MEASURING RELATIONAL MEANING MAKING: A REOPERATIONALIZATION OF RELATIONAL FRAMING THEORY

by

CLINT G. GRAVES

(Under the Direction of Jennifer Samp)

ABSTRACT

Relational framing theory (RFT; Dillard, Solomon, & Samp, 1996) is a staple of the interpersonal communication literature. The theory conceptualizes relational communication as a function of three dimensions: dominance, affiliation, and involvement. The framework has been criticized for issues surrounding unit of analysis, measurement, verisimilitude, and falsifiability. This thesis aims to address these criticisms, with particular focus on measurement. To date, communication research using RFT generally follows the operational norms set by Dillard et al. (1996) in conceptualizing dominance and affiliation as separate dimensions that correspond to separate bipolar constructs. This thesis adopts a dialectical process-oriented inquiry (DPOI) perspective to reoperationalize RFT, viewing dominance and affiliation as interdependent phenomena that correspond to a single bipolar construct called relational framing. Other important theoretical issues, including frame displacement and the role of involvement, are also clarified. Implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Relational framing theory, Relational communication, Operationalization, Dominance, Affiliation, Involvement, Dialectical process-oriented inquiry

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CLINT G. GRAVES

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by

CLINT G. GRAVES

Major Professor: Jennifer Samp

Committee: Celeste Condit
Jiyeon So

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2019

DEDICATION

For grandma, Carol Thurner.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Meaning making is central to a variety of communication processes, including relational communication. Relational communication can be defined as the meaning that establishes who social actors are to each other. Relational framing theory (RFT; Dillard, Solomon, Samp, 1996) posits schema-like structures, called relational frames, as central to the way individuals interpret the relational meaning of interpersonal messages. A product of the post-positivist tradition (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2015), RFT affords a scientific framework to predict and explain the way relational inferences are made. Although RFT meets many traditional standards of "good" theory, as set forth by Chaffee and Berger (1987), the framework has been met with criticisms of late concerning unit of analysis, measurement, verisimilitude, and falsifiability (McLaren & Solomon, 2015). The purpose of this thesis is to empirically explore those limitations and propose new operational norms for future RFT research.

In this first chapter, I detail RFT's propositions, review its empirical applications, and assess its recent criticisms. In the second chapter, I expand on some of the criticisms of RFT and present a rationale for an empirical study that attempts to meliorate those issues. The third chapter details the proposed methodology used for the empirical study—an analysis of which appears in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter discusses the findings of the study in the context of relational communication and RFT research. And the concluding sixth chapter recapitulates the central findings of the study.

Relational Framing Theory Overview

A long line of research affirms the notion that messages create meaning at both a content and relational level (for review, see McLaren & Solomon, 2015). Relational framing theory (RFT; Dillard et al., 1996; Dillard, Solomon & Palmer, 1999; Solomon, Dillard, & Anderson, 2002) describes the way humans derive relational meaning from interpersonal messages. For example, suppose one friend says to another friend, "Are you feeling all right? You're being quiet today." Is this utterance construed as compassion or admonishment? An implicit statement of liking or an indirect command? RFT posits the key to answering these questions is in the cognition of the individual interpreting the utterance.

RFT is grounded in assumptions of social cognitive, evolutionary, and communication theory established through decades of research (for review, see Tusing, 2000). Yet, the theory most directly proceeds from Burgoon and Hale (1984, 1987) who derived a series of relational topoi that characterize the way interpersonal actors can understand relational meaning. To derive their list, Burgoon and Hale (1984) traced work from a variety of literatures concerning anthropology, psychotherapy, personality, biology, meaning making, emotion, credibility, impression management, relationships, nonverbal behaviors, dyadic interaction, and interpersonal behavior. Key among these literatures was work by Bateson (1935) on dominance-submissiveness, by Leary (1957) on affection-hostility, and by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) on activity-passivity. These particular, recurrent findings would become the central dominance, affiliation, and involvement frames of RFT, respectively. The dimensions Burgoon and Hale (1984) derived from their extensive literature review provided the means for developing a measure of relational communication that could be statistically validated (Burgoon & Hale, 1987). Thus, Burgoon and Hale's (1984, 1987) relational topoi are a watershed moment in the study of relational communication because they integrate far-flung literatures into a single articulation. RFT relies heavily on these foundations.

Central to RFT, relational frames are "mental structures consisting of organized knowledge about social relationships" (Solomon & Theiss, 2007, p. 125). Similar to schemas, relational frames organize knowledge of past experience to facilitate understanding present and future experience (cf. Baldwin, 1995; Planalp, 1985). In this way, the frames "simplify the problem of interpreting social reality by directing attention to particular behaviors, resolving ambiguities, and guiding inferences" (Solomon & Theiss, 2007, p. 125). In other words, message interpretation involves screening interpersonal communication acts through a cognitive framework designed to render relational meaning sensible to an individual.

Where Burgoon and Hale (1984) sought to establish a granular understanding of relational communication through their 12 topoi, Dillard et al. (1996) argue that there are two substantive relational frames that reflect fundamental dimensions of human relating: dominance and affiliation. Grounded in evolutionary theory, RFT assumes humans are uniquely social animals that work toward social organization and harmony. Thus, one dimension of relating has to do with cooperation and liking (i.e., affiliation-disaffiliation). Yet social cohesion based solely on cooperation is, if not impossible, highly impractical. For example, conflicts over the distribution of resources, utility of group goals, and efficiency of group decision-making must be resolved. As cognitive misers, humans can efficiently settle such disputes through the establishment of hierarchies. Thus, a second dimension of relating has to do with power and control (i.e., dominance-submissiveness). These frames represent the two orthogonal dimensions of human relating that facilitate relational meaning making.

The third dimension central to RFT is involvement, a fundamentally different type of relational frame. Considered an intensifier variable by Dillard et al. (1996), involvement speaks to the level of engrossment in an interaction demonstrated by a particular social actor. Individuals more engaged in an interaction are more involved, which in turn Dillard et al. (1996)

theorized would increase the intensity of dominance or affiliation judgements. In this way, involvement becomes the metaphorical "volume knob" that determines the intensity of frame salience (Dillard et al., 1996, p. 716; a coinage of the third author's; J. Samp, personal communication, January 27, 2019). Actors may be highly withdrawn or highly engaged in an interaction, but this fact alone does not speak to the substantive interpretation of the relational content of a message, merely the certainty or strength of that interpretation.

Perhaps the strongest evidence in support of RFT's abstraction of relational communication to dominance, affiliation, and involvement is found in the work of Dillard et al. (1999). Their study used factor analytic methods to demonstrate that Burgoon and Hale's (1987) statistically validated dimensions collapsed into the second-order factors of dominance, affiliation, and involvement. In this, Dillard et al. (1999) provided an empirical test of Dillard et al.'s (1996) claim that the entire range of human relational phenomenology can be derived from their three fundamental dimensions. RFT thus builds upon decades of relationship research in its attempts to predict and explain the way individual social actors understand the meaning that establishes who they are to others in social reality.

The shift from relational topoi—also called themes—to relational frames is an important one. Where a focus on relational themes (e.g., Burgoon and Hale, 1984, 1987) reflects a preoccupation with understanding the multiple dimensions along which an individual might interpret relational meaning, relational frames represent cognitive structures between which individuals have an obligate binary choice in the interpretation of messages. RFT attempts to predict and explain actualized interpretive behavior along the dimensions of dominance and affiliation. A perspective based in RFT seeks to determine which frame (i.e., dominance or affiliation) is the one actively guiding an individual's interpretation of social reality (Dillard et al., 1996; McLaren & Solomon, 2015). Consider again the message, "Are you feeling all right?

You're being quiet today." It takes on different meanings depending upon the salient relational frame in the mind of the receiver. Through a dominance frame, the message might indicate admonishment or an indirect command: "You're not yourself today—get it together." Or, through the affiliation frame, the same message comes off as a compassionate, if implicit, statement of liking: "I can see you're not yourself today, I'm worried about you—How can we make it better?" Any number of contextual, cultural, linguistic, or relational factors may contribute to the activation of one frame over the other (McLaren, Dillard, Tusing, & Solomon, 2014; Tusing, 2000).

There are a few fundamental predictions that the RFT framework can make. For example, the *differential salience hypothesis* posits that individuals tend to view messages through *either* the dominance *or* the affiliation frame in the flow of interaction. This tendency results in the activation (i.e., cognitive salience) of one frame at any given moment. Dillard et al. (1996) found empirical evidence for the differential salience hypothesis when they linked dominance and affiliation frames to compliance-gaining and affinity-seeking goals, respectively. Dillard et al. (1996) also found evidence that involvement impacts frame salience. Known as the *general intensifier hypothesis*, this finding holds that heavily involved (i.e., highly engrossed) relational partners experience stronger frame salience. Solomon et al. (2002) completed a replication and extension of Dillard et al.'s (1996) work, finding support for both the differential salience and general intensifier hypotheses.

As a way of concretizing RFT, consider the example of two friends: Jack and Erik. Suppose Jack utters the following to Erik: "It would be great if we could use your cabin this weekend." RFT posits that Erik would interpret the relational content of that utterance (i.e., the meaning that establishes who Jack is to Erik) through a dominance frame or an affiliation frame. Through a dominance frame, Erik might understand the utterance as a request—one that

positions Jack at his decision-making mercy. Through his utterance, Jack would have established a hierarchy of decision-making power wherein Erik is dominant in the relationship, as he has power from his owning a cabin that others must request to use. If, however, Erik were to interpret the utterance through an affiliation frame, he might identify Jack's request as evidence of liking. Jack wants the two to spend time together, Erik might suppose, because Jack enjoys time spent developing their friendship. Any dominance hierarchy is decentered in favor of an understanding of the utterance that focuses on the similarity or liking between the two friends. Depending on the salient frame in Erik's mind, the message means something different in the flow of conversation. It is likely to influence the way the conversation proceeds thereafter.

Another important process, known as *frame displacement*, can occur when the non-salient frame rapidly overtakes the salient frame as interpretations shift during interaction (McLaren & Solomon, 2015). In the process of frame displacement, a prevailing interpretation based on one frame gives way to a competing interpretation based on the other. Consider again our example of Jack and Erik. Suppose this time we contextualize Jack's utterance, "It would be great if we could use your cabin this weekend," as one message in the flow of talk. In reply, Erik might say, "Sure, I don't see why not." To which Jack might reply, "Of course, the cabin is always open for me." In the space of these utterances, frame displacement may occur in Erik's view of social reality. For example, suppose he interpreted Jack's first message along an affiliation dimension as described above, and then interpreted Jack's second message along a dominance dimension. In the second message, Jack more overtly positions himself as a kind of unspoken co-owner of the cabin, relegating the ritual of asking for permission to the status of mere formality. Jack thus centralizes the notion that he is not at Erik's behest, calling into salience the power dynamics of the relationship. Jack has challenged Erik's perception of control in the relationship, particularly within the domain of cabin usage. Thus, Erik's interpretation of

the relational content of Jack's utterances shifts from an affiliation-based interpretation to a dominance-based interpretation, constituting frame displacement. He shifts from viewing social reality based on liking and similarity to viewing social reality based on power and control.

Operationalizations of Relational Framing Theory

To date, RFT has been applied to understand a wide variety of communication contexts through its predictive or sensitizing capacities. For example, RFT has been claimed to investigate social-sexual communication (i.e., Hall, 2016; Solomon & Williams, 1997), consent communication (i.e., Lannutti & Monahan, 2002), group communication (i.e., Henningsen, Henningsen, & Booth, 2013), relational uncertainty (i.e., Knobloch, Miller, Bond, & Mannone, 2007; Knobloch & Solomon, 2005; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013), relational hurt (i.e., McLaren & Pederson, 2014; McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2012), flirting (Frisby, Dillow, Gaughan, & Nordlund, 2011), persuasion (Henningsen, Henningsen, Cruz, & Morrill, 2003), superior-subordinate relationships (i.e., McWorthy & Henningsen, 2014), and health promotion messages (i.e., Streklova & Damiani, 2016). Across the wide range of topics, operationalization of RFT has been inconsistent and findings have been mixed.

Table 1 displays some of the operational choices made by studies that have applied RFT empirically. Other studies do not use the theory in a measurable capacity, opting instead to use it as a sensitizing device, predictive guide, or a priori coding scheme. As a sensitizing device, RFT has been used to explain patterns of social and task attraction in groups (i.e., Henningsen et al., 2013) and social-sexual encounters in the workplace (i.e., Solomon & Williams, 1997). As a predictive guide, studies have used RFT to forward predictions about social-sexual communication using new relational frames, like a seductive, friendly, or flirtatious frame (i.e., Hall, 2016) or about relational uncertainty using more general relational themes, like immediacy, similarity, or receptivity (i.e., Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). Finally, RFT has been

used to develop an a priori coding scheme to understand the effectiveness of tobacco prevention messages in mediated contexts (i.e., Strekalova & Damiani, 2016).

