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New Contexts for Relational Communication in Groups

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of relational communication in groups. Connections are made with potentially fruitful theoretical concepts, while findings from related group research are used to discuss new and interesting directions with regard to relational communication in three pivotal group contexts. Each section provides a rationale for *why* these group contexts should be studied and suggests propositions to guide future research. The discussion highlights the many facets of the "relational side" of members' intentions in groups: cooperation, connection, autonomy, similarity, flexibility/rigidity, cohesion/withdrawal, harmony/conflict, stereotyping, and stigmatization. Concerning group process analysis, we revisit the *family*, as our first group experience, from a relational communication perspective. Next, the influence of *heterogeneity of group membership and intercultural diversity* is discussed with regard to relational dynamics. Finally, the effects of *computer mediated communication* (CMC) on relational communication in groups are investigated.

## Introduction

...relational communication in groups refers to the verbal and nonverbal messages that create the social fabric of a group by promoting relationships between and among group members. It is the affective or expressive dimension of group communication, as opposed to the instrumental, or task-oriented, dimension. (Keyton, 1999, p. 192)

Irrespective of type, all small groups' communication processes possess the relational dimension described by Keyton (1999). Whether relational and task "dimensions" of group communication are regarded as separate (Bales, 1949; Homans, 1950) or intertwined (Frey & Barge, 1997), supportive (Scheerhorn & Geist, 1997) or derailing (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1986; Steiner, 1974), a better understanding of the relational dimension must be of value to all group scholars and practitioners. Relational messages act as antecedent influences on other aspects of group interaction, are entwined in the process of group work, and impact the outcomes of group dynamics. We certainly are not among the first to recognize the importance of relational communication in groups, which has long been a source of scholarly interest (Bion, 1948). However, in light of contemporary scholars' (e.g., Gouran, 1994; Keyton, 1994, 1999; Poole, 1999) calls for a *return* to the study of relational communication in recently neglected areas, we discuss overlooked and undetected relational dynamics in groups and suggest possible directions for research in three relational contexts.

In defining relational communication (see above), Keyton (1999) provides a signpost to potentially productive areas of research about the "relational side" of groups. To date much group research has emphasized antecedents, processes, and outcomes associated with decision making (Frey, 1996). Less attention has been paid to relational aspects of groups that identify *differences* within and between groups -- for example, a difference associated with gender, nonverbal behavior or conformity in relational communication in groups. With regard to gender, feminist scholars (cf. Meyes & Brashers, 1994; Wyatt, 1993) have suggested that due to the focus on task in small groups, there has been a failure to address aspects such as cooperation and connection that characterize groups predominantly comprised of women. For example, Ashcraft (1998) insightfully detailed the tensions and paradoxes in a social support agency for survivors of domestic abuse as its female managers sought to foster "ethical communication" within an organizational context.

Nonverbal processes are fundamental to relational aspects of communication. Across contexts, nonverbal messages assume primacy in assigning contextual and relational meaning to group formation, maintenance and change (Anderson, 1992; Burgoon, 1992; Hare & Davis, 1994). Also, in relation to differentiation within groups in terms of leadership (Curran & Longbill, 1983), and interpersonal attractiveness (Schuler & Peltzer, 1978), nonverbal communication has a part to play.

With respect to conformity or deviance in group contexts, relational concerns such as attraction or dislike of group members can be influential. When group members choose to conform or not to conform to group expectations because of relational issues, group dynamics are significantly impacted. Specifically, how majority group members deal with one or two group members' deviance may affect future relational patterns in the group and, ultimately, group performance.

These and many other factors influence relational communication in groups. However, for the purposes of this paper, we focus on three specific group *contexts* with regard to relational communication: family, heterogeneous and culturally diverse group contexts, and computer mediated groups. From a myriad of potentially illuminating group contexts, we choose these because they

possess truly pivotal implications, both in terms importance and timeliness, for increased understanding of the relational dynamics in contemporary group settings. But before we begin to examine these contexts, it is necessary to set the scene by developing an understanding of why the study of the relational side of groups has waned in recent years. What happened and why?

### Traditions in the Study of Relational Communication in Groups

The origins of group communication theory and research are found in concerns to promote democratic discussion, cooperation, and improved quality of decision making in groups (Frey, 1996; Gouran, 1999; Poole, 1999). Group researchers in communication followed on the heels of prominent scholars from a variety of social science disciplines (especially psychology, social psychology, and sociology). In all of these disciplines, as concerns about group dynamics grew, many scholars incorporated relational factors -- including communication -- as elements of their theories about group dynamics.

Bion (1948) argued that at any point in the life of a group one relational form dominates -- fight (conflict), flight (avoidance), pairing (interpersonal interaction) or dependency (on another member -- usually the leader). Lewin (1951) believed that relational factors help explain why group members are motivated to achieve goals and overcome barriers, thereby exerting a powerful influence on group performance. Homans (1950) highlighted the interrelationships among interaction (communication), action (task), and sentiment (relational issues) in group behavior.

