

Laurel J. Detert

Ph.D. Candidate, Management & Organizations
Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Employees increasingly struggle with interpersonal relationships at work: a recent survey found 69% were unsatisfied with their social connections and 52% wanted more workplace connection.¹ This need for more and better social connections at work is a serious problem given that most full-time employees spend more waking hours with coworkers than with family or friends. It also puts organizations in a unique position to address the growing loneliness epidemic and its far-reaching consequences. My research investigates the relational foundations of organizational life by examining how interpersonal distance embedded in organizational roles, relationships, and structures shapes employee and organizational outcomes. I conceptualize this distance in three ways, each with distinct antecedents and outcomes: social distance (e.g., status, rank), psychological distance (e.g., perceived dissimilarity, trust), and physical distance (e.g., spatial layout). My aim is to uncover concrete, deep-rooted levers for designing workplaces that maximize connection rather than sustain distance that undermines connection.

My research, specifically, focuses on (a) how workplace roles and relationships activate evolved motivational and psychological systems that shape interpersonal attributions and distance decisions, and (b) the consequences of interpersonal distance for individuals, dyads, and teams. I take a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach, integrating evolutionary psychology with organizational behavior research on roles, relationships, and distance. I conduct multi-method research to answer these questions (e.g., field studies, team lab studies, yoked experiments, confederate-based designs) to identify real-world patterns and their causal mechanisms.

Evolutionary Influences on Roles, Relationships, and Interpersonal Distance

In my first stream, I examine how workplace roles and relationships activate *evolved motivational and psychological systems*, such as those governing parental care, fear, and status seeking, and how that activation shapes interpersonal attributions and distance decisions. By integrating evolutionary psychology, I explain why individuals approach or withdraw from one another in specific role contexts, advancing the workplace relationships literature toward the deeper motivational systems that animate them and the counterintuitive behaviors they produce.

Parental Care Motivations in Mentorship

In my first dissertation paper (**Detert & Case, under review at *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes***), we integrate role theory and evolutionary research on the parental care system into the mentorship literature, arguing that mentoring and parenting share key role characteristics (i.e., asymmetric investment, long-term development, closeness) that activate the motivational system underlying parental care in mentors. Across several experiments using novel measures of implicit parental care motives and a field survey, we identify an unexplored mentoring motive—parental care orientation toward a protégé—that produces a distinct pattern of investment mimicking the nurturance and protection given to offspring. Mentoring behavior is thus driven not only by individual differences but also by evolved role expectations. We explain why mentors reduce distance to nurture and protect protégés even at potential cost to themselves.

¹ BetterUp. (2022). *The connection crisis: Why community matters in the new world of work*. <https://grow.betterup.com/resources/build-a-culture-of-connection-report>

Fear and Courage Contagion in Observers

In this paper (**Detert & Detert, in preparation**), we focus on an understudied perspective in courage research—the observer—theorizing that observers’ appraisals of others’ actions as courageous are inherently fear-laden and egocentric. Using paired observer-actor field surveys and experiments, including a deception-based design with confederates, we show that witnessing courageous behavior implicitly activates observers’ own fear systems. Specifically, we demonstrate that observers (a) label behaviors they personally imagine to be frightening as more courageous, (b) consequently view the actor as more admirable while increasing their psychological distance from them, and (c) ultimately become less likely to mimic the behavior they deemed courageous. We show that courage attributions are thus shaped by observers’ fear systems rather than any objective property of the acts themselves, with implications for how courageous actions are rewarded and whether cultures of courage emerge through mimicry.

Ovarian Hormones and Leader Identity Claiming

In this work (Hahn, Bloshtinsky, **Detert**, Makhanova, Case, & Hays, **under review at *Journal of Applied Psychology***), we draw on evolutionary research showing that menstrual hormone cycling drives women to alternate between two fundamental motives—procreation and protection—and argue this cycling also shapes women’s leader identity claiming in predictable ways. Using a large-scale, multi-cycle salivary hormone study comparing naturally cycling women with those using hormonal contraceptives, we find that cycle-driven fluctuations in estrogen and progesterone alter prestige-based status motives, producing within-cycle changes in leader identity claiming. We introduce an intrapersonal, physiological mechanism to a literature that has largely explained the female leader emergence gap through interpersonal paths, showing that evolved motivational systems can be activated automatically by employees’ physiological rhythms with consequences for important workplace identities.