Table 1

Operational Choices in Relational Framing Literature, 1996-2014

Source	Focal Context	Design	Stimulus	Measure	Analysis
Dillard et al. (1996)	Goals, Friendship	Between-Subjects Experiment	Single Vignette	Dillard et al. (1996) Dominance, Affiliation, Involvement	Repeated Measures Multiple Regression
Dillard et al. (1999)	Interpersonal Interaction, Dominance, Liking, Explicitness	Between-Subjects Experiment	Recalled Interaction	Burgoon & Hale (1987) Relational Message Scale	Factor Analysis
Edwards (2000)	Gender, Friendship, Peers	Within-Subjects Experiment	Multiple Vignettes	Modified Burgoon & Hale (1987) Relational Communication Scale	Repeated Measures ANOVA
Ebesu Hubbard (2001)	Conflict, Relational Uncertainty, Dating	Within-Subjects Experiment	Recalled Interaction	Modified Burgoon & Hale's (1987) Relational Communication Scale	Correlation
Lannutti & Monahan (2002)	Consent, Alcohol, Sexual Partners	Mixed-Experiment	Multiple Vignettes	Modified Dillard et al. (1996): Dominance, Affiliation, Involvement	Repeated Measures MANOVA
Solomon et al. (2002)	Gender, Attachment, Friendship	Mixed-Experiment	Multiple Vignettes	Dillard et al. (1996): Dominance, Affiliation, Involvement	Repeated Measures Hierarchical Regression
Henningsen et	Influence,	Between-	Live	Modified Dillard	Correlation;

al. (2003)	Group Decision Making	Subjects Experiment	Conversation	et al. (1996): Dominance, Affiliation, Involvement	ANOVA
Knobloch et al. (2007)	Relational Uncertainty, Marriage	3-Factor Nested Design	Live Conversation	Burgoon & Hale (1987) Dominance, Affiliation, Involvement	Hierarchical Linear Modeling
Frisby et al. (2011)	Flirting, Attraction, Social-Sexual Interaction	Between-Subjects Experiment	Live Conversation	Modified Burgoon & Hale (1987) Similarity; Affect; Receptivity/Trust; Dominance	MANOVA
McLaren et al. (2012)	Hurt, Relational Turbulence, Romantic Partners	Between-Subjects Experiment	Live Conversation	Modified Dillard et al. (1996) Dominance and Affiliation	SEM
Theiss & Knobloch (2013)	Relational Turbulence, Military, Romantic Relationship	Non-Experimental	Recalled Interaction	Modified Dillard et al. (1996) Dominance and Affiliation	SEM
McLaren & Pederson (2014)	Hurtful Events, Parent-Child Conversation	Non-Experimental	Live Conversation	Single Items for perceived dominance and dislike	Hierarchical Linear Regression
McLaren et al. (2014)	Utterance Form, Relational Context, Friendship	Between-Subjects Experiment	Single Vignette	Dillard et al. (1996): Dominance & Affiliation	Repeated Measures ANOVA
McWorthy & Henningsen (2014)	Impression Management, Superior-Subordinate Relationship	Within-Subjects Experiment	Recalled Relationships	Modified Dillard et al. (1996): Dominance & Affiliation	Paired-samples *t*-Test

Note. Analytic procedures reported are only those relevant to RFT.

Part of what makes RFT a useful theory to study is the diverse range of contexts to which it is applicable. As demonstrated in Table 1, the theory has been applied to a number of novel interpersonal contexts. Since relational meaning is inherent to communicative action, this diversity should come as little surprise. Moreover, the framework has been operationalized to good effect.

RFT has advanced knowledge on negative or conflictual episodes in close relationships. Ebesu Hubbard (2001) demonstrated that romantic partners tend to expect more affiliative and non-dominant messages during conflicted episodes about important issues and that meeting those expectations leads to greater communication satisfaction. And Knobloch et al. (2007) corroborated the notion of a pessimism bias by showing that partners experiencing relational uncertainty perceive more dominance and less affiliation and involvement in their partners' communication than outside observers do. This finding provides an explanation for why romantic partners can be reactive to seemingly ordinary statements. Knobloch et al.'s (2007) findings compliment earlier work completed by Solomon et al. (2002), who found that individuals with high attachment-anxiety are more attentive to relational messaging cues than other attachment orientations. McLaren et al. (2012) was able to support the notion that dominance and disaffiliation mediated the link between relationship turbulence and perceptions of hurt. Thus, two key themes should be taken from this collection of studies. First, RFT has been able to play a substantive, explanatory role in creating concrete knowledge claims about communication processes. Second, dominance in close relationships is repeatedly linked to negative relational outcomes, while affiliation is generally seen as a buffer against those effects.

The negative role of dominance is further corroborated in other contexts. For example, McLaren and Pederson (2014) showed that discrepancies in perceptions of dominance and disaffiliation about potentially hurtful messages were negatively linked to perceptions of

understanding in parent-child relationships. And Theiss and Knobloch (2013) were able to predict perceptions of dominance in a relationship using perceptions of aggression in self and other in relationships where one partner is post-deployment military personnel. And while Frisby et al. (2011) managed to demonstrate that men are perceived by women as more dominant and affiliative when flirting, they also showed that dominance perceptions were negatively associated with attraction and effectiveness. Overall, close—particularly romantic—relationship research has benefitted from the application of RFT to explain the effects of relational perception.

Of course, not all applications of RFT are as productive as its applications in close relationship contexts. Henningsen et al. (2003), for example, attempted to predict the pattern of influence statements that small group members would make when given certain goals. They made assumptions about normative influence—having to do with group harmony—and informational influence—having to with high quality decisions—being linked to affiliation and dominance, respectively. The framework proved unable to predict the statement patterns.

One important implication from all of the work discussed above and in Table 1 is that a great diversity of novel communication contexts can be better understood through the RFT framework. Communication studies in general and interpersonal studies in particular benefit from the application of RFT. Yet, a different, slightly more troubling trend is also found in the diversity represented in Table 1. Specifically, the operational choices of measurement, stimulus, and analysis reflect little cohesiveness. Measurement is sometimes completed with Dillard et al.'s (1996) scales, sometimes with Burgoon and Hale's (1987) scales, and sometimes with modified or truncated combinations of the two. Stimuli run the gamut from single or multiple utterances, to single or multiple vignettes, to entire interactions or relationships. And in terms of analysis, RFT data has been subjected to everything from basic and complex operations within the General Linear Model to an assortment of more complex statistical modeling. To be sure,

some of this diversity is due in part to the different contexts and types of questions that the respective researchers have chosen. It is a central claim of this thesis, however, that a more fundamental issue misaligns the conceptual and operational components of the RFT framework—one that contributes to the staccato patterns represented in Table 1 and to a weakening of the theory. To understand this claim, it is first necessary to discuss relevant criticisms of RFT and its applications.

Evaluating the Relational Framing Theory Framework

By many traditional standards (for review, see Chaffee & Berger, 1987), RFT is a good theory because it is explanatory, parsimonious, and heuristic. Despite these strengths, one of my central claims remains that the RFT framework—including its propositions of the theory and their counterpart operational norms—is associated with unnecessary limitations stemming from a fundamental misalignment between those conceptual and operational components. McLaren and Solomon (2015) succinctly summarize some of these limitations of RFT when they note its "lack of clarity about the extent to which frame displacement occurs and under what conditions," its "reliance on imprecise measures of frame activation," its "predominant use of hypothetical scenarios to operationalize interpersonal interaction," and more general qualms about its falsifiability (p. 123-124). The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to discussion of these limitations in greater detail and expansion on the issue of measurement.

The first limitation discussed by McLaren and Solomon (2015) concerns the topic of frame displacement. To review, frame displacement occurs when, in the flow of interaction, a non-salient relational frame becomes salient—overtaking the interpretive process from the other relational frame. In other words, an interactant's interpretation based on dominance could be rapidly displaced by a "better" interpretation based on affiliation as a result of any given interactional cue. McLaren and Solomon (2015) note that frame displacement could theoretically

happen in rapid succession—perhaps in the space of single talk turn in conversation. To date, only Tusing (2000) has focused particular attention on the empirical capture of frame displacement. He argues that the *relative* activation of a frame (i.e., one frame's salience compared to the other) constitutes strong, weak, or absent cases of displacement. He makes this case using the normative measures of frame activation posited by Dillard et al. (1996), a move that, as we shall see, shoots his explication through with problematic conceptual baggage and commits him to a view that authorizes what he terms the simultaneous *de*activation of relational frames. This view is untenable should we retain the assumption that relational meaning is inherent to communicative action. Thus, frame displacement remains a puzzle to be solved.

The second limitation discussed by McLaren and Solomon (2015) concerns the measurement of frame activation. The scales used to assess relational framing—typically a modified form of Dillard et al.'s (1996) or Burgoon and Hale's (1987) scales—can only access the conscious cognitive processes at work in the meaning making process (McLaren & Solomon, 2015). Both of the scales provide a series of Likert-type items to which participants respond, thinking of a specific stimulus—be it a vignette (e.g., Dillard et al., 1996; Lannutti & Monahan, 2002; Solomon et al., 2002), recalled or live interaction (e.g., Ebesu Hubbard, 2001; Knobloch et al., 2007; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013), or an entire relationship (e.g., McWorthy & Henningsen, 2014). Any non-conscious interpretive forces at play—plenty of which are suspected to impact frame activation (McLaren et al., 2014)—are left out of the analysis by design.

The third limitation discussed by McLaren and Solomon (2015) deals with the use of hypothetical scenarios or vignettes in measuring frame salience. While there are examples of studies with different stimuli (e.g., Ebesu Hubbard, 2001; Frisby et al., 2011; Henningsen et al., 2003; Knobloch et al., 2007; McLaren et al., 2012; McLaren & Pederson, 2014; McWorthy & Henningsen, 2014; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013), this point is well-taken. Using hypothetical

interactions is an admittedly convenient and controllable operational choice; however, it does not mimic naturally occurring interaction. As a result, it is difficult to talk about the verisimilitude of RFT findings with the actual talk between people.

Each of the first three issues leads to the fourth and final limitation discussed by McLaren and Solomon (2015): falsifiability. Given the ambiguities and problems concerning unit of analysis, measurement reliability and validity, and verisimilitude, "any empirical data could be argued to fit the theory," and worse yet, "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" (McLaren & Solomon, 2015, p. 124). This is ultimately the most serious problem with the RFT framework, for as Craig (1993) argues, "the sine qua non of scientific theory [is] falsifiability" (p. 27; see also, Popper, 1959). Without a standard for declaring a theory false, then researchers have no grounds for claiming its veracity either. To ensure the validity of future research that might use RFT, some (dis)confirmatory evidentiary standard needs to be established for the framework.

More on measurement. McLaren and Solomon's (2015) criticisms based on measurement are not exhaustive. It is a central claim of this thesis that a second set of measurement limitations are associated with RFT. Specifically, normative scales do not measure relational frame activation. For studies using Burgoon and Hale's (1987) scale, this should be clear. As has already been established, Burgoon and Hale (1984) were concerned with *themes* of relational communication, not relational *frames*. This distinction seems to be a source of confusion among researchers that purport to use RFT, but instead rely on measures developed under these different theoretical assumptions (e.g., Frisby et al., 2011). Even for those appealing to the appropriate source in Dillard et al.'s (1996) foundational work, however, there remains a validity problem. Dillard et al.'s (1996) scale—though it has demonstrated psychometric

structural validity—fails a basic inspection of its face validity. As Levine (2011) argues, face validity—or the critical examination of a scale to ensure that it measures what it purports to measure—is an important first step that should not be overlooked in the scale development process. It is therefore important to examine the particulars of Dillard et al.'s (1996) scales to substantiate the claim that it does not accurately measure relational framing.

Dillard et al.'s (1996) scale (Appendix A) consists of twelve items that reflect possible dimensions of judgment—four items for each relational frame: dominance (i.e., persuade/concede, influence/comply, controlling/yielding, and dominance/submission), affiliation (i.e., liking/disliking, attraction/aversion, affection/disaffection, and positive regard/negative regard), and involvement (i.e., involved/uninvolved, interested/disinterested, active/inactive, engaged/withdrawn). Participants are instructed to read or recall a stimulus of some kind—typically a vignette or interaction—and respond to the items indicating if the dimensions corresponding to the relational frames are 1—completely irrelevant—through 5—completely relevant—to their interpretation of that stimulus. This measure is taken as a proxy for actual frame activation. Measurement typically happens once, and analysis consists of loading the responses to the dominance and affiliation items into a repeated-measures regression model or analysis of variance. There are at least four problems with this operationalization of relational framing.

First, the scales demonstrate low reliability. For example, Dillard et al. (1996) found Cronbach's alpha scores of .76 for dominance, .66 for affiliation, and .67 for involvement; and, Solomon et al. (2002) found only marginal improvements. Other studies (e.g., Lannutti and Monahan, 2002) have overcome this issue by adding items to each scale.

