Repairing Trust to Preserve Balance: A Balance-Theoretic Approach to Trust Breach and Repair in Groups

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Abstract

We draw on balance theory (Heider, 1958) to better understand trust breach in its social context. By focusing on the motive to preserve balanced relationships within groups, we present a novel view on how and when trust repair is likely to occur in teams and workgroups. We also argue why such balanced states are likely to be more than just transitory, and why people attempt to rebalance systems rendered imbalanced by a breach. In addition, by examining the balance motive in trust relations, we conjecture about when trust judgments and behavior are likely to converge (or diverge) among the members of teams and work groups. Our approach contributes to an emerging stream of literature on the role of third parties and social groups on conflict and trust in teams and workgroups. Throughout our analysis, we offer propositions to guide subsequent empirical research.

New forms of organizing have emerged in recent years, tending toward flat, informal, networked, and flexible forms, many of which are team-based (Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995; Kellogg, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006; Schreyogg & Sydow, 2010). In these newer forms where formal contracting and hierarchical control are less prominent or even absent, interpersonal trust is often vital to successful team and organizational functioning (Korsgaard, Pitariu, & Jeong, 2008). Trust describes the willingness of employees or team members to make themselves vulnerable to their fellow group members or teammates, predicated not on the safety and certainty of contracts and control but rather based on positive, confident expectations about others' behavior (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Trust has both cognitive and affective dimensions (Boon & Holmes, 1991; Lount, 2010; McAllister, 1995) and is positively associated with a range of important organizational outcomes, including communication quality, performance, problem solving, and cooperation (Davis, Schoorman, Mayer, & Tan, 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998).

Although trust is vital, trust breach and betrayal are common features of everyday work life (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998; Jones & Burdette, 1994; Tripp & Bies, 2009). A growing body of scholarship has emerged, however, to consider how trust can be restored or repaired (cf. Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, & Dirks,

2007; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). The vast majority of this research focuses on the interactions between the transgressor and the trusting person (the trustor), such as social accounts, explanations, apologies, and forgiveness (Kramer & Lewicki, 2010). In other words, the most common approach to understanding trust breaches is to seek to understand the relationship and interactions between the transgressor and the trustor.

But in organizations, trust breaches unfold not in an "isolated dyad" (Burt & Knez, 1995) but rather within a broader social context, for example, within a team or workgroup. Even in a dyadic trust breach (one transgressor, one trustor), both parties are enmeshed into a network of existing relationships with others in their workplace. This is particularly true within groups. When a trust breach occurs between group members, both parties share ties of group membership to teammates and fellow group members. These teammates may have preexisting relationships of trust (or lack thereof) with the transgressor, the trustor, or both. Fellow teammates and group members, of course, may be direct witnesses to the transgression or may know of it secondhand through scuttlebutt and gossip. They may view it as trivial or serious; they may side with the trustor or the transgressor. The trustor, then, must interpret the transgression and determine how to respond while paying consideration to how their response will influence a broader range of social relationships and group dynamics.

Compared with dyadic approaches to trust breach and repair, this social dimension is underexplored in the trust literature, both in terms of theory and empirical research. In this article, we draw on balance theory (Heider, 1958) to better understand trust breach in its social context. By viewing trust repair as a group process, and by focusing on the motive to preserve balanced relationships, we present a novel view on how and when trust repair is likely to occur in teams and workgroups. In addition, examining the balance motive in trust relations helps to predict when trust judgments and behavior are likely to converge (or diverge) among the members of teams and workgroups. In so doing, we contribute to an emerging stream of literature on the role of third parties and social groups on trust (Burt & Knez, 1995; Chua, Ingram, & Morris, 2008; Ferrin, Dirks, & Shah, 2006). And, of course, we offer propositions to guide empirical research.

We organize our article around four arguments. We begin by arguing that (a) workgroups and teams seek to maintain balance in the structure of their trust relationships. We then continue by (b) describing behavior in the group—from clique formation to contracting—that results from the pursuit of balance at the dyadic and group level, including some novel approaches previously absent from the literature on balance theory. Next, we (c) underscore how balance-seeking at the group level can promote trust repair when it might not necessarily occur at the purely dyadic level or how it can inhibit trust repair when it might otherwise happen at the dyadic level. Finally, we (d) offer propositions about when each approach to balance restoration will likely prevail, drawing on the assumption that individuals try to preserve effort when seeking balance.

Trust Breach and Repair

Trust breaches occur when individuals make themselves vulnerable to another party, but the positive expectations that led them to do so are unmet or are perceived to have been disconfirmed by the transgressor's behavior (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). More specifically, trust breaches ". . . threaten the well-being of the trustor" in some way (that is, they have a substantive impact) and are perceived to contravene norms and expectations known by both trustor and trustee (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998, p. 548; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). It is important to note that trust violations are a matter of perception: Trust can be diminished by unsubstantiated allegations as much as by objective misbehavior, and we can feel that our trust was breached even when the harm is to another person (Kim, Dirks, & Cooper, 2009).

