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A social constructionist approach

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Jens O. Meissner

The autor:

Jens O. Meissner

Department of Economics (WWZ), Leadership, Organization and HRM, University of Basel

jens.meissner@unibas.ch

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Address for information:

WWZ Forum, Petersgraben 51, CH-4003 Basel, Fax +41 61 267 33 33

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RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION – A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH ¹

Jens O. Meißner ²

Mai 2005

Abstract

This paper contributes to possible answers to the question: What are the effects of computer-mediated communication on relationship qualities in organizations? To answer this question without oversimplifying the phenomena an adequate research methodology has to be found.

First, the interrelationship between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and relationship quality is reviewed. CMC-theory will be described from three main perspectives and the risks and chances for relationship quality will be shown. The review indicates that most studies in the field are founded on a positivistic basis. Relationships are treated as static dyads neglecting contextual factors. Thus, the insight into relational processes in computerized environments remains limited. As an alternative a research methodology based on the epistemological stance of social constructionism is proposed. It will be explained, how the researchers' view can be broadened by applying the method of the 'narrative interview' in practice based studies in computer-mediated contexts. In the concluding part, the contribution of this approach to research and practice will be discussed.

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication, relationship quality, social constructionism

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² The authors address is Department of Economics (WWZ), 'Leadership, Organization and HRM', University of Basel, CH-4052 Basel, Switzerland. E-Mail: jens.meissner@unibas.ch

Relationship Quality in the Context OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION – A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

1. INTRODUCTION

When introducing communication technologies in organizations, formal and informal patterns of coordination and interaction change. In the last thirty years, much research has been done in the field computer-mediated communication (CMC). Many sociological and social psychological insights about computer-based interaction have been gathered. But the interplay between technological and social factors in organizations still remains largely unknown. For example, Ackerman stated for the field of computer-supported cooperative work: “There is a fundamental mismatch between what is required socially and what we can do technically.” (2000: 197). A similar mismatch can be stated for CMC. Recently, Barry and Fulmer repeated criticism made by Bordia in 1997. He expressed alarm at “how little we know about the effects of CMC on interpersonal influence, persuasion, impression formation and management, power relations, and person perception.” (Bordia, 1997). Especially, CMC-theory systematically lacks in explaining a) effects on relationship quality as a part of a holistic relationship³ concept, and b) effects on relationships in ubiquitous computerized communication environments where multiple communication media are used under very diverse situational circumstances.

Because of the lack of CMC-theory mentioned above it is important to investigate the interrelationship between CMC and relationship quality in more depth. So the question to be answered here is: What are the effects of computer-mediated communication on relationship qualities in organizations?

This paper should be seen in its larger context which is to understand the effects of CMC on organizations’ social capital. Thus, social capital theory is the starting point for the rationale of this working paper. Social capital is “the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor’s social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence and solidarity it makes available to the actor.” (Adler & Kwon, 2002: 17). Social capital theory has evolved from several disciplines: sociology, ethnology, economics and political science. In management studies, social capital can be seen as an important construct for understanding the social interrelatedness in organizations as a valuable asset. There is a wide range of fields which indicates its positive influences on management issues. To name only a few: career success and executive compensation, helping colleagues finding a job, improving cross-functional team work, facilitating product innovation and fostering inter-firm learning (Adler & Kwon, 2002: 17).

Social capital cannot be reduced to the mere exchange of services and goods in the sense of reciprocal and transactional coordination. Adler and Kwon speak of “goodwill”, others mention “willingness” (Whiteley, 2000: 450), “informal values” (Fukuyama, 2000: 16) and “trust” (Paldam & Svendsen, 2000: 342; Putnam, 2000: 19). Because these topics are inseparably bound to social relationships relationship quality seems to be a crucial factor. Relationship quality determines whether resources will be shared and passed through the social network or not. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998: 244) subsume relationship quality under the ‘relational dimension’ of social capital. This dimension comprises norms and sanctions, trust, shared beliefs, solidarity and reciprocity, identity and identification.

³ In the following, “relationships” and “interpersonal relationships” are used with the same meaning.

These terms point to the concept of relational communication which sees communication as a process through which communicators reciprocally define their interpersonal relationship (Parks, 1977; Stohl & Redding, 1987). It is obvious that communication plays a critical role for relationship quality. Thus, changes of social capital by means of CMC can be identified by investigating changes of communication processes and their implications for relational understandings and practices. For this purpose, in the first chapter CMC-theory will be presented from three perspectives which are the “reduced-social-context-cues”-hypothesis, the social information processing model and the hyperpersonal perspective, and the online community model. The effects on relationship quality will be stated after the illustration of each concept. The second chapter focuses on concepts of relationship quality which are used in CMC research. It will be shown that these concepts base upon dyadic understanding of relationships and neglect to take contextual factors into account. This chapter is closed by proposing a social constructionist approach to investigate how relationship quality in CMC contexts is constructed by the involved individuals. In the concluding part, implications and conclusions will be drawn from the proposed research approach.