Second, the scale produces three scores—one for dominance, one for affiliation, and one for involvement. This suggests that participants merely consider the stimulus from a dominance

perspective, then an affiliation perspective, and then an involvement perspective. Such a process is antithetical to the idea that the frames compete with and displace each other. Instead of achieving an idea about which frame is guiding interpretation, Dillard et al.'s (1996) scale seems to capture something closer to a participant's idea of how coherent an interpretation of the stimulus based on dominance, affiliation, and involvement might be. This says nothing of the interpretation they settle upon in the flow of interaction. In other words, Dillard et al.'s (1996) scale reproduces the relational *themes* of dominance, affiliation, and involvement in a new format. This new format, therefore, does not assess the in situ interpretive work (i.e., the *activation* of a relational frame) in the minds of individuals within the tensional competition of frames presumed by the theory.

Third, the repeated-measures analysis procedure typically used to assess frame activation ignores the fact that most studies measure frame activation once (e.g., Dillard et al., 1996; Lannutti & Monahan, 2002; Henningsen et al., 2003; McLaren et al., 2014). It makes little conceptual sense to treat dominance or affiliation scores analogously to pre- and/or post-test results based solely on the fact that the scale measures them in a certain order. To do so is to assume that the participant, upon reading or recalling and interpreting a stimulus, considered both a dominance- and affiliation-based interpretation in a specific order without testing the possibility that they considered them in the reverse order, or considered only one of the interpretations at all. Such an a priori assumption is a threat to the validity of the scale because it rules out certain empirical possibilities before it can test for them.

Fourth, single measurements of framing completely flatten the interpretive work being done by any individual throughout their experience with a stimulus. Assessing frame activation once in response to several utterances assumes that one assessment applies to the stimulus as a whole. This is another untested assumption—one that excludes any chance of detecting frame

displacement. It may be true that the frames guide interpretation at the level of the message, the interaction, and the relationship. But to assume that a single measurement of frame activation accounts for all of the cognitive work being done by an individual across more than a single utterance is to mask the possibility that frames rapidly displace each other or that interpretations shift as individuals experience interaction.

Summary

RFT represents a useful theoretical framework for investigating the way individuals make meaning at the relational level of communication. The theory appeals to a robust lineage of communication and relationship research and has been applied to understand a variety of novel communication contexts. Unfortunately, the framework suffers from some methodological and operational limitations, as discussed by McLaren and Solomon (2015) and expanded upon in this chapter. These limitations deal with unit of analysis, measurement, verisimilitude, and falsifiability. And while each one poses a significant and unique threat to the framework's overall validity, they are all reflective of a deeper issue: a categorical mismatch between the conceptual and operational levels of RFT. Specifically, RFT research to date fails to capture interpersonal interaction as it is enacted in everyday talk. While the theory makes predictions about the way relational meaning is made in real time, no study has applied the theory to that end. It is my goal in this thesis to develop a methodological protocol that facilitates such an application—one that can match the propositional structure of RFT, thereby providing a way to operationalize relational frames that better captures the process of relational meaning making as it unfolds in interpersonal interaction.

CHAPTER 2

THE PRESENT STUDY

Relational framing theory (RFT; Dillard et al., 1996) benefits from many strengths as a scientific theory but is also limited by some of its methodological and operational norms. As discussed by McLaren and Solomon (2015) and expanded upon in the previous chapter, the framework gives cause for some concerns over ambiguity about frame displacement, imprecise measurement, unrealistic experimental stimuli, and falsifiability. While imprecise measurement is the main focus of this thesis, all of these limitations are reflective of a deeper issue with RFT. Specifically, the conceptual claims of RFT assume what I will here term a *dialectical process-orientation* that does not carry over into the operational norms used to apply the theory in research. This represents a categorical mismatch within the RFT framework that fuels its limitations.

The purpose of this chapter is to expand on the concept of a dialectical process-orientated inquiry (DPOI) and introduce an empirical study guided by this perspective. First, I detail why a lack of DPOI for RFT research is problematic. Second, I describe the findings of prior study guided by certain DPOI assumptions that influenced the design of the present thesis. Third, I posit a rationale and set of hypotheses for the present study that seek to validate new methodological norms for measuring relational frame salience and to replicate previous findings using these new methods.

Dialectical Process-Oriented Inquiry

A dialectical process-oriented inquiry (DPOI) reflects insights from dialectical theories (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, 1998) and process inquiry (e.g., Poole, 2013). These two

sources of influence direct attention to issues of conceptualization and operationalization within a framework. Figure 1 demonstrates these concerns applied to RFT in a matrix format. Dialectical theory focuses attention on the conceptualization of the binary of dominance and affiliation frames within RFT. Researchers are faced with the decision to conceptualize these constructs along dualistic or dialectic lines (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). In addition, process inquiry focuses attention on the operationalization of the frames. In this, researchers have to decide on a variance or process approach to examining the way the frames behave empirically. My position in this thesis is that the dialectical-process quadrant—a DPOI perspective—reflects the most effective orientation to adopt in using RFT to complete research. The following section will elaborate on the choices.

Figure 1

Dualistic vs. Dialectic, Variance vs. Process Inquiry Concerns Applied to RFT

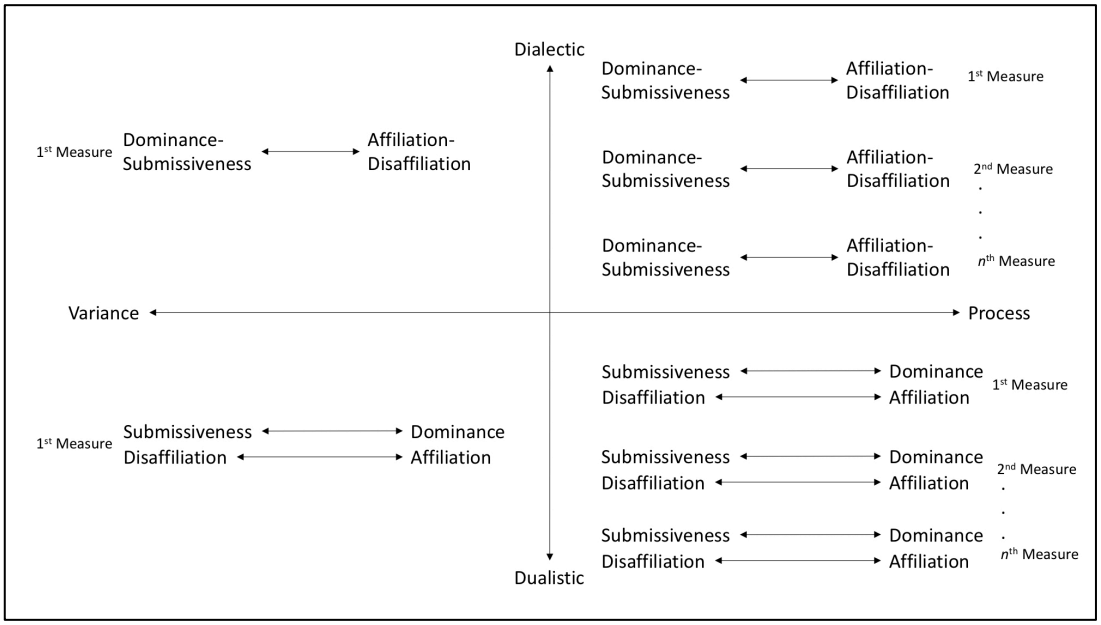

Figure 1. These quadrants visually depict the research concerns reflected in a shift to dialectical process-oriented inquiry. Dialectical thinking entails a shift in the conceptualization of the relational frames, while process thinking entails a shift in their operationalization.

Dualistic vs. dialectic. RFT posits dominance and affiliation as the two fundamental dimensions of human relating that can account for the entire range of relational phenomenology. In addition, the theory posits that these categories are correspondent to cognitive structures that compete with and displace each other in the flow of interaction. The RFT formulation, therefore, evokes a binary logic that involves two oppositional and competing social forces. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that two basic orientations to such binary logics are practicable: dualistic and dialectic.

RFT research to date has treated dominance and affiliation through the logic of dualism by operationalizing either dimension as a unipolar construct that corresponds to an individual subscale score. This is dualistic thinking because it treats the constructs of dominance and affiliation as "simple static polarities, each element of which is an anchoring point on a single dimension" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 46). Dualistic approaches such as these recognize the oppositional patterning of the social forces, but deny their mutual constitution and interrelatedness. Consider the analogy of *uncertainty*, in the sense of chaos or unpredictability (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Thought of in a dualistic way, uncertainty would be formulated as a unipolar construct that can be high or low. Such a formulation forgets or ignores the importance of considering relational uncertainty in terms of its dialectical counterpart: relational certainty. In Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) words, "The concept of 'certainty'…is meaningful only because we have an understanding of its logical and/or functional oppositions; without knowledge of 'uncertainty,' 'chaos,' 'unpredictability,' and so forth, the concept of 'certainty' would be meaningless" (p. 9). Just as uncertainty is constituted in certainty, so too must we conceive of dominance and affiliation. This means shifting from dualistic thinking to dialectical thinking, which "focuses on the messier, less logical, more inconsistent unfolding practices of the moment" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 46). Such an orientation would oblige

us to see dominance and affiliation as tensional with each other—as competing with and displacing each other in the flow of talk and in the ever-complex meaning making process. In this way, dominance and affiliation are not measured as separate unipolar constructs, but rather as mutually interdependent bipolarities of a single construct called *relational framing*.

Such a shift meliorates the issue of face validity discussed in the previous chapter. Dillard et al.'s (1996) scale reflects an implicit conceptualization of dominance and affiliation as dualistic constructs. As a result, participant responses reflect how coherent they believe their interpretation of a given stimulus *is*—based on dominance and then on affiliation. Since the frames are not juxtaposed, participants are contemplating the stimulus from both perspectives separately. Said another way, the dominance items artificially activate the participant's dominance frame that guides a dominance-based interpretation until the affiliation items artificially activate the participant's affiliation frame that guides a separate affiliation-based interpretation. The end result is a gauge of how much sense these interpretations made. The dialectical shift directly addresses this by forcing participants to consider both frames simultaneously, allowing their cognitive message processing to govern the activation of frames. In this way, a dialectical positioning of the frames better enables the operationalization of RFT toward capturing the in situ interpretive work of the individual.

Variance vs. process. A lack of process-orientation in RFT research represents an even higher-order issue that subsumes the issue of dualistic thinking. Almost all scholarly conceptualizations of communication render it as some kind of sequenced and on-going occurrence of events—that is, as a process (Poole, 2013). And despite the fact that "RFT provides a conceptual tool for representing interpersonal communication as a process" (McLaren & Solomon, 2015, p. 122), research to date has operated under what Poole (2013) terms a *variance* approach. This approach is focused on reducing concepts to variables and testing their

associations, independent of the larger-order processes to which they might belong. Importantly, the variance approach "is not geared to study processes directly" but, through "rigorous statistical methods can…be used to test assumption behind process theories and to test hypotheses regarding properties of processes" (Poole, 2013, p. 396). By measuring frame salience through a variance approach, researchers cut off the possibility of capturing the process of frame displacement and, therefore, the potentially fleeting nature of frame activation.

If dominance and affiliation are conceptualized as dialectical poles, then the concept of process becomes an important concern for RFT. In fact, dialectical theories are predicated on the notion that social life inherently involves change (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). A process-oriented approach would treat interaction as ongoing. In Poole's (2013) words:

> To study processes one must focus on patterns over time and delineate the generative mechanisms that account for those patterns as well as the contingencies and critical events that drive changes in the direction of the process. (p. 404)

Research based on RFT could assume such a process orientation by collecting data through repeated-measures designs that can capture the shifting process of relational framing. In turn, researchers would acknowledge that singular measurements of relational framing cannot capture the inherent process-orientation of RFT. Moreover, they would acknowledge that dualistic measurements cannot capture the way individuals interpret an utterance in situ. All of the issues outlined by McLaren and Solomon (2015) and expanded upon in the previous chapter are part and parcel of the flawed traditional approach to applying RFT that reflects a fundamental misalignment between its conceptual predictions (i.e., the activation of frames) and normative operational choices (i.e., the coherence of themes). This misalignment implies a need to shift how relational meaning is measured. Through a DPOI perspective, RFT researchers can access the potentials of the theory to predict and explain the nuances of relational meaning making.

A Prior Study

The shift into a DPOI orientation in this thesis was catalyzed by work in a prior study that sought to probe potential quantitative operationalizations of relational dialectics theory (RDT; Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011). In this study, I applied RFT to understand the way individuals shift their interpretations of meaning during conversation. The logic guiding that study argued that greater frame displacement should occur in what Baxter and Montgomery (1996) would term dialogic interaction as opposed to monologic interaction.