Bales' Equilibrium Theory (1953) and coding system, Interaction Process Analysis (IPA), as well as his later theoretical extension (Systematic Multiple Level Field Theory and SYMLOG, the coding system) identified how the socio-emotional (or relational) aspects of group communication can complement or disrupt task related communication. And Schutz (1960, 1966) identified three "interpersonal needs" as key to group relational dynamics -- inclusion (the need to establish and maintain satisfactory relationships); control (the need to manage relationships with respect to power and control); and affection (the need for affection and love).

Early group scholars did not limit their theoretical and research endeavors to task groups, which were hallmarks of group studies between the 1960s and 1980s (Frey, 1996). Considerable interest was shown to primary groups like the family (Homans, 1950; Merrill Bishop, 1955; Strodbeck, 1955) and peer groups such as gangs (Homans, 1950; Thrasher, 1955; Whyte, 1943). The early history of group research reflects scholars' recognition of the value of studying the relational dynamics of *all* groups, task-focused or otherwise. Why then did group scholars begin to ignore relational elements, and largely concentrate on task communication (Frey, 1996)?

### Whatever Happened to the "Relational Side" to Group Research?

In part, U.S. scholars' shift toward the study of group decision making can be traced to traumatic events that occurred in America during the 1960s; for example, the Bay of Pigs, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and tragic outcomes from police and state troops' handling of racial minority and student protests. Theorists (for example, Janis, 1972, 1982; and later, Hirokawa & Gouran, 1989) focused on the antecedents and processes associated with faulty decisions, thus leading to a continued focus on task dynamics. Alternatively, but perhaps relatedly, Meyers and Brashers (1994) argue that the emphasis on decision making emanates from a masculine perspective on groups. Conventionally, relational issues are considered to lie in the feminine sphere. Because male scholars have largely

dominated group research, Meyers and Brashers contend that this may account for the paucity of theory and research relating to relational communication in groups (cf., Wyatt, 1993).

Additionally, over the years most studies have been conducted in a lab environment (Frey, 1996) using zero-history groups of homogeneous membership with tasks possessing marginal relevance for the participants (Seibold & Meyers, 1988). These group studies typically do not mirror real life contexts and, therefore, made it impossible to examine relational dynamics in any convincing way (even if that were the goal). The artificial nature of the context, the lack of real value of the task to group members, and the cross-sectional nature of the research precludes meaningful study of how group relationships develop over time in natural settings and, by extension, of relational communication.

Until relatively recently, whenever the relational side of communication *was* highlighted, it tended to be in a negative fashion -- as if an *obstacle* to effective decision making in the group context (Gouran, 1999). Steiner (1974) argued that group productivity equals the potential productivity minus behavior not required to achieve the task at hand (i.e., relational communication). Hirokawa and Gouran (1989) dealt primarily with how relational dynamics would *inhibit* the decision-making process (Keyton, 1999).

Subsequent critiques centered on the failure of many group researchers to study group communication in naturalistic settings (see for example, Frey, 1992), in "embedded groups" with permeable boundaries (Stohl & Putnam, 1994), and the need to consider the relational element of group communication (Keyton, 1999). To an extent, calls for studies that recognize and incorporate hitherto neglected aspects of group research have been answered (see for example, Adelman & Frey, 1994; Cluck & Cline, 1986; Frey, 1994a, 1995; Guzzo & Salas, 1995; Hackman, 1990). However, the need remains for group researchers to widen their perspective beyond task processes, and to consider how specific contexts and forms of communication impact relational communication in groups.

## Overview

Remembering the varied and valued origins of the field, what follows is an attempt to integrate existing theory and research about the relational dimension of groups from other areas of the field of communication and from other social science disciplines. We hope that in emphasizing possible areas of theoretical and research commonality, new directions and contexts for investigation will be illuminated.

Poole, Keyton, and Frey (1999) highlight different levels of analysis with regard to the study of group communication, including individuals' generalized group experiences, individuals in a group, a specific group as a whole, and relationships among groups. With regard to the group level of analysis, we revisit the *family* from a relational communication perspective. Poole (1999) argues that studying diversity in groups will help us to understand "how different types of individuals 'fit together' in groups" (p. 92). Therefore, the influence of *social identity* on communication among heterogeneous group members is discussed. Finally, the influences of *computer mediated communication* (CMC) on relational dynamics in groups are investigated. The effect of our review in each area is to highlight many facets of the "relational side" of members' interactions in groups: cooperation, connection, autonomy, similarity, flexibility/rigidity, cohesion/withdrawal, consensus/domination, stereotyping, stigmatization, satisfaction, and relational development and maintenance. In each section we offer an overview suggesting *why* that group context *should be* studied; and include *propositions intended to guide* future research.

## **Relational Communication and the Family: A Group Perspective**

Group communication scholars have highlighted a need for a broader perspective incorporating natural contexts (see for example, Frey, 1988, 1994b; Socha, 1999; Stohl & Putnam, 1994; Poole, 1999), and for renewed interest in relational communication in groups (Frey, 1996; Gouran, 1994; Keyton, 1999; Poole, 1999). Additionally, family communication scholars (see for example, Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Petronio & Braithwaite, 1993; Socha, 1999) argue for less emphasis on the individual as a part of the whole, and more on family members as a system, bringing the interrelationship between family members to the forefront of research. We treat the intersection of these foci here.

