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## Toward a Communication Model of Intergroup Interdependence

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### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to expand the theoretical base of intergroup communication by proposing a new model of interdependence. As a backdrop toward this end, historical and contemporary uses of the concept of interdependence are briefly reviewed across a range of different disciplines and research fields. Defining interdependence in terms of the embedded nature of groups, the foundations of a new communicative model of intergroup interdependence are introduced. Four propositions articulate how intergroup interdependence is associated with a variety of communicative outcomes. These outcomes include those relating to language attitudes, communication accommodations, and linguistic biases, together with the moderating conditions shaping the extent of these behavioral consequences. Finally, a diverse array of research questions that could fruitfully guide the future development of the model are suggested.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Much of everyday life takes for granted that we are dependent on others, as, for example, when pedestrians and air travelers assume—and mostly take for granted—that motorists and pilots are competently cognizant of their safety needs. In other realms, teachers, police officers, and physicians have a powerful impact, respectively, on students, civilians, and patients' well-being. However, these directional impacts are reciprocal, as the latter also have, through evaluations and complaint procedures, an enormous influence on the careers of the former. These reciprocal relationships can be observed in many intergroup communication contexts where high levels of communication competence of one party can result in an interconnected net gain for everyone involved. Likewise, research on health communication from an intergroup perspective has shown that competent communication from physicians is important not only for patient satisfaction, safety, and compliance but also for the well-being and satisfaction of healthcare practitioners themselves (see Gasiorek, Van de Poel, & Blockmans, 2015; Hewett, Watson, & Gallois, 2015; Watson, Angus, Gore, & Farmer, 2015; for carer-caree relationships, see Lin, Giles, & Soliz, 2016). These reciprocal impacts and net gains or losses suggest interdependence between and among groups.

Lewin (1948) was, arguably, the first to highlight interdependence in group-oriented settings. In his studies on group dynamics, he introduced two types of interdependence. In the first, the fate of one group member relies on the fate of the entire group, whereas, in the second, the specific goals of group members are intertwined. Under these conditions, Lewin asserted that the individual will be ready and even eager to take a fair share of structural responsibility for the group's welfare, to the extent that they recognize such interrelationships (see Kelley et al., 2003).

Before introducing our own perspective and theory in progress, let us capture a flavor of the more recent ways that interdependence has been conceptualized across different domains of the social

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sciences. We also briefly highlight how cross-cultural and intergroup scholars (including those from a systems perspective) have construed processes *relating* to interdependence.

### **Prior interdependence research across the social sciences**

Many disciplines in the social sciences have acknowledged the existence and influences of interdependence, although not always labelling it as such. Economics recognizes how property values are interdependent, such that their values are determined based on the real estate values of their neighbours (e.g., Barbieri, 1996). Sociology has appreciated how groups and classes are invariably connected. Durkheim (1886) understood this phenomenon in terms of societal interdependence; here, different members serve different purposes for society, similar to the functions of a body. More recently, Balliet, Tybur, and Van Lange (2017) have investigated how social interdependence can better be understood through an evolutionary lens. Their work explains how cooperation between competitors resulted from a variety of different types of interdependencies.

Organizational studies have, for their part also, recognized the role of interdependence in globalization (e.g., Stohl & Ganesh, 2014). Those working in the media have characterized interdependence in terms of the relationships between media systems and audiences (the micro-level), groups and organizations (the mesolevel), and other social (e.g., political and economic) systems (the macrolevel). More specifically, media systems dependency theory (e.g., Ball-Rokeach & Defleur, 1976) describes the relations among the aforementioned as relatively symmetrical, as all are dependent on one another for resources. For example, political systems depend on media in order to promote their agenda, and the media systems depend on politics in order to secure their power and legitimization. Stated more generally, the more individuals perceive that media use could serve their goals, the more dependent relations they develop with the media (Ognyanova & Ball-Rokeach, 2015).

For their part, those working in the interpersonal and relational terrain have afforded attention on the role of interdependence in marital relationships (e.g., Fitzpatrick, Vance, & Witteman, 1984), with Rusbult and colleagues (2007) examining the rewards and costs of being interdependent in romantic relationships. One example of their theory is the *Michaelangelo phenomenon* that describes couple well-being as a function of the extent to which partners each attain their ideal selves based on affirmations from each other.

