related that due to the details of a criminal case she was working on coupled with her previous decisions on how to try the case that it was not possible for the defendant to be sentenced with jail time but that she had "asked for jail at sentencing and the judge whom I had the utmost adoration and respect for looked at me like I was a complete idiot."

While two participants described that because of the dysfunctional relationship they "considered quitting" (Interviewee 5) because "it just wasn't worth putting up with," the

relationship, one participant (Interviewee 19) had himself transferred to another department in order to avoid contact with his coworker. Transferring to the other department eventually resulted in him quitting the place of employment all together. This example contains a *Direct Work Repercussion* in that it resulted in him transferring to another department. It also contains an *Indirect Work Repercussion* in that transferring led him to decide to quit. Once the participant (Interviewee 19) acquired new employment he had to “work his way up the totem pole again.” The participant claimed that “being at the bottom of the ladder was a blow to my ego because I had superiors who were 5 or 10 years younger than I was.” Thus one of the repercussions of the dysfunctional relationship was a loss of prestige.

Emotional Arousal. This aspect contains the narrative evaluations that describe emotional repercussions of the dysfunctional relationship. One participant (Interviewee 4) described that her dysfunctional relationship had the following effect: “Well, it made going to work suck, but my actual job responsibilities didn’t suffer. It was more the social aspect of my job that sucked.” Later the participant remarked that this decrease in morale, “probably made me work more slowly and put less voluntary effort in. [it] made me do enough to get by, but not the extra mile I usually go.” So, in addition to having this *Indirect Work Repercussion of Emotional Arousal* it also had a *Direct Work Repercussion* affecting her *Work Efficiency*.

Other participants remarked that their dysfunctional relationships “made me angry” (Interviewee 5), “ended up causing too much grief,” (Interviewee 1) “makes me feel bad... and I feel guilty about my work” (Interviewee 22). While some of these participants remarked that their emotional arousal resulted in a *Direct Work Repercussion* such as “I get even less done” (Interviewee 1) or “I’m too distracted to work effectively” (Interviewee 22) these effects are secondary stemming from the emotional arousal that is in and of itself an effect.

Third Research Question

The third and final research question sought to identify the different strategies that individuals selected in order to mitigate the interference that dysfunctional peer coworker relationships had on their ability to achieve their individual and work goals. This research question was addressed by four thematic categories. *Direct, Tangential, Indirect, and Parallel.* These categories were developed by examining the attempts of mitigation described by the participants within their narratives' resolutions and recognizing that they all varied along two axes. These axes are whether or not the attempt at mitigation involved direct interaction with the other coworker participating in the dysfunctional relationship and whether or not the interaction directly involved the objectionable behavior described by the participant. (see Table 3 – Mitigating Strategies).

	Regarding Problem	Not Regarding Problem
Interaction	Direct	Indirect
No Interaction	Tangential	Parallel

Table 4. Category Relationships of Mitigating Strategies

Direct

The first category, Direct, encompassed themes that involved the participant interacting directly with their coworker as well as the specific mitigating actions were directly linked to the problem that the participant described. Two aspects were identified within this category: *Synchronous* and *Asynchronous Confrontation*. The most vivid examples of these strategies being used involved the participant being on the receiving end of their coworkers' attempts of mitigating the effects of the relationship. It is important to note that mitigating attempts were made by both member of the dysfunctional relationship.

Synchronous Confrontation. *Synchronous Confrontation* encompassed mitigating attempts that involved direct and interactive communication between the participant and their coworker and also occurred such that both individuals could simultaneously communicate with each other. One participant (Interviewee 4) described an incident at work in which her coworker took offense at the lack of a warm and instantaneous greeting at work and confronted her about it asking “why do you always have to be so stuck up?” and claimed that she was “always acting snobby to [him] for no reason.” While this example illustrates synchronous confrontation in a face-to-face medium the participant described further that “later that night, at 2:30 in the morning. I get text messages from him on my cell phone, saying things like ‘you stupid bitch, don’t you ever talk to me like that in front of customers.’” This illustrates that synchronous confrontations can occur through the use of technologically mediated forms of communication such as text messaging or phone conversations.