Group and relational experiences occur first in the context of the family (Keyton, 1994; Socha & Socha, 1994; Socha, 1999). It seems logical to assume that these early experiences must impact subsequent group communication behaviors; relational dynamics brought to group contexts may often "drive the interaction" (Gouran, 1994, p. 35). Yet this most significant area has received scant attention from contemporary group researchers (Frey, 1996).

Moreover, current group theory has not been applied specifically to relational communication in primary groups such as the family. This may represent a problem of omission rather than one of goodness-of-fit. For example, both Keyton (1999) and Poole (1999) suggest that Structuration Theory (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985) provides a promising theoretical perspective for understanding the underlying structures (rules/norms) maintaining and reproducing families as systems. Socha (1999) also argues that Symbolic Convergence Theory (Borman, 1996) offers a way of understanding how families develop a common culture and a sense of group consciousness, and how members share emotions or meanings by reliving family stories, experiences, and jokes (fantasy chains).

### Family Communication

Family researchers have begun to move away from their focus on relationships between individual family members by adopting an approach that encompasses the family as a unit (Petronio & Braithwaite, 1993; Socha, 1999). For example, Fitzpatrick, Marshall, Leutwiler and Krcmar (1996) categorized families within a four-fold communication typology: *consensual*, *pluralistic*, *protective* and *laissez-faire*. The consensual and pluralistic communication orientations, distinguished by openness and warmth, show an association with improved self-control and avoidance of expressions of negative affect. Children from families exhibiting the protective orientation where conformity is emphasized, show communication patterns characterized as domination and abrasiveness. Additionally, children from families exhibiting the protective communication environment are more likely to be more socially withdrawn and possess less self-restraint. By contrast, results from a survey of 161 seventh, ninth, and eleventh-graders (Ritchie, 1991) found that the conversation orientation (largely equivalent to Fitzpatrick et al's consensual/pluralistic orientations) is associated with harmonious social relationships.

This points to ways in which family relationship dynamics may impact relational communication in other groups. Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1994) argued that "research needs to consider how the family communication environment influences family members' interactions outside the family and, conversely, how experiences in other communication environments influence the way family members perceive and react to family communication" (p.298). Relatedly, Ritchie (1997) found a relationship between 178 parents' workplace experiences and their family communication patterns. Ritchie's conversation orientation was positively associated with the degree of openness and autonomy in workplace communication, while the conformity orientation (protective) was negatively associated with openness and autonomy.

In a study that could inspire a future application of both Structuration Theory and Symbolic Convergence Theory, Baxter and Clark (1996) investigated perceptions of family communication and the enactment of family rituals as sources of bonding and identity. Using a communication typology similar to that of Fitzpatrick et al., the study revealed that although both the conversational orientation (consensual/pluralistic) and the conformity orientation (protective) correlated positively with ritualizing, conformity-oriented families lacked flexibility in adaptation of rituals over time (for the Euro-American sample).

The findings of these four studies have implications for group relational issues in general. Propositions 1 and 2 below formalize such implications. In turn, hypotheses based on the Family Communication Pattern Typology implicit within them may be deduced to predict how children will interact in group contexts other than the family, and also in later life.

- Proposition 1: Any group predominated by members exhibiting the conversational (consensual/pluralistic) orientation will display greater openness, self-restraint, and flexibility.
- Proposition 2: Any group predominated by members exhibiting the protective (conformity) orientation will display a lack of openness, self-restraint, and flexibility.

### Insights from Media Effects Research

The research above exemplifies how theoretical concepts and models may usefully cross over from one social scientific domain to another. Indeed, the original conceptualization of the Family Communication Typology was formulated by Chaffee and McLeod (1972; Chaffee, McLeod, & Atkin, 1971) to aid in the understanding of how family communication patterns impact media use.

The process of investigating who is learning media messages, and why, necessitates investigation of the family context and how it mediates media effects. The relational dynamics of family life are known to mediate the association between television viewing, uses of television, and media effects such as aggression. Of particular relevance to group communication scholars is research related to parental viewing intervention strategies, parenting styles and mediation of media effects, and the implications for children's communication (and other) behaviors both in the family and in other group contexts.

Within a family systems perspective, some mass communication researchers have related family communication patterns to children's interactions with television. Children from families high in conversational orientation view less, are more selective, less satisfied with television, and more considerate of others' viewing habits (Lull, 1980). Children in families with a higher protective orientation are more likely to view more aggressive programming (Chaffee & McLeod, 1972), and are more likely to argue with siblings about television viewing (Morgan, Alexander, Shanahan, & Harris, 1990). One recent study (Krcmar, 1996) found that children from families exhibiting a high protective orientation were more likely to disobey their parents' rules about viewing when the opportunity arose. In light of these findings, we present the following propositions:

- Proposition 3: Any group predominated by members exhibiting a conversational orientation is likely to display social cohesion

Proposition 4: Any group predominated by members exhibiting a protective orientation is likely to display a lack of social cohesion.