Trust repair, if it occurs, follows in the wake of a trust breach. Trust repair is not an all-or-nothing event, rather it can vary along a continuum from no repair (trusting behavior and attitudes remain at

their postbreach level or worsen) to complete repair (trust returns to its original, prebreach levels). As trust breach is in the eyes of the trustor, so too is trust repair. The "resistance threshold" to reestablishing trust is set by the trustor, and can vary considerably, from a strong predisposition toward repairing trust to a firm resistance to any efforts aimed at trust repair (Kim et al., 2009). In other words, the trusting person's openness to repair matters as much to whether repair occurs as do the objective efforts by the transgressor to rebuild trust. In this article, we consider the role that balance-seeking might play in changing trustors' openness to trust repair.

Balance Theory

A System of Relationships

Traditional balance theory (Heider, 1958) focuses on the pattern of sentiment and unit relationships in triads. We begin by defining these two types of ties, as we use the terms (sentiment and unit ties) when describing trust breach in terms of balance theory. Unit relationships describe entitativity—the degree to which individuals perceive ties of association, membership, similarity, or belonging between nodes in the social structure (individuals have a unit tie if they are members of the same team, for instance). Sentiment relationships or ties, by contrast, are attitudinal, describing feelings such as valuing, liking, or approving (Cartwright & Harary, 1956). Balance theory is, in essence, a theory of consistency among these ties: it argues that people prefer coherent and consistent patterns of cognitions, attitudes, and beliefs. Given a state of tension in a system of attitudes, balance theory suggests that social processes occur to restore a state of balance to the social system. Before turning to its application in trust repair, we begin by providing a brief review of balance theory. We describe its dynamics in terms of object attitudes between two people, then its extension to relational triads (three people) and teams and workgroups of more than three members.

Balance theory in its original formulation tended to focus on triads with three elements: the person, another person, and an "attitude object." The basic premise of balance theory is that people seek to avoid sources of inconsistency and imbalance in these ties. Davis (1963) offers the literary example of Romeo and Juliet. Romeo likes Juliet. Romeo is associated with the Montague name (an attitude object); Juliet does not like this family. Given Juliet's dislike of the Montagues, Romeo may choose to do one of three things: sever his unit tie with the family, persuade Juliet to change her sentiments toward the Montagues, or lastly, change his sentiment tie toward Juliet (disliking her or ending their relationship). These are very different approaches—changing one's attitudes, influencing others, or reconfiguring one's social relationships—but they similarly serve to reduce the strain or "tension" in the social system and result in a balanced state (Heider, 1946).

Balance theory often illustrates balance and imbalance in this type of relational triad diagrammatically. In these diagrams, the valence of relationships is indicated with signs (+ or −); if the product of these signs is positive, the system is said to be balanced. Balanced systems do not necessarily need to be entirely positive or free of conflict; they must simply be stable. In other words, liking that which is liked by those we like is no more "stable" in the language of balance theory than is liking that which is disliked by those we dislike. In both cases, the system of relationships is in balance.

For our purposes, we think of social systems (like interpersonal relationships at work) in similar ways. Instead of a triad of two people and an object, we can think of two people and a third person as the attitude object. For example, in a three-person system, if you like your coworker and your manager, but your coworker dislikes your manager, the relationship is considered to be imbalanced (Figure 1). By changing one or more of the sentiment ties (for example, changing your sentiments and disliking your manager), balance could be achieved (Figure 2).

Most important for our purposes, this analysis can be extended beyond the social triad to larger groupings of social targets. For example, Woodside and Chebat (2001) applied balance theory to a large,
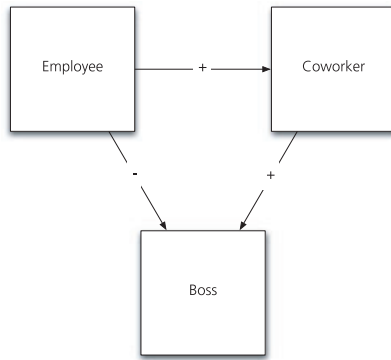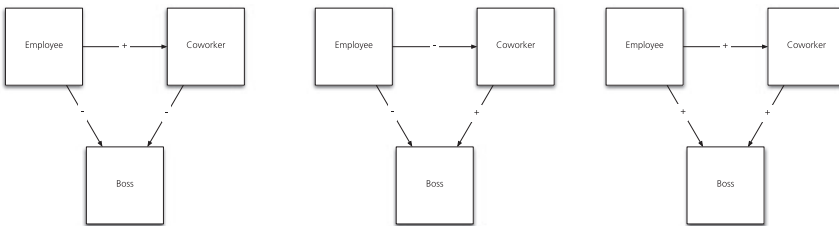
Figure 1. Imbalanced triad.

Figure 2. Balanced triads.

multinode system of unit relationships and consumer attitudes. It can also be extended to multinodal systems of people—that is, social groups (Cartwright & Harary, 1956; Newcomb, 1961). Here, the distinction between unit ties and sentiment ties becomes more important. Balance in social groups can be achieved by changing attitudes in the minds of the actors (like choosing to dislike my boss or convincing my friend to change their attitude about my boss). Or it can be achieved by changing the unit ties: It is less problematic to dislike someone who is an outgroup member than someone with whom we share a group bond. When these changes occur in groups larger than a triad, it often results in reconfigured unit ties and social structures; that is, balanced subgroups or cliques emerge out of the imbalanced larger group (Davis, 1963; Hummon & Doreian, 2003).