The study was experimental. It used two conversational scripts that were dubbed dialogic in one condition and monologic in the other (Appendix B). The dialogic script was taken from Baxter and Norwood (2015) and represented a multiplicity of discourses circulating at once, while the monologic script was systematically manipulated to reflect the dominance of one discourse. The scripts follow two sisters, Martha and Jane, discussing a recent decision to get engaged. The study recruited 76 participants from the University of Georgia Communication Studies research pool. The participants were randomly assigned to either the dialogic or monologic script condition, focusing on one sister or the other, one or two utterances at a time. The conversations was broken up across five pages of the survey. Thus, the experiment was a 2 (conversations: dialogic vs. monologic) by 2 (utterance sets: Martha vs. Jane) by 5 (conversation sections) mixed design with two between-subjects factors and one within-subjects factor.

Participants responded to Dillard et al.'s (1996) relational framing scale (Appendix A) 5 times—once for each page they read. I collected responses to the dominance and affiliation items only. This afforded the ability to view frame activation occur across a conversation. And while the hypothesized relationships were not supported by the data, the data indicated several trends that informed the design of revised relational framing and involvement scales (Appendix C) as well as the design of this thesis. I reproduce those data in Table 2. A strategy consisting of

paired-samples *t*-tests and general pattern analysis indicated two trends that catalyzed a shift toward a DPOI orientation. First, a shift into dialectical thinking was warranted by the pattern of non-differential salience across several utterances. Second, a shift into process inquiry was warranted by the apparent pattern of rapid frame displacement.

Table 2

Prior Study Means and Standard Deviations across Experimental Conditions

Focal Sister	Conversation	Conversation Section	Dominance	Affiliation
Jane	Dialogic	1	4.13 (1.14)[a]	5.05 (0.97)[b]
		2	4.86 (1.37)	4.68 (0.93)
		3	5.16 (1.17)[a]	4.20 (1.28)[b]
		4	5.29 (1.24)	5.06 (1.03)
		5	4.31 (1.44)	4.87 (1.18)
	Monologic	1	3.86 (1.27)[a]	5.64 (0.89)[b]
		2	5.75 (0.82)	5.37 (0.87)
		3	5.95 (0.81)[a]	5.34 (1.02)[b]
		4	5.22 (0.93)	4.87 (0.98)
		5	4.91 (1.30)	4.97 (0.85)
Martha	Dialogic	1	4.29 (1.20)	4.80 (1.16)
		2	5.26 (1.19)[a]	4.22 (1.20)[b]
		3	5.42 (0.98)[a]	4.54 (1.18)[b]
		4	5.33 (0.96)[a]	4.72 (1.07)[b]
		5	4.53 (1.54)	5.04 (1.10)
	Monologic	1	3.21 (1.16)[a]	4.64 (1.11)[b]

2	4.86 (0.83)	4.28 (1.47)
3	5.19 (1.25)[a]	4.31 (1.38)[b]
4	5.17 (1.29)	4.49 (1.04)
5	5.04 (1.80)	4.51 (0.78)

Note. Means range from 1 (high irrelevance) to 7 (high relevance). Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. Means with different superscripts in a single row correspond to *t*-test results indicating significant difference at $p < .05$. Higher means indicate frame salience.

Inhibited differential salience. The shift to dialectical thinking called for by a DPOI reoperationalization of RFT resulted from the patterns of (non)differential salience in these prior data. As demonstrated in Table 2, several measurements of dominance and affiliation resulted in nonsignificant differences, interpretable as the absence of differential salience. Plausible interpretations might argue that neither frame was salient or that the frames were simultaneously active (e.g. Tusing, 2000)—suggesting that participants were making no interpretation of the relational meaning or that participants were maintaining two interpretations simultaneously. Such conclusions would directly contradict the differential salience hypothesis. And given the pattern evidence in support of the hypothesis in previous work (e.g., Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon et al., 2002; Tusing, 2000) as well as in other data patterns in the prior study, alternative explanations became necessary.

As a result, I reasoned that the lack of differential salience could be reflective of the dualistic conception of the frames reflected in Dillard et al.'s (1996) scale. In this way, the scale was not able to assess the interpretive content of a given participant's perception, rather it was assessing a participant's perception of the coherence of a given interpretation of the stimulus. Since participants had the time to read the stimulus in dominance- and affiliation-based interpretations separately, both readings might seem plausible, and thus relevant to, an ambiguous utterance. Operationally, the dominance and affiliation items would produce similar

responses as an unintended measurement error. While participants might ultimately consider one interpretation (i.e., dominance or affiliation) to be more coherent, Dillard et al.'s (1996) measure might not be sensitive to that possibility. A dialectical shift that positions the frames in direct opposition forces the evaluation of one interpretation against the other. Such a shift would, in turn, probe more accurately the cognitive processing of the individual.

Rapid frame displacement. The shift to process inquiry as part of a DPOI reoperationalization was productively reflected in the repeated-measures design of the prior study. Visual inspection of the means in Table 2—irrespective of null hypothesis significance testing results—can demonstrate important patterns emerging across the data (Levine, 2011). One emergent trend suggested that frame salience was not an enduring feature of interaction, and frame displacement occurred with regularity. Across conditions, the dominance and affiliation relevance means fluctuate—crossing at least once and in most cases twice—in the space of five measurements. For example, in the Jane/dialogic condition, dominance has a higher mean than affiliation in sections 2, 3, and 4, while affiliation has the higher mean in sections 1 and 2. One conversational interpretation can thus be supplanted by a competing interpretation at almost any point in interaction. This suggests that frame salience is more fleeting than research to date may have supposed, and in turn, that frame displacement is a central concept to understanding relational communication. Moreover, single measurements of frame salience—particularly in response to multiple utterances or other complex units of analysis—fail to capture the complexities of the interpretive process. Indeed, a process-oriented shift that prioritizes repeated measures better enables the inspection and understanding of message processing.

Summary. The prior study adds to the evidence indicating that RFT would benefit from a reoperationalization to mark a renewed research trajectory with renewed operational norms.

This trajectory would strive to apply RFT in ways consistent with its conceptualization of relational communication. The present study marks the start of a DPOI-oriented approach.

The Present Study: Rationale and Hypotheses

The overarching research problem in the present study concerns the misalignment of conceptual- and operational-level components of the RFT framework. The reoperationalization of RFT is an effort to pull the operational norms associated with the theory into alignment with its conceptualization of relational communication as dialectical and process-oriented. This effort involves validating new scales that fit the conceptual claims of RFT and replicating past findings from RFT research. The proposed scale (Appendix C) is crafted to reflect a DPOI perspective that should work to address measurement limitations. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to discussion of the newly designed relational frame salience scales and to presentation of hypotheses that will guide the present reoperationalization effort.

The newly designed relational framing and involvement scales (Appendix C) consist of two factors, where Dillard et al.'s (1996) scale consisted of three. Instead of dominance, affiliation, and involvement factors, the revised scales reflect one *relational framing* construct and one *involvement* construct. Items were adapted from Dillard et al.'s (1996) and Lannutti and Monahan's (2002) work. On the relational framing measure, dominance-related words anchor one end of the semantic differential scale, and affiliation-related words anchor the other. In this way, the scale generates one relational framing score that can be coded to reflect interpretive content (e.g., low numbers indicating dominance, high numbers indicating affiliation) or judgment intensity (i.e., midpoint of zero; low numbers indicating non-intense judgments, high numbers indicating intense judgements). This shift in measurement reflects the shift into dialectical thinking as discussed above. By implementing this scale, researchers gain direct insight into the frame salience of the moment. And by implementing the scale in a repeated-

measures design, researchers gain that direct insight in several stages throughout interaction, thus enabling the capture of the relational framing process.

Additionally, the revised involvement scale uses Dillard et al.'s (1996) involvement items, but modifies them to follow a semantic differential format. Since the reoperationalized framework retains involvement as a unipolar construct, it should perform as Dillard et al.'s (1996) involvement items were theorized to perform in gauging the degree to which conversational partners appear engrossed in interaction. The semantic differential formatting allows for two advantages. First, the formatting is consistent with that of the relational framing items, thus minimizing cognitive strain for participants and lowing the rate of fatigue. Second, the semantic differential format measures the involvement frame more precisely. In the original formatting, participants were asked to gauge the relevance of word pairs (e.g., withdrawn/engaged) on Likert-type scales. This practice likely obscures measurements of involvement because it treats involvement with the same operationalization as it does dominance and affiliation—despite the differing conceptual status of those frames. The revised semantic differential format better approximates participant perception of the *degree*, rather than relevance, of involvement.

The first goal of this study is to establish validity portfolios for the revised relational framing and involvement scales. Reliability assessed through Cronbach's alpha should be at least .70 for each implementation of each scale (Keyton, 2015). With an alpha coefficient of at least .70, the revised scales can be considered consistent in their measurement of the construct to which they correspond. Further, structural unidimensionality of the scales should be demonstrated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), such that the items measuring relational framing and the items measuring involvement indicate one latent factor each (Levine,

2011). In this way, CFA can establish that the relational framing scale and involvement scale measure only one construct each.

Hypothesis 1: The revised relational framing scale will demonstrate acceptable a) internal consistency and b) structural unidimensionality.

Hypothesis 2: The revised involvement scale will demonstrate acceptable a) internal consistency and b) structural unidimensionality.

The structural validity of a scale is only one step in establishing if it measures what it is intended to measure. Tests of construct validity, which includes convergent and divergent validity, are also necessary. Convergent validity testing seeks to establish associations between one measure and other theoretically related measures (e.g., different measures of the same variable or different measures of theoretically related variables), while divergent validity seeks to establish theoretically relevant non-relationships (Levine, 2011). Given the nature of divergent validity testing, it is necessary to forward a null hypothesis (e.g., So, Kim, & Cohen, 2017). By conventions of null hypothesis significance testing, the present study will assume divergent validity hypotheses to be supported and require statistically significant (e.g., $p < .05$) evidence that a relationship exists for the hypothesis to be unsupported.

For convergent validity, the intensity of relational judgments (reflected in the relational framing scale) should be negatively associated with relational polysemy. Relational polysemy is the degree of interpretability (i.e., room for multiple interpretations) an individual perceives in a relationship. Said another way, high relational polysemy means that an individual interprets the dynamics of a relationship in many different ways, whereas low relational polysemy means that an individual has a high degree of certainty about a single interpretation of how a given relationship works. As a result, more certain judgments about the relational meaning (i.e., more intense relational framing) of a given message should be high when participants indicate low

levels of relational polysemy. For divergent validity, relational framing should be distinguishable from interpersonal effectiveness. Interpersonal effectiveness refers to the perceived degree to which a speaker is successfully accomplishing their goals (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011). In this way, an individual may be able to sense that a person is trying to affiliate with or dominate them, but this judgement (and subsequent interpretation) should be prior to and separate from any judgment about the success of that endeavor. Therefore, I predict:

Hypothesis 3: Relational framing intensity will be negatively associated with relational polysemy.

Hypothesis 4: Relational framing will be unrelated to interpersonal effectiveness.

This thesis also pursues tests of convergent and divergent validity for the revised involvement scale. Involvement deals with the perception of engrossment of an individual in a particular interaction, meaning that individuals can be highly engaged or highly withdrawn. A potentially meaningful negative correlate of involvement is topic avoidance, defined as the degree to which an individual appears to deliberately evade or deflect the apparent substantive content of an interaction. An individual who is deflecting or evading a present topic is actively trying to withdraw from the interaction in its present form. As perceptions of topic avoidance increase, perceptions of involvement should decrease. For divergent validity, conversational involvement should be distinguishable from the more general construct of perceived relational involvement. Merely because someone is highly involved in a conversation at hand does not mean they will have a strongly or weakly involved relationship overall. One proxy measure of relational involvement would be perceived relationship length, on the basis that individuals perceive lengthy interpersonal relationships as highly developed. There should be little or no relationship between conversational involvement and relational involvement as measured through perceived relationship length. Therefore, I predict:

Hypothesis 5: Involvement will be negatively associated with topic avoidance.

Hypothesis 6: Involvement will be unrelated to relational involvement as measured by perceived relationship length.

Beyond establishing validity portfolios for the revised scales, this thesis seeks to replicate and extend previous findings of RFT research. Among these findings are the differential salience hypothesis (DSH; Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon et al., 2002), the general intensifier hypothesis (GIH; Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon et al., 2002), the affiliation bias (McLaren et al., 2014), and the (non)role of gender in making relational judgments (Dillard et al., 1996; Edwards, 2000; Solomon et al., 2002).

Following Dillard et al.'s (1996) and Solomon et al.'s (2002) lead, this thesis tests the DSH through the experimental manipulation of conversational goals. To review, the DSH argues that the dominance and affiliation frames compete with and displace each other during interaction. In this way, people typically make *either* dominance- *or* affiliation-based interpretations of any given message, but those interpretations can rapidly shift throughout a conversation. Conversational goals reflect one of the only ways to unambiguously test the DSH, since messages reflecting compliance-related goals (e.g., persuasive messages) should encourage interpretation through the dominance frame, while messages reflecting affinity-related goals (e.g., liking messages) should encourage interpretation through the affiliation frame (Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon et al., 2002). Therefore, to test the DSH, I predict:

Hypothesis 7: a) Compliance-related utterances will be interpreted through the dominance frame, and b) Affinity-related utterances will be interpreted through the affiliation frame.

