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Relational Framing Theory

Drawing Inferences About
Relationships From Interpersonal Interactions

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Imagine yourself in a professional work environment, when your boss says, “I’m so glad you have been transferred to our office. You are always so friendly, and you’re much better looking than our last analyst!” Or a friend comments, “I’d really like you to come with me to Matt’s party. I don’t want to go alone.” Or imagine your parent says, “You remind me so much of your grandfather when you argue for your beliefs.” Or an instructor returns your paper to you and tells you, “Although you did well on the paper, I know you have the potential to do much better.” What do these messages mean? Are these comments friendly or unfriendly? Are you being coerced or admired? Situations such as these call for a response, but our reply depends on how we understand these messages. In this chapter, you’ll learn about Relational Framing Theory, which seeks to explain how we make sense of ambiguous messages about our relationships with others.

Purpose and Meta-theoretical Assumptions

Relational Framing Theory (RFT) explains how people organize interpersonal messages to support inferences about the relationship that exists between communicators (Dillard, Solomon, & Samp, 1996). According to the theory, people make sense of relational messages by interpreting them as indicators of either dominance-submissiveness or affiliation-disaffiliation. Although these two dimensions are not new concepts, RFT positions these dimensions in a new

way. In particular, the theory views dominance-submissiveness and affiliation-disaffiliation as functional frames that help people process social messages, resolve ambiguities, and draw relational inferences (Dillard & Solomon, 2005).

RFT emerges from a post-positivistic paradigm. This paradigm assumes that an objective reality does exist, and that it is the duty of science to discover reality through value-neutral research. RFT follows logical empiricism by offering a framework that is both logically deduced and informed by observable facts. RFT also theorizes about the causes of relational message processing at multiple levels. At the most precise level, RFT locates the immediate source of relational inferences in the contents of utterances, the goals of interactions, and features of the context. RFT also explains message processing in terms of the functions accomplished when people can efficiently resolve ambiguities. At yet another level, the theory recognizes that an ability to draw relational inferences is a human skill that is subject to both cognitive development and socialization. At the broadest level, RFT is rooted in assumptions about human evolution: in particular, our ancestors' abilities to decipher relational information would have influenced both survival and opportunities to reproduce. Thus, the theory links the dynamics of interaction to the evolution of the human species.

Main Features of the Theory

RFT is embodied in two sets of assumptions. The first set of claims addresses the nature of relational judgments. In other words, what evaluations are made when people draw inferences about their relationships? The second set of claims focus on the processes that guide relational inferences. This part of the theory describes how characteristics of the interaction context and cognitive processes jointly contribute to relational judgments.

THE NATURE OF RELATIONAL JUDGMENTS

In advancing RFT, Dillard and colleagues (1996) drew on the long history of research on relational communication (e.g., Bateson, 1935, 1958; Kemper, 1973; Leary, 1957; White, 1980). One important contribution to this body of literature was Burgoon and Hale's (1984) proposal that relational messages address as many as 12 facets of interpersonal associations. While recognizing the utility of the nuances revealed in Burgoon and Hale's perspective, Dillard and his colleagues (Dillard et al., 1996; Dillard, Solomon, & Palmer, 1999) argued that the domain of relational messages could be organized by three primary dimensions: dominance-submissiveness, affiliation-disaffiliation, and involvement.

Two of these dimensions encompass the substance of relational messages—or, in other words, the topic of the judgments people make about interpersonal associations. “Dominance-submissiveness” refers to the degree to which one person controls, influences, or has status over the other. For example, when a parent directs a child to clean his room, the parent is relying on status and authority to influence the child. “Affiliation-disaffiliation” captures the appreciation, esteem, or solidarity one person has for the other. As an example, consider how a love letter conveys affection and positive regard to the recipient. These two dimensions have been documented through a second-order factor analysis of responses to Burgoon and Hale’s (1984) relational message scale (Dillard et al., 1999). Whereas dominance-submissiveness is defined by the corresponding factor of the relational message scale, affiliation is a more nuanced construct that subsumes six factors: similarity, affect, receptivity, equality, composure, and formality.

