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Conversational Flow

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Chapter one

Overview of the Thesis

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Interaction plays an important role in the development of social relationships. Most research on interaction focuses on the role of *content* in developing shared realities and interpersonal relationships. In this thesis, we argue that people also obtain a sense of solidarity from the *form* of communication. This phenomenon has been the subject of my research during the past 4 years. The research began with a set of studies examining the consequences of brief silences during natural conversations. Although we were initially interested in the disruptions, as a result of our initial findings we became more interested in the phenomena that we observed in normal conversations: The consequences of conversational flow itself. And in the last stage of the research we began studying variations in the form of conversation. Although none of the later developments was initially anticipated, each individual step in the program of research was a natural consequence of the evolvment of our thinking about conversations.

In the very final phase of this research we wrote a review article which intends to build a coherent theoretical argument to describe and explain the various findings. This retrospective overview is now the opening chapter of this thesis (Chapter 2). The reason for opening with this is that it gives readers the best understanding of our current (most up to date) thinking on the phenomena witnessed in our research. This review integrates our own empirical work, which is reported in more detail in the remainder of this thesis, with relevant literature in social psychology, sociology, and communication. The review suggests that that the form of communication plays an important and often underexposed role in both the *emergence* and the *regulation* of solidarity within small groups and dyads. Our main conclusion is that the form of conversation can be seen as an embodiment of a social system (a group or a relationship) and that the dynamics of this social system are indicative for the state of solidarity within it.

Following the structure of this review, the empirical research contained within the rest of the thesis has been structured in two parts. The first part comprises three chapters on the role of conversational form in the *emergence* of solidarity. The second part includes three chapters on how conversational form plays a role in the *regulation* of solidarity. In the final chapter, we test how form can play a role in maintaining solidarity beyond the context of conversations.

In the experiments reported in the empirical chapters of this thesis, we focused on conversational flow and flow disruptions. We used different paradigms, including written scenario's, videotaped conversations, actual conversations with confederates, audio mediated and video mediated communication. In these paradigms, we manipulated the disruption of conversational flow by introducing a brief silence, or, in the case of mediated communication, brief delays in audio-visual feedback such that participants heard (and saw) each other's contribution slightly later than intended. Furthermore, we tested our hypotheses in different samples: Among undergraduate students, online participants from different countries, shoppers in shopping malls or respondents contacted on the street in different cities in the Netherlands. One study examined processes of flow among singers, and one study examined professional and amateur actors. Studies in which participants took part in dyads included dyads with no prior acquaintance and peer students, but also participants who were in a romantic or different kind of relationship. Some of the studies were based on online questionnaires ($n = 2$), but the majority of the studies include either laboratory ($n = 11$) or field experiments ($n = 6$). Although each of these studies may have its shortcomings, the combination of studies provides a test of our hypotheses across a wide range of contexts and situations. This strengthens our belief that the findings will prove to be robust and generalizable.

Part One: The Emergence of Solidarity

In part one we describe a series of empirical studies that focus on the role of conversational form in the *emergence* of solidarity. In Chapter 3,

we examined the effects of brief silences in conversations within a small group of people. We predicted that silences (in comparison with conversations in which such silences do not occur) may signal problems in underlying relationships and consensus, and therefore lead to increased feelings of rejection and negative emotions, while decreasing feelings of belonging, self-esteem, control and social validation. These hypotheses are tested in a written scenario study (n = 102), and a study using videotaped conversations (n = 60).

In Chapter 4, we present three studies (total n = 336) that tested whether the effects of single silences (versus uninterrupted conversations with good flow) found in Chapter 3 reflect a more general consequence of the disruption of conversational flow. To this end, we manipulated the disruption of conversational flow more dynamically, by introducing a delay in the line when people communicated via mediated channels. Testing our hypotheses in the context of video-mediated communication allowed us to examine consequences in those conversations that are most likely to be susceptible to flow disruptions. Together, these studies represent our shifting interest in conversational flow and its consequences for emergent solidarity.

Chapter 5 further zooms in on the *qualities* of conversational flow that may explain its impact on solidarity. In particular, these studies focus on forms of communication that may provide a foundation for different kinds of emergent solidarity. In this chapter, we examined the hypothesis that a sense of solidarity can develop in the background of action that individuals perform together (e.g., as a consequence of having a conversation). To this end, we compared different forms of coaction and tested whether these led to different forms of solidarity. We predicted that uniform action leads to a sense of solidarity in which individuality is irrelevant, or even problematic. On the other hand, we expect that complementary action promotes a sense of solidarity that is similar in strength, but qualitatively different from the solidarity developed through uniform action. Here, we expected that rather than relying on similarities between group members, the personal value of each group member would become predictive of the experienced solidarity at the group level. The hypotheses were tested in five studies among online participants (Study 1, n = 199), among students in

laboratory experiments (Study 2, $n = 76$, and Study 5, $n = 150$) and among singers and actors in field experiments (Study 3, $n = 31$, Study 4, $n = 93$, respectively).