### Family Scripts and Schemata

In psychology and mass communication research, Script Theory has been utilized in relation to parental viewing interventions (Huesmann & Miller, 1988). Cognitive scripts or schema that are stored in a person's memory are used as guides for behavior and social problem solving. A script suggests what might happen, how a person should behave in response, and the likely outcome.

Scripts can still be learned during adulthood, but scripts learned early are the most influential. Desmond, Singer, and Singer (1990) suggest that children can learn aggressive action scripts from unrestricted heavy viewing of television. Additionally, they argue "Through disciplinary mediation, explanation of events and programs, storytelling, and other communicative activities, parents can facilitate the development of alternative scripts to counteract the aggressive ones presented by the media" (p. 295). Another interesting line of group-related research, therefore, might investigate how relational communication within families leads to script or schema formation, and how family communication scripts are applied in other group contexts. Scripts or schema learned in the family may lead to positive outcomes in terms of behavior in other group contexts. Unfortunately, in terms of the "dark side" of relational dynamics (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994), power related schema learned in the family environment can also have negative outcomes.

### Power Relationships and the Family

Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1994) identified the laissez-faire family as exhibiting rejecting, neglecting, indifferent, and detached behaviors toward children. Such parents are uninvolved with their children -- and they seem to send contradictory messages about behavior. One parent believes in dealing with conflict and negativity, while the other strenuously avoids confrontation. Judgments about power relationships within the family are based on cognitive representations, schema, or "cultural scripts" (Bugental, Lyon, Krantz, & Cortez, 1997) learned from personal experience. Could these laissez-faire parents and children be considered low in perceived power? Research in the field of psychology discussed below, shows that parents who have low perceived social power make exaggerated use of power-oriented interaction strategies with children. Moreover, coercive parenting is predictive of future behavior problems among children.

In a study investigating the intergenerational transmission of perceived power (Bugental & Martorell, 1999), the interactions of children (ages 6-10) and their friends were observed following a potentially competitive task. Parental powerlessness most clearly predicted children's self praise, and child powerlessness predicted friend derogation. Interestingly, intergenerational transmission of perceived power was significant for mothers and sons in the sample. For those who possessed low power schema, defense strategies varied with context. Self-perceived low power individuals were more likely to overreact and engage in abusive power tactics, such as derogation of threatening others, if control opportunities were available. By contrast, low power individuals responded with avoidance, ambiguous communication and ingratiation tactics if control opportunities were not available (Bugental & Lewis, 1998).

Bugental and colleagues (1997) suggest that "it will be important to determine the extent to which low-power individuals show an equivalent response to power cues in other authority-based relationships, for example, supervisor-subordinate relationships in work settings" (p. 1307). Similarly,



how might these individuals communicate in group contexts? Interpersonal communication research suggests that, in the context of a power struggle, two forms of destructive conflict are exhibited: *overt* and *covert* (Comstock & Buller, 1991). Overt destructive conflict involves the use of distributive strategies such as assigning blame, communication of negative evaluations of others, and seeking unilateral behavior change from others (Sillars, 1980). Covert destructive conflict employs avoidance strategies to minimize conflict by ignoring the conflict or by addressing the conflict issue ambiguously (Sillars, Colletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982). Individuals with low self-esteem are said to be more likely to use either competitive distributive strategies or defensive avoidance strategies (Comstock & Buller, 1991). Therefore, we posit that it is highly likely that low perceived power individuals will also exhibit low self-esteem. Based on this line of reasoning, we offer the next and final set of propositions in this section.

Proposition 5: Group members from laissez-faire family backgrounds will exhibit low perceived social power and low self-esteem in other group contexts.

Proposition 6: Group members considered low in perceived social power and self-esteem will use distributive communication strategies in all group contexts exhibiting control opportunities.

Proposition 7: Group members considered low in perceived social power and self-esteem will use avoidant communication strategies in all group contexts where control opportunities are unavailable.

The foregoing propositions are offered as heuristics. They are by no means all-encompassing in terms of describing the impact of the family on relational communication in groups. However, they do serve as examples of why and how a broadening of perspective and an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the family may increase understanding of its impact in other group contexts.

## **Identity and Cultural Issues in Intragroup Relations**

### Group Heterogeneity

The increasing heterogeneity of groups has not gone unnoticed among small group researchers. Numerous scholars have called for an examination of the effects of diversity on group communication (Anderson, 1983; Barge & Frey, 1997; Boyett & Conn, 1992; Haslett & Ruebush, 1999; Keyton, 1999). Group members from heterogeneous backgrounds possess different experiences and worldviews that influence intragroup interaction. Research examining effects of heterogeneity suggests that heterogeneous groups are more creative, analytical, and produce higher quality solutions than homogenous groups (Cox, 1993; McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996). While these investigations are illuminating to both scholars and practitioners, not all of the outcomes of group diversity are positive. For example, known difficulties in diverse groups include negative affective reactions; and decreased satisfaction, productivity, and cohesiveness; shared leadership and boundary-spanning problems (McLeod et al., 1996; Kirchmeyer, 1993, Thomas, & Wallace, 1996; Triandis, Hall, & Ewen, 1965).