Beyond knowing the substance of interpersonal relationships, people make judgments about the intensity of their associations. The differences between positive regard and unmitigated devotion, authority, and subjugation, and between mild dislike and outright hatred are nontrivial distinctions within interpersonal relationships. RFT positions involvement as a third dimension of relational judgments that addresses the degree of coordination, engagement, and immediacy present in the interaction (see also Andersen & Andersen, 2005; Cegala, Savage, Brunner, & Conrad, 1982). Importantly, involvement is conceptualized as a unipolar construct that has no relational content. Rather, judgments of intensity can inform inferences about either dominance-submissiveness or affiliation-disaffiliation.

Consider interactions you might observe between two couples at a restaurant. As you glance at one pair, you see that they are maintaining direct eye contact, gesturing actively, and leaning forward. The other couple, in contrast, is talking quietly as they look at their plates. If you learned that both couples were celebrating a wedding anniversary, which pair would you conclude has the more loving relationship? If you learned that the dyads were involved in business meetings, which pair would you think was trying harder to exert influence or control? Odds are you would choose the same couple to answer both questions. In other words, partners that are more involved and active communicate both more liking for each other and more effort to influence or control each other. In this way, involvement is a modifier of the two substantive dimensions and does not have any experiential component on its own (Dillard et al., 1996). The theory implies that involvement can polarize judgments toward either extreme of the substantive dimensions (e.g., intense dislike, passionate love, obsequious submission, or total domination). Dillard and colleagues (1999) found that involvement correlates positively with affiliation and dominance within voluntary American peer relationships, however.

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The concept of relational frames integrates the three dimensions of relational messages. “Relational frames” are mental structures that consist of organized knowledge about social relationships. They are similar to relationship schema or mental models of relationships (Baldwin, 1995; Planalp, 1985) in that they contain assumptions about interpersonal associations derived from prior experience. To understand how frames work, consider the classic image depicted in Figure 8.1. If you’ve seen this image before, you know that it is possible to perceive it as either a young woman with a feather in her hat or an older woman wearing a scarf. By instructing yourself to focus on one or the other you can detect the image you’re looking for, but you cannot see both images at once. The way you frame the picture mentally determines what you perceive.

According to RFT, dominance-submissiveness and affiliation-disaffiliation constitute frames that guide the interpretation of interaction cues. As in our example, these mental structures direct what you pay attention to, how you organize information, and what you perceive. Because involvement can convey either dominance or affiliation, it is especially influenced by the relational frame through which it is viewed. Thus, relational frames both focus attention on particular cues and guide the meanings that people attach to more ambiguous indicators of message intensity.



Figure 8.1 The Old Woman and the Young Girl

THE PROCESS OF RELATIONAL JUDGMENTS

By taking a position with regard to the number and substance of relational judgments, RFT mirrors a number of previous efforts to clarify how people organize their social experiences (e.g., Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Kemper, 1973). RFT extends this tradition, however, by specifying the interface among cognitive structures, interaction cues, and relational judgments. Although other theoretical perspectives speak to the information processing patterns set in motion by violated expectations (Burgoon, 1983) or excessive or insufficient arousal (Cappella & Greene, 1982), RFT explains how relational inferences arise from both ordinary and extraordinary interactions.

The process of relational framing commences with the activation of dominance-submissiveness or affiliation-disaffiliation frames, which is influenced by a variety of factors (see Solomon, Dillard, & Anderson, 2002). Most specifically, the content of utterances themselves can clarify whether interactions are about social control (“If you don’t follow my rules, I’ll demote you”) or social closeness (“I’m so glad that I have a friend like you at work”). At a higher level of abstraction, the function of the social episode can focus attention on issues of power (e.g., a performance review) or affiliation (e.g., a birthday greeting). If partners have a history of interactions that focus on dominance or affiliation, that pattern would direct attention within a particular exchange. Likewise, people might have a dispositional tendency to focus on dominance-submissiveness or affiliation-disaffiliation when they interact with others. At the most general level, norms dictated by the social or cultural context direct attention to the dominance-submissiveness or affiliation-disaffiliation features of an interaction.

The information provided by the interaction, present in the context, and brought to bear by the participants, combines to activate the dominance-submissiveness or affiliation-disaffiliation frames. An important assumption of RFT is that the activation levels afforded to each frame are often in competition (Dillard et al., 1996). In other words, the theory maintains that the frames tend to displace each other as lenses for making sense of interaction. To develop this point, Dillard and colleagues argued that the simultaneous operation of both frames would undermine efficient processing. This is not to say that it is impossible for both frames to be activated, but that doing so consumes cognitive capacity and is subjectively uncomfortable. Thus, the cognitive system tilts toward one frame or the other.