Asynchronous Confrontation. *Asynchronous Confrontation* encompassed mitigating attempts that involved direct communication between the participant and his/her coworker, but occurred such that both individuals could not simultaneously communicate with each other. For example, one participant (Interviewee 1) said his coworker “would put post-it notes up on his bulletin board reminding him to take his food out of the refrigerator at the end of each day.” This example illustrates the asynchronous manner of communication, note leaving, to facilitate confrontation involving an aspect of the relationship.

Tangential

The second category, Tangential, encompassed themes that did not involve the participant interacting directly with the other member of the dysfunctional relationship, but that

the mitigating acts were attempts directed specifically at perceived problematic effects of the relationship. The aspects within this category included: *Compensation*, *Venting*, and *Subterfuge*.

Compensation. *Compensation* narratives involve the participant changing his/her own behavior to compensate for the behavior of the other individual. For example, one participant (Interviewee 3) answered the question of how he tried to limit his coworker's effect on his job by saying that, "I just try to work harder to pick up her slack." While this did not remove the effect his coworker has on him, it attempts to mitigate the negatives consequences of her influence such as being fired or receiving smaller tips from their shared customers.

Venting. *Venting* describes narratives in which the participant talks with other people such as other coworkers, friends, or family in order to reduce the emotional stress placed upon them by the dysfunctional relationship. For example one participant (Interviewee 22) said that she, "talked to other employees and found out they all disliked him and had the same problems with him that I did. So that made it a bit better, knowing I wasn't the only one." Prior to talking with her other coworkers "if it were just me, I'd feel like I was the problem. In this example the participant found reassurance in speaking with other coworkers and reduced the negative effects of the relationship.

Subterfuge. *Subterfuge* involved narratives in which the participant coordinated events or attempted to control the environment in which they interacted with the other individual. For example, "I try to get the other servers involved to ask her if she needs help and keep her on task" (Interviewee 3). Another participant (Interviewee 4) described that she would plan to interact with her coworker where their supervisor could see them. Enlisting help or entrapping the other coworker both involve the use of an audience to either aid directly or indirectly in order to mitigate the effects of the relationship.

Indirect

The third category, Indirect, encompassed themes that involved the participant interacting with the other member of the relationship, but that the interaction was not directly focused on mitigating the dysfunctional effects. The themes within this category included: *Sharing*, *Modeling*, and *Topic Avoidance*.

Sharing. The *Sharing* aspect is comprised of narratives involving an attempt to link the success or failure of both members in the relationship. For example, one participant (Interviewee 20) described that she would insist that she and her coworker “take the average of the server’s tips and redistribute them so that everyone has the same amount.” This strategy attempts to minimize the impact of dysfunctional relationships by linking the success or failure of both employees.

Modeling. The *Modeling* aspect describes mitigating attempts that involve the coworker behaving in a specific manner that they expect to be reciprocated. For example one participant claimed (Interviewee 3) that “I often ask her if ‘she’ needs help. She might also think to ask ‘us’ if we need help.” In this resolution the participant is modeling behavior that he would like for his coworker to adopt. This is considered an *Indirect* style of mitigation because while the interaction is directly with the participant’s coworker, the interaction is not specifically focused on changing behaviors. This mitigating attempt is relying on the hope that the coworker will pick up the differences between his/her and the participant’s behavior and voluntarily change his/her behavior.

Topic Avoidance. Participants claimed that they used *Topic Avoidance* in order to mitigate the effects of the dysfunctional relationship on their work goals. One participant (Interviewee 5) described that he “kept details about my own life mostly secret, in case it might

cause friction, or snide comments.” His belief was that because of his ontological differences any information he shared with his coworkers would be misunderstood and they would choose to ridicule him. This strategy differs from the other two in the *Indirect* category in that *Modeling* and *Sharing* both involve an addition to behavior, while *Topic Avoidance* involves a censoring of behaviors. However, *Topic Avoidance* still involves interaction with his/her coworker in the sense that the participants are only censoring topics and not all communication.

Parallel

The final category, Parallel, encompassed themes that did not involve the participant interacting directly with the other member of the dysfunctional relationship, and the acts were not directly focused on mitigating the dysfunctional effects of specific behaviors. The themes within this category include *Avoidance*, *Ignoring*, and *Vengeance*.