Keyton (1999, p. 193) notes, “when group members communicate directly or indirectly about their relationships with one another, they provide cues about their own and other members’ worth and identities that, ultimately, affect their self esteem.” In the following discussion, we highlight how individual members’ identities impact intragroup communication. Theoretical explanations are offered to assist in understanding how individual identities can, and often do hinder effective communication. Future research suggestions also are offered.

Research has not only established that members are differentiated with regard to status and roles (Jones, 1986; Kirchmeyer, 1993; Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992) but that such differentiation strongly influences intragroup relations. Minorities may face difficulty in heterogeneous groups, for example, especially in being relegated to a position of low status in the group (Asante & Davis, 1985). Consequently, minorities often feel ostracized, contribute less to decision making, are less committed to the group, and are confronted with discrimination and negative expectations (Cianni & Romberger, 1991; DeVries & Pettigrew, 1998; Haslett, Geis, & Carter, 1992).

Research on *social stigma* suggests that both minority members and the group frequently raise the question of “deservingness” (Major, Feinstein, & Crocker, 1994). The minority and/or the group may perceive minority members as “token” who are part of the group as a result of external influences, in turn sending strong relational messages about the value they bring to the group. Minority group members who question their sense of deservingness may experience feelings of loneliness and decreased satisfaction. Since levels of loneliness and membership satisfaction are negatively related to productivity (Anderson & Martin, 1995; Cragan & Wright, 1991), communication of relational messages is critical. Given the classic work of Schacter (1951), we might anticipate that in heterogeneous groups relational messages are communicated initially by pressure followed by termination of any communication. Similarly, research from other areas such as compliance gaining might lead us to expect initially positive communication followed by increasingly negative tactics (Burgoon, Dillard, Doran, 1983). Taken together, while positive relational messages may predominate during the “entry” stages of assimilation in work groups for instance (Jablin & Krone, 1987), over time relational messages may dissipate or become negative. In light of the preceding research we pose the following proposition:

Proposition 8: Minority group members are more likely to receive negative relational messages. As a consequence, they will experience loneliness, decreased group satisfaction, and reduced productivity.

Stereotypes, prejudice, and bias between people with different identities help explain why group heterogeneity impacts intragroup relations. Intragroup relations may suffer as a result of the tension between personal and social identities (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1986). *Personal identity* can be defined as the unique and individual characteristics that distinguish us from others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). *Social identity*, on the other hand, is defined as the identity we form by belonging to a number of groups (gender/ethnicity/class). Social Identity Theory seeks to explain how individual behavior is influenced by group memberships. Because the tendency to describe “the group in the individual” (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 17) can produce interactions based on group membership rather than individual identity, perceiving an individual based on social rather than personal identity is problematic. Specifically, members of a group may communicate with fellow group members not as individuals, but rather as members of a group. Concomitantly, because communication based on one’s social identity is often guided by stereotypes, the role stereotypes play in such heterogeneous groups should also be apparent (Turner, 1987). As Gouran (1994, p. 34) notes, “if we seek to develop

greater insights into the nature of interaction in groups, we must not only concentrate more energy on the effects of relational characteristics on the content and form of exchanges among members, but do so as understood from the point of view of the parties to given relationships.”

Such perceptions may affect the way members communicate with each other. According to Communication Accommodation Theory, we adapt our speech, language, and non-verbal communication as a way to show if we are thinking about a person in an encounter as an individual or as a group member (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995). Specifically, if an interaction is seen mainly in interpersonal terms, or if we wish to show our liking and approval for the other group’s culture, we may change our language, accent, or other behavior to be similar to our interaction partner; this is called *convergence* (Giles & Coupland, 1991). On the other hand, we can show our dislike or disapproval for the other group’s culture through *divergence*, or accentuating communication differences (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987). Given group scholars’ (Hirokawa & Salazar, 1999) call for theoretical developments that account for diversity in groups, Social Identity Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory may offer group scholars increased traction with which to investigate the “relational side” of heterogeneous groups. Analysis of convergent/divergent communication messages among heterogeneous groups should reveal whether group members are communicating with each other based on social identities, rather than personal identities. Hence, we advance the following proposition:

Proposition 9: Heterogeneous group members who communicate with each other based on social identities will produce divergent communication messages.

The use of divergent communication among group members may explain the lack of cohesion, satisfaction, and affect in heterogeneous groups, and explain why diverse groups have more difficulty in agreeing and working together, and have members who more frequently try to be controlling (Watson, Kumar, & Michaelson, 1993). In light of these findings, it may be that group members interact with each other based on social identities rather than personal identities. Thus, our tenth proposition:

Proposition 10: Heterogeneous group members who communicate based on each others social identities will experience lack of cohesion, satisfaction, and affect.