Motivation for Balance

In light of these changes, the obvious question is, why? Why do we change our attitudes, try to influence others, and reconfigure our social groups to achieve balance? A range of arguments exist as to why imbalanced systems are aversive and undesirable. Heider (1946, 1958), rooting his theory in Gestalt psychology, suggested that there is an inherent pull toward the simple, stable "good form" (Simon & Holyoak, 2002). Indeed, contemporary evidence suggests that the impulse to seek balance is implicit (Greenwald et al., 2002) and can shape not only evaluative judgments but also the initial encoding of social information (Gawronski, Walther, & Blank, 2005). Imbalanced systems require cognitive effort and granular distinctions between social targets; balanced systems are easily stored in memory and recalled (Crandall, Silvia, N'Gbala, Tsang, & Dawson, 2007). Experimental evidence supports this view; specific sentiments are more easily retained and recalled when they are part of a balanced system than when they are part of an imbalanced system (Cottrell, Ingraham, & Montfont, 1971).

The proclivity or motive to seek balance is also reinforced by a range of social factors. Matz and Wood (2005) argued that balance is desired for both informational reasons (seeking consistency with others' judgments is a source of validation and social proof) and normative reasons (seeking to avoid the social sanctions usually associated with inconsistency and disharmony.)

Trust and Balance

Balance theory has been extended to a range of phenomena, from consumer attitudes (Basil & Herr, 2006; Woodside & Chebat, 2001) to group disagreement (Matz & Wood, 2005) to problem-solving (Adejumo, Dulmering, & Zhong, 2008). However, to our knowledge, no previous research has used balance theory to examine the influence of group structures and social relationships as they relate to trust. In this section, we argue that balance is sought in trust relationships and that trust breach can result in tension and promote efforts aimed at reestablishing balance.

We previously discussed the general reasons that balance is sought across sentiment ties of any type: Individuals seek the good form and prefer easily encodable, easily recalled attitudinal structures; they want the validation of sharing attitudes with others, particularly with teammates; and they want to avoid the conflict associated with incompatible attitudes within a group. However, there are additional reasons that they would seek balance with specific regard to trust judgments.

In general, trust is often chosen over control or contracting because it reduces transaction costs, reduces complexity, and conserves cognitive effort (Kramer, 1999; Luhmann, 1979; McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003). The simplicity of trust ties in a balanced system (I trust those who trust the same people I do; I distrust those who trust the people I distrust) improves the usefulness of trust as a heuristic. Lewicki, McAllister, and Bies (1998) theorized that individuals can maintain imbalanced trust relationships by segmenting and compartmentalizing their relationships, by adopting a "trust but verify" approach, and by continually revisiting their trusting beliefs so as to be accurate. Although this is certainly possible, it is cognitively effortful and socially awkward within groups. Any gains from trust over control and contracting are eroded by the constant effort expended on maintaining contingent, situation-specific trust judgments, and continually revising our beliefs. As well, the presence of imbalance (and tension) in a group combined with the interpersonally cautious style of "trust but verify" will likely compromise the nature of the group itself. All things being equal, we expect that people will prefer balanced to imbalanced trust structures, even if this preference leads to the creation of subgroups or cliques to maintain a balanced system of relationships in a group.

Beyond this cognitive-interpersonal perspective, there is also a broader, network-based calculative reason to maintain a coherent and balanced trust structure. In complex, interdependent work, trust makes individuals vulnerable not only to those they trust directly but also to their trustees' trusted teammates. In an imbalanced structure, for example, I might delegate a piece of important work to someone I trust in the group, who in turn might delegate it to someone I do not trust either inside or outside of the group. To the degree that my trusted teammate continues to trust someone that I do not trust, it erodes my ability to insulate myself from risk and vulnerability to that untrusted party. Balanced structures of trust, by contrast, ensure that decisions about trust made at the interpersonal level are not undermined by such second-degree trust (trustees of trustees) involving others either inside or outside of the group.

In addition, it is dissonant to imagine that someone we trust is willing to trust someone we distrust. If a teammate is willing to trust someone you view as untrustworthy, it may signal that they lack appropriate judgment—which in turn may impugn their own trustworthiness in your eyes. Based on the intuitive presumption that individuals will want those they trust to come to similar judgments about whom else to trust, we should prefer balanced structures to imbalanced ones.

Indeed, despite Lewicki et al.'s (1998) argument that individuals live in states of "imbalance, inconsistency and 'uncertainty'" (p. 444) with regard to trust (so as to be accurate in their trust perceptions),

there is evidence that people often seek to find simple, balanced trust relationships. As cognitive misers, they often engage in selective, confirmation-seeking processing of trust-related behavior. Their attributions in trust judgments are often motivated by concerns wholly unrelated to accuracy (Weber, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2005). They also tend to ignore infractions when their trust is relational in nature (Rousseau et al., 1998), when the trusting person believes that people's basic qualities are fixed and immutable (Haselhuhn, Schweitzer, & Kray, 2008) or when they are motivated to confirm their previously held beliefs (Robinson, 1996). Thus, instead of simultaneously trusting and distrusting and engaging in regular information-seeking to update and revise their trusting beliefs, the empirical record suggests individuals often trade off accuracy for other reasons when it comes to trust judgments. We argue that seeking balance may be one such reason.