Together these chapters show that the form of communication conveys information about both the degree and the quality of solidarity that is being formed.

Part Two: The Regulation of Solidarity

In part two, we focus on the role of conversational form in conversations among people that have already established a sense of solidarity. Specifically, we examine how the form of conversation can function to regulate group processes, such as the maintenance of group norms, hierarchies and socially shared realities. These chapters also underline why it may be important to examine subtle aspects of conversation.

In Chapter 6 we examined how subtle conversational characteristics can function to regulate norms within groups. We specifically tested the effects of brief disruptions of conversational flow, by introducing silences in either videotaped ($n = 134$) or actual conversations ($n = 69$), just after a participant or a target person in the video had given his or her opinion. We expected that these subtle silences would signal a threat to the inclusionary status of group members, and therefore instigate conformity amongst group members who were highly motivated to belong to the group. That is, we expected group members with a high motive to belong to change their attitudes to become more in line with the group norm if their opinion expression received a silent response from the audience. In this way, we believe to have identified a subtle mechanism for norm regulation that can act complementary to explicit norm regulation. Explicit norm regulation (e.g. sanctions or punishments) tend to be costly and therefore less common. By contrast, brief pauses and hesitations in conversation are subtle but powerful cues, yet their material and social cost appears to be limited.

Chapter 7 focuses on the regulation of hierarchy within groups. We hypothesized that people experience the strongest sense of solidarity when the form of conversation reflects and respects the status structure within the group. We assumed that norms for communication depend upon one's status in the group. For instance, when a high status person speaks one is expected not to interrupt or talk back, whereas low status group members may expect some confirmation after they have spoken. In line with this, we expected that group members would interpret a disruption of conversational flow after they had spoken as either compromising or fortifying solidarity, depending on their status within the group. To test these predictions we manipulated status and flow disruption in two studies using videotaped conversations ($n = 138$) and actual conversations with confederates ($n = 77$).

In Chapter 8 we examined the effects of flow disruptions in conversations among intimates. Because intimates (lovers, family members, close friends) may sometimes have the feeling that they need no words to understand each other, we predicted that flow disruptions would affect these relationships quite differently compared with disruptions in conversations among strangers. In close relationships, we expected that flow disruptions would encourage partners to fall back upon the shared reality that they experienced among each other. When the viewpoints of the partner are difficult to access – as would be the case when flow was disrupted – there would be more room for interpretation, and thus more scope for the projection of one's own viewpoints. In strong and secure relationships, we therefore expected that flow disruptions would paradoxically foster a sense of social validation. In a correlational online study ($n = 273$) we examined the interpretations of flow disruptions among partners. Subsequently, we manipulated the disruption of conversational flow in a laboratory study among romantic partners ($n = 74$) and in a field study among people in different kinds of relationships ($n = 130$).

Together these chapters show that solidarity can be regulated and maintained by means of micro-processes that are concealed in the form of conversation. We identify three types of regulation in which the form of conversation plays a role: Norm regulation, the regulation of status relations, and the regulation of shared reality.

Beyond the context of conversation

In Chapter 9, we tested whether the form of communication would also play a role beyond the context of dialogue. Previous chapters examined the form of communication in dyads and small groups. We expected, however, that similar processes would also play a role in large groups, or even at the level of societies. In this chapter, we examined the role of silence during elections. In countries such as the Netherlands, where voting in elections is voluntary, a large segment of the population do not vote in elections and their views therefore remain unknown. This is a very particular form of silence, and one might wonder what meaning voters attribute to it. Extending the findings from Chapter 8, we expected that the “silence” of non-voters’ would provide voters with an increased scope for interpretation. We expected voters to use this scope to project their own viewpoints onto non-voters and therefore perceive non-voters as particularly likely to support their own party in the elections. In two field studies ($n = 158$ and $n = 414$, respectively), we compared voters’ estimates of their parties’ share of votes in two situations: The normal situation during the elections and the situation where everyone – including non-voters – would cast a vote. We hypothesized that the latter situation would lead to higher estimates of support for their party, especially among highly committed voters, as they would be highly motivated to maximize the support for their party in the elections. Results reveal that “silences” in the elections (in terms of non-voting) create increased scope for the projection of one’s own viewpoints on the population at large. These studies provide some initial evidence that the findings in the first two parts of the dissertation might prove to have societal relevance beyond the context of dialogue.

Additional remarks

Each chapter was written as an individual paper and may therefore contain some overlap in theoretical reasoning and methodology explained with the other chapters. Chapter 3, 4, 6, 7, and 9 have been accepted for publication (Koudenburg, Postmes, & Gordijn, 2011a; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2011b, respectively), Chapter 5 and 8 are currently under review, and Chapter 2 will be submitted in the near

future. Furthermore, the research reported in this thesis has all been conducted in cooperation with others. Accordingly, the personal pronoun “we”, instead of “I” is being used throughout this thesis, because I express thoughts and ideas that were developed in collaboration with my co-authors.