### Intercultural Communication

Thus far our discussion has focused on group heterogeneity in general. Culture is one aspect of group heterogeneity that impacts intragroup relations (Gallois & Callan, 1997). As Gouran (1999, p. 46) notes, “a particular important antecedent variable is the cultural background of group members.”

Hofstede (1984) has identified four dimensions of culture: *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *individualism*, and *masculinity*. The *power distance* (PD) dimension concerns how societies cope with human inequality. Specifically, Hofstede (1984) focuses on how individuals respond to the relative power of superiors and subordinates. *Uncertainty avoidance* (UA) refers to an individual’s lack of tolerance for uncertainty as indicated by a willingness to follow rules, expectation to continue in the current job, and perceived stress at work. Research by Watson et al. (1993) and Thomas et al. (1996), in which heterogeneous groups often report having members of Western origin

who tried to be too controlling, suggests that cultural differences of power and leadership are relevant issues to group diversity. Furthermore, Bantz (1993) suggests that multi-cultural groups that vary on PD and UA are likely to face difficulty in group development in terms of the emergence of norms, particularly those concerning conflict and leadership. Given these difficulties, establishing “leaderless” cross-functional groups or ensuring collective agreement in establishing leaders may be particularly appropriate for heterogeneous groups. As a result of employing such leadership practices, we would expect instances of conflict to be reduced. Hence, the following proposition:

Proposition 11: Groups comprised of members who vary on PD and AU, and that engage in collective agreement in establishing leadership in heterogeneous groups will be less likely to experience conflict than groups who do not employ collective agreement in establishing leaders.

The relative importance of the individual and the collective are the focus of Hofstede’s (1984) dimension of *individualism*. Research reveals that individuals from *collectivistic* cultural traditions are more cooperative than individuals from individualistic cultural traditions and that groups comprised of homogenous members representing collectivistic cultures have more positive assessments of group processes and outcomes than collectivistic members in heterogeneous groups (Cox et al., 1992; Thomas et al., 1996). While collectivistic cultures may initially appear more cooperative than individualistic cultures, this may only be true when individuals from collectivistic cultures are interacting with an ingroup. According to Triandis (1995) collectivistic cultures have clearer ingroup/outgroup distinctions than individualistic cultures. When individuals from collectivistic cultures interact with a perceived outgroup, cooperation from individualistic members will dissipate. In light of the reviewed research, we should expect to see differences in the relational messages communicated by individualistic and collectivistic group members. Consequently, we pose the following proposition:

Proposition 12: In groups composed of both individualistic and collectivistic members, collectivistic members will send more positive relational messages when they perceive the group as an ingroup rather than an outgroup.

The final dimension, *masculinity*, reflects Hofstede’s argument that societies may promote socialization of individuals in two different directions. Masculine cultures socialize individuals to be assertive, seek advancement, and strive for earnings, whereas, feminine cultures socialize individuals to be nurturing, oriented toward providing service, emphasize interpersonal needs, and be concerned about the physical environment. In an examination of multi-cultural task groups, Kirchmeyer (1993) concluded that degrees of assertiveness and concern for others affect how one interacts in groups. Given that group members representing the two cultural orientations ostensibly have different foci and concerns, it would seem reasonable to expect different relational messages from each. Thus, the following proposition is advanced:

Proposition 13: In groups comprised of individuals from both feminine and masculine cultures, group members from feminine cultures will tend to interpersonal needs more than group members from masculine cultures.

The importance of identity and cultural issues in small groups cannot be overestimated. While group members are typically reminded of these issues in meeting face to face with group members, given the proliferation of technology “virtual teams” are increasingly being formed (Hofstede, Vermunt, Smits, & Noorderhaven, 1999). Although computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been heralded for its ability to transcend social boundaries, mounting evidence suggests CMC may have the opposite effect (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995; Spears, Lea, & Lee, 1990). While CMC does provide the opportunity to cross social boundaries, ironically, it can also reinforce these boundaries by giving group members greater power to define personal and group identity. The following section is devoted to understanding the impact CMC has on relational communication in groups.

### **Relational and Computer-Mediated Communication: A Group Perspective**

A plethora of research on CMC has focused on four areas -- technology assessment, organizational dynamics, technical capabilities, and social psychological studies. Technological assessment studies look at the impact of computers on society (Bikson & Law, 1993; Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Lancaster, 1978; Ocker, Fjermestand, Hiltz, R. S., & Johnson, 1998). Organizational studies focus on the effect of CMC on professional and managerial functions as well as employment contexts (Bikson & Gutek, 1983; Christie, 1981; Hiltz, 1982; Hinds & Kiesler, 1995; Markus, 1994). Studies addressing technical capabilities examine the degree of difficulty with which people use computers (Rice, 1992; Thomas & Carroll, 1981; Turoff, 1982). Finally, social psychological studies have analyzed effects of social or organizational setting and *CMC on relationships* (Kiesler, Zubrow, Moses, & Geller, 1985; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Short, Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994; Williams, & Christie, 1976; Williams, 1975). As we know, the relational dynamics of groups impact all aspects of group behavior, but it is in this latter social-psychological area where most of the research on the relational side of CMC *groups* has been conducted.

