

## ORGANIZATIONAL CRISES AND THE DISTURBANCE OF RELATIONAL SYSTEMS

WILLIAM A. KAHN  
MICHELLE A. BARTON  
STEVEN FELLOWS  
Boston University

Various bodies of literature attest to how crises significantly damage the way people relate with one another—damage that lasts long past the cessation of those crises. Such relational disturbances are problematic in terms of crisis management theory. If crises are understood to be operationally resolved yet the relational systems that underlie organizations remain disturbed, the crises may not truly be resolved, with implications for ongoing dysfunctional patterns of behavior, organizational vulnerabilities, and longer-term performance problems. The purpose of this article is to conceptualize organizational crises in terms of relational disturbance and crisis management as the repair of such disturbances. We introduce a framework for analyzing the relational health of organizational systems, drawing on family systems theory to help define the dimensions of relational systems. We describe and illustrate the disturbances of relational systems in the context of crises and develop a framework for their repair and transformation. We conclude with implications for theory and research guided by an expanded definition of crisis management that links operational and relational dimensions.

Traditional models of crisis management are rooted in a classic engineering mandate: identify and fix the problems in inputs and operations that lead to ineffective outputs (see Mitroff & Pearson, 1993, and Woods, 2006). Most crisis management studies focus, understandably, on the theory and practice of minimizing interruptions of the operations by which tasks are completed, work is performed, and products are delivered. Resulting definitions of effective crisis management highlight the stabilization and transformation of operations (see James & Wooten, 2010, and Pearson & Clair, 1998).

Missing from such definitions is an understanding of the *relational* disturbances within organizations left in the wake of crises. Such disturbances can continue long past the cessation of operational disruptions and can lead to dysfunctional patterns of behavior, organizational vulnerabilities, and longer-term performance problems. Our purpose here is to conceptualize organizational crises in terms of relational disturbance and crisis management as the repair of such disturbances. We expand beyond

purely operational perspectives by introducing a framework for analyzing the relational health of organizational systems. We suggest that without direct attention to the relational disruptions that follow some crises, their management may not ultimately be defined as successful. In developing this argument, we draw on family systems theory to define the dimensions of relational systems. We then describe and illustrate the disturbances of relational systems in the context of crises, their repair and transformation, and implications for crisis management theory and research.

### A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON CRISES

Organizational crises are low-probability, high-impact events that pose threats to organizations (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Crisis events are marked by ambiguity in relation to their genesis and resolution and an urgency to fix what has been damaged (James & Wooten, 2010). Crisis managers seek to prevent crises through systematic routines that reduce inconsistencies and anomalies in operational systems (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Amid crises, they urgently seek to resolve ambiguity and fix damaged systems (James & Wooten, 2005), after which they engage

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in damage control, diagnosis, and long-term repair in order to assuage stakeholders and prevent future crises (Mitroff & Pearson, 1993).

Crisis management efforts are mostly premised on operational/engineering models of the organization, in which the organization is viewed as a machine that can break down when operating outside intended parameters and can be fixed so that acceptable functioning is restored (Quarantelli, 1988; Woods, 2006). The operational/engineering perspective has a critical, often unquestioned effect on the way theorists frame and pursue crisis management research. Organizations tend to be separated from their members; when organizations are viewed, for example, as legally recognized business entities with associated property (James & Wooten, 2010), it is difficult to recognize that they are enacted by and exist through their members (Weick, 1995). As a result, models of crisis management treat organizational members as just another class of stakeholders separate from the firm itself.

The operational/engineering frame is at once useful and incomplete. The frame directs attention to systems and routines that enable predictability, stakeholders that need to be engaged in order to maintain valuable resource flows, and fixes that need to be applied in order to restore damaged organizations. Yet the frame also directs attention away from how crises personally affect system members and disrupt their connections, networks, and attachments. A relational lens on organizational crisis focuses attention on how relational systems are damaged and may remain so long after operations are up and running again. We suggest that repairing crises often requires repairing relational damage, which can require approaches and tools different from those used in traditional crisis management. Furthermore, we suggest that repairing relational systems can be an opportunity to transform how people enact organizations, enabling them to grow stronger—and not just return to normal—as a result of crises.

### Relational Systems

Organizations are defined by sets of relationships among people who coordinate their activities in the service of tasks, goals, and missions (Gittell, Seidner, & Wimbush, 2010; Kahn, 1998). These relationships exist in the context of the

departments, teams, functions, divisions, and other units that make up organizations. Relationships are, metaphorically, the nervous system of the organization—the source of complex social interactions, rapid coordination of systems, and integrated processing of concurrent signals. Formal and informal work relationships can be thought of as underlying *relational systems* that stretch beneath units and shape what occurs within them (Kahn, 1998). These systems are defined by patterns of affect, cognition, and behavior among members of bounded groups ranging in size from dyads to organizations (Alderfer, 1980). Throughout this article we focus on these patterns as they occur in different levels of analysis (interpersonal, group, family, organization). We suggest that across these levels the phenomena associated with relational systems are similar.

All human systems are relational, in that they are composed of individuals who move toward and away from one another in ways that become patterned over time (Schein, 1993). Relationships affect how work gets done—how individuals and teams coordinate, share knowledge, and accomplish tasks (see Bechky, 2006). Relational systems thus constitute a set of resources and structures through which complex organizing occurs (see Feldman, 2004). While relational systems influence most aspects of organizing, they are particularly important to task coordination (Weick & Roberts, 1993), especially when situations are uncertain, interdependent, and time constrained (Gittell et al., 2010). This is evidenced in studies of “high-reliability organizations” (e.g., nuclear power plants, air traffic control systems) that are able to avoid crisis despite conditions of high uncertainty and interdependence (LaPorte, 1996). These studies show members coordinating rapidly and flexibly and reorganizing resources and actions, even as conditions change (Barton & Sutcliffe, 2009; Weick & Roberts, 1993). Similarly coordinated relational systems may also develop and operate as informal, emergent organizations, taking precedence under crisis conditions as formal structures and work processes become unavailable (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Powell & Piderit, 2008).

The relational systems lens reveals key gaps in how crises are framed and managed. People affected by crises tend to turn toward and away from one another in different ways. Various bod-

ies of psychological literature, including trauma recovery (Herman, 1997), disaster relief (Erikson, 1978), and family systems (Minuchin, 1974), attest to how individual, family, and community crises can significantly damage the way people relate with one another. This can be problematic in terms of crisis management. When relational systems damaged by crises are indeed not truly repaired, organizations and their longer-term performance can be at risk. Yet little is written about how organizational crises disrupt relational health. Thus, little is known about the nature and extent of relational damage or how to repair such damage.

The relational lens further illuminates how crises can be opportunities for growth and positive change, rather than merely the resumption of precrisis states. Researchers have noted that crises can provide the opportunity for improved resilience (Gittell, 2008; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003) and, further, that capitalizing on the opportunity is a function of relational as well as operational capacities (Dutton et al., 2006). It is through their sets of relationships that unit members can join together not simply to fix problems but to strengthen how they think, work, and learn about themselves, their work, and their environments (Kahn, 1998). Crises thus afford opportunities for unit members to join together in new ways on behalf of their organizations and their own collective growth (Dutton et al., 2006). Crisis management theory has room for concepts related to the growth of relational systems, defined as movements toward healthy, functional patterns among members (Kahn, 1998).

A relational perspective therefore offers the opportunity to expand and change current models of crisis management by considering organizations as relational systems with the capacity for damage and disturbance as well as the capacity for resilience and transformation. We begin by specifically defining relational systems and the nature of their health. In the organizational sciences a broad set of literature enumerates various relational components, yet there are no models for conceptualizing the nature and health of relational systems as a whole. Thus, scholars have considered how trust, communication, mutual respect, and high-quality relationships more generally facilitate coordination and learning (Dutton et al., 2006; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), whereas negative patterns of relating are associated with poor

organizational outcomes (Argyris, 1982; Miller, 1993; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). While this work indicates helpful patterns, it neither offers a more encompassing model nor points to how relational patterns are particularly important or vulnerable in crisis situations.