The GIH argues that highly involved conversational partners will tend toward more intense relational framing judgments. This hypothesis was originally supported by Dillard et al.

(1996) and replicated by Solomon et al. (2002). These past tests correlated the separate dimensions of dominance and affiliation with involvement. Since the revised relational framing scale positions the two dimensions as part of one construct, the GIH cannot be tested in the traditional way. Instead, the relational framing scale coded for intensity can be correlated with involvement. This represents a stronger test of the GIH because it removes any possible confounding effect of the content of an interpretation (i.e., dominance or affiliation) from the test, allowing observation of the pure intensity of the interpretation. To replicate the GIH, I therefore predict:

Hypothesis 8: Involvement will be positively correlated with relational framing intensity.

McLaren et al. (2014) argue that relational framing judgments may be partially affected by what they term an affiliation bias. In that, they argue that individuals go into interaction believing that messages have more to do with liking (i.e., affiliation) than with control (i.e., dominance). This bias should show up as anomalous data for which the DSH cannot account. If McLaren's hypothesized cognitive bias systematically distorts relational judgements, then the first utterances of any interaction should be uniformly interpreted through the affiliation frame. Therefore, I predict:

Hypothesis 9: First utterances will be interpreted through the affiliation frame regardless of compliance- or affinity-relation.

Finally, gender has been a contested variable in RFT research, with mixed results stemming from highly contextual and highly generalized research. For example, Dillard et al. (1996) concluded that gender of the participant exerted little or no effect on frame salience. Solomon et al. (2002) found that the cross- or same-gender status of the dyad also had little or no effect. And McWorthy and Henningsen (2014) replicated the non-role of gender in frame salience in the context of superior-subordinate impression management. Yet, Edwards (2000)

found that gender of the source (i.e., the individual being interpreted) affects framing, such that female sources are judged higher in terms of affiliation. In the context of flirting, Frisby et al. (2011) found that men were perceived as more dominant and more affiliative than women. And McLaren et al. (2012) found that perceptions of relational turbulence was associated with greater perceptions of dominance in men and smaller perceptions of dominance in women, but that women's report of partner interference was associated with greater perceptions of dominance. In short, past work presents contradictory findings on the role of gender in relational judgments in both generalized and specific research contexts. More generalized approaches, like that of Dillard et al. (1996) and Solomon et al. (2002), have found less evidence of a gender effect on relational framing. This suggests that gender effects may only come into play as result of context. In this vein, I can forward three predictions:

Hypothesis 10: Differential salience patterns will be unaffected by a) participant gender and b) source gender.

Hypothesis 11: Differential salience will be unaffected by dyadic gender alignment.

As with the null hypotheses forwarded in H4 and H6, the present study will assume gender-related hypotheses to be supported and require statistically significant (e.g., $p < .05$) evidence that a relationship between gender and relational framing exists for the hypothesis to be unsupported. The following chapters present an empirical study that tests these hypotheses. These hypotheses represent a systematic effort to reoperationalize RFT in order to rejuvenate its literature and inspire future research on relational communication.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The present study seeks to reoperationalize relational framing theory (RFT; Dillard et al., 1996) in order to bring the conceptual claims and operational norms associated with the framework into alignment. In essence, the proposed scales (Appendix C) reorient the measurement of relational framing to reflect the insights of dialectical process-oriented inquiry (DPOI). As such, the reoperationalized framework should more accurately capture the in situ interpretive processes that individuals undergo in generating and understanding relational meaning. The purpose of this chapter is to detail the methodology implemented to test the hypotheses outlined in the second chapter.

Design and Stimulus

Through an online quasi-experiment, the present study manipulated message goal and measured relational frame salience. The stimulus in the experiment (Appendix D) consisted of a conversational script based loosely on Baxter and Norwood's (2015) hypothetical conversation script that was used as a stimulus in the prior study. The script follows a conversation between two friends, Sam and Alex, who are deciding where to eat dinner. Participants read the conversation one utterance—constructed to pursue a specific type of goal (i.e., compliance or affinity)—at a time by clicking through a series of 8 survey pages. They were instructed to imagine themselves as one character and interpret the utterances of the other character as if they were participating in the conversation. The experiment was a 2 (utterance goal shift pattern, maximum shift vs minimum shift) by 4 (conversational sections) mixed design, where the first factor was between-subjects and the second factor was within-subjects.

Using Dillard et al.'s (1996) goals framework and Dillard's (2015) Goals-Plans-Action theory as a guide, I constructed the stimulus conversation to consist of utterances geared toward either compliance-related or affinity-related goals. Examples of compliance-related goals include giving or gaining assistance, giving or seeking advice, or changing someone's orientation (Dillard et al., 1996). Examples of affinity-related goals include offering a positive or negative evaluation, seeking or giving disclosure, and showing inclusion or exclusion (Dillard et al., 1996). Different utterances were constructed to correspond to different goals, such that either character can be thought of in terms of a "goal scheme," or the series of goals they pursue in the conversation. The Alex character was written to alternate between compliance- and affinity-related utterances with each talk turn, while the Sam character was written to say affinity-related utterances in the first two talk turns and then compliance-related utterances in the second two talk turns. The different goal schemes worked to minimize any possible order effect that might pollute the results. Of course, not all goal schemes would be as informative as others. For example, the order of goals selected for Alex reflected the maximum number of possible goal shifts—thereby predicting the maximum amount of frame displacement. And the order of goals selected for Sam reflected the minimum number of possible goals shift—thereby predicting the minimum amount of frame displacement. The stimulus was pretested multiple times to ensure the validity of manipulations, perceived realism of conversational speech, and gender neutrality of the character names.

Participants and Procedure

Recruited individuals consented to participation in the experiment through initiating the online survey. All recruitment methods and materials as well as experimental procedures and materials were approved by university IRB. The survey began with an example question that demonstrated what to expect in the actual survey. This example question (Appendix E) was

based on Dillard et al.'s (1996) example that focused on textures. In the example, participants were told to imagine they were given a piece of sand paper and were asked to indicate what words (presented in a semantic differential structure) were most relevant to understanding the phrase "This paper is rough." Options juxtaposed words associated with texture (i.e., texture, feel, touch, physical) against words associated with sound (i.e., sound, hearing, listening, audio). Participants were free to select through the options before reading a debriefing paragraph that explained that no "correct" answer existed, and that the selections were useful for learning how they understood the phrase. Next, the survey collected a series of demographic data, including age, sex, and racial/ethnic identification.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions, both of which exposed them to the same conversational script (Appendix D). The conditions differed by manipulating which character participants focused on. Participants were told to imagine themselves as either Alex or Sam and to provide measurements regarding their conversational partner: Sam or Alex, respectively. This manipulation created condition one, "Sam's perception of Alex," which measured perceptions of Alex's utterances that shifted goals: from compliance to affinity to compliance to affinity; the manipulation also created condition two, "Alex's perception of Sam," which measured perceptions of Sam's utterances that shifted goals: from affinity to affinity to compliance to compliance. Measurements using the revised relational framing and involvement scales occurred one time for each section of the conversation presented, for a total of four measurements. Additionally, participants responded to a manipulation check item. This 7-point semantic differential item asked participants to describe the conversational goal of their focal character in each utterance. The item was anchored by the terms "Persuade/Influence" and "Show Liking/Disliking." The item was delivered immediately after manipulation.

Once the conversation was complete, the questionnaire collected a series of other measures of interest (i.e., relational polysemy, interpersonal effectiveness, topic avoidance, and perceived relationship length) and demographic perceptions about the characters in the conversation, including perceived gender and perceived race/ethnicity. Finally, students input identifying information (stripped from data before analysis) to receive course credit for participation in the study.

Sample. The study recruited a total of 319 participants, randomly assigned to the two between-subjects conditions. In the first condition, 158 participants assumed the role of Sam and provided perceptions of Alex. In the second condition, 161 participants assumed the role of Alex and provided perceptions of Sam.

Participant demographic information was collected on age, gender, and race/ethnicity. The average age of participants was 19.39 years old (*SD* = 1.41), with a range from 18-27. The sample consisted of 228 females (71.5%), 90 males (28.2%), and 1 nonbinary individual (0.3%). Most participants identified racially as white (234 individuals, 73.4%), while fewer participants as Black or African American (21 individuals, 6.6%), Asian or Asian American (32 individuals, 10.0%), or Hispanic or Latino/a/x (12 individuals, 3.8%). And 20 participants (6.3%) identified as another race/ethnicity, biracial, or mixed-race.

Measures

Relational framing and involvement were measured using the revised scales (Appendix C), while all other all other variables of interest—unless otherwise noted—were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Relational framing. The relational framing scale (Appendix C) consisted of six semantic differential items adapted from Dillard et al. (1996) and Lannutti and Monahan (2002). Anchors corresponding to affiliation-frame interpretations included *liking*, *attraction*, *affection*, *esteem*,

caring, and *fondness*. When coded for content, these anchors corresponded to 7 on the 1-7 scale. Anchors corresponding to dominance-frame interpretations included *persuasion*, *influence*, *control*, *dominance*, *convincing*, and *coaxing*. When coded for content, these anchors corresponded to 1 on the 1-7 scale. Table 3 includes the means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients for each implementation of the relational framing items.

Table 3

Relational Framing and Involvement Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities

Scale	Conversational Section	M	SD	α
Relational Framing	1	4.29	1.53	.88
(Content)	2	4.70	1.24	.78
	3	2.56	1.20	.86
	4	3.00	1.51	.90
Relational Framing	1	1.77	0.66	.78
(Intensity)	2	1.67	0.73	.85
	3	1.90	0.80	.90
	4	1.83	0.85	.92
Involvement	1	5.23	1.44	.91
	2	5.73	1.20	.93
	3	5.61	1.38	.89
	4	4.86	1.71	.90

Note. N = 319. Mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha assessed across between-subjects groups.

Involvement. The involvement measure (Appendix C) consisted of four semantic differential items adapted from Dillard et al. (1996). Anchors measured the perception of

engrossment of an individual in the interaction. They included *disinterested/interested*, *uninvolved/involved*, *inactive/active*, *withdrawn/engaged*—each of which corresponded to values of 1 and 7, respectively. Table 3 includes the means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients for each implementation of the involvement items.

Relational polysemy. A single item measured relational polysemy: "Judging from this conversation, I am certain that Sam and Alex are good friends." The item was reversed in analysis. The average score was 2.43 (*SD* = 1.10).

Interpersonal effectiveness. Two items measured interpersonal effectiveness. One item concerned effectiveness at persuasion (i.e., "Alex/Sam persuaded Sam/Alex successfully," *M* = 3.24, *SD* = 1.28), while the other item concerned effectiveness at displaying liking (i.e., "Alex/Sam showed they liked/disliked Sam/Alex successfully," *M* = 3.27, *SD* = 1.10). The wording of these items depended on participant condition. These items were analyzed separately.

Topic avoidance. A single item measured topic avoidance: "Alex/Sam avoided talking about the topic at hand." The average score was 2.81 (*SD* = 1.40). The wording of this item depended on participant condition.

Relational involvement. A single item measured relational involvement through perceived relationship length. This item took the form of the following question: "How many years do you think Alex and Sam have been friends?" Participants were provided with a drop-down menu of 12 options, ranging from 0.50 to 6.00 and increasing in 0.50 increments.

Partner demographics. Participants were also asked to identify their conversational partner's gender and race/ethnicity. Multiple choice questions identical to those used to collect participant demographic information were used to measure partner demographics. A majority of participants identified their conversational partner as male (233 individuals, 73%), while fewer identified their partner as female (83 individuals, 26%) or nonbinary (3 individuals, 0.9%). A

majority of participants identified their conversational partner as white (262 individuals, 82.1%), while fewer identified their partner as Black or African American (6 individuals, 1.9%), Asian or Asian American (9 individuals, 2.8%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (3 individuals, 0.9%), or Hispanic or Latino/a/x (5 individuals, 1.6%). The remaining participants (34 individuals, 10.7%) identified their conversational partner as another race/ethnicity, biracial, mixed-race, or *non*-raced.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the data analytic procedures of the present study and to detail the results of those procedures toward a reoperationalization of relational framing theory (RFT; Dillard et al., 1996). Data analysis was divided into three parts. In the first phase, I examined the structural validity of the relational framing and involvement scales (H1-H2). In the second phase, I examined the convergent and divergent validity tests for the relational framing and involvement scales (H3-H6). In the third phase, I conducted the replication tests of previous findings from RFT research (H7-H11).