Trust Breaches Create Tension

Earlier, we described balance theory with three systems: the traditional Heiderian triad (two people and one attitude object), the relational triad (three people), and the group (more than three people). Using those same structures, we propose a unique way of thinking about trust in teams and workgroups.

At its simplest level, trust breach can be described in a traditional Heiderian triad with three nodes: the trusting person (trustor), the person being trusted (trustee), and that person's actions or behavior. When the person being trusted behaves in predictably trustworthy ways, the system is in balance. When the transgressor's behavior would seem to disconfirm that trust, there is the potential for tension in the system. If the trustor maintains their trust (a positive sentiment tie between the two parties), views the trustee as responsible for their disconfirming behavior (they "tie" the transgressor attributionally to the breach), and feels harmed by the breach (a negative sentiment tie between the trustor and the breach), the triad is imbalanced.

This form of imbalance can be resolved by changing any one of the three ties. Most obviously, balance can be achieved if the trustor reduces his or her trust in the transgressor (severing the positive sentiment tie between the parties). Balance can also be restored in two other ways: They may downplay the harm, removing the negative sentiment tie between the act and the trustor. Or they may be attributionally lenient, thinking of the behavior as uncontrollable or nonvolitional (Elangovan, Auer-Rizzi, & Szabo, 2007; Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998; Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009), which serves to erode the positive unit tie between the act and the transgressor. Later in this article, we explore some of the group-level determinants of the individual balance strategy selected.

How this individual system is rebalanced also has implications for balance at the group level (the social system of trust formed by the trusting person, the transgressor, and one or more teammates or colleagues in the group). Once the sentiment tie of distrust between the trusting person and the transgressor is altered by the breach (as in Figure. 3), it creates the potential for a more pervasive imbalance in the group if the trusting person also trusts a teammate who, in turn, trusts the transgressor (this is illustrated in Figure 4). From a balance theory perspective, this system (roughly, "the friend of my enemy is my friend") is imbalanced and aversive. As trust breaches occur between group members, the tension will be imposed on the system's unit and sentiment relations, creating aversive and unstable imbalanced states.

Seeking Balance

Faced with a trust breach that disrupts the balanced trust system within the group (as pictured in Figures 3 and 4), a trusting person has a menu of strategies that can restore balance to the group system (trustor–trustee–teammate), while preserving balance in the triad formed by the trustor, the trustee, and the act of trust breach. We take a two-stage approach, showing how balancing efforts at one level (the group) influence the type of balancing undertaken at the other level (the dyad).
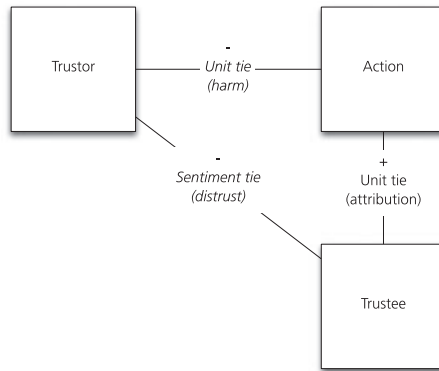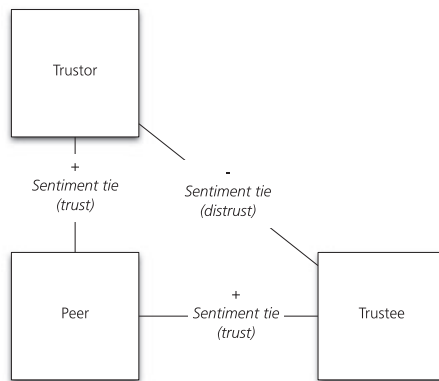
Figure 3. Dyadic trust breach.

Figure 4. Imbalanced group trust.

We describe four ways to achieve balance in a group that trusts someone who appears to have violated one's trust. First, one can (a) defer to the group, maintaining trust in the transgressing party. Or one can (b) behave as if they trust the transgressor, despite quietly held distrusting beliefs. Or one can (c) persuade other teammates to reduce their trust in the transgressor. Finally, one can simply (d) choose to distrust the teammates who trust the transgressor. We describe how each of these approaches might play out in the group and how they each would serve to restore balance at the group level.

But the process is not so simple. Efforts to achieve balance at the group level may in fact cause imbalance in the dyadic system (the triad formed by the trustee, trustor, and the apparent breach). Choosing to trust, or even behave trustingly toward someone who is viewed as responsible for a harmful breach of trust introduces tension to this system. We describe how this tension is resolved through attributions, forgiveness, reframing, and the use of substitutes for trust and how each of these responses is linked to the type of balancing approach taken at the group level.

Lastly, we acknowledge that the restoration of balance in both the group and dyadic systems is not necessarily positive in terms of the group's dynamics: We describe how the balancing process can create mutually distrusting subgroups or coalitions, each balanced in their trust in one another and in their lack of trust in the other subgroups' members.