### **Interdependence from cross-cultural and intergroup perspectives**

Cross-cultural scholars have appealed to the construct in terms of dependent versus interdependent selves (e.g., Singelis, 1994). People in cultures that can be characterized as individualistic (where people value standing out as an individual) or collectivistic (where people value group loyalty and commitment) employ different construals of the self, of others, and the interdependence between the two (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The interdependent self (of greater interest to our discussion), which is more common in collectivist cultures, has diffuse boundaries between self and others. Others are seen as a part of the self and the self as a part of others, as in the notion of self-expansion (Wright, Aron, & Tropp, 2002). People with interdependent self-construals value their social relations and are motivated to fit into these connections by conforming to the norms and values of the group. Interdependence in this context then prescribes self-concepts.

Interdependence had also attracted attention within the theoretical attempts of explaining intergroup relations and social behavior. Sherif (1966), with his theory of realistic conflict, proposed that intergroup interdependence based on shared goals—described as superordinate goals, that is, goals desired by both groups but that can be accomplished only by the synergetic action of the groups—leads to cooperation and intergroup harmony. Lack of intergroup interdependence, caused by mutually exclusive goals, produces conflict between the groups. The former is understood as positive interdependence—whatever is beneficial for the one group can be simultaneously beneficial for the

other group. The latter is understood as negative interdependence—what is beneficial to one group is harmful to the other group (see also Brewer, 2000).

The social identity approach has stressed the complementary functioning of interdependence along with social categorization, social identity, and social comparison in intergroup relations (see Tajfel, 1982). Turner and Bourhis (1996) further suggested that perceived interdependence could function as both a cause and an effect of psychological group formation. Common fate, shared interests, positive interaction, and interdependence could function cognitively as predictors of social categorization and the awareness of a shared social identity. Similarly, social categorization *per se* can, in turn, lead to the realization that group members share common interests and goals.

The relationship between interdependence and social categorization has been further elaborated by Brewer (2000). She also employed the distinction between negative (beneficial outcomes for Group A will have detrimental effects on outcomes of Group B) and positive (beneficial outcomes of Group A will also benefit outcomes for Group B) interdependence. However, Brewer differentiated between common fate and positive interdependence, where the former is determined by external forces (e.g., decisions that govern the future of a group but taken by another group) and the latter can depend on the reward structure and/or mutual coordination toward the accomplishment of common goals. For example, positive shared outcomes can be based on coordinated interaction in pursuit of common goals (e.g., see summer camp experiments; Sherif, 1966), or just from the accumulation of behaviors by independent actors (e.g., workers' input in different lines of production).

Another related intergroup perspective—the common ingroup identity model—suggests that intergroup conflict can be avoided when opposing groups focus on larger, more inclusive meta-identities (e.g., Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). Inherent to their argument is the idea that reconceptualizing “the other” to find common ground builds a more encompassing ingroup network. Of interest, we can find instances where even some rival gangs can have surprisingly overlapping social networks (Bolden, 2014) that may potentially induce them to reconceptualize the existence of mutual needs and attitudes. Competing needs and prejudicial attitudes may not preclude future outgroup contact of a more cooperative nature (Wölfer et al., 2017). Generally most, if not all, of us have multiple social identities that can interconnect or intermix to influence our future interactions, based on the overlap between those group identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Sønderlund, Morton, & Ryan, 2017).

## Interdependence as a system-level phenomenon

Intergroup scholars have long acknowledged the need to be aware of systems-level pressures that encourage individuals to act against the ostensible interests of their own groups. Theories in this arena recognize the need to go beyond considerations of social identity as an explanation for intergroup behavior (see Markus, 2017). Specifically, social identity explains intergroup conflict quite well when group boundaries are polarized, clear, and antagonistic. Social identity may not explain ideological persuasion and social learning in scenarios in which group boundaries are not as previously described. In this vein, system justification theory helps explain why members of disadvantaged groups engage in outgroup favoritism, contrary to how social identity theory would predict them to behave (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Members of stigmatized groups in positions of much lesser power from the dominant group may even see the disparaging behaviors of dominant group members toward their group as justified. This occurs such that the stigmatized group member feels threatened should the dominant group behavior deviate from being discriminatory if they adhere to system to justifying beliefs (for a review, see Major & Sawyer, 2009).