However, there are few studies that specifically address *relational communication* in CMC groups. In highlighting this deficit, Gouran (1999) emphasized the importance of analyzing the role of computer technology in groups. Although, researchers have examined the differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication outcomes, they have failed to address “how and when one may form a personal *relationship* with another member of a salient *group*” (Walther, 1997). In particular, Walther (1994) urged that “further research must explore the influences of media, temporal dynamics, and *relational communication* on the effectiveness and satisfaction of CMC groups” (p. 495). In this section, we review relevant research on CMC and discuss theoretical perspectives with the greatest potential to illuminate the relational and communicative aspects of group members’ use of CMC.

#### Relationship-Relevant CMC Research

One dominant view of CMC is that it produces different emotional and relational group patterns than those characterizing face-to-face (FTF) groups (Walther & Burgoon, 1992) because of a reduction in the types of message cues readily available to FTF group members. In particular, some have suggested that CMC users try to adapt the content of their messages to reflect some socioemotional content (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Rice & Love, 1987). Nevertheless, users often report that CMC is less personal and socioemotional

than FTF communication, and leads to different relational patterns (Hiltz, Johnson, & Turoff, 1986; Rice & Love, 1987).

Several explanations have been offered for the finding that relationships fostered in CMC contexts are less satisfying than those nurtured in FTF settings (Hiltz et al., 1986). First, the language used by CMC group members may be interpreted as affective but negative in tone (e.g., insults, flaming, contempt). In turn, this may affect how a group deals with conflict, as well as influencing the rules governing behavior for that particular group (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire., 1986). Given these findings, we offer the following proposition:

Proposition 14: Language used by CMC group members will be interpreted differently than language used by FTF group members.

Second, lower satisfaction in CMC groups may be a result of technologically-induced de-individuation. CMC consists of factors that can induce de-individuation -- anonymity, reduced self-regulation, and reduced-self awareness (Lea & Spears, 1991). These ingredients can sometimes affect group behavior and relationships by promoting uninhibited or antisocial communication within a group, leading to actions not usually displayed in FTF settings (Jessup & Tansik, 1991). Moreover, we can also posit that as satisfaction increases, the CMC factors which induce de-individuation will also fluctuate. Therefore, we pose the related propositions:

Proposition 15: Initially, CMC group members will experience less satisfaction with their group than will FTF group members; however, (a) as satisfaction increases, anonymity in CMC will decrease; (b) as satisfaction increases, self-regulation in CMC will increase; and (c) as satisfaction increases, self-awareness in CMC will increase.

Additionally, the lack of nonverbal cues (concerning physical appearance, authority, status), may allow CMC users to take part in group decisions and interaction in a more uninhibited manner (Edinger & Patterson, 1983; Hiltz, Turoff, & Johnson, 1985).

CMC has been described as allowing less “social presence” in group communication (Fowler & Wackerbarth, 1980; Hiemstra, 1982; Williams, 1978). Fowler and Wackerbarth (1980) reported that CMC fostered a more serious and business-like climate focused on task goals, while FTF was more friendly, emotional, and personal. However, attitudes toward CMC appear to shift in a more favorable direction *over time* as informational exchange evolves to include relational linkages (McGrath, Arrow, Gruenfeld, Hollingshead, & O’Connor, 1993). Hence, we put forth the following proposition:

Proposition 16: Initially, CMC group members will act in a less friendly manner than FTF group members.

Proponents of Social Information Processing Theory, one of the theoretical perspectives we treat next, have explained this shift in relational climate in CMC groups.

### Relevant Theories about CMC and Groups

Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory suggests that relationships require more time to develop in computer-mediated groups compared to FTF groups (Chidambaram, 1996). Not only have

CMC groups been shown to take longer to reach decisions compared to the face-to-face counterparts (Scott, 1999; Walther, 1992), but CMC groups -- while initially lower in intimacy than FTF groups -- adapt overtime and develop ways of exchanging socioemotional thoughts (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). All communication in CMC groups -- socioemotional and task -- is received and sent on computer screens. Add to this the amount of time it takes to read and reply to a message, and it is not hard to understand why relational intimacy takes longer to develop in CMC groups (Chidambaram, 1996). Given previous studies demonstrating that despite initial dissatisfaction with relational aspects of CMC groups, members become more satisfied with the technology over time. Therefore, we offer the following proposition:

Proposition 17: Over time, there will be a positive relationship between use of technology, satisfaction, and relational development in CMC groups.

Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) proposes that over time CMC groups will tailor salient aspects of the computer medium to fit their relational needs (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996). AST proponents suggest that frequent use of a technology by members of a *group* will change the basic nature of that technology because of the unique ways in which people appropriate it (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). AST emphasizes the role of mutual influence of social and technological context on the structuration of technological usage (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). Implicit in this theory is the idea that relationships among group members are dynamic and, as these groups change in relational structure over time, so does the nature of technology use: “both *technology* and content, then, affect *group* outcomes through their influence on the structuring processes by which these outcomes are produced” (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990, p. 181). Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 18: Over time, CMC group members will appropriate technological features to fit their relational needs.