The family systems literature both conceptualizes relational systems and adopts a systemic perspective on crisis management. Theorists conceptualize families as open systems within larger systems that contain their own subsystems (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974). There is significant overlap between families and organizations, since both have operational and relational aspects, involve hierarchies, manage boundaries with larger systems, navigate developmental transitions and crisis situations, are governed by explicit and implicit rules, can experience problematic boundaries between subsystems, and struggle with tensions between change and homeostasis (Brotheridge & Lee, 2006; Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1980; Schein, 1998). We thus draw on family systems theory to guide our conceptualization of crisis management.

### Dimensions of Relational Systems

In the last several decades there has been a concerted effort by Olson and colleagues to synthesize key concepts from family systems theory into a parsimonious model using theoretical and factor analysis (Olson, 2000; Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1989). The resulting circumplex model of family systems has been used widely in family systems research to analyze dysfunctional family systems (Thomas & Olson, 1993; Walsh & Olson, 1993) and family systems under stress (Lavee & Olson, 1991).

The circumplex model weaves together insights from respected family systems theorists (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974) to describe three dimensions of relational systems (Olson, 2000). *Cohesion* refers to how system members balance separateness and togetherness in their relations with one another. *Flexibility* refers to how system members balance stability and change in their relations. *Communication*—which refers to how system members listen, speak, self-disclose, respect, regard, and stay focused with one another as they discuss task and affective dimensions—is critical to facilitating shifts of cohesion and flexibility (Olson, 2000). These three dimensions are integral to the

conceptualization of how the family system accomplishes its primary task—namely, the development of each of its members (Shapiro & Carr, 1991). Such development requires each member to be autonomous and yet still join with other members to create loving attachments (Bowlby, 1988) and, moreover, to collectively adapt to systemic and environmental changes while maintaining necessary stability (Minuchin, 1974).

The circumplex model conceptually distinguishes healthy and unhealthy family relational systems. In healthy systems family members are routinely independent from and connected to one another (Bowen, 1978), are able to change and maintain stability (Olson & Gorall, 2003), have appropriate voice in decisions and negotiations (Walsh, 1998), and move fluidly among roles as necessary (Byng-Hall, 1995). The family system is open to feedback from other sources, enabling it to adjust levels of cohesion and flexibility in response to situations and events (Olson, 2000). Such healthy systems are considered balanced: the levels of both cohesion and flexibility enable families to effectively carry out operational and relational tasks (Olson & Gorall, 2003). There are also midrange types of family systems as well, created by balances on one dimension and extremes on the other (Olson & Gorall, 2003).

Unhealthy family systems are marked by extremes on both dimensions (Minuchin, 1974). Members are emotionally disengaged (completely separate) or enmeshed (completely together). In reaction to altered circumstances, they are rigid (completely stable) or chaotic (completely changing). In rigid families too much control and power are located in particular individuals, roles are strictly defined to dictate who does what, and family system rules are unvarying and unyielding (Olson, 2000). In chaotic families leadership is erratic or limited, members move in different and uncoordinated directions, decisions are made impulsively, and roles are unclear and constantly shifting without clear coordination (Olson, 2000). Poor communication increases the possibility that unbalanced systems will remain so: members are too disengaged or enmeshed, or their systems too rigid or chaotic, to communicate well enough to resolve conflicts (Olson & Gorall, 2003; Walsh & Olson, 1993). Extreme system types are framed as rigidly enmeshed, rigidly disengaged, chaot-

ically enmeshed, and chaotically disengaged (Olson & Gorall, 2003).

The circumplex model is useful in its comprehensive view of relational systems. While cohesion, flexibility, and communication have been variously used in organizational science, neither they nor other concepts have been drawn together to describe the nature of the relational systems that underlie organizations. The circumplex model is, of course, suggestive rather than definitive, given that families are not work organizations, and vice versa. Families emphasize emotional interdependencies and expression, while work systems emphasize formal tasks (Brotheridge & Lee, 2006). Entanglements are deeper, memberships more durable, and exits more complicated in families, extending the timelines over which relational dynamics can play out relative to work systems (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1980). Nevertheless, the circumplex model fills a void in organizational literature by offering a useful way to define and analyze relational systems ranging from healthy to unhealthy. The model enables us to move beyond categories and descriptions and explain relational shifts and disturbance in the context of crises.

#### **CRISES AND THE DISTURBANCE OF RELATIONAL SYSTEMS**

The circumplex model provides conceptual language to define how crises disturb relational systems. Crises are not simply natural shifts of relational patterns. Balances of cohesion and flexibility are always in play as relationships develop and grow, get stuck, progress, plateau, regenerate, and terminate. Two colleagues go into business for themselves, creating a partnership; a quality improvement task force is created; a department gets a new leader. Relational systems form in each unit, as members strike various balances of being separate and together (cohesive) and stable and in flux (flexible). These balances shift over time as members communicate well or badly, needs and motives shift, situations arise, and individuals change. Beneath the observable phenomena of organizational life, these underlying relational systems exist, shaping and being shaped by people's interactions (Kahn, 1998).

Crisis, however, are distinct from both normal developmental transitions and shifting circum-

stances. Crises are high-impact events that threaten organizations (Pearson & Clair, 1998) and thus represent significant jolts to both relational and operational systems. Such events can trigger anxiety in members confronted with disrupted work routines and operations (Pearson & Clair, 1998) and the potential loss of income, jobs, status, identity, and coworkers (Morris, 1975). Crises can also trigger certain emotions, such as anger at those who caused events, guilt in those at fault, and hopelessness and despair at acts of nature (James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). In the face of such experiences, members cope. They might draw very close to some individuals and groups for protection and support, or they might pull far away from others blamed for crises or their aftermath (Miller, 1993). They might become more rigid and constricted in communication and decision making (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981), or they might become simply more chaotic in their responses to crises (Kahn, 2011). When such movements occur, relationships become, in a word, disturbed.

Such relational disturbances can remain hidden beneath operational disruptions. While these disturbances have not been systematically researched as such, a set of organizational crisis case studies (summarized in Table 1) offers enough information about events, actions, and experiences to analyze what occurs in relational systems as a result of crises. The case studies are analyzed in terms of the three dimensions of the circumplex model.

The case studies show that crises affect the health of relational systems by unbalancing cohesion and flexibility and disrupting communication that would rebalance those dimensions. Unhealthy relational processes (e.g., blaming, isolation, withdrawal, scapegoating, aggression) are both cause and effect: as members engage in such acts in response to anxiety and emotion, they move their systems toward greater imbalance and disrupted communication, which further worsen relational processes (see Kahn, 2005, and Miller, 1993). Hence, members of groups such as those in the medical practice that become overly enmeshed suppress differences among themselves and heighten those with groups they define as "other," thus avoiding useful conversations within and across groups (see Coser, 1956). Similarly, if members such as the law firm partners become

rigid and controlling in the face of threat (see Staw et al., 1981), they can diminish, isolate, and undermine others, such as the law firm associates, who might well provide useful resources. The imbalance of relational systems can therefore become intertwined with communications that are closed, self-protective, and defensive, creating self-reinforcing negative spirals that maintain imbalances (see Minuchin, 1974).

We borrow from the circumplex model to offer a useful way to chart relational systems and their changes during and after crises (Olson, 2000). Family systems researchers use the typology to show how crises shift the health of relational systems (Lavee & Olson, 1991). The typology uses the cohesion and flexibility dimensions to sort relational systems into balanced, midrange, and extreme. We use the graph in Figure 1 to illustrate the shifts in the relational system of a branch office of a large consulting firm through a particular crisis.