As an overview, we organize our propositions about balancing at the group and individual levels and about the potential for group fragmentation in Figure 5. This figure can be referenced throughout the following discussion and presentation of our propositions.
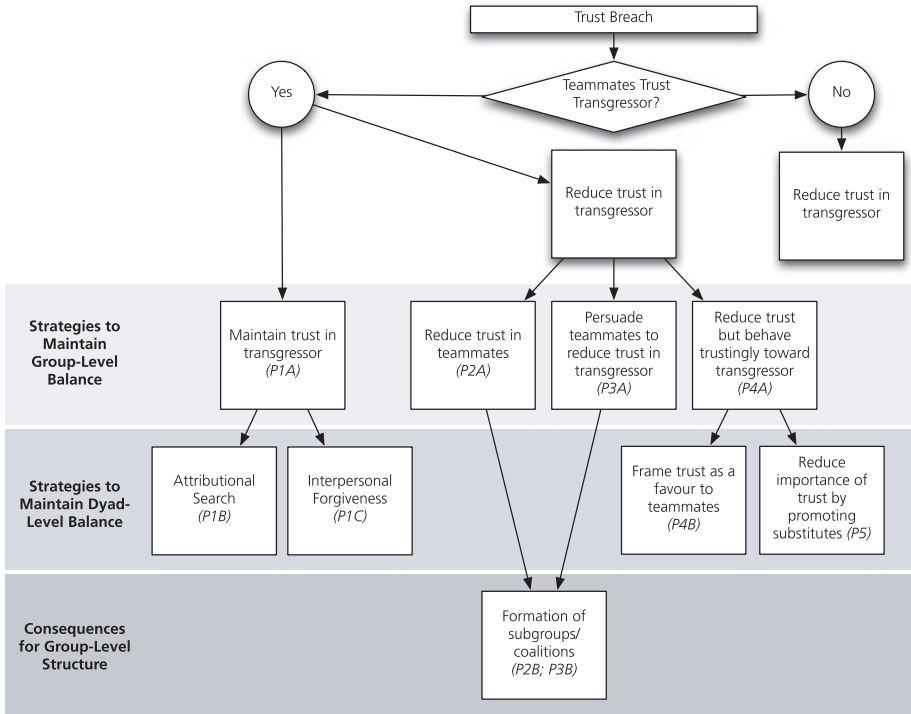
Figure 5. Balance-preserving responses to breach.

Attitude Change Toward the Transgressor

As described previously, if a group member breaks another member's trust, and yet the group member remains trusted by other group members, it creates tension and imbalance in the group system. One way to resolve this is for the trustor to simply change his or her sentiment tie toward the transgressor to match that of his or her teammates (i.e., both trustor and teammates are trusting); this approach resolves the imbalance in the workgroup's sentiment ties. However, this approach creates imbalance at the dyadic level, as the trustor ends up trusting someone he or she perceives to have willfully broken his or her trust and caused the trustor harm.

This tension may promote information-seeking and sense-making by the trustor, as the trustor seeks to reduce the tension in this dyadic (trustor–trustee–transgression) system. The process of information-seeking may be effortful and explicit as the trustor specifically asks teammates about the reason for their trust in the transgressor. Or it may be implicit and simply based on observation of others' trusting attitudes and behavior. Research on trust transferability suggests that trusting people use other parties' trust as social information in forming their own judgments (Ferrin et al., 2006; McEvily et al., 2003).

> *Proposition 1a:* When trustors rely on the information and positive attitudes of others (fellow group members) to change their sentiments toward the transgressor, it will reduce tension in the trust system and restore balance at the group level.

However, this type of balancing strategy at the group level can cause imbalance in the dyadic system since it involves a trustor who trusts the transgressor despite having been harmed by the transgressor's actions. In the dyadic system, there is tension: a positive trust tie to the transgressor, a negative sentiment tie to the trust beach, and a unit link between the transgressor and the breach. In other words, the approach taken to achieve balance at the group level creates imbalance at the individual level (and vice-versa).

This dyadic tension can be resolved through construal and attributions: The trustor might choose to construe the action as unintentional or caused by forces beyond the transgressor's control (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). All trust judgments, after all, hinge on attributions—whether the behavior under consideration is attributed to volitional action or to the "visible demands of circumstances" (Luhmann, 1979, p. 41).

The desire to preserve balance at the group level (by adopting other group members' trust beliefs) may lead the trustor to engage in a motivated search for benevolent attributions or to give greater weight to explanations or social accounts provided by the transgressor (Elangovan et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2006). Alternately, balance can be restored by reconstruing (ignoring or downplaying) the severity of the transgression. In cases where acknowledging the severity of the breach would contribute to imbalance at the group level, trustors may opt to trivialize the trust breach.

> **Proposition 1b:** Trustors who adopt the positive trusting attitudes of other group members (to restore balance at the group level) will experience tension and imbalance at the individual level, motivating them to search for information or change their construal or attributions related to the breach.

In instances where the breach is severe and reconstrual is untenable (e.g., benevolent attributions are implausible), the trustor may be able to attitudinally restore balance in the dyadic system by offering forgiveness. Forgiveness is a process that involves a reduction of anger and revenge motives and a restoration of benevolence (Aquino, Grover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003). When a victim forgives, he or she tends to think of the transgression as closed instead of continuing (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). The victim focuses on the future and moves on from the offense (Kearns & Fincham, 2005). In many cases, the victim focuses on the positive side of the experience (thinking, for instance, of how he or she grew or felt stronger from having dealt with the experience; McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006). Finally, forgiveness serves to reduce the ongoing harm of a breach by offering victims a greater sense of peacefulness (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002), less anger and rumination (McCullough, 2001; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001), and improved well-being (Stoia-Caraballo et al., 2008). In other words, forgiveness serves to reduce the unit link (the ongoing harm) between the transgression and the trustor. And, we argue, the impulse to seek structural balance at the group level may promote forgiveness when it might not otherwise occur in a dyad without the social context of the group.