AST takes into account not only stability but also change in CMC groups (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). *Group norms* that govern *relationships in CMC* systems are typically adapted from “general social knowledge of how decisions might be made and built into the system” (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990, p. 180). Groups then develop idiosyncratic bases for communication --including technologically mediated communication. An AST perspective references many traditional treatments of relational dynamics such as cohesion, alienation, relational development, cooperation, and the like as inherently tied to groups’ structuring processes (with regard to task, technology appropriation, etc.) *and* as fundamentally communicative in nature.

## Conclusion

The origins of the study of the "relational side" of groups are rooted in the desire to foster cooperation with the ultimate aim of achieving effective outcomes (Morgan, 1934). Additionally, the concept of working together in groups encapsulated a democratic ideal held particularly dear after the World War II, when democracy was truly threatened by dictatorship (Frey, 1996). The idea that a positive relational group atmosphere is not only inherently appealing, but also productive, does not preclude the consideration of the

negative aspects of relational influences in groups. However, there is a need for balance in the study of the relational aspects of group communication. This balance is reflected in the way we have set forth an agenda for the study of relational dynamics in the group contexts, and with regard to antecedent and contextual attributes discussed above. Above all, we have emphasized the impact of relational communication on group *process* rather than task or outcome. This redresses the balance somewhat, remembering that in the recent past task considerations have attracted the lion's share of scholarly interest (Frey, 1996).

Family, truly the first group (Socha, 1999), represents the original source of relational learning of *self-control* or the lack of it, *flexibility* or *rigidity*, relational *cohesion* or *withdrawal*, *consensus* or *domination*. How does this learning affect our relational behaviors in groups across the life span? As another potentially pivotal antecedent to the relational behavior in groups, our social identity as members of a myriad of social groupings -- female, older adult, ethnic minority, or our cultural identity as high or low context -- involves *stereotyping* and possibly *stigmatization*. How does this help or hinder the relational process in heterogeneous groups? And finally, in a technological age, computer mediated communication in groups presents interesting problems in terms of *relational development*, *satisfaction*, and *cooperation*. Time and distance constraints for many individuals forming groups make CMC a necessity and therefore common place. How will this increased use of technology impact relational satisfaction and cooperation as a process and as an outcome?

There exists a huge, and potentially fertile, area for research with regard to the relational side of groups. In Table 1, we summarize some of the relational functions that are served in groups. Many of these functions act as facilitators of group process and outcome, but as we have already pointed out, they also present a "dark side" (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994). Throughout our discussion of this research agenda, we have identified potential theoretical underpinnings with the belief that theory is no less important than empirical work. Therefore we urge against a return to the variable analytic approach characterizing the past group research (Frey, 1996). In underscoring the importance of relational communication in the group context, it is helpful to examine how existing, hitherto unapplied group theories and research practices can inform a new research agenda. More fruitful, though, may be an approach that marries what is current in group communication with theoretical insights and research from other allied disciplines, and communication areas. It is hoped that this brief discussion will ignite interest, and foster useful academic partnerships that ultimately lead to happier and more productive experiences in the types of groups we study.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE



**Table 1: Summary of Relational Aspects of Selected Antecedent, Process, and Outcome Factors in Groups**

<b>Antecedent</b>	<b>Process**</b>	<b>Outcome**</b>
<b>Gender</b>	affiliation/belonging climate cooperation control/domination*  inclusion rapport role emergence* satisfaction	affiliation/belonging climate  commitment to future work  role emergence* satisfaction
®	<b>Non-verbal Behavior</b>  approval/disapproval* attraction competence credibility maintenance (e.g., mediation, support, facilitation) rapport	
®	<b>Influence</b>  approval/disapproval* attraction  conflict vs. harmony* conformity vs. deviance* consensus* dependency (leader)* norm development	commitment to future work conflict vs. harmony* conformity vs. deviance* consensus* dependency (leader)* norms

<b>Family</b>	avoidance/withdrawal* competence flexibility groupphate* groupthink* nurturing self-restraint	avoidance/withdrawal*  groupphate*
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<b>Antecedent</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>Social Identity and Culture</b>	avoidance/withdrawal* climate cliques/subgroups* cohesion complements or disrupts process* conflict vs. harmony* conformity/deviance* control/domination* groupphate* motivation satisfaction scapegoating* socialization stress*	avoidance/withdrawal* climate cliques/subgroups* cohesion  conflict vs. harmony*  groupphate*  satisfaction  stress*
<b>Computer Mediated Communication</b>	affiliation/belonging climate cohesion*  consensus coordination inclusion  rapport role emergence* satisfaction	climate cohesion commitment to future work consensus*  productivity  role emergence* satisfaction

\* dark side components as conceptualized by Cupach & Spitzberg (1994)

\*\* after Keyton (1999)

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