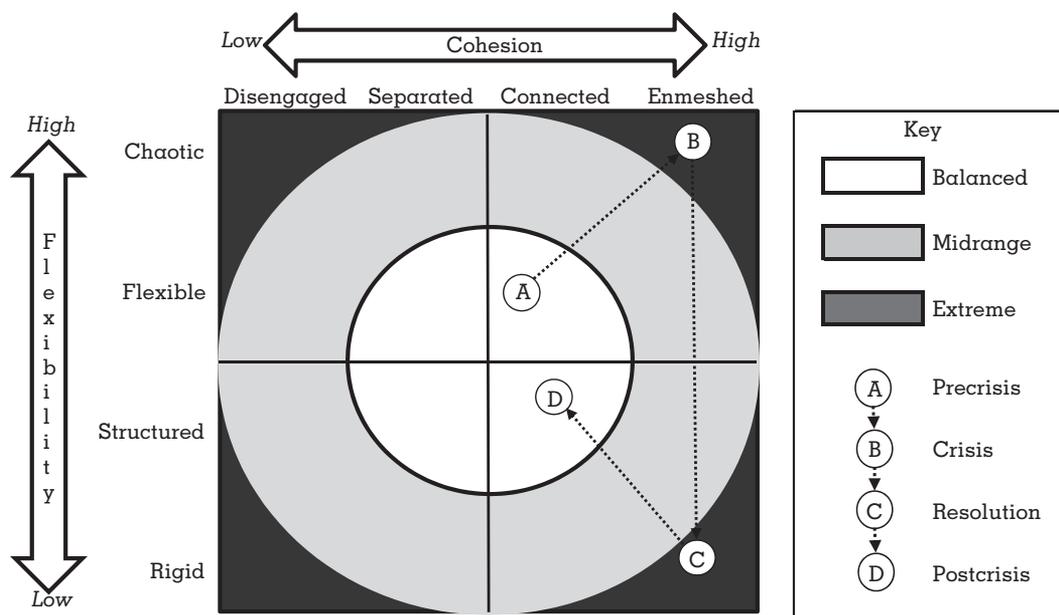
The branch office consists of two senior consultants, several junior consultants, a business manager, and administrative assistants. There has been little turnover in the last few years. The relational system is balanced, its members flexible and somewhat connected (point A). One of the senior consultants suffers a heart attack. The crisis brings the group together emotionally, the members remaining in constant contact. They become enmeshed, unable to act autonomously. Chaos ensues as members dramatically shift routines. The relational system becomes unbalanced amid the crisis, shifting into chaotic enmeshment (point B). A few weeks pass. Members stabilize routines, creating rigid divisions of labor and patterns of interaction after the crisis has resolved. With members remaining enmeshed, the relational system shifts to rigidly enmeshed (point C). Six months later the members remain close but more autonomous and with more structure to manage the senior consultant's chronic heart condition. The office's relational system has returned to a balanced form, its members creating a new status quo as structured and connected (point D). The branch office thus changes systemic type several times; the changes help the branch office deal effectively with the crisis.

The example illustrates several key themes relevant to systems more generally. First, crises can send systems into unhealthy extremes, as members struggle with highly charged, difficult

**TABLE 1**  
**Relational Systems Amid Organizational Crises**

System Crisis	Cohesion	Flexibility	Communication
The sudden, severe illness of the senior partner of a law firm, along with recently developed plans to limit the size and growth of the firm, triggers survival anxiety, hopelessness, and despair in firm members (Shapiro & Carr, 1991).	The partners draw closer to one another ( <i>enmeshment</i> ). They also draw away from the associates, who are left without formal processes for feedback, evaluation, or career planning ( <i>disengagement</i> ).	Partners maintain strict formal control over associates, prescribing their roles and leaving little room for negotiated outcomes or collaborative decision making ( <i>rigid</i> ).	Partners issue firm policy memos to associates, outlining role requirements, without follow-up dialogue. Partners are closed to feedback from senior associates that would enable both groups to become more effective. Attempts to change ineffective boundaries between groups through dialogue are fruitless.
The sudden announcement of the potentially imminent closure of an adolescent residential treatment center triggers feelings of anxiety, anger, loss, fear, and hopelessness in staff members (Cardona, 1994).	The treatment center is marked by conflict between "angry" staff and "ineffectual" management, between the school and the residential units, between residential teams, and between staff members and children they label as abusive, uncontrollable, and hostile ( <i>disengagement</i> ). These conflicts are enabled when members within these groups draw together in mutual support and admiration ( <i>enmeshment</i> ).	Management attempts to draw together staff members to discuss issues and create unified plans to deal with closure are uncoordinated, uncertain, messy, and ineffective at building shared momentum ( <i>chaotic</i> ).	Center leaders and members routinely engage in conflictual discourse, which distracts them from facing the reality of the imminent closure of the center. The conflictual discourse prevents center members from joining together to share experiences, create options, and develop strategies to manage the current environment.
A series of violent assaults in an urban high school leaves teachers anxious about their safety and their ability to do their work, along with feelings of despair, frustration, guilt, and sadness (Powell, 1994).	Teachers focus on discipline rather than academics and, thus, disconnect emotionally from their students; the school becomes fragmented by splits between teachers and administrators, between departments, between tracks, between programs, and along staff racial lines ( <i>disengagement</i> ). Staff members withdraw into tightly drawn small groups whose identities are shaped by other groups against which they are positioned ( <i>enmeshment</i> ).	The process by which teachers and administrators seek to develop solutions to the problem of school violence is marked by competing conversations and warring factions, and the lack of clear decision rules and authority. Different leaders emerge, without continuity or clarity of vision ( <i>chaotic</i> ).	Teachers and administrators remain isolated within groups and cliques and, thus, are unable to join together on the larger issues facing the school. Members talk at rather than with one another, are unable to provide or receive useful feedback in relation to safe practices at school, and are unable to speak openly about their emotional experiences within and across groups.
The murder of a senior partner in a medical practice by a psychotic patient triggers shock, sadness, despair, pain, and fear in staff members (Garland, 2002).	Individual staff members emotionally withdraw from their work and from one another, working with patients without genuine care ( <i>disengagement</i> ). Some staff members create small, insular pockets of emotional support with one another that preclude their challenging one another on issues of quality care ( <i>enmeshment</i> ).	Staff members are unable to think together about the most effective ways to both engage in their work and take care of themselves. Leadership is largely absent, since senior partners individually withdraw in order to mourn privately ( <i>chaotic</i> ).	Staff members remain superficial in their conversations with one another. They are unable to mourn their loss in relation to one another and, thus, are unable to realize that their lack of engagement with one another contributes to their sense of isolation and pain.
The 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center decimates the corporate headquarters and kills most of the members of a financial services firm (Barbush, 2003).	The surviving members of the firm—many of whom are friends or relatives—cling to one another in their grief, shock, and sadness. They remain together constantly, giving and receiving emotional support regardless of hierarchy, function, and roles ( <i>enmeshment</i> ).	Firm members scramble amid the disruptions to figure out who can do what to aid in the recovery of damaged operations and confusing messages regarding the firm's status. The surviving senior leaders struggle to remain focused on work amid their own personal grief ( <i>chaotic</i> ).	Communications among surviving members are disrupted, haphazard, and alternately focused on personal expressions of grief and the recovery of damaged operations and systems. Members are often intimately connected to one another, providing personal and emotional support.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Consulting Office Relational System Shifts**



new realities (Lavee & Olson, 1991; Thomas & Ozechowski, 2000). Second, as crises abate, balanced systems tend to recover and remain balanced, even if they shift relational forms; they often have the resources and skills to appropriately modify levels of cohesion and/or flexibility to enable members to cope effectively (Lavee & Olson, 1991; Walsh, 1998). Third, unbalanced systems have relatively fewer resources and skills useful for adapting to crises; their members cannot easily change levels of cohesion and flexibility through positive communication (Olson, 2000). These insights help frame the postcrisis repair of relational systems.

#### RELATIONAL SYSTEM REPAIR AND TRANSFORMATION

The relational system framework offers a means of reconceptualizing crisis management to include postcrisis balancing of relational systems. However, we should first note that all crises, of course, are not alike. Typologies recognize how crises differ across various dimensions, such as control and intentionality (Coombs & Holladay, 1996), predictability and influence possibility (Gundel, 2005), and origin and effect (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Yet one aspect of crises remains constant across time

and type: all have the potential to disrupt relational patterns. Following family systems theory (Byng-Hall, 1995; Walsh, 1998), we suggest that such disruption has less to do with the type of crisis than with preexisting relational patterns. The same type of crisis can have different effects on different groups, depending on the cohesion and flexibility of preexisting relational patterns (Walsh & Olson, 1993). Consider, for example, how the Mann Gulch fire (Weick, 1993) and the Chilean mine disaster (Useem, Jordan, & Koljatic, 2011), each categorized in Gundel's (2005) typology as "unexpected," resulted in different relational patterns, with the former marked by disengagement and chaos and the latter by enmeshment and flexibility. We suggest that in discussing crisis management we focus less on the type of crisis and more on its disturbing effects. Appropriate responses need to reflect the disruption that has occurred, not just what caused it; so, too, should theories of crisis management.