Additional Work

In other earlier-stage projects, we build on our mentorship findings to examine what the parental care system reveals about who does (or does not) receive mentorship investment. In one (**Detert & Case, in progress**), we study cases where the parental care system does not take hold: just as some parents have weaker parental motives, some mentors are “non-parental,” showing far greater discrimination in whom and how they invest. In a second (Case & **Detert, in progress**), we draw on research showing that offspring resemblance powerfully activates parental care to examine which protégés receive greater investment. We begin to explain why cross-race mentorship pairings can produce weaker outcomes and point toward interventions grounded in the psychology of parenting. In a third (**Detert & Detert, in progress**), we extend the courage attributions paper to examine how attributions of courageous behavior vary based on evolved gender role expectations for actors and observers. Together, these projects further unpack how evolved systems shape the attributions and investments employees make in work relationships.

Consequences of Interpersonal Distance

In my second stream, I examine the consequences of interpersonal distance—namely, emotional, relational, and performance outcomes—for individuals, dyads, and teams. I aim to renew attention to interpersonal distance in organizational behavior and shift the conversation from treating distance as a fixed byproduct of individuals, relationships, and structures to a variable that can be intentionally altered to help employees. Treating distance as a design tool, I clarify when and why it is beneficial or harmful.

Dominance, Distrust, and Physical Distance in Leader-Follower Relationships

In my second dissertation paper (**Detert, Case, & Ronay**, under review at *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*), we extend research on dominant leadership, which has emphasized the forceful, approach-focused tactics these leaders use to claim power, by integrating positional incumbency. We argue that in positions of power, dominance-oriented leaders often adopt an avoidance-focused strategy rooted in a chronic perception of their leadership as unstable and fragile. Across a field survey of leaders and four experiments (including deception-based and yoked designs), we show this mindset leads them to trust followers less and create physical distance from them. We also find that this insulation strategy backfires, such that followers respond with reduced trust and greater social distancing of their own. Dominance-oriented leaders thus create self-fulfilling cycles of distrust and distance that validate their underlying threat psychology and destabilize the very position they seek to protect.

The Emotional Consequences of Differentiation in Teams

In my third dissertation paper (**Detert & Greer**, revise-and-resubmit at *Academy of Management Journal*), we extend research on hierarchical differentiation in teams, which has focused on cognitive, strategic reactions to rank structuring, by using social comparison theory to identify a new emotional consequence. Across several studies, we find that hierarchical differentiation increases collective emotional exhaustion by creating a salient comparison dimension that sparks negative emotional dynamics, with downstream consequences for team conflict and performance. We also show that this emotional cost has a ceiling: rank and role differentiation together do not double exhaustion, suggesting teams can use more complex structures to capture certain benefits without added emotional cost. Collectively, we show that a team structure intended to stabilize teams can elicit emotional and conflict processes that destabilize them.

Additional Work

In other work, we examine interpersonal distance as a tool that has been evolutionarily honed and wielded by contemporary leaders. In a recent book chapter (**Detert, Ronay, & Case**, **forthcoming**), we propose interpersonal distance as an evolved, universal leadership tool, departing from prior work that treats it as a situational tactic leaders use only when advantageous. Examining leader behavior across five eras of human social living, we show how leaders have consistently used distance to address fundamental social motives: communicating status, coordinating tasks, building relationships, and protecting themselves. My newest work (Ronay, **Detert**, & Case, **in progress**) integrates this argument with multi-capital leadership theory, examining how distance decisions function as a strategic signal of leader capital and shifting conversation from specific forms of distance toward what leaders signal with distance.

Conclusion

My research advances understanding of interpersonal distance and social connection in organizations by arguing that distance is a psychological and relational process shaped by evolved motivational systems and consequential for emotions, relationships, and performance. More broadly, I aim to provide evidence-based, multidisciplinary solutions to the workplace connection crisis that are grounded in fundamental psychological systems and the structural realities of organizational life. Looking ahead, I plan to map additional evolved motives onto specific roles and relationships, design and test interventions that counteract embedded distance, and investigate how the changing nature of work (e.g., remote work, AI-mediated relationships) is altering the bases and consequences of interpersonal distance.