Previous research in this arena has found, for example, that African American students entering their 1st year of college who expect discrimination, and then report experiencing it, are less bothered by racial discrimination because their experience was consistent with their worldview (Seller & Shelton, 2003). Furthermore, studies of stigma (for a review, see Major & Sawyer, 2009) have

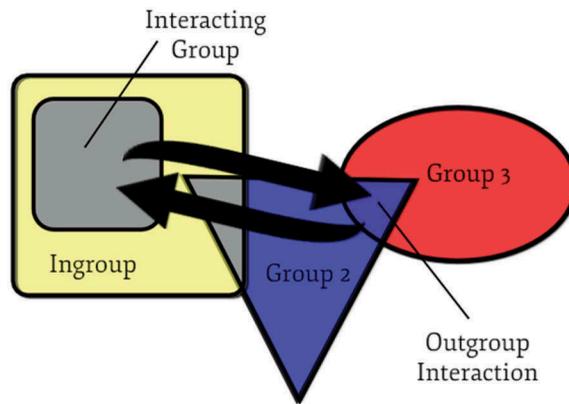
considered how members of stigmatized groups may internalize their stigma and agree with dominant group judgments of their devalued social identity. This internalization may result in depressed entitlement to earned resources or attitudinal ambivalence. Behaviors such as these perpetuate and justify the social system, demonstrating the interconnected nature of groups within the system. Members of stigmatized groups in positions of much lesser power than the dominant group that endorse system justifying beliefs (i.e., meritocracy) may see a message that does not adhere to their belief as more threatening than a message that does enforce the meritocracy and their position as low in the hierarchy (McCoy & Major, 2007). In this way, system justification theory helps explain why groups may instead endorse their position as a low-status group. They may even experience physiological and psychological advantages believing and endorsing a fair system, despite their low-status position (i.e., motivation to attain goals: Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2011; better mental health: Brody et al., 2013). This endorsement of position in the system, and belief that it is fair, exemplifies intergroup interconnectedness and interdependence for worldview formation and justification.

### Introducing a communication model of intergroup interdependence

In the preceding scenarios, interdependence has been framed mostly in terms of the behavioral and emotional interconnectedness between individuals who are *codependent* (see Le Poire, Hallett, & Giles, 1998) and/or between individuals and the groups to which they belong (e.g., Markus, 2017). However, in many situations the tendrils of such mutual dependency are far more widespread given the networks of social entities that can be interlocked across ingroups and outgroups (Stohl, Giles, & Maass, 2016). Toward this end, let us revisit our opening case of air travelers; their welfare is dictated not only by the competence of pilots but also by that of air controllers, baggage handlers, flight attendants, booking agents, union leaders, and so on. Hence, our own stance on intergroup interdependence acknowledges that communication between in- and outgroups, and at times a combination of the two, is shaped by their respective identities and histories (see Keblusek, Giles, Maass, Gardikiotis, this issue). But communication is shaped also, in part, by perceptions of the other dependencies with which each social category is seen to be variably intertwined and in the larger systems, in which they exist simultaneously.

In what follows, we introduce a *communication model of intergroup interdependence* that highlights the interrelated consequences for intergroup interaction on other groups outside the immediate in- and outgroup interaction. Given Taylor, King, and Osborne's (2010) contention that intergroup theorizing is overly dependent on social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986), our approach here is a modest respond to their plea "to expand the theoretical base of intergroup communication, not as a replacement for social identity, but rather to broaden the field and generate new insights" (p. 275). At this stage of theorizing, we define intergroup interdependence as the subjective awareness that in- and relevant outgroups are embedded in a fabric of other meaningful social categories that impact the fate, outcomes, relationships, and communication between and about them. As an illustration, let us examine one intergroup setting as a case study to elucidate such relationships.

Figure 1 serves as a model to visualize how the interactions between groups can have an effect on individuals in the context of other, comparatively disconnected groups. For example, Zabrodskaia (2016) demonstrated how the Crimean conflict between Russia and Ukraine has a significant impact on the sociolinguistic landscape in the relatively uninvolved city of Tallinn, Estonia. For Russian-speaking Estonians who live more than 2,000 km from the Crimean Peninsula, the interdependent nature of their relationship with Russia guarantees that Russia's geopolitics do not stay separate from their own. In the terms set forth in Figure 1, Estonians (the ingroup) actually experience a linguistic shift due to dynamics between prescriptive official language policies and implicit Estonian touristic market accommodation. These changes are a direct result of the interactions between the two relevant outgroups (Russia [2] and Ukraine [3]; see Figure 1), demonstrating the impact of these



**Figure 1.** A case study of patterns of interdependence.

external groups on the ingroup. Although many more players can be present in such relationship, this is the base interaction at the heart of intergroup interdependence; one group is affected by the interaction between two (or more) other groups. Acknowledging this interaction, we introduce four propositions.