> **Proposition 1c:** Trustors who adopt the positive trusting attitudes of other group members (to restore balance at the group level) will experience tension and imbalance at the individual level, motivating them to forgive their transgressor.

Attitude Change Toward Others in the Group

As we argued earlier, people prefer balanced trust structures because they want the people they trust to share their trust judgments. They want this symmetry and balance in their system of trust attitudes. To reduce (second-degree) vulnerability to distrusted parties, we want those we trust to also distrust those we distrust. If trusted others continue to trust a transgressor, it signals either a lack of social solidarity (why don't they care about how the transgressor who harmed me?) or a lack of judgment (how can they be so stupid as to trust someone who behaves like that?). If other group members do reduce their trust in the transgressor, this tension is eliminated. But if others in the group continue to have positive trusting relations with the transgressor despite the trustor's own reduced trust in the transgressor, it may create tension.

> **Proposition 2a:** Trustors who reduce their trust in their transgressor (to restore balance at the dyadic level) will experience tension and imbalance at the group level if other group members continue trusting the transgressor, motivating trustors to reduce their trust in other members of their group.

Although it may exacerbate conflict, and may lead to their isolation from the group, the trustor may indeed choose to lower his or her trust in the transgressor and in other group members who choose to continue trusting the transgressor. The effect of this attitude change, however, will depend on the nature of group members' trust in the transgressor. When the trustor's group includes both those who continue trusting the transgressor and those who reduce their trust in the transgressor, the resultant pattern of changes to trusting relations may create mutually distrusting subgroups. In other words, a single dyadic trust breach in a group may provoke changes to trust between otherwise uninvolved parties seeking to preserve balance.

> **Proposition 2b:** When other group members' trust in the transgressor varies following a breach (some continue trusting, whereas others reduce their trust), it will lead to the creation of mutually untrusting (or even distrusting) subgroups.

Social Influence Directed Toward Others in the Group

Thus far, we have treated the perspectives of others in the group (teammates) as relatively fixed. These teammates trust, do not trust, or even distrust the transgressor, and the trustor changes his or her own cognitions and reorganizes his or her own ties to seek balance and resolve the tension in the dyad and group systems. However, an alternate approach for the trustor involves persuading others in the group to change their sentiment ties toward the transgressor.

In a case where the trustor lowers trust in the transgressor but other group members do not, this mismatch in trusting ties may stem from informational differences. Teammates' information about the breach may be incomplete or ambiguous. Not all group members will share an understanding of what occurred, and in some cases, teammates may even be unaware of the breach (Brodt & Gross, 2008; Elangoven & Shapiro, 1998). If teammates' familiarity with the transgression comes from the accounts of the transgressor rather than the trustor, their perceptions may be influenced by those accounts. Indeed, empirical research shows that both victims and perpetrators of interpersonal transgressions distort their recollection of the same event due to self-serving motives (Kearns & Fincham, 2005; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Unlike victims, perpetrators tend to emphasize details that minimize the event or omit details about the victim's suffering (Kearns & Fincham, 2005). In the case of these incongruent group judgments, one way of restoring balance at the group level is for the trustor to actively persuade teammates about the accuracy of his or her own account.

> **Proposition 3a:** When trustors persuade other group members to share their negative trust judgments toward a transgressor, it will reduce tension and restore balance in the trust system at the group level.

Although persuasion aimed at lowering teammates' trust of the transgressor may restore balance, it may also be a means by which conflict resulting from a trust breach can spread within teams and workgroups. This spreading may lead to factions within the group. Indeed, Davis (1967, cited in Adejumo et al., 2008, p. 85) observed that the preservation of balance may cause groups to cluster into ". . . mutually hostile subgroups or coalitions." At best, this may lead group members to substitute monitoring or control for trust. At worst, it may erode the underlying unit ties of identification among group members.

One of the original premises of balance theory was that negative sentiment ties paired with positive unit ties are a source of imbalance and tension. Empirical studies suggest a robust association between unit ties like similarity and belonging and the sentiment tie of trust (Chattopadhyay & George, 2001; Kramer, Brewer, & Hanna, 1996; Williams, 2001). Membership ties, therefore, will likely be reorganized along the same lines as the trust ties. From this perspective, a dyadic trust breach can have a pervasive effect on a group, reshaping and changing trust relationships even among group members not directly involved in the breach.

Proposition 3b: When trustors persuade some but not all fellow group members to change their trust judgments toward the transgressor, it will lead to the creation of conflicting subgroups, isolating the transgressor and those who choose to remain trusting of the transgressor from other group members.

Trust as a Favor to Other Group Members

One way to reduce the tension without changing the ties described earlier is to think about trusting behavior toward the transgressor as a favor to other group members. Trust is often built through a process of social exchange (Molm, Takahashi, & Peterson, 2000; Whitener et al., 1998). One way of maintaining trust without revising the unit and sentiment relations described previously is to think of postbreach trusting behavior toward the transgressor as a favor to one's shared teammate or fellow group member. To use an example, if Sandy does not trust Lee, but Chris does, Sandy might decide to behave trustingly toward Lee as a way of signaling the importance of the relationship with Chris. ("I'll trust Lee because I know it's important to Chris.") This does not necessarily mean that trusting attitudes are rebuilt but rather that the trustors may engage in acts of interpersonal vulnerability that are the behavioral manifestation of trust.