In exploring how relational systems are repaired in the face of disturbance, we turn to structural family therapy for a model of diagnosis and intervention (Minuchin, 1974). Family therapists routinely use structural family concepts and methods in working with imbalances in cohesion and flexibility and dysfunctional

patterns of communication (Fishman, 1993). Structural family therapy can thus provide a useful way to conceptualize interventions in disturbed relational systems at varying levels of analysis (see Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1980).

### Structural Family Therapy

The following tenets of structural family therapy were initially outlined by Minuchin (1974). He described family systems as sets of transactional (or relational) patterns among members that regulate their behaviors. Relational patterns are regulated by *boundaries*—that is, the rules defining who participates and how in the family. Boundaries create subsystems (or coalitions) and are defined, set in place, and protected via communications among members. The parental and sibling subsystems, for example, are marked by boundaries defining the nature of relations between the two; these boundaries are routinely named and reinforced through everyday communication on the order of “This is what you do and what we do.” Such communication maintains the underlying structure of coalitions.

Minuchin (1974) noted that healthy boundaries protect necessary differentiations, enabling both individual members and subsystems to remain separated yet connected. Such boundaries enable parents, for example, to retain their individual identities in relation to one another, even as they join together in parenting tasks. In the normal range boundaries are clear, with members participating in one another’s lives with appropriate degrees of separation and connectedness. In the abnormal range the boundaries are unclear and inappropriate. As Minuchin (1974) first noted, disengaged systems are marked by inappropriately rigid boundaries. Members and subsystems, overly distant, tend not to respond to one another when responses are necessary. Enmeshed systems are marked by diffuse boundaries. Members and subsystems, overly close, respond to any variation in transactional patterns with speed and intensity. In abnormal ranges existing coalitions are ill-suited to the tasks facing the larger system.

Minuchin (1974) developed structural family therapy techniques to clarify diffuse boundaries or open inappropriately rigid boundaries—and sometimes both, with different parts of the same family system (Colapinto, 1991). The process of

clarifying boundaries shifts members on the circumplex model, creating relational systems balanced in cohesion and flexibility. In a family in which the mother is overly connected to her son, for example, an intervention that encourages her to join with her husband to develop rules regarding the son’s curfew simultaneously strengthens the boundaries of the parental coalition, moves the son back into the child subsystem, and reduces the chaotic process of the mother turning toward the child rather than her husband to make key decisions (cf. Olson, 2000). Communication is the primary tool by which to open up rigid systems and to bring order and structure to chaotic systems. Structural family therapy interventions thus restructure relational systems, defining and shoring up boundaries of coalitions appropriate for family needs and goals (Minuchin, 1974).

Clarified boundaries protect the integrity of the system as a whole and the functional autonomy of its parts (Colapinto, 1991; Minuchin, 1974). Consider how the boundary concept helps explain the earlier example of the consulting office (Figure 1). Prior to the crisis (point A), the boundaries were clear and well defined, enabling members to remain connected and to act independently on behalf of the firm. Amid the crisis (point B), the office becomes enmeshed and chaotic as boundaries between members collapse, rendering them unable to individuate and perform distinct tasks. As the immediate crisis abates (point C), members become rigidly enmeshed, with the boundaries between them remaining diffuse even as they create processes that lock them into overly structured routines. The office’s final shift (point D) represents a return to healthy boundaries as members remain connected, even as they develop the flexibility necessary to both follow and change routines.

The return to healthy boundaries does not, however, mean that the system is precisely as it was before its crisis. Nor should it be, given that postcrisis groups and organizations are left confronting new realities (Pearson & Clair, 1998). The relational system of the consulting office noted above, for example, was disturbed by the senior consultant’s heart attack, rendering the remaining members enmeshed and chaotic. As the crisis subsided, the group’s relational system shifted and stabilized. Yet the office was not as it was before; its members were faced with the new reality of an imbalance in the capaci-

ties of the two senior consultants who had heretofore been equal. The repair of the relational system thus involved rebalancing levels of cohesion and flexibility to meet the new reality. Similar new realities need to be faced in the organizations described in Table 1, such as the assaults in the high school that left teachers and administrators looking for new solutions together, or a disaster that forced leaders of a financial services firm forced to redefine their roles.

### Repair and Transformation

The purposeful creation of appropriate boundaries is instrumental in repairing disturbed relational systems. Actions that create such boundaries restructure disturbed relational systems and render them more balanced. The case studies documented in Table 1 provide enough information to identify the processes involved in restructuring disturbed relational systems. The restructurings were guided by leaders and consultants whose efforts helped repair group and intergroup relations within postcrisis organizations. While the efforts were not explicitly described in terms of restructuring relational patterns and creating balanced relational systems, they can be analyzed as such. Table 2 offers such an analysis. The shifts in the relational systems of these organizations from precrisis to crisis to resolution to postcrisis following attention to disturbed relations are graphically displayed in Figure 2, with the circumplex model used to display similar shifts in family relational systems (see Olson, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The organizations graphically displayed in Figure 2 are classified in terms of system rather than subsystem dynamics. In the law firm, for example, the relations between the partners and associates are marked by disengagement, even as the partner subsystem is enmeshed. This is relatively common in disturbed relational systems: subsystem members draw too closely together in the process of creating disengaged relations with other subsystems (see Minuchin, 1974). In Figure 2 the law firm is classified as disengaged, with the intergroup dynamics between the partners and associates determining the firm's relational dynamics. When such intergroup relations are not prominent, relational patterns within the focal group are mapped. In the medical practice, for example, relations among group members were disengaged, since they mostly withdrew from one another and their patients after the crisis, even as small pockets of the group remained enmeshed. Relational patterns that affect the largest part of the system are thus determinant.

In each case none of the relational systems returned to what it had been prior to the crisis. Further, each relational system shifted toward more balanced degrees of cohesion and flexibility in the aftermath of key relational interventions. Of the five organizations, four shifted into balanced relational systems; the fifth, the treatment center, shifted to a midrange relational system. The repair of these relational systems involved increasing cohesion between disengaged groups (e.g., law firm partners and associates) and/or decreasing overly connected relations within enmeshed groups (e.g., surviving financial service firm leaders). Members created more connections across and inserted more distance within groups that had become disengaged from one another during the crises (e.g., high school teachers and administrators). The repair further involved members reducing overly flexible work patterns to reduce chaos (e.g., medical practice working group) or increasing too narrow behavioral repertoires to reduce rigidity (e.g., law firm values clarification process).

We therefore suggest that repair can involve not simply the return of relational systems to precrisis states but their healthy transformation, an idea supported by the family systems literature (Walsh, 1998, 2007). As noted earlier, families that experience significant crises face new realities in the wake of those crises, given seismic shifts in what individual members need, are capable of, and must contend with (Walsh, 1998). If these families simply return to the precrisis status quo in how members relate and function, they will be ill-suited for their changed circumstances. Their relational systems would not be considered repaired in the sense of enabling effective functioning (see Olson, 2000; Walsh, 2007). Such relational systems either transform or remain insufficient. Repair and transformation, in the context of relational systems, are, thus, inextricably intertwined.