Phase One: Reliability and Structural Validity

Central to structural validity is confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). This statistical procedure assesses the way items in a scale "hang together" in measuring what it is they are intended to measure (Levine, 2005, 2011). To test structural validity, the latent factor structure of the scales was examined through CFA. A latent factor is a single construct that cannot be directly measured so must be indirectly measured through indicators like survey items (Levine, 2011). A scale is structurally unidimensional if there is one latent factor to which all of the scale items correspond. I conducted CFA through SEM techniques using AMOS software. I assessed model fit by the following indices: χ^2/df less than 3.0, a comparative fit index (CFI) near .95 (and at least .90), a goodness-of-fit index (GFI) of at least .90, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) near .06 (and under .08) (Hu & Bentler, 1999; McLaren et al., 2012; Shen, Condit, & Wright, 2009). One model was created for the relational framing scale (Figure 2), and a separate model was created for the involvement scale (Figure 3).

Figure 2

Modified CFA for Relational Framing Scale

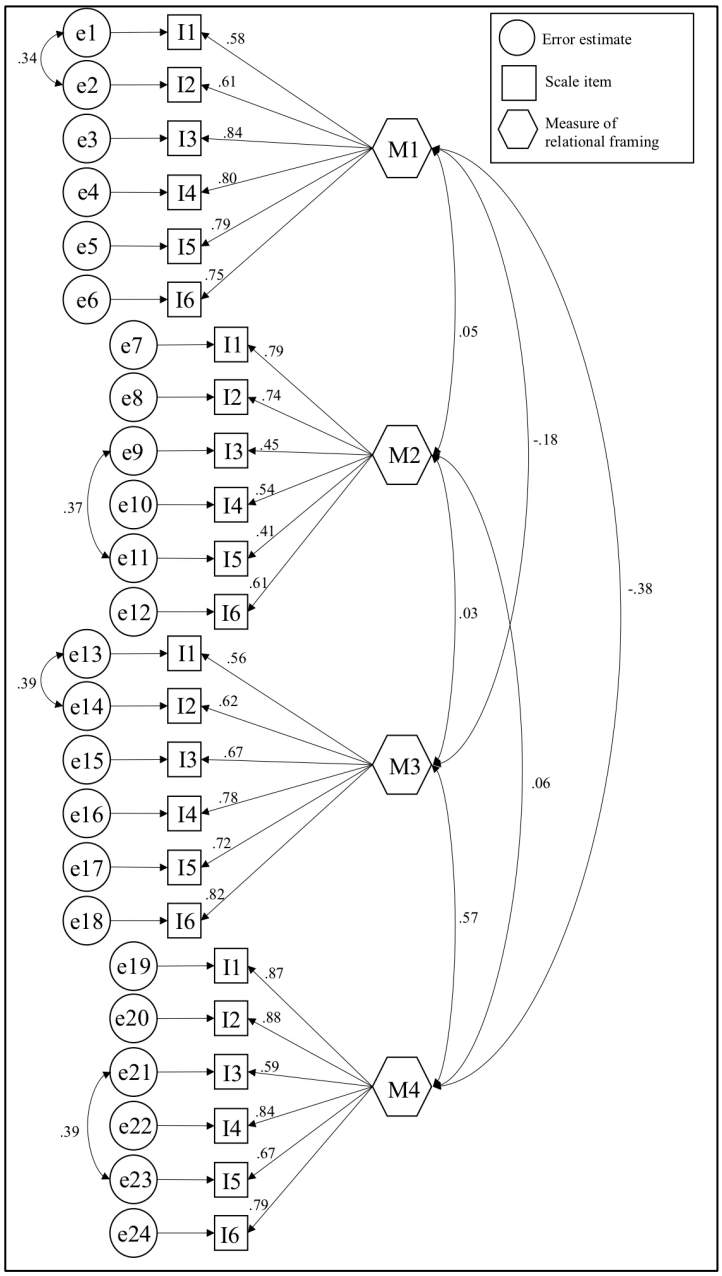

Figure 2. Confirmatory factor analysis model of the relational framing scale modified to allow for highly correlated error terms. Each participant gave four measurements of relational framing yielding the four latent factors. Factor loadings shown are standardized and range from .41 to .88.

Figure 3

CFA for Involvement Scale

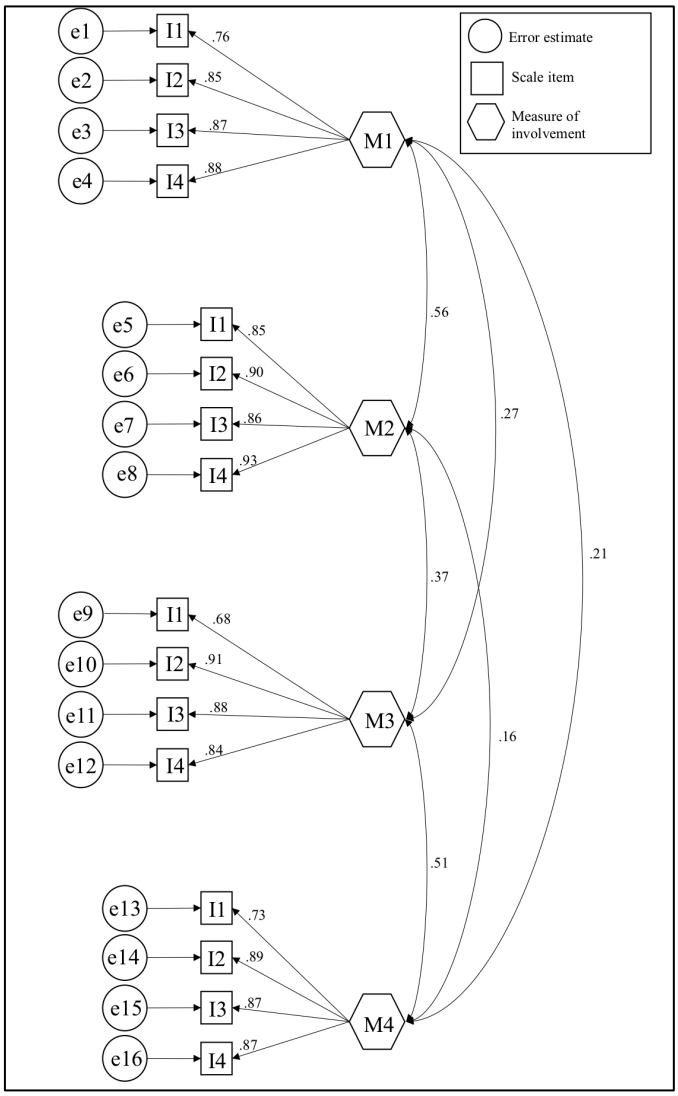

Figure 3. Confirmatory factor analysis model of the involvement scale with no modifications. Each participant gave four measurements of involvement yielding four latent factors. Factor loadings shown are standardized and range from .68 to .93.

Hypothesis one. H1a predicted acceptable internal reliability, and H1b predicted acceptable structural unidimensionality for the relational framing scale. As demonstrated in the previous chapter (Table 3), Cronbach's alpha was over .70 for each implementation of the scale, suggesting the scale is reliable. Thus, H1a was supported. Each relational framing item was

loaded on a single latent factor, called relational framing. Since participants responded to the relational framing scale four times, this process yielded four latent factors. Thus, the SEM model was specified to have four latent factors (i.e., four repeated measures of relational framing) on which the six relational framing items were loaded. Figure 2 shows the CFA model for the relational framing scale. Latent factors were correlated, and modification indices were examined in order to guide the correlation of error estimates within a single latent factor. As Levine (2005) notes, this practice builds confounds into the model and usually indicates invalidity, but patterns of error correlation can emerge across the model and indicate possible sources of confounding (see also Cortina, 2002). The overall model fit was moderate *after* modifications: χ^2/df = 2.52, CFI = .90, GFI = .86, RMSEA = .069. Modification indices indicated a pattern of correlated error estimates *between the first and second items* and *between the third and fifth items* in the first and third sections and in the second and fourth sections, respectively. This pattern suggests the possibility of a confound affecting the variance explained by these items and reducing the overall model fit. Overall, the relational framing scale lacks adequate structural unidimensionality. Thus, H1b was not supported. The relational framing scale is reliable but not structurally valid.

Hypothesis two. H2a predicted acceptable internal reliability, and H2b predicted acceptable structural unidimensionality for the involvement scale. As demonstrated in the previous chapter (Table 3), Cronbach's alpha was over .70 for each implementation of the scale, suggesting the scale is reliable. Thus, H2a was supported. In examining the structural unidimensionality of the involvement scale, procedures identical to those used on the relational framing scale were implemented. Figure 3 shows the CFA model for the involvement scale. All latent factors were correlated, and no modifications were made to the initial model. The overall model fit was strong: χ^2/df = 2.50, CFI = .96, GFI = .92, RMSEA = .069. As a result, the

involvement scale reflects adequate structural unidimensionality. Thus, H2b was supported. The involvement scale is reliable and structurally valid.

Phase Two: Construct Validity

Beyond structural validity, construct validity is another useful tool for investigating whether a scale measures what it is intended to measure. Construct validity involves both convergent and divergent testing. Convergent validity testing involves correlating the scale with theoretically relevant measures, while divergent validity testing involves establishing theoretically relevant non-relationships (Levine, 2011). To conduct these tests, I created composite relational framing content, relational framing intensity, and involvement variables that reflected the mean of all four implementations of all three scales. The overall relational framing content mean was 3.64 (SD = 0.69). The overall relational framing intensity mean was 1.79 (SD = 0.55). And the overall involvement mean was 5.36 (SD = 1.00). As is customary in construct validity tests (e.g., So et al., 2017), bivariate correlations were examined for predicted patterns of association.

Hypothesis three. H3 comprised a convergent validity test for the relational framing scale. H3 predicted that relational framing (coded for intensity) would negatively correlate with relational polysemy. The bivariate correlation was nonsignificant (r = .04, p = .54). H3 was not supported.

Hypothesis four. H4 comprised a divergent validity test for the relational framing scale. H4 predicted that relational framing (coded for content) would be unrelated to interpersonal effectiveness. Two bivariate correlations were examined as a result of the two measures of interpersonal effectiveness. The first correlation, corresponding to effectiveness at persuasion, was significant and negative (r = -.34, p < .001). The second correlation, corresponding to

effectiveness at showing liking/disliking, was significant and positive ($r = .15$, $p = .008$). H4 was not supported.

Hypothesis five. H5 comprised a convergent validity test for the involvement scale. H5 predicted that involvement would be negatively correlated with topic avoidance. The bivariate correlation was significant and negative ($r = -.31$, $p < .001$). H5 was supported.

Hypothesis six. H6 comprised a divergent validity test for the involvement scale. H6 predicted that involvement would be unrelated to relational involvement, as measured by perceived relationship length. The bivariate correlation was nonsignificant ($r = .03$, $p = .57$). H6 was supported.

Phase Three: Replications

Beyond establishing validity portfolios for the revised relational framing and involvement scales, the present study sought to replicate previous RFT work. This replication work includes the differential salience hypothesis (DSH; H7), the general intensifier hypothesis (GIH; H8), the affiliation bias (H9), and the role of gender in frame activation (H10-H11). With the exception of H8, each of these hypotheses was tested through a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique. In these tests, the analysis was broken into two phases: first, the data in the first condition (i.e., Sam's perception of Alex) were analyzed through repeated-measures ANOVA; second, the data in the second condition (i.e., Alex's perception of Sam) were subjected to an identical procedure. One important assumption of the repeated-measures ANOVA is that of sphericity, reflected in Mauchly's test. Where violations of the assumption occurred, I applied the Huynh-Feldt correction on the recommendation of Keppel and Wickens (2004). Where applicable, I report the results by phase.

Hypothesis seven. H7 sought to replicate the DSH. To review, the DSH predicts that at any given moment either the dominance or the affiliation frame is actively guiding interpretation

of relational meaning. A common, unambiguous way to test the DSH is through the manipulation of conversational goals. Unambiguous compliance-related utterances should encourage interpretation through the dominance frame, while unambiguous affinity-related utterances should encourage interpretation through the affiliation frame. In the first condition (i.e., Sam's perception of Alex), goals shifted: from compliance to affinity to compliance to affinity, suggesting that frames should shift: from dominance to affiliation to dominance to affiliation. In the second condition (i.e., Alex's perception of Sam), goals shifted from affinity to affinity to compliance to compliance, suggesting that frames should shift: from affiliation to affiliation to dominance to dominance.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Manipulation Check Item Across Conditions

Condition	Section	M	SD
One: Sam's perception of Alex (n = 158)	1	3.44^{a}	1.92
	2	4.84^{b}	2.09
	3	3.35^{c}	1.80
	4	5.21^{d}	1.74
Two: Alex's perception of Sam (n = 161)	1	4.80^{a}	2.08
	2	4.76^{a}	2.00
	3	2.38^{b}	2.01
	4	2.27^{b}	1.76

Note. Means with different superscripts from directly preceding values indicate significant difference at $p < .001$. Values closer to 1 indicate "persuade/influence," and values closer to 7 indicate "show liking/disliking."