2. Relationship Quality in Theories of Computer-mediated Communication

In CMC, two basic hypotheses can be distinguished. First, the “reduced-social-context-cues”-approach which states that CMC filters social context cues out of communication processes and leads to depersonalization. Second, the social information processing model and the hyperpersonal perspective which posit that a) CMC is able to convey relational information adequate to face-to-face (FTF) settings. Furthermore, b) CMC might lead to communication which promotes intimacy as well as identity building and can be equivalent and even more intense than FTF-communication. Both these hypotheses shall be described and reviewed here for their influence on social capital. Moreover, because it sees communication as an action of a collective, the concept of online communities and its consequences for social capital is worth considering as a third perspective.

2.1. Reduced Social Cues Hypothesis

In the “reduced social cues”-approach, communication is seen as a process mediated through computer media which has – in comparison with FTF-communication - limited capacity to convey social cues (e.g. age, sex and social status). Social presence theory, which conceptualized structural characteristics of communication media, gave first insights into this mechanism. Short, Williams & Christie (1976) determined the social presence of a medium as the degree to which it enables interpersonal interaction. Information richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) observed that media differ in their ability to handle rich information. “Information richness is defined as the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval.” The richness of a medium reflects its “capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization, and language variety” (Daft & Winginton, 1979; Daft & Lengel, 1986: 560). As a consequence, para- and nonverbal symbols are filtered out and fewer senses are addressed. Also, possibilities to give immediate feedback and to create a sense of proximity decrease.

When communication lacks the dynamic personal interaction and information, consequences for the social sphere are observable, too. People focus their attention more on the characteristics of the message (e.g. words, pictures) than on the social setting in which this action takes place. Researchers found that communicators feel a greater sense of anonymity and detect less individuality in others

(Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). “They feel less empathy, less guilt, less concern over how they compare with others, and are less influenced by social conventions.” (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991).

In Culnan’s and Markus’ view, FTF-communication is the ideal one, and mediated communication, especially CMC, is a poor substitute (Culnan & Markus, 1987). In contrast to this stance, researchers argued that the suitability of communication media depends on the task which is to be accomplished (Jarvenpaa, 1989; Rice, 1992). This notion of a task-technology-fit leads to a ‘media richness model’ which attributes a sector of effective use to each communication medium (Reichwald, Möslein, Sachenbacher, & Englberger, 1998: 57, see figure 1) depending on the complexity of the respective task. When task and chosen medium do not fit, overcomplication or oversimplification will be the consequence.