### The propositional model

The first component of our four-part propositional format to communication and interdependence specifies some major outcomes when ingroup members are attuned to the interconnecting relationships existing with other relevant groups. With respect to the ingredients or elements of Proposition 1, we focus on selective outcomes that pertain to how positively ingroup members will attribute characteristics of prototypical representatives of groups with which they are appreciatively interdependent, how they describe these traits to others in complimentary ways, how they communicate with them to decrease social distance with a view to enhancing propitious results, and how their viewing practices accommodate auspicious manifestations of interdependent groups' media. The second proposition contends that an ingroup's construal of a network of robust and valued interdependencies with other potentially supportive groups will incline them to shore up negative cognitions, affects, and behaviors vis-à-vis its conflicting outgroups. The remaining propositions posit a parsimonious set of *moderating* conditions affecting the extent of the preceding outcomes in the sense of circumstances that can be predicated on strengthening them, on one hand, and stretching or straining them, on the other.

Relatedly, recent reviews of the field of intergroup communication (e.g., Keblusek, Giles, & Maass, 2017) highlight influential subfields within it that suggest outcome variables that we explicitly embrace in our propositional theorizing. These subfields include, but herein are not limited, to the following:

1. *Language attitudes* attends to how speakers of various language varieties invite trait attributions from others (e.g., Dragojevic, 2016). Research has shown with caveats that, in general, ingroup listeners typically upgrade speakers of their own group relative to contrastive outgroup in terms of status and solidarity ratings.

2. *Communication accommodation* focuses on how, when, and why members of different social categories accommodate one another or not (e.g., Palomares, Gilles, Soliz, & Gallois, 2016). Studies have shown that communicators converge toward and synchronize with those with whom they identify and diverge from those they do not (see Giles, 2016).

3. The *linguistic intergroup bias* model has recourse to how construing an ingroup or outgroup actor behaves—benevolently or malevolently—can influence how their actions are described for others (e.g., Maass, Salvi, Acuri, & Semin, 1989). It has been shown that ingroup actors behaving well

are described in abstract terms (e.g., generous), whereas outgroup members' similar behaviors are described more concretely (e.g., she gave money to a charity), the converse being the case when the behavior observed is negative.

4. *Group vitality* theory is concerned with how perceived structural factors, such as demography and history, that can shape communication in intergroup encounters (e.g., Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). Our initial, propositional formulation of the following model is crafted so as to pinpoint the intergroup communicative outcomes attending subjective interdependence based on the preceding subfields.

PROPOSITION 1: The more a group member becomes aware, and interpretively processes an optimal number of valued interdependencies of their group with relevant others, this will lead to

- (1) the increased likelihood to attribute communicators from such interdependent groups as more competent, trustworthy, and socially attractive than members of less interdependent groups (see Subfield 1 earlier);
- (2) a more favorable and abstract language used in descriptions of, and reference to, influential members of their other interdependent categories when behaving benevolently but attracting more concrete language when behaving badly; the converse pattern will emerge when the behavior is malevolent (see Subfield 3 earlier); and
- (3) more convergence to, and synchronization with, their interdependent groups, and more divergence away from contrastive, conflictual outgroups (see Subfield 2 earlier).

Drawing also on work regarding the intensity and nature of ethnophobias directed at other groups (e.g., Mullen & Rice, 2003), and research showing how group members select and avoid media that represents their group favorably and unfavorably, respectively (e.g., Abrams & Giles, 2007; Harwood, 1999; Reid, Giles, & Abrams, 2004), we posit

- (4) the decreased likelihood of using slurs and derogatory language when talking to members of interdependent groups as well as communicating (on- and off-line) about them, and
- (5) the increased likelihood to select and express positive sentiments about media that emanates from these interdependent groups.

PROPOSITION 2: Focusing on the consequences of the foregoing to relationships with (especially historically) *conflicting outgroups*, the ingroup's perception of existence of such manifold and valued interdependencies will bolster ingroup bias, construct and perpetuate negatively valenced intergroup attitudes, and lead to antagonistic interpersonal communication and media *practices*, with outgroup members (both on- and off-line).