Consider the example of reading hastily scrawled text: When you encounter a word you cannot decipher, you can look to surrounding cues to guess what it is. Although you might be able to narrow down the options, you’ll have trouble moving on in the text until you make a decision about what the word means. Moreover, maintaining alternative interpretations of the word will compromise your understanding of the text that follows. Because confusion about the meaning of ambiguous involvement cues undermines social

functioning, human evolution may have promoted cognitive systems that facilitate sense-making. In other words, the activation of the dominance-submissiveness frame suppresses the affiliation-disaffiliation frame (and vice versa), to facilitate efficient and fluid processing of otherwise ambiguous involvement cues. This proposition is the differential-salience hypothesis.

The forces that influence frame activation, coupled with the tendency toward frame displacement, result in the primary activation of the dominance-submissiveness frame or the affiliation-disaffiliation frame. In turn, the salient relational frame directs attention to features of the interaction that inform relational judgments. When the content of interaction cues aligns with the activated relational frame, relational inferences are straightforward. In the case of more ambiguous involvement cues, the salient relational frame conveys meaning to the messages. Those involvement cues also inform the extremity of the relational judgment, such that involvement can lead to perceptions of either greater dominance or greater affiliation, depending on the salient relational frame. This proposition is the general-intensifier hypothesis.

In summary, relational frames are activated by a variety of contextual factors, ranging from the content of specific messages to the social and cultural norms for the interaction. The differential-salience hypothesis states that the two frames of dominance-submissiveness and affiliation-disaffiliation are in competition with one another; one necessarily displaces the other when individuals make sense of relational messages. In addition, the general-intensifier hypothesis positions involvement as a variable that polarizes salient relational judgments.

Conceptualization of Communication in the Theory

As the previous description of RFT reveals, the theory relies on two important assumptions about the nature of communication. First, RFT takes to heart the long-standing axiom that communication has both content and relational components (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). “Content messages” encompass the semantic or denotative meaning of the symbols exchanged; “relational messages” address assumptions about or preferences for the relationship that are implied by symbolic actions. For example, the ways in which your mom might ask for the salt (“Honey, could you please pass the salt,” “Give me the salt,” “I said I need salt now!”) all convey the content of her goal, but the particular form of her request speaks volumes about how she sees your relationship. RFT centralizes the distinction between content and relational messages, and seeks to explain how people decipher the oftentimes ambiguous relationship component of messages.

Second, RFT highlights the polysemic nature of communication—in other words, the way in which communication supports multiple interpretations and multiple meanings. Of course, RFT is not the first perspective to recognize that

meaning is subjective. Notably, however, RFT suggests that the same cues can support very different inferences, depending on whether they are viewed through a dominance-submissiveness frame or an affiliation-disaffiliation frame. Whether a loud voice is passionate or patronizing, whether mutual eye contact is intimate or intimidating, and whether a hand on a shoulder is comforting or controlling all depend on message interpretations. As these examples illustrate, the polysemic nature of communication allows people to reach a variety of conclusions from the same cues.

Uses of the Theory

RFT can help us to understand interpersonal communication on many levels, all of which reveal different nuances of the theory. The initial tests of the theory examined how people frame messages from friends based on the strategic goal of the episode. In the study reported in Dillard and colleagues (1996), participants were asked to imagine they were interacting with a same-sex friend who was pursuing either a compliance-gaining goal or an affinity-seeking goal. Results showed that the dominance-submissiveness frame was viewed as more relevant to compliance goals and that the affiliation-disaffiliation frame was judged as more relevant to affinity scenarios. This pattern was replicated in a study that included both same-sex and cross-sex dyads (Solomon et al., 2002).

Tests of the theory have also shown how personal characteristics can influence relational information processing. For example, Solomon and colleagues (2002) demonstrated that a dispositional tendency to be anxious about relationships was positively associated with the relevance of both dominance-submissiveness and affiliation-disaffiliation as people evaluated strategic messages from peers. Although speculative, Solomon and colleagues reasoned that paying attention to both relational dimensions at the same time could compromise a person's ability to draw relational inferences and might, in turn, perpetuate relational anxiety. Relatedly, Knobloch and Solomon (2005) found that relational uncertainty was positively associated with perceptions of the difficulty of an interaction, and that it corresponded with more conservative (i.e., less extreme) relational inferences. An RFT perspective on these findings suggests that relational uncertainty hinders a person's ability to frame an interaction and, in turn, to draw clear relational inferences.