Avoidance. *Avoidance* strategies were used by participants, in some cases, after *Topic Avoidance* had not successfully mitigated the effects of the dysfunctional relationship. This aspect of *Parallel* mitigating methods encompasses attempts to eliminate all or some interactions with the participant’s coworker. One participant (Interviewee 19) utilizing this strategy explained that “I had myself transferred to the other office.” This example sought to eliminate all interaction with his coworker. Another participant (Interviewee 7) explained that she only had problems with her coworker in the morning and so she “would come in late to avoid dealing with him.” This example only reduces the amount or situation in which she is interacting with her coworker. Both of these examples highlight that *Avoidance* involves consciously and preemptively reducing or eliminating interaction with the participant’s coworker.

Ignoring. Participants also described *Ignoring* their coworkers as an attempt to mitigate problems. Specifically, one participant (Interviewee 20) explained that when her coworker

would come near her she would “not look at him and pretend I couldn’t hear him until he went away.” This strategy is similar to *Avoidance* strategies in that interaction is reduced or eliminated, but it is different in that it is reactionary as opposed to preemptive. One participant (Interviewee 22) illustrated the use of both *Avoidance* as well as *Ignoring* strategies saying that when her coworker called her phone she would either “not answer” (*Avoidance*) or “pretend the connection was bad and just say ‘Hello?’ until she hung up” (*Ignoring*). *Ignoring* neither involves interaction with a coworker nor is it trying to address a specific problematic behavior.

Vengeance. *Vengeance* was used by two participants and involved both a lack of interaction with their coworkers as well as not trying to change their coworkers’ objectionable behaviors. One participant (Interviewee 13) described that in order to reduce his coworker’s affect on him he “tried to get her fired... by going to the register near the end of the day and re-ringing all of her sales under my name.” He detailed that his plan was that she would either “quit because she wasn’t making any money” or “get fired for not having enough sales.” This participant also described that aside from tangible benefits to this strategy such as him making more money potentially excising his coworker from the workplace, he also gained emotional satisfaction from his acts of vengeance. “A little evil makes the day go faster.” *Vengeance* strategies were retaliatory in nature and not necessarily motivated towards changing behaviors.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This study sought insights into dysfunctional peer coworker relationship dynamics and consequences. Results have a number of important scholarly and practical implications. The results of the present study provide insight into three issues: how coworkers socially construct dysfunctional relationships, the individual and departmental effects of dysfunctional relationships, and the tactics individuals use to mitigate the effects of dysfunctional relationships.

Reasons for Dysfunctional Relationships

The first research question sought to understand the perceived reasons for the formation of dysfunctional peer coworker relationships. Results indicated three primary reasons coworker relationships became dysfunctional – *Personal Idiosyncrasy*, *Work Effectiveness*, and the *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives*. These three categories capture both the social and task-related aspects of a peer coworker relationship. The *Personal Idiosyncrasy* category primarily captures the social dimension of peer coworker relationships whereas the *Work Effectiveness* primarily captures the task-related dimension of peer coworker relationships. *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives* captures the interaction of both the social and task-related dimensions of peer coworker relationships.

While *Personal Idiosyncrasy* can construct a dysfunctional relationship in any venue, *Work Effectiveness* and *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives* both necessitate, by definition, a work environment. *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives* exemplifies the complexity of dysfunctional peer coworker relationships in that it is the *combination* of work setting and personality that creates the dysfunction, neither factor in isolation results in the formation of dysfunctional relationships.

Unlike previous research, this study conceptualized dysfunctional relationships at the dyadic level of analysis, assuming that dysfunctional relationships are the result of both people and cannot be laid upon a single individual regardless of how objectionable the behavior or how many people agree that the behavior is wrong, undesirable, or inappropriate. A previous study closely related to this one in terms of purpose and subject (Fritz, 2002) identified the reason for a “troublesome other” (a term similar to dysfunctional relationship) in terms of the communicative style of an individual. This conceptualization implies that dysfunction is trait-like and that all others would view this other as being troublesome. Many participants of this study indicated that the person with whom they were in a dysfunctional relationship had friends and worked well with others. Assuming that the dysfunction is a result of the interaction between both members of the relationship sets the stage for a much more complex understanding of dysfunctional relationships.

All three of the previously mentioned categories indicate that that regardless of the reason for the formation of the dysfunctional relationship, the reason is dyadic and not individual. It is tempting to interpret the *Incompatible Personality* and *Work Style* themes as having to do with the individual rather than the combination of individuals; however, it is precisely the combination that makes them incompatible. All of the coworkers described in the examples used to illustrate the *Incompatible Personality* and *Work Style* themes appeared (to the participant) to maintain other coworker friendships and worked well with others. This exemplified that dysfunction is not a matter of individuals, but rather the combination of at least two individuals. Neither personality nor work styles are incompatible in isolation. Personality and work style incompatibility can only exist relative to another personality and work style.