FIGURE 1

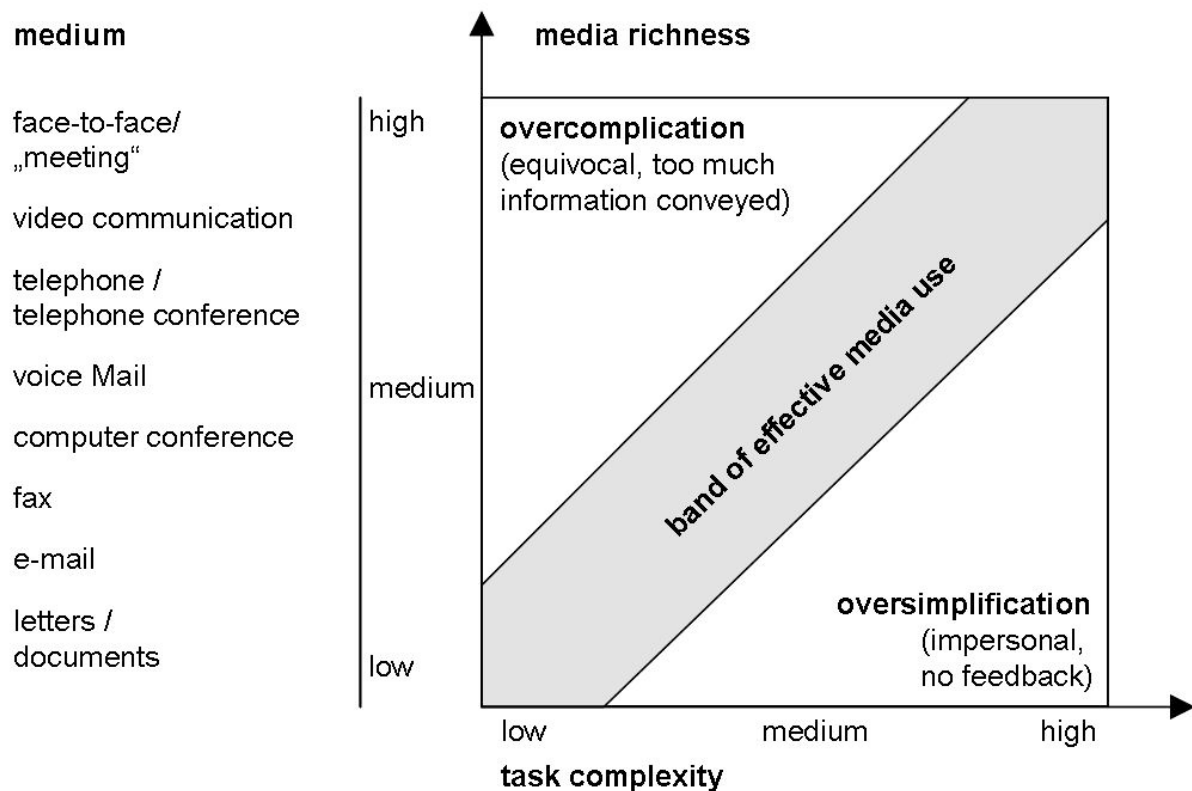


Figure 1. Media richness model (Reichwald et. al., 1998: 57)

The media richness model and especially the assumption of a fixed media hierarchy based on technological characteristics have been criticized: “The richest medium is that which best provides the set of capabilities needed by the situation: the individuals, task and social context within which they interact. Thus, concluding that fact-to-face communication is the ‘richest’ medium is inappropriate.” (Dennis & Valacich, 1999: 3)

Dennis and Valacich (1999) argue that, instead of task complexity, communication processes in groups are the relevant factor in choosing the adequate media. Thus, ‘media synchronicity’, that means “the extent to which individuals work together on the same activity at the same time; i.e., have a

shared focus” (Dennis & Valacich, 1999: 3) would be a better criterion than task complexity. Media synchronicity theory is founded on the time-interaction-performance theory of McGrath (1991). He distinguishes between two communication processes in groups. The first class of processes are ‘diverging’ in nature. That means information has to be efficiently distributed. Secondly, ‘converging’ processes are necessary to create a common ground and shared meaning for successful team cooperation. Media synchronicity theory suggests choosing the adequate communication media for the different group processes. For divergent processes Dennis and Valacich propose ‘lean’ asynchronous media like e-mail and groupware systems. Convergent processes require socially rich and synchronous media like FTF and telephone conferences.

Media richness theory and media synchronicity theory prescribe the choice of different media in specific contexts. Thereby both theories assume that media selection can be made by acts of rational choice. However, media choice theory has developed different alternative concepts about how media are chosen. Those will be delineated later when alternative perspectives on the use of media will be explained.

2.1.1 Consequences for relationship quality

From the perspective of the “reduced social cues”-hypothesis relationship quality between communicators is shifted towards more anonymity and egocentrism. The lesser concern for others, social norms, and conventions draws a dark picture of the sociability of communication media users. CMC has a destructive impact on trust, collective norms and shared values. However, when choosing appropriate media for specific tasks the negative consequences of these media for relationship quality might be minimized.

2.2 Social Information Processing and the Hyperpersonal Perspective

While the “reduced social context cues”-hypothesis dominated the academic discussion during the 1970s and 80s, an alternative view on CMC evolved in the 1990s. This view can be taken as a counter-perspective because it refers to field research which questioned the results of the “reduced social context cues”-hypothesis (Walther, 1995; Barry & Fulmer, 2004: 288; Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

With the application of the *social information processing model* to CMC Walther (1992) introduced a concept which was able to deal with relational communication. This model states that groups interacting through technology are able to form social relationships as comparable FTF groups are. But they are handicapped by the restricting characteristics of media. The basic assumption of Walther’s model is that “relational communication is a question of rate, not capability” (Walther, 1992:53). Thus, given enough time, groups communicating via communication media will develop similar to FTF-groups because they will establish a well defined set of symbols and behaviours expressing relational information. Empirical results showed that persons interacting by means of CMC exhibited a greater proportion of more direct behaviours than participants did when interacting unmediated. Additionally, they showed a higher degree of intimacy and demonstrated significantly greater gains in attributional confidence over the course of the investigated conversations, thus reducing uncertainty more effectively than the FTF couples (Walther, 1995, 1992; Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

The social information processing model has led to the *hyperpersonal perspective* on CMC. The term hyperpersonal perspective stems from Walther, too. He stated that online communication might

reach a level of affection which would be unexpected to occur in offline settings (Walther, 1996, 2000). The hyperpersonal perspective makes some assumptions for its four basic elements (a) receiver, (b) sender, (c) channel, and (d) feedback. As an outcome of the interplay of these four factors, a very high degree of affection can be created.