Before H7 could be tested, it was first necessary to establish the salience of the manipulation of conversational goals. All experimental manipulations were salient. Table 4

displays the means and standard deviations for the manipulation check item in both between-subjects conditions. In the first condition (i.e., Sam's perception of Alex), repeated-measures ANOVA, applying the Huynh-Feldt sphericity correction, indicated significant differences across the four conversational sections ($F(2.84, 445.21) = 39.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$). Follow-up, paired-samples *t*-tests indicated the expected pattern of goal shift, applying the Bonferroni correction. In the second condition (Alex's perception of Sam), repeated-measures ANOVA, applying the Huynh-Feldt sphericity correction, indicated significant differences across the four conversational sections ($F(2.72, 434.65) = 82.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .34$). Follow-up, paired-samples *t*-tests indicated the expected pattern of goal shift, applying the Bonferroni correction. Since the manipulation of conversational goals was salient, H7 could be tested using repeated-measures ANOVA.

In the first condition (i.e., Sam's perception of Alex), repeated-measures ANOVA indicated significant differences in frame activation across the utterances of the conversation ($F(3, 471) = 47.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .23$). The assumption of sphericity was met (Mauchly's $W = .94$, $p = .10$). Table 5 displays the means and standard deviations for relational framing (coded for content). Follow-up, paired-samples *t*-tests, applying the Bonferroni correction, demonstrated that the frames shift from dominance in the first utterance to affiliation in the second utterance ($t(157) = -7.28$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.55$), from affiliation in the second utterance to dominance in the third utterance ($t(157) = 11.69$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.87$), and from dominance in the third utterance to affiliation in the fourth utterance ($t(157) = -7.02$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.57$). Therefore, H7 was supported in the first condition.

In the second condition (i.e., Alex's perception of Sam), repeated-measures ANOVA indicated significant differences in frame activation across the utterances of the conversation ($F(2.47, 395.23) = 358.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .69$). The assumption of sphericity was violated

(Mauchly's $W = .60$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon = .82$), so the Huynh-Feldt correction was applied. Table 5 displays the means and standard deviations for relational framing (coded for content). Follow-up, paired-samples *t*-tests, applying the Bonferroni correction, demonstrate that the affiliation frame remains salient from the first to the second utterance ($t(160) = 1.73$, $p = .09$, $d = -0.13$), then shifts to dominance in the third utterance ($t(160) = 21.78$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.51$), and remains dominance in the fourth utterance ($t(160) = 0.06$, $p = .96$, $d = 0.00$). Therefore, H7 was supported in the second condition. Thus, H7 was fully supported, and the DSH was successfully replicated.

Table 5

Relational Framing Means and Standard Deviations by Condition

Condition	Section	M	SD
One: Sam's perception of Alex ($n = 158$)	1	3.63^{a}	1.36
	2	4.69^{b}	1.23
	3	3.21^{c}	1.08
	4	4.10^{d}	1.13
Two: Alex's perception of Sam ($n = 161$)	1	4.94^{a}	1.41
	2	4.71^{a}	1.26
	3	1.92^{b}	0.94
	4	1.92^{b}	0.94

Note. Means with different superscripts from directly preceding values indicate significant difference at $p < .001$. Values closer to 1 indicate "dominance," and values closer to 7 indicate "affiliation."

Hypothesis eight. H8 sought to replicate the GIH. To review, the GIH predicts that highly involved interaction participants will experience stronger frame salience. The most straightforward way to test the GIH is to examine the bivariate correlation between involvement

and relational framing (coded for intensity). The bivariate correlation was significant and positive ($r = .19$, $p < .001$). Thus, H8 was supported, and the GIH was successfully replicated.

Hypothesis nine. H9 sought to test for the presence of an affiliation bias. Such a bias would systematically distort relational frame salience, such that the beginning of an interaction is always interpreted through an affiliation frame. The affiliation bias is predicated on the presence of anomalous data for which the DSH cannot account. For the affiliation bias to be supported, the first utterances in both conditions should be interpreted through an affiliation lens, regardless of conversational goal. The most succinct way to test H9 is to reexamine the results for H7, inspecting for patterns of anomalous data. Since no anomalous data was present in that test, I can conclude that H9 was not supported. These data do not depict an affiliation bias.

Hypothesis ten. H10a predicted that participant gender will not affect the pattern of frame salience. The most succinct way of testing H10a is to add participant gender as a between-subjects factor in the repeated-measures ANOVAs run for H7 and examine the interaction term between participant gender and relational framing. To review, the gender breakdown of the participants is as follows: 90 males, 228 females, and 1 nonbinary individual.

In the first condition (i.e., Sam's perception of Alex), repeated-measures ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between participant gender and relational framing ($F(3, 468) = 1.61$, $p = .32$, $\eta^2 = .01$). The assumption of sphericity was met (Mauchly's $W = .94$, $p = .13$). Therefore, H10a was supported in the first condition.

In the second condition (i.e., Alex's perception of Sam), repeated-measures ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between participant gender and relational framing ($F(4.97, 392.85) = 1.05$, $p = .39$, $\eta^2 = .01$). The assumption of sphericity was violated (Mauchly's $W = .59$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon = .83$), so the Huynh-Feldt correction was applied. Therefore, H10a was

supported in the second condition. Thus, H10a was fully supported, and these data demonstrate that participant gender has no significant effect on relational framing.

H10b predicted that source gender will not affect the pattern of frame salience. The most succinct way of testing H10b is to add source gender as a between-subjects factor in the repeated-measures ANOVAs run for H7 and examine the interaction term between source gender and relational framing. To review, the perceived gender breakdown of conversational partners is as follows: 233 males, 83 females, and 3 nonbinary individuals.

In the first condition (i.e., Sam's perception of Alex), repeated-measures ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between source gender and relational framing ($F(6, 465) = 0.72$, $p = .79$, $\eta^2 = .01$). The assumption of sphericity was met (Mauchly's $W = .94$, $p = .11$). Therefore, H10b was supported in the first condition.

In the second condition (i.e., Alex's perception of Sam), repeated-measures ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between source gender and relational framing ($F(4.99, 394.27) = 0.31$, $p = .93$, $\eta^2 = .004$). The assumption of sphericity was violated (Mauchly's $W = .60$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon = .83$), so the Huynh-Feldt correction was applied. Therefore, H10b was supported in the second condition. Thus, H10b was fully supported, and these data demonstrate that source gender has no significant effect on relational framing.

Hypothesis eleven. H11 sought to investigate the role of cross-gender dyadic interaction in making relational framing judgements. H11 predicted that cross-gender dyads will not significantly differ from same-gender dyads in their patterns of relational framing. The most succinct way of testing H11 is to create a new grouping variable that reflects a dyad's cross-gender or same-gender status. Participants indicating that their conversational partner was a different gender from their own were assigned to the cross-gender group, while participants indicating that their conversational partner was the same gender as them were assigned to the

same-gender group. The repeated-measures ANOVAs conducted for H7 were reexamined with this new variable added as a between-subjects factor. There were 199 (62.4%) reported cross-gender dyads and 120 (37.6%) reported same-gender dyads.

In the first condition (i.e., Sam's perception of Alex), repeated-measures ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between dyadic gender alignment and relational framing ($F(3, 468) = 0.94$, $p = .96$, $\eta^2 = .001$). The assumption of sphericity was met (Mauchly's $W = .94$, $p = .10$). Therefore, H11 was supported in the first condition.

In the second condition (i.e., Alex's perception of Sam), repeated-measures ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between dyadic gender alignment and relational framing ($F(2.48, 393.99) = 0.92$, $p = .43$, $\eta^2 = .01$). The assumption of sphericity was violated (Mauchly's $W = .60$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon = .83$), so the Huynh-Feldt correction was applied. Therefore, H11 was supported in the second condition. Thus, H11 was fully supported, and these data demonstrate that dyadic gender alignment has no significant effect on relational framing.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret and contextualize the results presented in the fourth chapter. The present study has generated potentially useful insights about theory and measurement within the framework of relational framing theory (RFT; Dillard et al., 1996). The chapter is organized into four part: first, insights on measurement; second, insights on replication work; third, implications for future research; and fourth, limitations.

Measurement: Conclusions on Reliability and Validity of Proposed Scales

One purpose of this thesis was to introduce new operational norms that might guide future RFT research. To do so, the present study utilized revised scales in order to measure relational framing from a dialectical process-oriented inquiry (DPOI) perspective. H1-H6 dealt with issues of measurement in the RFT framework. H1-H2 dealt specifically with internal reliability and structural unidimensionality of the revised relational framing and involvement scales (Appendix C). The data demonstrated mixed results.

For the relational framing scale, reliability saw an improvement over previous methods of measurement, but the CFA model did not achieve strong fit, indicating that structural validity was lacking. Internal reliability, reflected in Cronbach's alpha, was an issue in Dillard et al.'s (1996) and Solomon et al.'s (2002) work—as the statistic hovered just above and below the traditionally accepted cutoff of .70 for both the dominance and affiliation scales. Since a measure must be reliable before it can be considered valid, this trend posed potential problems for the framework as a whole. A shift into the DPOI-derived scales resulted in Cronbach's alpha's ranging from .78 to .92. This suggests that a semantic differential format that juxtaposes the

dominance and affiliation frames dialectically is a more reliable format than the original Likert-type approach instantiated by Dillard et al. (1996). Perhaps the semantic differential format makes more intuitive sense to participants, as even Dillard et al. (1996) note that their protocol was abstract in application, a fact that led them to accept sub-optimal reliability coefficients.

In terms of structural validity, the relational framing scale fared less well. Direct comparison between Dillard et al.'s (1996) work and the present study is somewhat difficult, since the older study used a principal axis factoring (PAF) method and the present study used structural equation modeling (SEM) to perform confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). SEM allows the researcher to judge an overall model fit for items loading on specific factors, the traditional standards of which the relational framing scale did not meet. The model did not achieve moderate fit until certain errors were correlated, suggesting that confounds exist in the scale (Levine, 2005). Upon inspection of the scale, the highly correlated errors are found between items one and two, as well as between items three and five. It is possible that these items are being confounded by other dimensions of relational communication that have been distilled into the abstracted framework of RFT. Recall that Burgoon and Hale (1984, 1987) proposed *12* distinct dimensions of relational communication that Dillard et al. (1996) sought to abstract into the three principal ones: dominance, affiliation, and involvement.

One likely source of confounding is the construct of affiliation that was borne out of Burgoon and Hale's (1984) maximally complex construct of intimacy that reflected sub-themes of: immediacy, trust, and depth-superficiality. And these sub-themes contained still other sub-themes: affection-hostility, involvement, inclusion-exclusion, attraction, liking, evaluation, interest, receptivity, and character. Dillard et al. (1999) argue that the abstracted framework of RFT reflects a "desire for parsimony and structure" and that "meaningful theorizing and research can and should be conducted at [high and low] levels of abstraction" (p. 62). Such a theoretical

stance is prone to losing the granular details that is seeks to abstract. In other words, there is a tradeoff between having a parsimonious theory and having a detailed one. It plausible that the move to reduce *all* of Burgoon and Hale's (1984) theme of intimacy to the frame of affiliation overshot the tradeoff between detail and parsimony, causing measurement instability. Such an interpretation is supported by other conclusions of Dillard et al. (1999) who maintain that "affiliation is expressed and evaluated along a multiplicity of specific dimensions" and that, as a result: "affiliation is a complex and nuanced construct" (p. 61). Examining the problematic items from the revised scale reveals that *liking* and *attraction* might share variance, possibly explicable through the theme of affection-hostility; and *affection* and *caring* might share variance, possibly explicable through the theme of immediacy more generally. Regardless of the specific issues at hand, the items reflecting affiliation have to capture a far more complex construct than do the items reflecting dominance. This suggests that confounding is most likely a result of structural issues in operationalizing affiliation.

The conceptual status of affiliation is primed for confounding since it is derived from so many distinct notions. Across the RFT research, the concepts of liking and similarity are used as synonyms for affiliation in attempt to capture this inherent complexity (Dillard et al., 1996, 1999). Thought of in the evolutionary terms developed by Dillard et al. (1996, 1999), however, affiliations takes on slightly different meaning. Where dominance corresponds to the social hierarchization of individuals, affiliation seems to commune or cohere them. One contemporary construct that reflects this notion of togetherness is social distance. Originally theorized by sociologists (e.g., Park, 1923; Bogardus, 1933) as a variable reflecting an individual's sympathetic understanding of certain social groups, social distance is potentially instructive for discussions of clarifying affiliation. Pronin's (2008) discussion of self-other perceptions imbues the concept of social distance with kind of ontological prowess insofar as the construct becomes

a way of understanding how individuals distinguish themselves from others in social reality. Viewed in this light, social distance evokes some of the same abstract relationality as Burkean (1969) consubstantiality and the same fluidity of Bakhtinian conceptions of self (Baxter, 2004). By conceptualizing affiliation as a version of social distance, RFT can organize around a meaningful spatial heuristic wherein *dominance* tracks the *vertical* (i.e., hierarchical) relations of social being, while *affiliation* tracks the *horizontal* (i.e., consubstantial).