Focusing on dysfunction as dyadic, coupled with the conceptualization of relationships as socially constructed, required the examination of dysfunctional relationships as created, maintained, and recreated through communicative acts (Sigman, 1995). This assumes that relationships are not constant and static, but are instead fluid and dynamic, changing as individuals continue to interact with one another. The evolving nature of relationships was evident through some of the interviews as some participants described that at first they had no problems with their coworkers, but eventually the relationship became dysfunctional.

This underlying assumption on the nature of dysfunction is most visible within the *Personal Idiosyncrasy* and the *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives* categories; however, it is also present within the remaining category, *Work Effectiveness*. Within the *Personal Idiosyncrasy* and *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives* categories, communicative acts are paramount to the formation of the dysfunctional relationship. It was through communication that the participants formed the relationships and it was through communication that the relationships became dysfunctional. For example, communication allowed the participants to realize that their personality and the personality of their coworker were incompatible. Without this communicative interaction, the participants would not have relationships with their coworkers – dysfunctional or otherwise.

The results of this study are largely consistent with previous research. The *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives* category can be used to encompass the five dialectic tensions identified by Bridge and Baxter (1992). These dialectic tensions describe the complications that arise due to the different expectations that individuals have for the work life and their personal life. The five individual dialectic tensions included: *Instrumentality vs. Affection*, *Impartiality vs.*

Favoritism and Closedness vs. Openness, Autonomy vs. Connectedness, and Judgment vs. Acceptance.

The *Instrumentality vs. Affection* dialectic tension theoretically describes the tension resulting from people holding different expectations in terms of the amount or magnitude of behaviors performed that were affectionate or strictly work related. This is similar to the *Overly Affectionate* category identified in this research. The *Instrumentality vs. Affection* dialectic tension and the *Overly Affectionate* theme identified in this study both describe situations in which one person is showing affection when it is not deemed appropriate by the other.

The other dialect tensions described by Bridge and Baxter (1992) relate to either *Expectations of Friendship* or *Prioritizations of Work vs. Private Life*. The example given for *Prioritization of Work vs. Private Life* could be seen as a manifestation of the dialect tension of *Autonomy vs. Connectedness*. The participant (Interviewee 3) related that “toward the end of the shift she told us that she had to leave early and wouldn’t be able to clean her part of the section before she left. She had to do something pertaining to her personal life.” In this example the coworker is acting more as an autonomous being and not as part of a connected workforce. The participant later described his coworker as being “unused to working as a team” and being more used to “working as an individual server.” This example could also be interpreted as being a manifestation of the *Impartiality vs. Favoritism* dialect tension. The coworker is asking for special dispensation from the participant and their shared coworker. Favors are something granted from a friend, but not from an impartial coworker.

The themes identified by Sias et al. (2004) describing the deterioration of a workplace friendship also apply to the findings of this research. The *Betrayal of trust* and *Problem Personality* themes align with the category *Expectations of Friendship* theme of this research. In

the example given for the *Expectation of Friendship* theme a participant relates that her coworker has betrayed her trust and revealed what she had thought as being personal and confidential information. This violation of expectations resulted in personal information no longer being shared and the friendship rapidly deteriorated. This betrayal of trust also illustrates the *Closedness vs Openedness* dialectic tension. The participant is open and sharing personal information with her friend and expects her friend to keep the information closed with other people whom the participant is not friends. This example clearly illustrates different expectations for friends as opposed to coworkers in terms of the information they have.

This example also shows aspects of the exigency for friendship deterioration identified by Sias et al. (2004), *Problem Personality*. The participant described her coworker and once-friend as being very gregarious and friendly toward most of the people at the office. This quality initially drew the participant toward the once-friend, but it is also the same attribute which led to her once-friend betraying her trust. The sharing of the participant's personal information with others was done in the same manner that initially drew the participant toward her. The once-friend's gregarious nature of chatting and gossiping was a positive until the subject matter was the participant's life.