- (a) For the behaviour of the receiver, the SIDE-model⁴ proposed by Spears and Lea (Spears & Lea, 1992, 1994; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995) provides valuable insights. This model does not question the social cues reduction caused by communication media. But it comes to different conclusions because it proposes that the effects of CMC will vary depending on whether the social context highlights individual or group identity relations. CMC thus can have two different consequences: Either an individual tends to egocentrism when individual identity is emphasized. Or it strongly supports feeling as a part of a group when social identity is salient. That means, if the collective context is clearly emphasized, egocentrism can be prevented and joint identity can be fostered.
- (b) For the sender the hyperpersonal perspective supposes selective behaviour and the tendency to represent himself in a positive manner (cf. Gardner, Martinko, & van Eck Peluchette, 1996). This means, before sending his messages the sender will revise them to check their clarity and his self-representation.
- (c) Concerning the communication channel another positive effect can occur, especially when the pressure on a group is high. In FTF-settings which are characterized by entrainment it is observable that communication becomes impersonal. In CMC-settings the chance remains to compose messages carefully with explicit regard to aspects of relational communication. Thus, there is a bigger chance to avoid destructive conflict.
- (d) Last but not least, additional feedback opportunities may create positive dynamics in CMC-settings.

Walther recapitulates that the hyperpersonal perspective assumes a selective sender and an idealizing receiver. Additionally, the channel is seen as supportive and the feedback as enhancing. This will lead to a better and more selective communication behaviour and thus create a very high degree of affection in the communication process (Walther, 2000: 21). As can be seen here, the assumptions of the hyperpersonal perspective seem too optimistic. But this perspective explains why some kinds of online relationships appear to be more affective - therefore "hyperpersonal" - than comparable FTF-relationships as Walther and others have found. (Walther, 1995; Burke & Chidambaram, 1999; Tidwell & Walther, 2002) Also, the existence of successful and enduring romantic online relationships can be explained by applying this perspective on CMC.

2.2.1 Consequences for relationship quality

Differing from the rather sceptical way in which the "reduced-social-context-cues"-hypothesis sees CMC, the hyperpersonal perspective contributes to an alternative understanding of CMC. Communication media are not seen as restricting; instead they offer some characteristics allowing, facilitating, and improving social interaction and thus provide additional opportunities for personal relationships. Especially when enough time is given to establish a shared set of symbols that expresses relational information, chances are high that relationship quality can be influenced positively in CMC. Also, the insights of the SIDE-model offer new possibilities: In social psychology, people in large collectives were seen as being addicted to faceless conformity. Now, via CMC, it seems to be possible

⁴ SIDE = Social Identity and DE-individuation

to create group identity even in the case of very large groups. From this point of view the relationship quality of large social structures can be affected positively.

Up to here, CMC theories can be criticized because of their mainly social psychological conception: Most empirical results stem from experimental zero-history observations which are not suitable to render contextual factors and dynamic processes. More comprehension can be gathered from alternative concepts on media use. Several perspectives on the use of media have been deployed which broaden the narrow understanding which was introduced by media richness theory.

First, researchers developed a symbolic interactionist perspective (Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987) which assumes that media is very often chosen and used for symbolic purposes. The mere use of a particular channel may carry symbolic significance which totally ignores other rational considerations about media use.

Second, researchers suggested that social constructions of technology determine the media use (Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990; Fulk, 1993; Markus, 1994). From the social constructivists' perspective even "objective" media characteristics are seen as shared meaning which emerges and is negotiated in social interaction among the members of a collective.

Third, following Giddens theory of structuration, the interplay between groups and their cooperation technology was investigated (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990; 1992; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). It was found that technology enables group behaviour as well as it restrains it. Thus, new media use has to be adapted to existing structures but will lead to other structures, too. This was called "adaptive structuration theory" and was applied to the more general interplay between technology and organization earlier (Barley, 1986; Orlikowski & Robey, 1991; Orlikowski, 1992).

Fourth, Carlson and Zmud (1999) proposed the channel expansion theory as another perspective. In their concept, media richness underlies the perception of the communicators. Their experiences with the medium, the tasks, their communication partners, and the organizational and social context play an important role. In a specific setting, actors learn to use media with each other and to "establish" the necessary richness to fulfill their needs.

Fifth, Barry & Fulmer (2004) propose a model of media adoption which suggests that communicators choose media mainly to influence others. The actors are able to migrate, i.e., switch the medium, if needed. Additionally, they can expand or contract the media characteristics, that is, its "social bandwidth", the degree of interactivity and surveillance.

Summing up, these alternative perspectives on media use integrate aspects of social and strategical influence, symbolic action, and contextual learning into the theory of media use. All these concepts indicate that shared norms and meaning as well as contextual factors are important criteria which have to be taken into account when thinking about CMC. Thus, a contextual perspective on media use and its effects provides valuable insights for understanding CMC. The online community model supports this stance.

2.3 The Online Community Model

An early definition of online communities stems from Howard Rheingold: "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." (Rheingold, 1993). Jenny Preece (2000) states the following characteristics of online communities:

“An online community consists of: (1) People, who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, such as leading or moderating. (2) A shared purpose, such as an interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community. (3) Policies, in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules, and laws that guide people’s interactions. (4) Computer systems, to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness.”