By offering trusting behavior as a favor to fellow group members, trust is thought of less in terms of a sentiment tie unto itself and more as a means for enhancing exchange relationships (Alessio, 1990) in the system. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that trust beliefs and attitudes will change—simply the manifested trust behavior will change. And we know that trust attitudes and trusting behavior imperfectly correspond (cf. Ben-Ner & Halldorsson, 2010; Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, & Soutter, 2000). In this case, trusting behavior would be part of an overall system of social exchange rather than the reflection of trust sentiment ties. Although we do not expect trusting behavior to be explicitly demanded by teammates, it may nonetheless emerge as a favor; the nature of social exchange is that favors are voluntary and that obligations are not explicitly specified (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The cost of trust directed by the trusting person toward the untrusted or unscrupulous transgressor is accounted for in the exchange relationship between the trusting person and that person's teammates.

These strategies are related: The person's choice to rebalance the group system by choosing to behave trustingly creates imbalance to resolve at the individual level. One such strategy for tension reduction is to construe one's seemingly trusting behavior as a gesture of affiliation with the group—a favor.

Proposition 4a: In groups where some members continue trusting the transgressor following a breach, group-level tension can be reduced if the trustor chooses to behave trustingly toward the transgressor.

Proposition 4b: The tension created at the individual level by trustors' trusting behavior toward their transgressors can be reduced if trustors construe their behavior as a favor to other group members, decreasing the salience of the breach and increasing the salience and importance of other social relationships in the system.

Substitutes for Trust

A second way of avoiding the tension of imbalance when deciding to behave trustingly (as described in Proposition 4a) is to reduce the salience and centrality of trust. This can be performed in two ways. Returning to Lewicki and colleagues' description of constant evaluation and reevaluation and a trust-but-verify ideology, teams and workgroups may choose to institute systems of control like contracts or monitoring, despite their transaction costs as substitutes for trust. Alternatively, teams can reduce their interdependence, making trust less relevant and important (Rousseau et al., 1998).

In teams with extremely strong unit ties, the approaches to rebalancing presented earlier—which can lead to fractiously divided teams—may be unpalatable. Teams may, rather than adjusting their trusting beliefs and behaviors in response to breach, choose instead to reduce the stakes associated with the

accuracy of their trust judgments. Particularly when members are tied together by strong bonds of liking, and the breach is related to ability (rather than benevolence or integrity), members of teams may wish to maintain these ties. And since balance theory suggests we seek congruence, we will want—at least superficially—to feel like we trust those who we like. However, for practical reasons, we may wish to reduce the downside associated with misplaced trust.

By reducing the centrality of trust as a sentiment tie—that is, the degree to which the issue is important to the members of the group (Davis & Rusbult, 2001)— the tension associated with imbalance in the group can be made less immediate and salient. However, trust without vulnerability is not really trust at all (Rousseau et al., 1998), and there are substantial costs to essentially abandoning trust. But for teams motivated to maintain structural balance, this cost may be worth paying.

> **Proposition 5:** Using substitutes for trust, such as imposing contracts or minimizing interdependence, will reduce tension by decreasing the centrality of trust within the system.

A related strategy, which also serves to avoid tension, is to engage in what Lewicki et al. (1998) describe as compartmentalization. In this cognitive approach, an individual comes to think of the trust breach as related to a very specific domain and limits his or her lack of trust to that specific domain; for instance, if a trusted colleague provides fudged numbers on an accounting report, a compartmentalization strategy would be to think of that colleague as untrustworthy on jobs related to accounting but remain trusting of that colleague in other domains. Where balance cannot be otherwise struck, this individual cognitive strategy allows the overall system to be parsed into subsystems that can each remain balanced.

Predicting Responses

To this point, we have described ways that sentiment and unit ties can be reconfigured (or, as with the last cases, made less salient). For researchers interested in predicting the effects of a trust breach on group dynamics, it is important to know which of the described rebalancing strategies is most likely to be employed under what conditions. As described, some of the strategies lead to trust repair, some preserve or even spread low levels of trust, and some serve to avoid or reduce the salience of the tension of imbalance. Throughout, we have described how the quest for balance at the group level can promote approaches to trust breach that might not otherwise occur without the social context of the group. However, some of those predictions involve greater trust repair, while others predict sharper declines in trust. In this section, we seek to offer insights into which of these paths toward balance will be most likely to be chosen.

Recalling that one of the functions of balance (among others) is the conservation of cognitive resources, we expect that individuals will remain cognitive misers as they attempt to seek a rebalancing of ties. This means that they will change weakly held trusting attitudes or weak, ambiguous unit ties rather than strongly held ones when rebalancing. Consider an example: if you are betrayed by a coworker and the trust breach is particularly egregious, your tendency would be to reduce trust in the transgressor (which would restore balance to the system at the dyadic level). If you are friends with a teammate who is highly trusting of that transgressor, however, you have at least two options to reduce tension at the dyadic and triadic levels simultaneously: you can fall in line with your colleague's trust of the transgressor and engage in some attributional lenience to rebalance the dyadic system. You can stick with your original inclination to lower trust in the transgressor and instead lower your trust in the other teammate. Or you can try and persuade your colleague to share your reduced trust in the transgressor.