Although results of this study are consistent with prior research, they also contribute to the further development of this body of literature by providing a framework for understanding how different exigencies for the social construction of dysfunctional peer coworker relationships relate to one another. Prior to this study, the extant literature was disjointed with no overarching framework. Friendship deterioration (Sias et al., 2004), dialectic tensions (Bridge & Baxter, 1992), and "troublesome others" (Fritz, 2002) were all studied and described as inhibiting the

attainment of work goals; however, they were not drawn together and assembled into a coherent structure.

Effects of Dysfunction

The second research question addressed how the relationship manifests its dysfunction. Given the conceptualization of dysfunctional peer coworker relationships as relationships that interfere with the achievement of work goals, the effects of a relationship dynamic define what it means to be dysfunctional. The results of this study identified two general ways these relationships affected the participants' ability to achieve work goals – *Direct Work Repercussions* and *Indirect Work Repercussions*. While these two categories are distinct, they are closely related to each other. These two categories are recursively linked.

The results indicated that *Indirect Work Repercussions* often led to *Direct Work Repercussions*. Participants became *Emotionally Aroused* by the behaviors of a coworker. This arousal led to a lack of concentration, which led to an inability to work efficiently. Being unable to work efficiently increased the participant's irritation which in turn amplified the participant's inability to work. This iterative and recursive cycle of cause and effect link these two categories together; however, they are categorically different in terms of theory. The recursive nature of dysfunctional relationships exemplifies the underlying assumption that dysfunctional relationships are socially constructed. As coworkers' communicative behavior affects the participants, it socially constructs the relationship as dysfunctional. The effects of the behavior in turn, either maintain or recreate the previously constructed dysfunctional relationships. This pattern of creation, maintenance, and recreation of relationships stems directly from social constructionism.

Kram and Isabella (1985) argued that functional coworker relationships can create emotional support systems. This study revealed that dysfunctional peer coworker relationships can create emotionally *destructive* systems. The results indicated that the repercussions of a dysfunctional relationship to both the individual as well as the organization can be severely negative. The *Direct Work Repercussions* are the easiest to identify and to anticipate. As previous researchers (Chapman, 1993; Cooper & Cartwright, 1994) identified, dysfunctional relationships can have adverse effects on the achievement of work efficiency. Employees not being able to work efficiently can result in a loss of pay. Sias et al. (2004) noted that friendship deterioration can remove “an important source of support and intrinsic reward” dysfunctional peer coworker relationships can also create environments wherein the employee no longer believes going to work is worth it. Kram and Isabella (1985) further argued that these emotional support systems can reduce job turnover. Individuals’ quitting their jobs is a *Direct Work Repercussion* and was found in the interviews of this study and clearly illustrates the link between *Direct* and *Indirect Repercussions*.

Mitigating Dysfunction

The final research question focused on understanding the tactics that employees use to lessen the dysfunctional effect the relationship has. Data revealed four primary types of mitigation tactics: *Direct, Tangential, Indirect, Parallel*. Although some of the strategies employed by the participant yielded varying degrees of amelioration, none of the mitigating tactics used by the participants yielded the recreation of the relationship as functional. While this study did not evaluate the success of mitigating strategies, it was interesting to note that only a single participant responded that he was pleased with the effects of their mitigation. This

participant used *Vengeance* and while this did not solve any of the specific problems of the dysfunctional relationship, the participant claimed that it made him “feel better.”

Previous research (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Dailey & Palomares, 2004) indicated *Topic Avoidance* may be a likely strategy used to mitigate the effects of dysfunctional relationship. Participants reported using *Topic Avoidance* was used; however, other strategies that are very similar and potentially indistinguishable from *Topic Avoidance* were identified, *Ignoring* and *Avoidance*. The addition of these two similar themes is important in that they contribute more detail to the strategies that individual’s may choose to avail themselves. *Ignoring* and *Avoidance* are in a different category from *Topical Avoidance* due to the fact that neither *Ignoring* nor *Avoidance* involve interaction between the participant and his/her coworker.

Sias et al (2004) found that coworkers tried tactics related to *Synchronous Confrontation* and *Topic Avoidance* to recreate the relationship. Unlike Sias et al. (2004) many of the mitigating tactics found in this study were not focused on changing the relationship, but rather were used to mitigate the effects of the relationship. Specifically, the *Tangential* and *Parallel* mitigating tactics are not focused on the relationship, but instead on alleviating the effects of the relationship.