The online community model proposes very important insights for understanding CMC. As the definition shows, an online community has a cultural component which consists of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules etc. These terms are similar to the basic elements of organizational culture which are ‘basic assumptions, shared norms, values and beliefs’ (Schein, 1984). Online communities thus can be seen as cultures which can only exist in cyberspace.

From a sociological perspective, online communities are social systems which produce specific communication patterns (Luhmann, 1984) and structures (Giddens, 1984). For reproducing themselves they reduce complexity, create and maintain their own identity and boundaries. The shared purpose mentioned by Preece and quoted above is the main criterion which produces the difference between “in” and “out” of the system.

For CMC-theory, the online community model provides an alternative understanding of the nature of communication. That is, information has to be contextualized to be understood. This is a more systemic perspective on communication than that of the rather reductionist view provided by the traditional sender-receiver-model in the middle of the 20th century (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Social systems are selective regarding the communication acts they refer to. Thus, a shared meaning and a shared understanding of the collective determines whether communication is effective or not.

Consequences for relationship quality.

From the theoretical perspective CMC has to be understood as a constituting element of the specific social context “online community”. Without CMC this form of community – including unique interactions and relationships - would not exist. Thus, relationships emerging in online communities cannot be separated from the cultural context in which they take place. Online communities *do exist* because of a shared purpose. In this sense, they are similar to voluntary associations like clubs and communities of interest. Relationships occurring in an online community have to be adequate to its goals and culture. The community is to be seen as the context for relationships, giving them a predefined set set of general norms and conventions. Thus, online communities foster relationship qualities that allow idea and resource sharing, thereby supporting successful cooperation. Communication technology with its nearly unlimited possibilities to create online communities bears a significant potential to build relationships with diverse functions which was not possible earlier.

But it should also be kept in mind that building online communities is difficult. First, communities tend to be self-organized, which means, they are resistant or in some way defiant to managerial control. Second, the community needs to have a shared purpose which should fit into the organizational context and its culture in some way. Especially, the norms of cooperation and sharing knowledge and expertise or their absence are important here (cf. Rhode, 2004). Third, the technology has to provide adequate means to build a community platform and communication settings. In earlier days, discussion boards and e-mail listservers might have been sufficient for this purpose. Today, advanced communication media which operate via text and video – possibly using mobile devices – set new challenges for online community building.

The online community model shows that CMC cannot be seen isolated from its context. Instead, CMC has to be understood as only one element of a whole arrangement which consists of people, tasks, culture and technologies. In recent years researchers chose such context-sensitive positions to take organizational microsettings into account. Those more broadly defined CMC contexts can be identified in expressions like “hybrid work configurations”, “local virtuality”, or “polychronic communication”. The term “hybrid work configurations” (Woerner, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2004) means that most virtual teams neither work entirely in a co-located nor entirely in a distributed manner. Rather, they cooperate using both CMC and FTF-communication. “Local virtuality” (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004) points in the same direction and focuses on the use of CMC in a co-located work arrangement. The term “polychronic communication” (Turner & Tinsley, 2002; Cameron & Webster, 2004) paraphrases the managing of multiple communication media at the same time, i.e. using instant messaging while participating in a web conference. These later works indicate that exploring CMC contexts is an endeavor which has just begun. In this field of research the effects of CMC thus are little explored, and there are many questions left open which have to be answered, e.g.: How (and why) exactly do employees switch media during interaction sequences? What kind of communicative patterns regarding different media emerges (in dyads and especially in hybrid teams)? Which strategies are chosen (by communicators and groups) for reducing the complexity of the communication setting? And, which relational practices can be observed when communication relies heavily on CMC?

At the beginning the question of this paper was: What are the effects of computer-mediated communication on social relationships in organizations, especially on relationship quality? It has been shown so far that CMC-theories provide valuable insights into the effects of communication media on relationships. When using communication media in organizations, consequences for relationships can be assumed: CMC bears the risk of contributing to a style of communication which potentially bears the risk of eroding relationships. But using communication media also offers the chance of increasing community building and the cultivation of positive shared norms. Relationship quality may change in such a way that mutual support, idea sharing and trust are fostered, and that it becomes productive for cooperation. At least for entirely virtual contexts this assumption is plausible. For hybrid communication settings, little is known about the effects of CMC on social relationships.

FOCUSING ON RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IN CMC-CONTEXT

In this section, I will focus on the methods for studying relationship quality in CMC-context. For his studies, Walther (1992; 1995; Tidwell & Walther, 2002) applied the “relational communication questionnaire” provided by Burgoon & Hale (1987) which provides the most comprehensive set of relational dimensions to describe relationships. This conception of relationship quality is widely used in CMC research. It is founded on communication research and social psychology and will be outlined here first. The concept describes relational topoi which are only one part of relationship quality. Therefore, a more comprehensive concept proposed by Barry and Crant (2000) is outlined. Afterwards I will analyze relationship quality from the perspective of social constructionism. By doing this, new opportunities for explaining and interpreting relationships arise. How to assess

relationship quality from a social constructionist perspective will be explained in the last section.