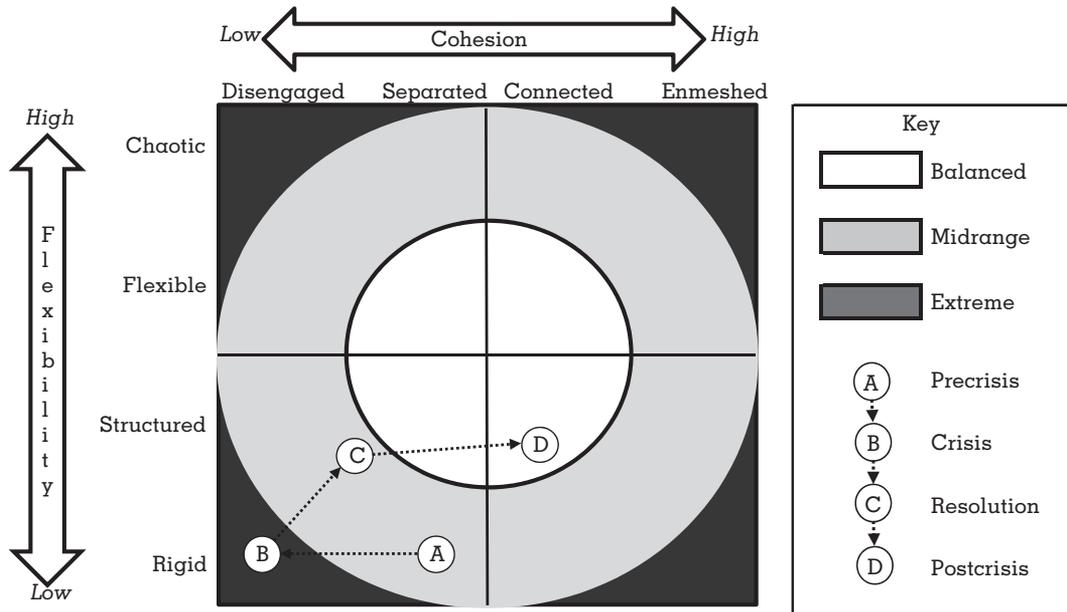
The relational view offers the opportunity to understand, precisely, how crises can actually leave members better off (see Brockner & James, 2008, and James et al., 2011). Such transformation postcrisis goes beyond simply learning from mistakes or implementing new operational systems. It involves what posttrauma researchers term *posttraumatic growth*—that is, qualitative changes in functioning that surpass what was present prior to struggling with crises (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Posttraumatic growth moves

**TABLE 2**  
**The Restructuring of Five Relational Systems**

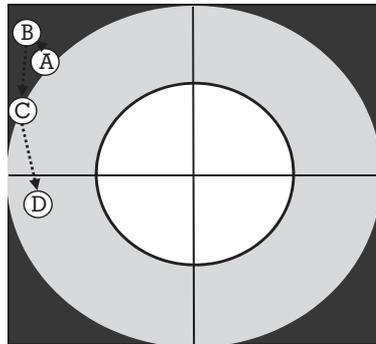
Restructuring Dimensions	Key Activities
<p><i>Law firm</i> (Shapiro &amp; Carr, 1991)</p> <p>Postcrisis responses</p> <p>Key relational interventions</p>	<p>In a series of all-staff retreats, consultants help firm members discuss the state of the firm and develop strategies for firm operations.</p> <p>(1) Firm members discover that tensions between partners and associates represent unaddressed conflict about firm values.</p> <p>(2) The partners invite the associates into discussions about whether the firm's survival is to be at all costs or on the basis of certain values.</p> <p>(3) They join to develop key values—integrity, excellence, succession—to ground how members work with one another.</p> <p>(4) The firm creates working groups, chaired by partners, to use the newly articulated values to clarify and organize the associates' evaluation process, modify associate roles, shape the recruitment process, and create mentoring systems.</p>
<p>Communication patterns</p>	<p>The consultants help members name their shared survival anxiety and collective patterns of denial and avoidance. The partners and associates begin to talk openly and listen actively within and across their groups. The partners create ongoing structures for dialogue rather than issuing policy memos; they engage the associates in feedback loops.</p>
<p>Boundaries</p>	<p>The overly rigid boundaries between the partners and associates become more permeable as members turn toward one another for information, resources, and problem solving. The boundaries around each condition loosen, enabling firm members to attach to the firm as a whole more than to their respective subsystems. The subsystems become more dependent on one another while retaining the boundaries necessary to perform distinct roles.</p>
<p>Relational systems</p>	<p>The firm moves from disengagement to separated to connected as partners and associates develop cohesion in the face of newly articulated shared concerns, goals, and values. The firm shifts from the rigid control of the partners to increasingly more flexible processes of negotiated decisions with the associates, whose voices are solicited and heard. The firm engages in structured ways to create and implement changes in strategy, policy, and systems.</p>
<p><i>Adolescent residential treatment center</i> (Cardona, 1994)</p> <p>Postcrisis responses</p>	<p>A consultant conducts a retreat in which center members (managers, with representatives from the other sectors) reflect together on the center's possible closure.</p>
<p>Key relational interventions</p>	<p>(1) Staff members develop an understanding of how their crisis responses prevented them from creating strategies to position the center for survival in the new competitive environment.</p> <p>(2) The executive director (ED) begins to assume appropriate authority to engage staff members in developing proactive strategic plans.</p> <p>(3) The ED creates a working group with representatives from all parts of the system; its task is to develop plans and strategies for the possibilities of either the center's closure or its development.</p>
<p>Communication patterns</p>	<p>Staff members are helped during the retreat to share some thoughts, concerns, and feelings regarding the possible future of the center. The resulting dialogue creates enough space (amid ongoing intergroup conflict) for the ED to articulate a unifying task and mission for a working group composed of representatives from the various staff groups. Yet staff members retain images of "other" groups as problematic and remain unable to work together effectively across groups.</p>
<p>Boundaries</p>	<p>The overly rigid boundaries separating the various groups loosen slightly as center members try to join together in the face of shared anxiety about survival, shifting away from intergroup conflicts and toward the difficulties facing the center as a whole. The working group created by the ED strives to form a boundary around itself in order to create itself as an independent coalition that drives change. This is only partly successful in the face of opposition from members of existing coalitions.</p>
<p>Relational systems</p>	<p>The center moves from chaotic to flexible to structured as members join together under the direction of the ED to examine alternatives and make decisions. Led by the task force, center members are able to synthesize information from the various groups and to act in a more coordinated fashion. Center members remain relatively disengaged, with only slight movements toward greater cohesion after the retreat. With the exception of the working group representatives, members continue to identify with their groups rather than with the center as a whole.</p>
<p><i>Urban high school</i> (Powell, 1994)</p> <p>Postcrisis responses</p>	<p>The school implements the Community Groups program, which assigns teachers to student cohorts for four years of high school. Cohorts meet weekly so that students can discuss topics of concern (e.g., teacher-student relations, peer pressure, drugs, pregnancy).</p>
<p>Key relational interventions</p>	<p>(1) The program is authorized by senior school administrators, led by an assistant principal, and implemented by a diverse task force of school administrators and teachers.</p> <p>(2) The task force (representatives from different tracks, departments, and racial identities) plans, reflects, trains, and builds curriculum.</p> <p>(3) The task force solicits feedback from faculty and administrative to improve program design.</p> <p>(4) Task force members become the leaders of a consultative process across the school.</p>
<p>Communication patterns</p>	<p>Teachers and administrators engage in difficult, constructive conversations about program philosophy, design, structure, and implementation. They build on rather than dismiss one another's ideas, speaking appropriately and listening actively across the intergroup divisions. Staff members ask for and receive support as they lead cohorts.</p>