RFT has also been applied to understanding normative and informational influence in groups (Henningsen, Henningsen, Cruz, & Morrill, 2003). Henningsen and colleagues manipulated whether decision-making group members prioritized group harmony or task performance and the level of involvement in the group. Results indicated that involvement intensified judgments of dominance in the task goal condition, and promoted evaluations of

affiliation in both the task and group harmony goal conditions. Thus, Henningsen and colleagues' study demonstrates the applicability of RFT beyond interpersonal communication contexts.

In another application, RFT was used to understand the factors that shape people's perceptions of social-sexual messages in the workplace (Solomon, 2006). Social-sexual communication is often ambiguous, and it can lead to judgments of either liking or sexual harassment. Solomon and Williams (1997a, 1997b) have shown that perceptions of sexual harassment are affected by the formality of the context, the sex of the perceiver, the sex of the message initiator, and the explicitness of the message. By applying an RFT perspective, Solomon demonstrated that the effects of situational, personal, and message features are mediated by perceptions of dominance or affiliation.

Finally, Lannutti and Monahan (2002) examined how people interpret scenarios involving sexual escalation and coercion, and they manipulated alcohol consumption to evaluate how intoxication affected the salience of relational frames in these situations. As one might expect, the results indicated that people perceive affiliation-disaffiliation as the relational frame most relevant to consensual sexual episodes, and they tend to see dominance-submissiveness as more relevant to situations that involve both consensual and coercive activities. Moreover, perceptions of involvement were correlated with judgments of affiliation in the consensual scenarios. Involvement contributed to evaluations of both affiliation and dominance in the mixed cue interactions, however, especially when respondents in the study were intoxicated. Although these results are not wholly in line with RFT predictions, they shed light on relational information processing within sexual episodes.

This review of how RFT has been used to understand different aspects of interpersonal communication highlights two more central issues that the theory addresses. First, RFT provides a conceptual tool for representing interpersonal communication as a process. Although communication scholarship privileges the exchange of messages and the coconstruction of meaning as an important window on human behavior, few theoretical frameworks clarify how social norms, individual differences, and contextual features are woven together and intersect message processing. In the work reviewed in this section, the goal of the episode, personal traits, the interaction context, and temporary states have all been linked to the perceived relevance of the dominance-submissiveness and affiliation-disaffiliation frames and corresponding relational judgments. Thus, RFT provides a framework for embracing interpersonal communication as a dynamic and context-embedded social phenomenon.

In addition, the studies previously reviewed illustrate the particular applicability of RFT to ambiguous relational messages. When confronted with an explicit message—perhaps an expression of devotion or a threatening influence

message—a person may be challenged to form a response to that message. But when the message itself is ambiguous, this challenge is two-fold. Not only must recipients form a response to the message, but they must first decipher its relational implications. In contexts such as ongoing relationships, problem-solving groups, the workplace, and first dates, misinterpreting cues and responding inappropriately can have serious consequences. Although the framing processes outlined in the theory are generally applicable to any interpersonal communication encounter, RFT is especially useful for understanding ambiguous and difficult communication experiences.

Strengths and Limitations of the Theory

As RFT has developed, both strengths and limitations of the theory and corresponding research have emerged. Perhaps the main strength of the theory is its heuristic value. RFT focuses on basic interpersonal communication processes that can shed light on a variety of interaction situations. Moreover, because the theory highlights the potential for confusing distinct relational judgments, it may be especially useful for understanding socially significant communication problems such as sexual harassment or unwanted sexual escalation. RFT also provides a framework that integrates cultural, personal, relational, and episodic forces that affect interpersonal communication. Thus, this perspective can be the source of many specific hypotheses about the effects of the interaction context on relational information processing within a variety of socially significant communication situations.

The primary limitation of RFT is the lack of clarity about the extent to which frame displacement occurs and under what conditions. Whereas the theory states that the dominance-submissiveness and affiliation-disaffiliation frames are differentially salient, empirical research suggests only a tendency toward frame displacement. These empirical patterns could reflect both theoretical and methodological ambiguities. At the conceptual level, the theory is unclear about how quickly a relevant frame can be activated and then replaced by the alternative frame. In fact, the factors that influence frame activation that are specified within the theory suggest that frames can fluctuate based on utterances, episodes, relationship contexts, interaction participants, or social contexts. Thus, the theory leaves ample room for ambiguity about the duration of an activated relational frame.