Which approach you take is likely to depend on the strength of the ties, with a preference for resolving the tension in a way that requires the adjustment of strongly held beliefs as little as possible. Indeed, our attributions are often made for the purposes of attenuating social discomfort and preserving desired relationships (Weber et al., 2005). If you have extremely strong trust in your teammate, and your teammate

is intransigent in his or her trust of the transgressor, you will likely rebalance through attributional lenience with the transgressor rather than changing the trust relationship with your other teammate or attempting in vain to persuade the other teammate of the transgressor's unscrupulousness.

The same logic holds when considering dependence: Individuals will try to rebalance in a way that does not force them to sever central and valuable ties or abandon longstanding relationships. Thus, the strength of ties (or conversely the ease of altering ties) will predict which balancing approach is likely to be taken.

We also predict that this path-of-least-resistance approach will hold in group-level social structures as well. People will rebalance by changing relations that are easiest to alter (those with fewer relations that need changing to achieve balance) before those that are more difficult to change. Altering more than one tie, or having to change the attitudes of others, is considerably more effortful than changing a single tie related to one's own perceptions. Finally, it is more likely that trustors will choose to change ties that are less central to their sense of identity than ties that strongly implicate social identity. If the trustor has invested a great deal of his or her social identity into a team, for instance, the trustor may be reluctant to hold a negative sentiment tie toward the wrongdoing person and toward an uninvolved teammate. It is likely that intrapsychic attitude change and external persuasion attempts will occur before the trusting person decides to forge a negative tie to a teammate.

> **Proposition 6:** Trustors' choice of rebalancing strategies will depend on the relative ease of altering ties, such that they will prefer strategies that involve changing trust attitudes (sentiment ties) or relationships (unit ties) that are as follows: weakly held rather than strongly held, peripheral rather than central, fewer in number rather than numerous, self-focused rather than other focused (requiring changes in self versus changes in others), and less central to their self-identity rather than more central.

In predicting responses, it is also important to broaden the psychological lens. Because individuals conserve cognitive resources when trying to rebalance, they are likely to change their sentiment ties "… simply because it feels harmonious," rather than because of substantive changes to their underlying evaluations (Petty & Wegener, 1998, p. 21). It just "feels good." Individuals may choose to trust, behaviorally and even attitudinally, but if prompted, might realize that they had not necessarily changed their evaluations of the transgressor's trustworthiness (ability, benevolence, integrity). Particularly in situations where trustors are accountable or otherwise encouraged to elaborate on their actions and choices, they may choose approaches to balance restoration that create consistency between their attitudes and behaviors in addition to balance in their social systems.

Conclusions, Contributions, and Limitations

In this article, we have sought to examine trust relationships through the lens of the fundamental psychological tendency toward balance in social systems. We draw on and extend Heider's balance theory as our theoretical inspiration. Doing so offers a number of unique contributions to the literature on trust breach and repair. Most notably, it situates breach—even within dyads—as part of larger, interdependent social structures. Because of the commonness of teams and workgroups in organizations, this larger view captures trust dynamics better than traditional models of dyadic social exchange focusing on the two individuals involved in the trust breach. It considers how our interpersonal motives related to teammates in a workgroup may lead us to trusting behavior and attitudes that are substantively different than those at which we might arrive independently in the "isolation" (Burt & Knez, 1995) of the dyad. The nature of relationships between any two individuals changes as more are added to the system; a balance theory approach can capture and reflect this change. It also explains why trust attitudes might converge within teams and how disagreements on trust may serve to split work groups into factions or subgroups.

We have argued that teams and their members seek balance in trust relations, both within the dyad and at the group level. That they seek balance does not mean that they will seek harmony. Indeed, many

of our propositions describe how the deterioration of trust within a transgressor–trustor dyad can spread between and among other group members entirely uninvolved in the trust breach itself. Our theoretical perspective sheds new light on why minor acts of dyadic trust breach can quickly reconfigure trusting relationships in teams and work groups more broadly.

Despite the promise of our approach, there are limitations. Our theory describes in relatively static terms a process that clearly unfolds over time. We have offered some propositions about the types of strategies that can be used to establish a balanced state, but we do not discuss how tension in these systems increases and decreases over time. The spread of information about a transgression through third parties and gossip may occur over an extended period of time. Transgressors may counter the trustor's account of the transgression, causing further attitudinal changes, and reintroducing imbalance. Does the choice of balancing strategy change over time, and how long do balanced states last? We are describing a clearly temporal phenomenon, but we do so with the static graphs provided by balance theory. A future conceptual advancement would be to extend this theory across different time scales and consider the dynamic nature of how balance is increased and diminished over time (Mitchell & James, 2001).

In conclusion, our use of balance theory as scholarly inspiration for the study of trust breach and repair in teams and workgroups is a first step. It suggests a number of ways of looking at the dynamics of trust based on the presumption that we strive for balanced trust relationships both at the dyadic and group levels. Although these propositions offer a novel new lens on trust in groups, empirical research is needed to assess the true value of our approach.

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