Relationship Quality in Communication Research

Especially since the 1980s, there have been many attempts to understand relationship quality. Later theoretical and empirical works stem mainly from communication researchers and social psychologists (for both cf. Barry & Crant, 2000) as well as from related sciences like anthropology (cf. Fiske, 1991, 1992). This amassment of theories is a consequence of the scholars' insight that focusing on individuals is not sufficient for understanding social dynamics in dyads and groups. Haslam states: "The study of social relationships lies at the heart of the social sciences, but psychologists' understanding of the cognitive structures that support them remains in the hinterlands." (Haslam, 1994: 575). Asendorpf & Banse (Asendorpf & Banse, 2000: 1) add that for decades the social psychology has been too individualistically interested in social cognition or individual interaction. Reflecting on the development of research on communication in relationships since the mid-70s, Fitzpatrick (1999) argues that three major approaches have been applied to explain social relationships: relational communication, relational topology, and relational topoi.

Relational communication refers to "aspects of messages which define or redefine relationships." (Parks, 1977: 372) and thus focuses on interactivity. However, the basic assumption of Parks is that relationships are isomorphistic in some way. Interactivity is not an issue in the latter two approaches: They focus on the issue of intersubjectivity.

Relational topology is "based on a consideration of the ideological views held by individuals and partners about the nature and function of relationships in their lives, as well as in their levels of interdependence and autonomy" (Fitzpatrick, 1999: 445). This approach emphasizes the subjective meaning a relationship has for a person.

Relational topoi – the last of the three approaches – is one of the most widely accepted sets of relational dimensions and was suggested by Burgoon and Hale (1984; 1987). They identified the most comprehensive conceptualization of relational dimensions which consists of seven non-independent clusters / dimensions of message themes: (1) The *immediacy / affection* dimension comprises the level of affection, the degree of inclusion, and the extent of involvement in a relationship. (2) The *similarity/depth* dimension refers to the degree to which communicating persons emphasize similarities and their interest in a deeper relationship. (3) The *receptivity/trust* dimension includes the concepts of expression of rapport, openness, and the desire to be trusted. Trust entails qualities which are associated

with credibility – sincerity, dependability, honesty, respect, and the like. (4) The *composure/relaxation* dimension indicates whether the communicators feel relaxed and calm as opposed to tense and aroused. (5) The *formality* dimension can be understood as the degree to which a relationship is explicitly regulated. When explicit rules and conventions play an important role in the functioning of the relationship, the formality level is high. (6) The *dominance/inequality* dimension: Dominance indicates the effort to control, command, and persuade others whereas inequality signifies lack of cooperation and mutual respect. (7) The *task-social orientation* dimension explains that the primary objectives of communication may be categorized into either task- or social-oriented. High task-orientation is seen in turn as low social-orientation in communication.

These relational dimensions have been used in CMC studies of Walther to measure relationship qualities (Walther, 1992; Walther & Burgoon, 1992; Walther, 1995; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). By using the “relational communication questionnaire” proposed by Burgoon & Hale (1987) he was able to support the “hyperpersonal perspective” as has been shown earlier in this paper. However, in spite of the enormous increase in measurability of relationship quality provided by this concept, additional factors relevant for understanding relationships have to be taken into account.

Barry & Crant (2000: 651) try to conceptualize dyadic relationships in a more complex way and include aspects of relational development. “A key advantage of developmental approaches is the ability to analyze emerging relationship norms and routines, which over time accumulate and can become difficult to disentangle or change.” (Barry & Crant, 2000: 652) So further “behavioral and perceptual precursors of relationship development” are taken into account by their concept. These are (1) the *relational content* of specific messages that are exchanged in the dyad, (2) *patterns of messages* that emerge over time and across communication encounters and (3) *perceptions by dyad members* regarding the status of the nascent relationships. This conceptualization extends the understanding of relationships and promises valuable insights regarding Barry & Crant’s overall “model of relational development”. By taking into account the perceptions of the communicators they point to the role of dependence, commitment and confidence in relationships as well as to their transferability. However, Barry & Crant focus on the relational development of dyads in organizational contexts, which seems to be too narrow a focus because of the interwovenness of relationships in a collective. In this article, I will go a step further than the theories presented above. This striving is backed up by the epistemological position of social constructionism, which allows an alternative interpretation of the phenomenon ‘relationship’.

