My research enriches our understanding of work relationships by introducing ideas about the human body. I integrate research from the medical and social sciences to add a bodily dimension to the study of work relationships. I use the insights generated in this research to uncover sources of individual agency and effectiveness in organizations.

**High quality relationships**

Most relationships research focuses on the structure of relationships (e.g., network research) and on enduring relationships (e.g., boss-subordinate dyads), and relies on general measures of relationship quality (e.g., close, strong, supportive). In contrast, Jane Dutton and I (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003) develop a definition of “high quality” relationships by identifying common features of relationship quality described across a number of relationship literatures. We suggest that even momentary connections between two people, not only enduring relationships, can have powerful effects on individuals and organizations. We demonstrate the importance of high quality connections by identifying their role in exchange, learning, identity, and growth and connection theories.

In an empirical study, a colleague and I (Losada and Heaphy, 2004) demonstrate that high quality connections contribute to strategic business unit (SBU) performance. In an observational lab study of 60 SBU teams, we show that the ratio of positive to negative speech acts that occur during a business meeting contribute to and reflect the quality of the team’s work relationships (measured as connectivity). Higher relationship quality, in turn, is associated with SBU performance.

**Work relationships and the body**

I further expand research on high quality relationships by incorporating research on the human body. I propose three “lenses,” or ways of conceptualizing the body, that organizational scholars can use to study the body as it relates to work relationships: as a physiological system, as subjectively experienced bodily cues, and as culturally mediated symbols (Heaphy, 2006).

I have worked with others (Heaphy and Dutton, *AMR*, conditionally accepted) to develop the physiological perspective on high quality work relationships. I show that peoples’ subjective experience of their work relationships has immediate, enduring and consequential effects on their bodies, specifically on their cardiovascular, immune, neuroendocrine systems. I propose that the physiology of positive social interactions builds human capacity (e.g., work recovery, engagement) and that organizations shape the physiology of employees by creating or minimizing opportunities for positive social interactions (e.g., through practices, culture and leadership). This paper introduces a new way of thinking about and studying the physiological impact of workplace relationships. In contrast to most research on stress, health and burnout, which emphasize how bodies are harmed by workplace experiences, I develop a framework that explains how workplace experiences leave positive physiological imprints on employees’ bodies.

My dissertation research develops the two additional lenses on the body and work relationships. The “subjective experience” lens calls for greater attention to the role of bodily cues, or perceptions, feelings and beliefs about their own body (Pennebaker, 1983), that people experience in work relationships. I suggest that they are particularly important in sensemaking and meaning-making processes. The “cultural interpretation” lens proposes that these subjective experiences are shaped in part by cultural context, and that bodily symbols, and especially physical touch, have the potential to facilitate not only harm work relationships.

My dissertation elaborates these perspectives in a study of agency relationships, or those relationships in which a person acts on behalf of a person or group. Specifically, I study hospital-based patient advocates in Veterans’ Administration and teaching hospitals. I use a set of qualitative methods (individual and small group interviews; participant observation and shadowing; documents) to elicit narrative, observational and archival data from over 50 patient advocates. These methods allow me to capture both patient advocates’ phenomenological interpretation of their work as well as observe patient advocates to identify uses of the body that they may take for granted. These data sources contribute to a theory of bodily-based agency relationships in organizations.

For example, most research suggests that agents rely on cognitive skills and self-interested motivations (Heath, 1999; Coleman, 1990). My research shows that agents also rely on their interpretations of their own bodily cues and other’s bodily gestures, to form relationships with others,
discern and evaluate their claims, and then act appropriately on their behalf. One example of the subjective experience lens is suggested by my interviews, which show that patient advocates use their own experience with physical pain to evaluate patients’ complaints about inadequate pain medication prescribed by doctors. Patient advocates, in turn, represent the patients’ concerns differently within the hospital depending on whether they believe the patients’ claims are legitimate (e.g., a doctor refused to help based on their personal beliefs) or illegitimate (e.g., the patient is seeking drugs to sell on the street). A second example highlights the cultural meanings of physical touch. Patient advocates all use physical touch to build relationships, yet the use of physical touch is culturally mediated. For example, patient advocates in VA hospitals rarely use physical touch to build relationships, where a male-centered culture and high degree of post-traumatic stress disorder make physical touch culturally and medically ill-advised. In contrast, patient advocates commonly use physical touch in teaching hospitals, where touch (e.g., a hug, tap on the arm) is more often viewed as a way to comfort patients and their families.

My dissertation demonstrates the important but overlooked role of the human body at work. It contributes to the multidisciplinary scholarship on the body by answering the call for research on the body not only as a site of control, but as a source of agency (Davis, 1997; Meyerson, 1998), and not only as a potent symbol, but as an important part of individuals’ subjective experience (Benner, 2000; Loewenstein, 1996; Wacquant, 2004). I also demonstrate the importance of the human body to organizational research. For example, research on agency relationships focuses on cognitive processes of motivation and incentives. In contrast, I study agency relationships with a focus on the quality of the relationship between the principal and agent, and specifically, how the body helps or hinders relationship formation and subsequent action.

Social construction of the self
During graduate school, I have also had the opportunity to develop my theory building and testing skills in two joint research projects. The first project emphasizes how individuals revise their self-concept. My colleagues and I developed theory about how discrepant or surprising events, or “jolts,” can enable people to discover their strengths, talents and contributions, which can then propel them along positive developmental trajectories (Roberts et al, 2005a, 2005b). This theory of self-development at work suggests that jolts can be incorporated into one’s self-portrait when people have the social resources of positive affect to view the feedback creatively, relational connections to help make sense of the event, and feelings of self-efficacy to act on it. Second, in two field experiments, my colleagues and I show how culture influences the cues that people use to convey and evaluate appropriate, professional behavior in organizations (Heaphy, Sanchez-Burks, and Ashford). This research shows how years of experience in American culture tacitly shapes the standards to convey impressions and evaluate others.

Future research
My future research will expand on my interest in high quality relationships and the human body. I am currently working with colleagues to validate the measure of high quality relationships we have proposed. I am developing the physiological line of research in two ways. First, in a lab experiment with colleagues, in which we are testing whether the hormones that are released in high quality relationships affect a dyad’s performance on a coordination task (Brown, Fredrickson, Cohen, Heaphy, Figa). Second, I expect to test how organizational practices affect employee physiology and health among health care employees. Finally, upon completion of my dissertation, I expect to further develop my research on how people rely on their bodies for their work to other relationship-centric roles, such as negotiators and executive coaches.
References