Boundaries	The boundaries dividing groups from one another lessen as staff members join together and attach to students. Students learn to express and work through obstacles to academic and social achievement. The boundaries between staff and students are clarified as each group accepts its respective responsibilities regarding student success. Staff conditions weaken as members traverse boundaries on behalf of the intervention.
Relational systems	The school moves from disengaged to separated to connected as members from the split-off coclitions join forces and become more cohesive while working on the Community Groups program. Mutual trust develops as members share resources, information, knowledge, and support. The school also moves from chaotic to flexible to structured. The task force, led by senior administrators, creates structured processes by which school staff members develop and implement the school-wide program. The program provides a stable, guiding structure for a coordinated response to the epidemic of violence in the school.
<i>Medical practice</i> (Garland, 2002)	
Postcrisis responses	A consultant facilitates meetings in which staff members (physicians, nurses, technicians, administrators, and volunteers) reflect on their experiences in the wake of the murder.
Key relational interventions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) The consultant helps staff members reflect on how their withdrawal from patients and one another in the wake of the tragedy is related to their inability to create time and space away from the ever-present workload.</li> <li>(2) As staff members process their experiences of the tragedy, the remaining senior partners join the conversations and share their experiences of the tragedy.</li> <li>(3) Led by a senior partner, the staff decides to turn to one another for help in caring for patients during difficult shifts. They develop ground rules by which to ask for and provide support.</li> <li>(4) Working groups, run by various staff members, lead the staff toward more effective ways of working together and managing life-work balances.</li> </ol>
Communication patterns	Staff members talk about their sense of loss and the attendant feelings (outrage, misery, sadness) they experience in the wake of the tragedy. These conversations are authentic and revealing, rather than superficial; staff members allow themselves to be vulnerable with one another and, in turn, are listened to closely and with meaningful support.
Boundaries	Staff members who had withdrawn from patients and one another seek out one another to give and receive support, crossing the boundaries separating them. The increasingly permeable boundaries enable staff to break away from tightly connected conditions that had remained disconnected from one another. Members are thus able to join together on behalf of the practice and its work with patients.
Relational systems	The practice moves from disengaged to connected as members turn toward rather than away from one another amid a newly realized sense of shared pain. Working groups help coalesce members of disparate conditions, creating connections across the practice. The working groups provide a containing structure, enabling the practice to shift from chaotic to structured to flexible in how its members identify and solve problems. Members are able to synthesize rather than remain overwhelmed by information and act in an organized fashion across the practice.
<i>Financial services firm</i> (Barbash, 2003)	
Postcrisis responses	The CEO and surviving senior leaders regularly convene people for months after the tragedy for various purposes: mourning with surviving members; comforting the families of firm members who did not survive; sifting through the damage to the firm to understand what might be saved, in terms of operations and processes; and processing their own experiences of loss and grief.
Key relational interventions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) The CEO reaches out to surviving members and grieving families, visiting homes and hospitals, attending funerals, and establishing a disaster recovery site.</li> <li>(2) Firm members grieve together, sharing experiences and telling stories, expressing their loss, sadness, and shock.</li> <li>(3) The CEO creates a relief fund for spouses and children of firm members killed in the tragedy. Senior leaders commit to using firm profits over the next five years to provide financially for spouses and widows.</li> <li>(4) Firm members meet regularly to process their experiences, provide support, and decide together about their future courses of action.</li> </ol>
Communication patterns	Surviving firm members are openly vulnerable with one another, sharing stories and experiences of loss, shock, and sadness. Members openly discuss their concerns about the future, in terms of the viability of the company's survival in the aftermath of the tragedy. Led by the CEO and other senior leaders, they have difficult conversations about resuscitating the company while grieving the loss of their colleagues.
Boundaries	Leaders and members clarify the boundaries that had collapsed amid the tragedy. Firm members thus assume more defined roles as divisions of labor become increasingly defined and possible. The CEO and senior leaders create appropriate separation between their personal and professional relationships with firm members, one another, and surviving spouses and children, while maintaining their levels of concern and commitment.
Relational systems	The firm shifts from enmeshment immediately following the crisis to connected as leaders and members clarify the boundaries that enable them to remain bonded while autonomous in their tasks. After the crisis shifts the firm from structured to chaotic, the interventions enable members to remain flexible in how they approach and solve problems, make decisions, and respond to both a complex environment and an organization recovering from trauma.

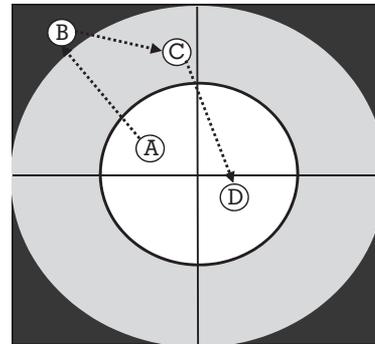
**FIGURE 2**  
**Relational System Shifts**



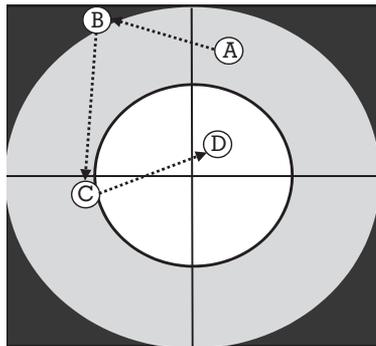
(a) Law firm: Rigid separation to structured connection



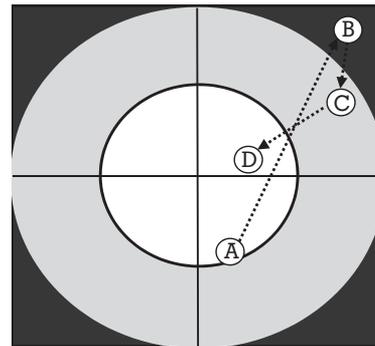
(b) Treatment center: Chaotic disengagement to structured disengagement



(c) School: Flexible separation to structured connection



(d) Medical practice: Chaotic connection to flexible connection



(e) Financial services firm: Structured connection to flexible connection

beyond resilience, resulting not simply in the resumption of life but in pronounced positive differences in how people appreciate their lives, prioritize their activities, create intimacy, value their strengths, recognize new life possibilities and paths, and develop their spirituality (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The posttraumatic growth model applies to families in distress (Berger & Weiss, 2009), whose crises can be turning points that lead to qualitatively different system functioning (Patterson, 2002).

Posttraumatic growth offers a way to conceptualize the transformation of organizations in the wake of crises, as distinct from conceptualizations of organizational change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), evolution (Greiner, 1998), and resilience (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). Such transformation can involve, as for individuals and families, pronounced differences in how leaders and members collectively define and enact the meanings and purpose of their work. Groups and organizations, like families and communities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Walsh, 2007), have the capacity to deepen their collective purposes, to act according to shared values, to develop close attachments, and to enact new possibilities and paths (Dutton et al., 2006; Smith & Berg, 1987). We suggest that such relational shifts, in the wake of shared traumas, loss, and crises, can similarly define the underlying nature of some organizational transformations. This formulation presumes that the essential nature and treatment of traumatic experiences adhere across individual, family, group, and organization levels (see Herman, 1997, and Kahn, 2005).

Such transformations do not happen of their own accord; they need to be managed, like other aspects of crisis recovery. The posttraumatic literature includes three processes by which such postcrisis transformations are managed in individuals (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), families (Berger & Weiss, 2009), and communities (Walsh, 2007). These processes restructure damaged relational systems—that is, they create and clarify appropriate boundaries within and between subsystems (Minuchin, 1974). We suggest that in some postcrisis organizations adaptations of these processes can occur as well, as leaders, members, and consultants engage in acts of repair that transform postcrisis balances of cohesion and flexibility. These processes are illustrated using the case material in Table 2.

**Emotional processing.** Trauma survivors engage in posttraumatic growth via meaningful connections with others with whom they continue to process their experiences of distress while performing the concrete tasks of rebuilding their lives (Herman, 1997). In organizations a similar multitasking occurs as people engage in both operational recovery and the processing of their emotional experiences. The latter involves people telling stories of their experiences and sharing what they thought and felt amid crises and their aftermaths (Berger & Weiss, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Storytelling enables people to share rather than remain stuck with painful events, experiences, thoughts, and emotions (Herman, 1997). It helps them to not feel alone and isolated with the pain they experienced. The organization becomes a series of “holding environments”—settings in which support and compassion are sought and provided (Kahn, 2001). Absent these settings, the emotional fallout from crises remains located within individuals, impeding their personal and collective ability to recover (Burke, 2012).

Emotional processing can restructure the boundaries of damaged relational systems. As people share their stories and experiences, they discover connections among those who had turned away from and bound themselves off from one another (see Kahn, 2011). In the medical practice (Garland, 2002) the collective processing of members’ grief in the wake of their colleague’s murder brought them closer, shifting them from disengaged to connected. As they identified and processed their emotions, members gained more control over their reactions to the crisis, enabling them to become more flexible (and less chaotic) in how they analyzed information and made decisions. In the financial services firm (Barbash, 2003) members cried over the loss of friends and colleagues, told stories, and consoled one another, bearing collectively what they could not bear individually. As their emotional pain faded from sharp to dull, they had less need to cling to one another, enabling them to become less enmeshed while remaining connected. In the law firm (Shapiro & Carr, 1991) members’ acknowledgment of shared feelings of fear and frustration enabled them to join together rather than split apart; they became less rigid (yet still structured) in how they shared information and made decisions.