With the exception of *Avoidance*, all of the tactics, regardless of the category, maintain or recreate the dysfunctional nature of the relationship. A mitigating tactic that is successful for both the individual as well as the organization would recreate the dysfunctional relationships as a functional relationship. None of the participants indicated that they successfully accomplished this. Instead the relationships were recreated as dysfunctional relationships of a different sort or maintained as dysfunctional. *Avoidance* is unique in that with this tactic, participants attempt to eliminate all communication with his/her coworker. If the worker is able to successfully avoid

all future contact with his/her coworker, then it results in the relationship ceasing as there is no longer a discernable pattern of interactions. In contrast, the *Ignoring* theme attempts to recreate the relationship by tacitly communicating that the relationship is not desired by the participant. This is a subtle, but important distinction between the *Avoidance* and *Ignoring* themes.

As Rawlins (1992) noted friendships can lead to increased commitment to the organization and reduce turnover. This study indicates that the opposite is also plausible. Dysfunctional peer coworker relationships led to a lack of commitment to the organization and resulted in turnover.

The results addressing the third research question provide a structure placing mitigating strategies in relation to one another. Extant literature provided only a list of potential strategies with no underlying structure illustrating the relationship between different strategies. The creation of this structure provides generalizability in such that all future examinations of mitigating tactics can be placed within one of these four categories. The four categories describe the communicative aspects underlying all potential specific tactics.

The mitigating tactic is the final communicative act taken in an iteration of the social construction of a dysfunctional peer coworker relationship. Dysfunctional relationships are created by *Personal Idiosyncrasy*, *Work Effectiveness*, and through the *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives*. These relationships are maintained and recreated by the communication surrounding the effects of the relationships whether the effects are *Direct* or *Indirect Repercussions*. Finally, the relationships are maintained, recreated, or destroyed (in the case of *Avoidance*) through attempted mitigation.

Previous research (Billings & Moos, 1981; Folkman et al., 1986) found three types of strategies employees use to cope with stress and burnout: *Problem-focused*, *Appraisal-focused*

and *Emotion-centered*. These three coping strategies illuminate some of the connections between the reason for the construction and the effects of dysfunctional relationships with mitigating tactics. *Problem-focused* coping deals directly with the cause of the burnout; this is similar to *Direct* and *Indirect* mitigating tactics because they all focus on communicating about the perceived problematic behavior. *Direct* tactics attempt to recreate the relationship through explicit communication with the coworker regarding his/her behavior. *Indirect* tactics attempt to recreate the relationship by communicating with other regarding his/her coworker's behavior. *Direct* and *Indirect* tactics would work to mitigate any of the *Personal Idiosyncrasy*, *Work Effectiveness*, and *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives* because *Personal Idiosyncrasy* involve the problem as the coworker's being, *Work Effectiveness* involve the problem as the coworker's task-related actions, and *Interaction of Work and Personal Lives* involve the combination of both.

Appraisal-focused coping involves with the employee changing how they think about the relationship and its effects on them. This type of coping attempts to recreate the relationship through internal communication regarding the problem. *Appraisal-focused* strategies were not identified in this study. This may be because successful *Appraisal-focused* strategies recreated the relationship as no longer dysfunctional and therefore participants did not mention it. Additionally, participants were not asked what they were trying to accomplish through their mitigating tactics. It was assumed the tactics were problem-oriented and not self-oriented. The only theme that fits a self-oriented mitigating tactic is *Compensation*. *Compensation* entails the employee changing his/her own behavior in order to compensate for the coworker; however, this is a change in actions, not thoughts.

Emotional-centered coping strategies entail mitigating negative emotional repercussions. These strategies seem best designed for mitigating the *Emotional Arousal* repercussions of dysfunctional relationships and are most related to *Parallel* mitigating tactics. *Parallel* tactics attempt to mitigate the effects of the dysfunctional relationship by neither explicitly communicating with the coworker nor communicating about the problem. Specifically, *Vengeance*, was found to be a tactic which resulted in the participant feeling better. *Venting* was also found to help employees feel better about the relationship.