The Social Constructionist Perspective on Relationships

Social constructionism⁵ emerged from constructivism and is based on assumptions derived from postmodern thinking. Social constructionism assumes that the members of a collective create shared meaning in ongoing processes of interactive communication. In social processes meanings are generated as well as terms for social constructions are coined. In this manner, shared realities are understood as the basis of a common understanding. This allows the coordination of individuals as well as collective actions as they occur in organizations. In social constructionism, communication is the only means which can be used to create a shared reality. Figure 2 illustrates how the mutual shaping of relationships between two persons can be conceptualized (Müller, 2003).

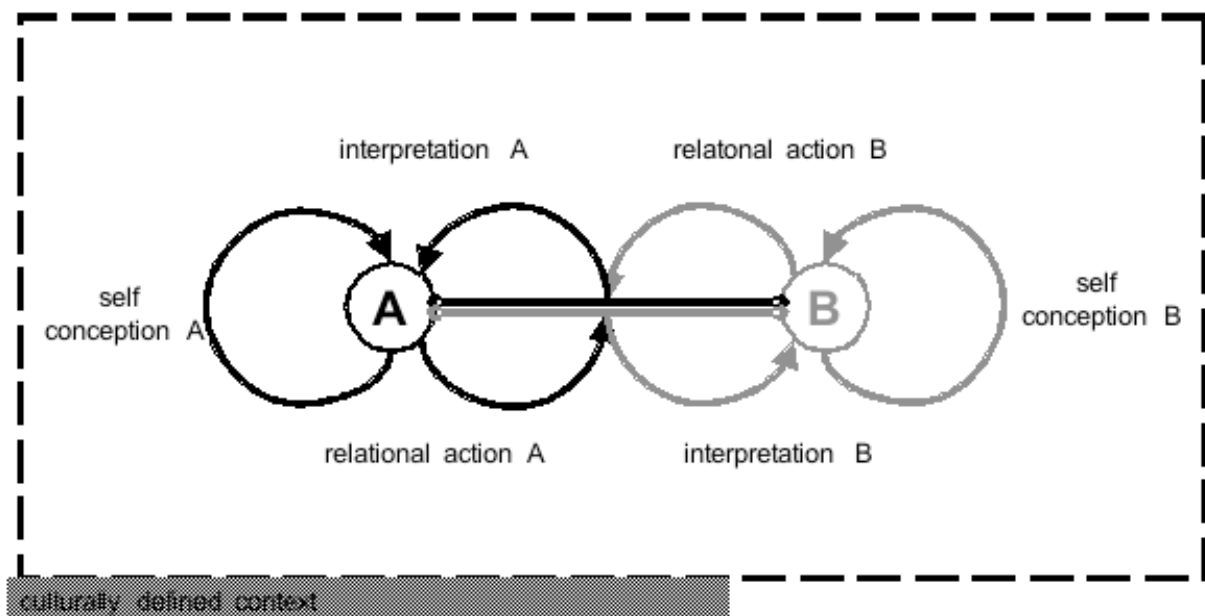


Figure 2. Mutual shaping of relationships (Müller, 2003)

A typical dyad is shown between person A and B. Their relationship consists of interaction sequences which, in turn, consist of communicative actions. The basis of this concept stems from Karl Weick who presented the 'double interact' as the basic units of organizations

(Weick, 1985:130). Every communication contains relational information. Theorists regard messages and relationships as inseparably interwoven (Stohl & Redding, 1987). Both persons interpret the relational actions of the other one respectively and act accordingly. Moreover, both persons' self-conception is shaped by the dyadic relation on the one hand and the culturally defined context on the other. In this setting, the dyadic relationship is co-constructed as a social reality of its own. It contains a semantic landscape which is seen from different perspectives by the participating persons. The landscape holds information about basic assumptions about the environment, the self and the other person; it offers information about ideals, ideas, conflicts and ambiguities; and it allows to be virtually regarded from different perspectives. By outlining the landscape it can be illustrated why a person acts the way he or she does and possibly which alternative actions can be conceivable.

At a more collective level it is promising not only to study the social construction of one person but also the typical co-constructions which occur in the collective. This opens up new vistas on central issues. Additionally, by contrasting multiple perspectives shared norms and values become visible. As a consequence, valuable insights concerning shared meanings and the 'internal logic' of a collective can be won.

In summary, assessing the social construction of persons at the individual and group level offers to raise the understanding about how people see and interpret the world. In social constructionism, relationships are co-constructed entities. Relationships are characterized by specific qualities that are created and enacted in an ongoing interactive process of the relating subjects. These qualities does not come into place arbitrarily – they are reasoned, even if the process of reasoning often happens implicitly. Assessing the relationship quality in CMC-context offers possibilities to create new hypotheses about the field in which these qualities are observed.