Conceptual ambiguity about the activation and deactivation of relational frames is compounded by the reliance on imprecise measures of frame activation in research on the theory to date. In particular, self-reports of frame relevance are, at best, indirect indicators of underlying cognitive processes. Moreover, because people can infer relational judgments from other evaluations they

have made (Dillard, Palmer, & Kinney, 1995), they may perceive both frames as relevant to their perceptions of an interaction. At present, then, tests of RFT are limited by the methods used to assess frame activation.

The conceptual and methodological limitations noted thus far suggest the potential for a more far-reaching flaw in the theory. Namely, we wonder whether RFT is sufficiently falsifiable. As long as the details about frame activation and displacement are unspecified, any empirical data could be argued to fit the theory. Likewise, a lack of clarity about how the forces that affect frame activation work in concert invites alternative explanations for empirical observations that are all theoretically viable. Although these loopholes are not fatal flaws for a theory in its infancy, the falsifiability of RFT relies on the resolution of these ambiguities in the future.

As a final critique, we note that research on RFT is limited by the predominant use of hypothetical scenarios to operationalize interpersonal interaction (but see Dillard et al., 1999; Henningsen et al., 2003). On the one hand, constructing scenarios that describe specific and consistent interaction goals has allowed researchers to examine the role of involvement in situations that are clearly about issues of dominance or affiliation. At the same time, those scenarios fail to capture the dynamics and complexities people confront when they must make sense of real-time face-to-face interaction. Thus, support for the theory remains tentative until its claims can be evaluated in more ecologically valid research designs.

Directions for Future Research and Applications

RFT's strengths and limitations point to directions for improving and expanding the theory. First, RFT would benefit from empirical tests that use diverse research designs and tools. For example, response time measures that index cognitive processes could provide more precise tests of frame activation, frame duration, and frame displacement. Likewise, investigations of real-time interaction, either face-to-face or computer mediated, would enhance the external validity of research on RFT. Relatedly, research on RFT needs to expand beyond its current focus on verbal messages to consider how people process nonverbal cues. Because nonverbal indicators of involvement (e.g., eye contact, forward lean, animated gestures) often convey especially ambiguous relational information, the effects of relational frames on interpretations of nonverbal messages may be particularly pronounced.

Another avenue for future research is suggested by evidence that the degree of frame displacement can vary. What are the conditions that make it more or less easy for people to discern the relevance of dominance-submissiveness and

affiliation-disaffiliation? Prior research implies that anxiety about relationships (Solomon et al., 2002), intoxication (Lannutti & Monohan, 2002), and relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005) might make it difficult for people to privilege one frame over the other. And what are the consequences of paying attention to both relational frames simultaneously? RFT was founded on the assumption that frame displacement allows people to process ambiguous social information in a timely fashion, and Solomon and colleagues speculated that people who are unable to commit to one or the other relational frame will have difficulty drawing relational inferences. We see research dedicated to exploring these claims as a priority for future inquiry.

Additional directions for research stem from the applicability of RFT to diverse social contexts. For example, we wonder how relational framing might influence how parents and children make sense of interactions about sensitive topics such as sexual activity or drug and alcohol use. Whereas conversations that are viewed through a dominance-submissiveness frame might invite psychological reactance, the same conversations viewed through an affiliative parent-child interaction might have a dramatically different effect. Similarly, we see value in applying RFT to doctor-patient interaction. Collaborative approaches to doctor-patient interaction are beneficial (Kaplan, Greenfield, & Ware, 1989). Power dynamics can inhibit cooperation and the open exchange of information when doctors and patients discuss medical conditions and treatment options, however. Applying RFT to medical interactions would highlight the forces that privilege the dominance-submissiveness frame, as well as strategies for suppressing this view of communication between doctors and patients.

In this chapter, we have examined RFT's account of the processes by which people draw relational inferences from interpersonal interaction. Because the theory is relatively young and the empirical base limited, further research is needed to explore core assumptions and clarify conceptual ambiguities. At the same time, we are encouraged that the theory has heuristic value as a framework for making sense of communication—and miscommunication—within a variety of socially significant communication contexts.

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