Limitations and the Future

One of the limitations of this study is that the data gathered relied solely on the memory of participants. While the participants were encouraged to recall the most recent and most vivid stories regarding dysfunctional peer coworker relationships, the potential for retrospective sense making may have distorted participants' memories of actual occurrences making the stories more extreme in nature maximizing the dysfunctional actions of others and minimizing their own. This has both positive and negative repercussions on the findings of this study. The positive aspects are that the possible exaggeration of behaviors of others or the effects that they had may have resulted in the examples being poignant and easier to identify. The negative aspects are that the possible minimization of their own behavior creates the illusion that the dysfunctional relationship is the result solely of the other person. Another negative repercussion is that since the examples are distilled and more extreme, they may not accurately reflect real-work observations. Researchers examining dysfunctional relationships may be able to mitigate the negative aspects of this phenomenon by interviewing several people from the same workplace to corroborate narrative accounts.

Because the participants of this study all came from different areas, different places of work, and held a variety of different jobs it is likely that the findings are able to be generalized to a large variety of populations; however, this diminished the depth able to be plumbed in each of the three research questions as well as within each of the thematic categories of each research question. Future research on this area may wish to examine a single research question or thematic category to further expand in order to provide more detail to each individual theme.

An important limitation with respect to the third research question is that the study design and interview protocol tended toward identifying only unsuccessful mitigating tactics. Successful mitigation would have resulted in the relationship no longer being dysfunctional (but not necessarily becoming functional). Since participants were asked to keep their responses limited to a specific dysfunctional relationship they likely recalled only relationships that were currently or terminally dysfunctional, the framing of the study precludes the likelihood of identifying successful mitigating tactics. Future research on mitigating tactics ought to encourage participants to recall relationships which were once dysfunction, but no longer are. Such a study would likely identify “problem-focused” coping strategies that actually functional, both for the individuals in the relationship, and for the organization in which the relationship is embedded. These insights would be of great value for both organizational scholars and practitioners.

As noted previously, the *Tangential* and *Parallel* categories of mitigating tactics were not long term solutions to the problem, but instead merely attempts by the individual to get through their work. One application of the study is to ease the identification of mitigating tactics that would allow for the transformation of the dysfunctional into a less dysfunctional or in an ideal setting, a functional relationship by encouraging individuals to select tactics that are among the

Direct and *Indirect* categories. These two categories are, conceptually, more likely to yield a recreation of a relationship.

While this study examined only coworker relationships, the generated categories for the construction, effects, and mitigation of dysfunctional relationships may apply to other interpersonal relationships. Future research should be conducted to determine how consistent these categories are with other types of interpersonal relationships.

This study did not investigate the transformation of dysfunctional relationships into functional relationships; however, that should be a goal of this line of research. Understanding the reasons a relationship becomes dysfunctional is a crucial first step to understanding the process behind dysfunctional relationship formation and ultimately, could reveal a prescription for urging the relationship towards a functional peer coworker relationship.

Additionally, this study examined these three facets of dysfunctional relationships in relative isolation of each other. Future research should attempt to examine the patterns between the construction of certain types of dysfunctional peer coworker relationships, the repercussions of such relationships on an employee's ability to achieve work goals, and what tactics tend to be successful or unsuccessful in mitigating specific repercussions. To do so, researchers should survey a larger sample size such that it is possible to identify correlations between these three facets. Such knowledge would yield great utility for both employees and managers to help recreate dysfunctional relationships as functional ones as it would provide them with a diagnostic tool for identifying why the relationship is dysfunction, why it should be changed, and how to change it.

¹ The excluded fifth theme identified by Sias et al. (2004) involved one of the individual's being promoted resulting in a legitimate power differential within the relationship negating the applicability of the qualifier peer.