PROPOSITION 3: Elements of the preceding can be *accentuated* under at least three conditions when

1. the ingroup interdependencies are seen to be defined in socially compelling ways that affect positively the lifestyles and future of group members with respect to advantageous interconnecting economic, political, and militaristic ties;
2. the ingroup perceives itself to have relatively high status and a powerful position vis-à-vis its interdependent entities that are cognitively construed (as posited by social identity theory) as legitimate, stable, and unchangeable (see Turner & Brown, 1978); and
3. any conflicting outgroup(s) that are perceived as negatively affecting the ingroup's fate are seen to have powerful and supportive interdependencies of their own.

PROPOSITION 4: Elements of Propositions 2 and 3's communicative effects will be *attenuated*, *neutralized*, or even *countermanded* under at least three conditions when

- (1) the ingroup becomes cognitively aware that its status could have been illegitimately gained and that its power situation is ambiguous or unstable position vis-à-vis these interdependent entities (i.e., the converse of Proposition 2b);

- (2) the ingroup believes itself to be vulnerable given a perceived overdependence on its other interdependent networks, particularly when there is an incongruence of needs and values; and
- (3) the social consequences of such interdependencies decrease the perceived relative group vitality of the ingroup (see Subfield 4 earlier).

## Future agenda

Our model presents a new empirically testable, integrative approach to intergroup communication. This model emphasizes both the levels and natures of interdependency (both positive and negative) and the individual's awareness and interpretation of these interdependencies (both for ingroup and outgroup networks). How our conceptualization and theorizing of interdependency aligns with prior approaches—many briefly described in a previous section in this article—obviously warrants closer analysis and scrutiny that space precludes herein. Clearly, more incisive conceptual sharpening of these propositions is in order, not least with respect to what constitutes optimal numbers of beneficial networks and social systems of interdependencies with other groups; what invites valued and less valued relationships among them; what emerges when valued interdependencies are not available, invited, yet sought after; and what kinds of meta- and common identities are discursively forged (and labeled) as these interdependencies evolve and change. Undoubtedly, we need to empirically explore the social attributional antecedents that give rise to the conditions inherent in Propositions 3 and 4. Furthermore, how our six moderating factors work in tandem needs investigation, and all this opens the door wide for a plethora of exciting follow-up questions that are not limited to but *include* the following:

- What are the social and communicative repercussions for the ingroup of perceiving growing interdependence among relevant outgroups?
- When and why do which group members seek more, or to decrease interdependence with other groups?
- What are the social implications of and attributions about an increase or decrease in interdependence, and when is it perceived and expressed as successful or unsuccessful?
- What are the communicative implications of perceived discrepancies between how much interdependence exists or is possible, and for whom?
- What are the psychological and discursive processes that affect people's perceptions of intergroup interdependencies?
- What is the language and discourse of intergroup interdependence seeking, on one hand, and interdependence depletion, on the other?
- How can interdependence itself be used as a way of exerting power and influence? Stated differently, does a reminder of our interdependent relationship with outgroups make us more lenient and more accepting of their positions?

Albeit a model in development, the communication model of intergroup interdependence provides a promising framework for contextualizing intergroup interactions that can be applied to and tested in wide variety of different intergroup settings (see Ehala, Giles, & Harwood, 2016) varying in their groups' relative vitalities (for a review, see Smith, Ehala, & Giles, 2018). Clearly, working across different intergroup settings (e.g., intergenerational, between-sexual orientations, and interability settings) that possess their own identities and local norms (see Hogg, this issue), cue categorization radars (see Fasoli & Maass, this issue), and digital channels and preferences (see Walther, this issue) will allow us to identify additional communicative outcome variables that can be fruitfully clustered together. In addition, the model provides a heuristically useful paradigm for scholars who are interested in intergroup communication in settings where multiple significant group identities and their social networks overlap and become salient in different interactions. Toward that end, and in the prologue to this special issue, Keblusek et al. incorporate subjective interdependencies into their own framework, identifying ways in which this construct (and its doubtless

innumerable forms) will interact with other social variables to impact a wide variety of communicative behaviors. As such, this will allow for a more contextualized understanding of intergroup interactions that, in some ways, picks up Taylor et al.'s (2010) gauntlet for broadening extant theorizing and takes into account more recent directions envisioned for this domain (Gallois, Watson, & Giles, *in press*).

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