**Construction of meaning.** Traumatic experiences disrupt one's sense of reality (Herman, 1997). Weick (1993) described such disruptions as cosmological episodes, in which the universe is no longer seen as rational and orderly. In the wake of crises, the narratives that had made sense of the world and oneself no longer do so. The process of constructing new narratives to provide meaning to new realities is central to transformations in the wake of crises. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) found that persistent cognitive processing—that is, rumination—enables crisis survivors to formulate new goals and world views in reconstituted realities. Such processing occurs collectively as well, as families engage in interactive processes of giving meaning to sharply altered realities (Berger & Weiss, 2009). Individual narratives are shared and integrated into social narratives such that crises are collectively seen as turning points (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). People discuss who “we” are in the aftermath of a crisis and decipher the meaning that the trauma has for their groups (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004).

As people join together to share experiences and make sense of newly altered realities, they clarify and shift the boundaries marking their relations with one another. In the urban school (Powell, 1994) the narrative shifted from that of a war zone in which teachers, administrators, and students battled within and across their groups to that of a community fighting for itself and its members. The new narrative helped shift the school's relational system from disengaged to connected (as members joined together across divisions) and from chaotic to structured (as leaders provided direction and supporting structures). In the financial services firm (Barbash, 2003) the precrisis narrative revolved around ruthless competition for clients, money, and influence. In the wake of the tragedy, surviving members created the different narrative of creating a legacy for those who had perished by providing for their families. This narrative required firm members to collaborate (i.e., become more flexible and less rigid) and organize effectively (i.e., become less chaotic and more structured).

**Envisioning and creating desirable futures.** Traumatic experiences shatter the sense of normal progress and development (Herman, 1997). It is the past that grips individuals, families, and communities that have suffered trauma (Berger

& Weiss, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Walsh, 2007); the future appears as a memory, from a time and place no longer familiar and recognizable. Amid such despair, it is hope—the lone weapon left inside Pandora's box after evils have been loosed upon the world—that offers the possibility of recovery and transformation (Walsh, 2007). Hope allows people to envision and ultimately create desirable futures. Trauma recovery involves enabling people to envision and take steps toward enacting preferred futures and, thus, to move from despair to optimism (Herman, 1997; Walsh, 2007). Organizations follow a similar path in postcrisis repair and transformation. Key to this process are working groups, where members join together across divisions to figure out the way forward, and leaders, who use their roles to embed hope in those forward movements.

Small groups provide key settings for members to come together to develop ideas that help their systems move from places in which they are stuck (Smith & Berg, 1987). In the treatment center a group developed strategies to position the organization for survival; in the school a group developed and implemented a program that tackled the underlying causes of the school's crisis; in the medical practice senior partners sponsored groups to develop more effective work routines; in the law firm working groups reorganized evaluation and mentoring practices; and in the financial services firm groups met regularly to figure out how to keep their firm alive in a shifting competitive environment. The work of such groups provides bridges between painful pasts and optimistic futures. Moreover, small groups can enable the repair and transformation of relational systems. The groups can provide the structure to offset chaotic patterns (e.g., treatment center) and the settings for flexible collaboration rather than rigid command and control (e.g., law firm). They can also dissolve overly rigid boundaries that mark disengagements between various divisions (e.g., school) while enabling members to appropriately voice their own ideas (e.g., medical practice).

Leaders enable traumatized system members to move toward desirable futures when they engage in the *discourse of renewal*—the framing of events in ways that are empowering and motivating (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). The discourse of renewal is prospective, related to the future rather than the past, and thus becomes the

means to create a new organizational reality (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). Such leaders do not merely issue directives, lead by example, or pull crisis teams together. They engage with others in ways that engender hope about what can be rather than simply despair about what has been. The CEO of the financial services firm used the discourse of renewal to empower, motivate, and provide hope to surviving firm members (Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005). In offering a vision of what a reconstituted firm could do—become profitable enough to take care of the families of those who died, as well as take care of surviving firm members—the leader provided a focus for members' energies and an outlet to act constructively (Seeger et al., 2005). Such leaders focus on the future rather than all that has been lost, and they then articulate what others can do to help make that future a reality. They thus help restructure relational system boundaries, creating a larger "we" from fragmented, balkanized groups while authorizing specific subsystems to take on specific work.

### Facilitating Conditions

The repair and transformation of postcrisis organizations can thus involve system members joining together to share their crisis experiences and to process their emotions, which give way to narratives that help them make sense of their altered realities. Those narratives can provide meaningful contexts, as well as the possibility of hope, in which to envision desirable futures. This process parallels the healing and transformation of individuals (Herman, 1997), families (Berger & Weiss, 2009), and communities (Walsh, 2007) that have sustained trauma. In organizations these processes may repair underlying relational systems, transforming them into healthier balances of cohesion and flexibility that fit their new internal and external realities. In organizations the leader is clearly important, being the individual who plays the central role in convening others to share experiences and process emotions (Kahn, 2011), framing the meaning of crises (Seeger et al., 2005), authorizing working groups to envision the future (Miller, 1993), and articulating the discourse of renewal and hope (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002).

The precrisis state of an organization's disturbed relational system likely shapes the limits of its repair and transformation, at least in the

short term. Family systems researchers note that balanced types of families will more effectively manage stress than unbalanced types because they are able to engage in second-order change in order to cope (Olson, 2000), particularly if the families have functioned at extreme levels for too long (Olson & Gorall, 2003). In the adolescent treatment center (Cardona, 1994) a consultant helped center members understand that the potential closing of the center negatively affected their abilities to relate, collaborate, and work together. The relational system ultimately shifted from extreme to midrange. Yet members remained unable to alter their disengagement across departmental, functional, and hierarchical lines. The center's relational system was disturbed precrisis, making it that much more difficult to fully transform the system. Implied is the need to balance a group's relational system prior to crisis.

It is also likely that repair and transformation efforts in the wake of crises need to be sustained over time in order to be fully successful. The risks associated with discussing trauma largely accrue when "debriefings" are stand-alone events rather than events conducted as part of comprehensive, integrated intervention programs with multiple components spanning the entire temporal spectrum of a crisis (Everly & Mitchell, 2000; Flannery & Everly, 2000). The postcrisis intervention in the treatment center was relatively brief, without ongoing attention by either its leader or consultant. In such conditions it can be counterproductive for system members to engage in openly sharing their experiences—in effect, opening themselves to the possibility of retraumatization without ongoing support and consultation through which new meanings and structures develop and stabilize (Everly & Mitchell, 2000). The pain of reliving the trauma in the absence of adequate holding environments sustained by competent leaders, consultants, and counselors can actually worsen for trauma survivors (see Herman, 1997). The larger implication here is that full recovery from organizational crises may take far longer than operational recovery models indicate.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND RESEARCH

A focus on the nature, disturbance, repair, and transformation of relational systems can expand and change existing conceptualizations of

crisis management. The relational system lens can alter how we define, analyze, and manage organizational crises. Theory and research have mapped the terrain of the damage that crises cause to business operations, systems, and performance (James & Wooten, 2010); the nature and effects of preventing, mitigating, and containing crises (Mitroff & Pearson, 1993); and postcrisis recovery and learning (Clair & Dufresne, 2007). Our argument suggests that theoretically and empirically mapping the terrain relevant to the relational systems that exist alongside and enable operational systems can add a deeper understanding of the impact of organizational crises. This terrain includes crisis management, crisis leadership, and organizational resilience.