Table 1 - Reasons for Dysfunctional Relationships

	Theme	Definition	Example
Personal Idiosyncrasy	Incompatible Personality	The combination of individuals' personalities repelled each other.	"Anyone who is not a fucking retard would realize that this is totally not funny, however, since E.D. is indeed a fucking retard, he would laugh hysterically..."
	Prejudice	Coworkers possessing a trait viewed as being unacceptable by the other.	"Her black-ass pisses me off."
	Language Barrier	The coworkers not being able to understand one another.	"Mostly due to the language barrier, and only a few cases due to prejudice."
Work Effectiveness	Incompatible Work Style	Evaluation of the coworker's work style without placing a negative evaluation on his/her ability or willingness.	"She would ask you to do things for her or a certain way when the way you did them was correct but not her way."
	Work Efficiency	Negative evaluation of his/her coworker's ability or willingness to work	"My first real dealing with him was when I couldn't read his writing on one of the orders and I had to ask him what he wrote."
	Competition	Scarcity of resources creating competition or conflict.	"knew that their tip would be better than the smaller tables we were working with at the time so she selfishly jumped in there."
Interaction of Work and Personal Lives	Expectations of Friendship	The coworker violates expectations that are consistent with friendship.	"Carolina and I have had trouble because we were friends and we know each other more so than our other coworkers."
	Prioritization of Work vs. Private Life	The expectation that a coworker will not sacrifice the completion of work goals for her personal life	"Toward the end of the shift she told us that she had to leave early and wouldn't be able to clean her part of the section before she left. She had to do something pertaining to her personal life."
	Overly Affectionate	Expectations of how much affection is appropriate for coworkers.	"He came on to me at a conference we were at. I said no. He asked again, I said no again and then he went off on me."

	Theme	Definition	Example
Direct Work Repercussions	Work Efficiency	Adversely effects the quality and/or quality of work being done.	“sort of directly affected performance, faster meant more of a chance to create an error.”
	Extrinsic Reward Loss	Anticipated extrinsic rewards, such as money, being lost or not received.	“at the end of the shift she took off early and did not split her tips with us. That directly affected how much money I made that day.”
Indirect Work Repercussions	Advancement	Diminished prestige or sense of accomplishment.	“being at the bottom of the ladder was a blow to my ego because I had superiors who were 5 or 10 years younger than I was.”
	Emotional Arousal	Adversely effecting the emotional quality of the work experience.	“Well, it made going to work suck, but my actual job responsibilities didn’t suffer. It was more the social aspect of my job that sucked.”

	Theme	Definition	Example
Direct	Synchronous Confrontation	Direct and interactive communication between the participant and their coworker and also occurred such that both individuals could simultaneously communicate with each other.	"Why do you always have to be so stuck up?"
	Asynchronous Confrontation	Direct communication between the participant and his/her coworker, occurring such that both individuals can not simultaneously communicate with each other.	"Put post-it notes up on his bulletin board reminding him to take his food out of the refrigerator at the end of each day."
Tangential	Compensation	Changing his/her own behavior in order to compensate for the behavior of the other individual.	"I just try to work harder to pick up her slack."
	Venting	Talking with other people about the coworker or relationship in order to reduce the emotional stress	"I talked to other employees and found out they all disliked him and had the same problems with him that I did. So that made it a bit better, knowing I wasn't the only one."
	Subterfuge	Manipulating the environment in which they interacted with the other individual.	I try to get the other servers involved to ask her if she needs help and keep her on task."
Indirect	Sharing	Linking the success or failure of both members together.	"Take the average of the server's tips and redistribute them so that everyone has the same amount."
	Modeling	Behaving in a specific manner and expecting it to be reciprocated.	"I often ask her if 'she' needs help. She might also think to ask 'us' if we need help."
	Topic Avoidance	Censoring specific topics from discussion.	"kept details about my own life mostly secret, in case it might cause friction, or snide comments."
Parallel	Avoidance	Preemptively reduce or eliminate interaction.	"Come in late to avoid dealing with him."
	Ignoring	Reactively reduce or eliminate interaction.	"Not look at him and pretend I couldn't hear him until he went away."
	Vengeance	Retaliation, aimed at the person and not a behavior.	"Tried to get her fired... by going to the register near the end of the day and re-ringing all of her sales under my name."

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol:

1. Tell me about your job.
 - a. What do you do?
 - b. How would you describe your working environment?
 - c. Do people interact a lot?
 - d. Tell me about this interaction?

Please think about a current peer coworker (not your boss, not your employee), who you have trouble working with...

2. Tell me about your relationship with this person.
 - a. What was your first time meeting them like?
3. What does it mean when you say you have trouble working with this person?
 - a. Please give an example that illustrates this problem.
4. At what point in the relationship did your relationship start interfering with your work?
5. How do you cope with this relationship?
 - a. How do you get your work done in spite your relationship with this person?
6. How does this person work with the other people at your workplace?
 - a. Tell me about that.
 - b. What have other employees told you about their relationship with this person?
7. That's all of my questions, is there anything you'd like to add to what you've told me?
 - a. Can you think of anything that I should have asked?
 - b. Do you have any questions for me?

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