How to Assess Relationship Quality from a Social Constructionist Perspective

The description of a social constructionist perspective on relationships shows that research has to be adequately designed. Social constructionists gather insights about the studied

⁵ For a brief overview see Larkin (2005): "Constructivism postulates social origins of mind; 'strong' constructionism, however, will not/can not account for 'mind' *per se* - only for representations *of* mind in social interaction." "For example, consider the various constructions of 'war' which are currently in dispute. We can see that there are multiple ways of constructing what a 'war' is and what it would mean, that these are often mutually-exclusive, and that they are developed from various ideological and political interests (i.e. power). For constructionists, all phenomena are like this. (Note that this is different from a 'social theory' - it does not say

phenomena by trying to “look through the eyes of the other one”. For this, qualitative methods are used, mostly discourse analysis, critical inquiry, narrative approaches and other interpretative methodologies (Larkin, 2005). To illustrate the working mechanism of this research approach, the “experiential narrative” interview (Müller & Hurter, 1999) will be presented in the following paragraphs.

This method wants the interviewee to tell stories about his or her own experiences with the topic the researcher is interested in. Thus, the narrative interview begins by asking a question, which ‘invites’ the interview partner to formulate his experiences: “When you reflect about your experiences with relationships in computer-mediated communication in this organization, which stories do you think of?”. When listening to the interviewee the interviewer has to reduce his own influences to the minimum. Direct interventions are only allowed, when the interviewee loses the thread of his discourse or when he remains in trivial “philosophy of everyday life”. The aim is to gain verbalized experiences because they provide valuable clues for the narrations and scripts the interviewee has.

After the interview has finished, it has to be transcribed and analyzed. The researcher now is interested in finding answers to the question: How does the narrator see relationships in his CMC-context and what qualities does this construction offer? Thereby the coding scheme with which the interview is treated is generated out of the material itself. The analysis will result in a list of topics supported by quotations from the interview material. Additionally, it is helpful to develop a graphical map of the topics and their relations to each other.

To validate his interpretation the researcher should combine different validation methods, but – in every case – he has to validate the topics with the interviewee. Additionally, he should compare his results with the interpretations of a researching partner who also analyzes the material. When research is organized by a team, different constellations with subgroups are possible which are to ensure that the interpreted topics and single landscapes are critically discussed, reviewed and validated in multiple sessions. In the end, different levels of aggregation of topics from multiple interviews enable the researchers to identify typical common traits and thus generate practice-based knowledge about the construction of relationship qualities in CMC-contexts at different levels of aggregation.

For example, combining multiple interviews from one company would provide valuable information about existing relational patterns and thus the collectively created reality in which

that a behaviour like ‘aggression’ can be explained by social variables; it says that ‘aggression’ itself is a social construct).” (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Burr, 1995; cf. Gergen, 2002)

the employees cooperate. Combined with the method of ‘traversing’ social networks, i.e. arranging the narrative interviews according to the respective social relationships (cf. Latour, 1987; Lamb, 2003; Lamb, King, & Kling, 2003), insights into cooperation practices – and indirectly about the extent of social capital – can be won.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this paper is to propose an adequate method of studying the effects of CMC on relationships without oversimplifying the investigated phenomena. This section presents potential contributions for both interested practitioners and researchers.

Implications

As opposed to numerous research efforts that investigate topics that are not practically significant or produce valuable results, the proposed methodology focuses on a topic that has real meaning for managers. In the world of organizations, CMC is increasingly used and there is a strong need to balance CMC and personal relationships in a way that fosters cooperation quality. Managers may take the results to reflect their own practices and to improve their everyday CMC skills. By participating in the proposed research they – and others in comparable situations, too – develop practice-based knowledge concerning *their* communicative environment. For teaching the application of social constructionist methods is decisive in assessing communication practices, too. Managers who are trained in narrative methods concerning relationship quality will be more sensitive in everyday communication and will choose media adequate to the social situation.

Theoretical contributions refer mainly to the improved understanding of relational practices and relationship quality in CMC-contexts. The application of social constructionist methods in CMC-settings will provide further insights in the field of analyzing and assessing human communication research as well as the construction principles in the highly networked world. By using social constructionism as a research method, new hypotheses can be generated which will lead to further research. Last but not least, the proposed study will contribute to the understanding of organizational communications as highly specific actions of social systems. Especially, results concerning the intersection of communication practices of individuals and the larger system can be expected.

Conclusion

Effective communication is necessary in an organization to promote smooth operations and to maintain its place in the competitive environment. Miscommunication or misinterpretation in organizations on the one hand may slow down operations or cause business failures. On the other hand, mutual understanding of the communicated information not only facilitates appropriate decision making, but also encourages future collaboration.

The research methodology proposed in this paper enriches the understanding of relationship quality in CMC environments, i. e., in virtual and hybrid communication settings. Relationship quality is a very important factor in successful communication and cooperation. Understanding the relational scripts of individuals and groups which emerge in CMC settings will provide a basis for contributing to wider fields of CMC like computer-supported cooperative work or usability, which, in turn, will improve the communication abilities of organizations.

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