Prior to mapping that terrain, we should note that while our focus is on the aftermath of crises, relational systems are also likely to influence efforts prior to and during crises. Building on family systems research (Olson, 2000; Walsh, 1998), for example, we believe balances of cohesion and flexibility likely will shape how prone systems are to crises. The lack of balance can leave leaders dangerously unaware of unfolding crises: in disengaged systems members are less likely to share key pieces of data; in enmeshed systems they are less likely to scan external environments. Similarly, chaotic structuring is likely to prevent members from marshalling and sifting through bits of information, while rigidity prevents them from diverging from habitual patterns of thought and action. Amid crises, relational systems are likely to shape how members react. In the immediacy of crises, system members become unbalanced: they become more chaotic or rigid and more disengaged or enmeshed. Yet for how long and how deeply relational systems remain unbalanced likely varies, according to preexisting relational systems that shape collective action, the actions of authority figures, and the response of others to those actions (see Walsh, 1998, and Walsh & Olson, 1993).

### **Crisis Management**

The concept of balanced and unbalanced relational systems offers a means by which to reconsider the definition and processes of crisis management. To the extent that disturbed relational systems continue to undermine effective work operations—as systems are fragmented,

chaotic, and rigid and as individuals and groups are isolated—crisis management efforts are not yet fully successful. Building on the operational model criteria noted by Pearson and Clair (1998), we offer an expanded definition of crisis management:

*Crisis management efforts are effective when operations are sustained or resumed, organizational and external stakeholder losses are minimized, learning occurs so that lessons are transferred to future incidents, and organizational groups create and sustain healthy, balanced relational patterns of cohesion, flexibility, and communication within and across clarified boundaries.*

The expanded definition signals the importance of both operational and relational dimensions to crisis management. This has certain theoretical implications. First, system members are key stakeholders, as much as owners and shareholders are (Pearson & Clair, 1998), in that imbalanced relational systems can greatly undermine long-term organizational recovery. Second, postcrisis learning may need to focus not only on operational vulnerabilities that exacerbated the crises (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993) but on relational ones as well. Third, the effects of crises can be understood as relational as well as financial, operational, and positional (see Quarantelli, 1988).

Several sets of research questions emerge regarding relational systems in the aftermath of crises. One research stream involves examining both the long-term and short-term impacts of crises in the intertwining of operational and relational recovery processes. For example, while operational recovery is at the forefront in the immediacy of crisis containment, the timing of relational systemic recovery will likely affect the effectiveness of operational recovery. A second set of questions focuses on how preexisting relational systems shape how and how much they are disturbed, with implications for efforts at recovery and repair (see Lavee & Olson, 1991). The third stream focuses on how crisis types might affect the nature, extent, and repair of relational system disturbances. While we have suggested that all crises disturb relational patterns, empirical work might well indicate certain patterns of disturbance triggered by acci-

dents, scandals, or product safety and health incidents (Marcus & Goodman, 1991), or by conventional, unexpected, intractable, or fundamental crises (Gundel, 2005).

Such empirical work will require valid instruments to assess relational systems. Family systems researchers use a self-report survey to map cohesion and flexibility in systems ranging from couples to multigenerational families (Olson et al., 1989); the validated scale discriminates between healthy and problematic families (Olson, 2011). The Family Communication Scale is widely used to assess communication within family systems (Barnes & Olson, 1985). In addition to self-report surveys, relational systems are assessed by the Clinical Rating Scale (Olson, 1990), a validated scale designed for researchers and therapists using clinical interviews or observations (Thomas & Olson, 1993). The scale provides specific indicators for each level of cohesion, flexibility, and communication and produces the same factor structure when raters are researchers or therapists (Lee, Jager, Whiting, & Kwantes, 2000). Organizational researchers can adapt these tools to assess relational systems of varying sizes and configurations. This would involve carefully identifying and bounding specific groups in order to collect and analyze data about specific relational systems, given the size and complexity of organizations relative to families (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1980).

### **Crisis Leadership**

Crisis leaders are deemed responsible for detecting systemic vulnerabilities, containing and controlling crises and their fallout, fixing damaged systems, and pressing for learning and subsequent preparation and prevention (Clair & Dufresne, 2007; James & Wooten, 2010). The idea that crises can also disturb relational systems (disturbances that can linger long past the cessation of those crises) implies a different set of postcrisis leadership activities. Postcrisis leaders may need to engage in recovery efforts in ways that both restore operational systems and balance relational systems. This expanded view offers leaders a means by which to engage in positive leadership in response to crisis (Brockner & James, 2008): their balancing of relational systems, coupled with their helping others increase competence and efficacy in the wake of

crises (James et al., 2011), can enable transformation and growth.

Empirical research can help develop knowledge about such postcrisis leadership. One set of questions focuses on how leadership differs in practice when attending to relational systems. In the case studies leaders convened members so they could empathize with, normalize, and validate one another as they worked through distressing events. The leaders moved between focusing on emotional release and operational recovery, and between facilitative and directive stances. They were the primary framers of meaning (Seeger et al., 2005). Empirical research is necessary to examine the nature, sequencing, and timing of leaders' efforts to restore both operational and relational systems postcrisis. Such efforts likely require leaders to tolerate anxiety and the difficult feelings triggered by crisis without getting so disturbed that they cannot engage in discourses of renewal that enable optimism and hope (Seeger et al., 2005). How such leadership qualities fit with other leadership competencies and capacities is a theoretical question; how leaders actually develop and maintain relevant qualities and skills amid crises is an empirical question.

### **Organizational Resilience**

The relational systems concept enables us to expand and deepen recent efforts to theorize about organizational resilience, defined as the collective capacity to absorb strain, withstand setbacks, and recover from untoward events (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). Resilience is at once a latent capacity that exists before crises occur, a source of positive adjustments within crises, and an enabler of learning and recovery (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). The extent to which relational systems are balanced or unbalanced offers a precise way to chart resilience capacity. Thus, groups and organizations may be better positioned to remain resilient during crises when they are balanced along cohesion and flexibility; as family systems researchers have discovered, such balance can become a resource on which to draw (Byng-Hall, 1995; Walsh, 1998). Moreover, people's efforts during crises are more than simply positive and supportive or negative and unsupportive. Their efforts can facilitate or undermine balances of cohesion and flexibility.

There are implications here for empirical work. Family systems researchers show that balanced relational systems are more resilient, with greater ability to recover functioning and relational balances than unbalanced systems (Lavee & Olson, 1991). Similar research needs to empirically examine this relation across various types of organizational systems affected by various crisis types and impacts. More precisely, this empirical work should link the creation of social resources prior to (Powley, 2009), during (Feldman, 2004), and after (Dutton et al., 2006) crises to the processes by which system members create balances of cohesion and flexibility through positive communications and actions. Such empirical work can complement Gittel, Cameron, Lim, and Rivas's (2006) airline study on organizational resilience following 9/11 to understand the factors that contribute to achieving postcrisis resilience.

### CONCLUSION

Organizational crises are shock waves sent through systems. Much is understood about how those shock waves affect what organization members do in preparing for, containing, and recovering from crises and in repairing operational systems. In this article we emphasize the necessity of similar advancements in theory and research about the potential effects of crises on relational systems. These effects are less observable than the abrupt disruption of activities and output; they can be subterranean, affecting the underlying relational patterns that implicitly define organizations and their subsystems. As psychologists have long noted, the impact of crises on people and their relationships can be far-reaching and long-lasting. Crises can also be transformational, offering both significant opportunities for positively altering the health of people and their relationships. Building on the extensive theory and research of family systems theory, we identify the properties of relational systems and the nature of their disturbances; building on structural family therapy concepts and practices, we identify the processes of relational system repair and transformation. The result is a foundation for researchers to develop empirical knowledge about organizational crises and their effective management.

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**William A. Kahn** (wkahn@bu.edu) is professor of organizational behavior at Boston University School of Management, where he has taught since receiving his Ph.D. in psychology from Yale University. His current research focuses on the social, cultural, and structural dimensions of caring for organizational members exposed to painful stress and trauma.

**Michelle A. Barton** (mbarton@bu.edu) is assistant professor of organizational behavior at Boston University School of Management. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on the social and cognitive processes that affect the awareness, interpretation, management, and adaptive responses to uncertain events.

**Steven Fellows** (fellows@bu.edu) is a Ph.D. candidate in organizational behavior at Boston University School of Management. His research addresses the potential of transitions for facilitating growth and development as individuals construct new identities and leaders use disruptive events as catalysts for sensemaking and organizational change.