In contrast, the measurement of involvement was less problematic. As with relational framing, reliabilities—ranging in Cronbach's alpha coefficients between .89 and .93—were uniformly higher than in past studies (e.g., Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon, et al., 2002). This pattern again demonstrates that the revised scale—using a semantic differential format—attained more reliable measurements of frame activation than do their predecessors. And in terms of structural validity, CFA demonstrated that the model achieved good fit without modification. This suggests the revised scale reflects a structurally unidimensional construct. As a result, Dillard et al.'s (1996) insight that involvement is non-substantive and set apart from other prevalent themes of relational communication is corroborated by these data.

H3-H6 concerned construct validity testing for the revised measures. The present study undertook a convergent and divergent test for both the relational framing and involvement scales. Congruent with the structural validity findings: the relational framing scale was not validated, while the involvement scale was validated.

Relational framing was hypothesized to be negatively correlated with relational polysemy and unrelated to interpersonal effectiveness. Results indicated no relationship with polysemy, a positive relationship with effectiveness at persuasion, and a negative relationship with effectiveness at showing liking/disliking. While these results seem to demonstrate the invalidity of the relational framing measure, it is also plausible that the measurement of these constructs

was flawed. For the sake of brevity, single-item indicators were used to measure relational polysemy and interpersonal effectiveness. Constructs as complex as these probably require a more nuanced treatment before conclusions can be capably drawn. Moreover, since the measures of polysemy and effectiveness were taken at the end of the conversation, relational framing had to be composited *across* sections of conversation in order to derive an overall score for purposes of validation. It is plausible that this practice obscured the measurement, making conclusions impossible to draw with any level of certainty. The design should have accommodated for this by taking repeated-measures of polysemy and effectiveness at each conversational turn.

In contrast, involvement performed as hypothesized: it had negative relationship with topic avoidance and no relationship with relational involvement. These results indicate validation of the involvement measure. I draw this conclusion with more confidence because the issues experienced in construct validation of relational framing do not apply to involvement as readily. The single-item measurements were more appropriate because topic avoidance and relational involvement (captured by perceived relationship length) are less abstract than polysemy and effectiveness. And since involvement has been retained as a unipolar construct, it is less problematic—conceptually speaking—to composite the scores across the sections of the conversation. Perceptions of involvement seem to be more stable across time than perception of relational frame activation. Thus, the present study has presented substantial evidence for using the revised involvement scale within an RFT framework.

In terms of measurement, the reoperationalized RFT framework offers several advantages over its predecessors. Measurement limitations associated with Dillard et al.'s (1996) framing scale can be circumvented with the proposed scales developed through a DPOI perspective. Reliability is an area of particular improvement. The revised relational framing and involvement scales have uniformly outperformed reliability coefficients in past formative research (i.e.,

Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon et al., 2002). In this way, questions of validity can be broached without qualms over the necessary condition of reliability. In addition, the reoperationalized framework avoids reproducing relational themes by positioning the frames of dominance and affiliation dialectically. This move suggests the revised scales are more face valid than their predecessors. As a result, they allows researchers to access the in situ interpretive work of individuals. And the reoperationalized framework lends itself to process research applications, allowing researchers to survey the way the frames compete with and displace each other over time. In this sense, the revised scales are more versatile than their predecessors. The final advantage of the reoperationalized framework is reflected in measurement of involvement. The results of the structural and construct validity tests suggest that the involvement scale is capturing a single construct that behaves as involvement is hypothesized to behave. In contrast, validity testing also suggests that the revised relational framing scale is suboptimal in its current form, though error correlation patterns have indicated a strategy for further revision. Even though validation results were mixed, the reoperationalized RFT framework can be refined to capitalize on the clear advantages it offers over previous measurement strategies.

Replication: Insights on Differential Salience, Involvement, and Gender

H7-H11 dealt with replicating past work completed within the RFT framework. Specifically, the present study sought to replicate the differential salience hypothesis (DSH; Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon, et al., 2002), the general intensifier hypothesis (GIH; Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon et al., 2002), the affiliation bias (McLaren et al., 2014), and the role of gender in relational framing (Dillard et al., 1996; Edwards, 2000; Solomon et al., 2002).

The present study successfully replicated the DSH using the revised relational framing scale. Not only does this finding provide further empirical support for the RFT framework, it also sheds light on the previously understudied phenomenon of frame displacement. To review,

frame displacement occurs when one relational frame rapidly overtakes the other in the interpretive process. McLaren and Solomon (2015) have argued that little is known about the process beyond speculation that it might occur with great frequency. By testing the DSH with a controlled and repeated-measures method, I could observe frame displacement occur in real time. Results indicate that frames may displace one another in the space of a single talk turn, suggesting that the process plays a much larger role in understanding relational meaning making than was previously understood to be the case. While previous studies have utilized single-measurements of frame salience (e.g., Dillard et al., 1996; Henningsen et al., 2003, 2013; Lannutti & Monahan, 2002; McLaren et al., 2014; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013), the present study demonstrates that frame activation is not an enduring quality of interaction. Examining the granular details of interaction—talk turn by talk turn—reveals participants shifting between salient interpretations of relational meaning rapidly. Therefore, differential salience should be understood as fleeting in the flow of everyday talk.

The present findings on differential salience have implications for future research. Lannutti and Monahan (2002), for example, attempted to explain perceptions of mixed-cue and consensual-cue sexual interactions by college students under the influence of alcohol. As was the case in the prior study described in chapter two, their study found instances with no differential salience. This specifically occurred when students viewed mixed-cue scenarios while sober. The lack of differential salience may be a result of methodological issues addressed here. For example, they used Dillard et al.'s (1996) format that reflects dualistic rather than dialectical thinking and applied those measures to entire conversations. The DPOI-constructed scales proposed in the present study can be used to replicate Lannutti and Monahan's (2002) work in order to rule out methodological issues that may have obscured differential salience.

Furthermore, the insights generated here on the process of frame displacement can be useful in extending past research. Consider McLaren et al.'s (2012) study that identified perceptions of dominance and disaffiliation as mediating variables between relationship qualities and feelings of relational hurt. In one conclusion, McLaren et al. (2012) argue "the ordering of the variables suggested in the final model imply that hurtful messages are interpreted through a dominance-submissiveness frame first and then an affiliation-disaffiliation frame" (p. 966). This is an explicit prediction about the occurrence of frame displacement. Future work could make use of the revised scales to investigate hurtful message processing patterns, testing the hypothesis that those processes are associated with instances of frame displacement and confirming the direction of that displacement.

The present study also successfully replicated the GIH using the revised measurement protocols. Unlike previous tests of the GIH (Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon et al., 2002), this replication used relational framing intensity to correlate with involvement directly, such that the content of the frame judgement (i.e., dominance or affiliation) had no impact on the correlation. There are two insights worth noting about this replication. First, it corroborates the status of involvement as a non-substantive intensifier variable. In Dillard et al.'s (1999) words, replicating the GIH "casts involvement as an intensity variable that contributes to interpretation of social interaction by conveying the degree to which the relational event is dominant or affiliative" (p. 60). The present study extends this claim by replicating the GIH where the content of framing had no impact on the analysis. Researchers can be more certain that judgments of involvement are happening alongside judgments of relational meaning and serving the intensify them.

Second, this replication of the GIH helps to clarify the operational role of involvement in RFT. Specifically, some conceptual confusion stems from Dillard et al.'s (1996) measurement of involvement as the "relevance of dimensions" (i.e., engaged/withdrawn, involved/uninvolved,

interested/disinterested, active/inactive). Since the "relevance of dimensions" is the way in which dominance and affiliation activation is measured, it makes little conceptual sense to treat involvement under the same logic if it is a fundamentally different type of construct. Even Dillard et al. (1996) note that involvement is a "unipolar construct that ranges from extremely withdrawn (zero involvement) to extremely engaged (high involvement)" (p. 707). The relevance of the dimension *withdrawn/engaged* would *not* measure the actual amount of involvement—merely that involvement is relevant at all. Thus, the revised scale—which retains involvement as a unipolar construct—more aptly orients the construct to be measured not in relevance but in amount. The successful reliability and validity testing of the measure indicates an overall success in clarifying the role of involvement within RFT.

As a result, future research could implement the revised involvement scale alongside Dillard et al.'s (1996) measures of dominance and affiliation. For example, consider Henningsen et al.'s (2003) study that attempted to predict the types of influence statements that groups with different goals would produce during deliberation. They found that involvement intensified affiliation regardless of group goal, but that the intensification of dominance necessitated that the group be guided by a task goal—findings contrary to the GIH. A replication of that work could rule out methodological limitations as an explanation of these anomalous findings. Along similar lines, Knobloch et al. (2007) observed that uncertainty in marriage can lead to a pessimism bias that encourages relational partners to interpret their partner's messages through a dominance frame rather than an affiliation frame. They also found a negative relationship between uncertainty and involvement, reflecting a conceptual misapplication of the involvement construct. Specifically, Knobloch et al. (2007) define involvement as "the degree of intensity, activity, and engagement displayed in a message" (p. 158). This definition places involvement on the same logical level as affiliation and dominance, thereby removing involvement from its role

as intensifier and invoking it as a substantive dimension of relational communication. Replication using the revised involvement scale could better parse the role involvement, as an intensifier variable, in the processing of messages of relationally uncertain couples. For example, the pessimism bias detected in the Knobloch et al.'s (2007) data may be intensified by highly involved relational partners, such that relationally uncertain couples experience a *dominance* bias in interpreting relational meaning.

In an attempt to replicate McLaren et al.'s (2014) affiliation bias, the present study was unsuccessful. Of course, the affiliation bias and the DSH—as represented here—predict contradictory results. Since the DSH was successfully replicated, the affiliation bias was necessarily unsupported. Two possible explanations for this finding seem plausible. First, the presence of an affiliation bias may be confined to certain types of close relationships that were not directly under study here. McLaren et al. (2014), after all, studied in the context of *friendship* and could have achieved a greater amount of experimental realism than did the present study. In this way, participants in the present study might not have felt close enough to their hypothetical conversation partner and, as a result, felt like they were interacting with an acquaintance or stranger rather than a friend. Another plausible explanation for the lack of replication has to do with the design of the present experiment. There was only one opportunity for anomalous data to support an affiliation bias—specifically in the first utterance of the first condition (i.e., Sam's perception of Alex). There could have been intervening characteristics of that utterance that overrode the effects of the bias—for example: its form is commanding, and its substance includes the idea of "taking charge." Even if the affiliation bias does systematically distort relational frame activation, it is plausible that the bias is too weak to overcome certain interactional cues.

The final piece of replication work here addressed dealt with the role of gender in relational frame activation. Traditional Western and American social norms would suggest that males and females should interpret dominating and affiliating behavior along gendered lines. This has been a rationale for investigating gender and RFT in the past, supporting studies that examine the way that the gender of the receiver (H10a; i.e., participant; Dillard et al., 1996), of the source (H10b; i.e., hypothetical conversation partner; Edwards, 2000), and of the dyad (H11; i.e., cross- or same-gender; Solomon et al., 2002) impact relational framing. Past findings have been mixed, with some studies seeing clear impact of gender on relational framing (e.g., Edwards, 2000; Frisby et al., 2011; McLaren et al., 2012), while other studies have found gender to have little or no effect (e.g., Dillard et al., 1996; Solomon et al., 2002; McWorthy & Henningsen, 2014). As was hypothesized, the generalized context used in the present study replicated the non-role of gender. Introducing participant gender, source gender, and dyadic gender alignment into a relational framing analysis as interaction terms returned no significant results across either condition. Put simply, the idea that men and women occupy different social realities does not hold up in this or other RFT research. Generally, this finding supports the evolutionary derivation of dominance and affiliation as key relational frames, the activation of which must be explained by something in excess of sociocultural factors, like gender conditioning.

General Implications

Relational communication is a central theme of all interpersonal studies because relational meaning is inherent in all interpersonal messages. RFT provides a particularly adept framework for studying general communication processes as a result of its abstracted approach to predicting and explaining relational message processing patterns. As such, the

reoperationalized RFT framework has the potential to shed light on many novel communication concepts.

Communication competence is an area of study focused on understanding the processes of good communication. Spitzberg and Cupach (2011) argue that in order for communication to be competent it needs to be perceived as both effective (i.e., accomplishing its goals) and appropriate (i.e., adhering to social expectations). Since competence resides in the perception—and thus processing—of messages, RFT provides a useful perspective for understanding the standards of *good* relational communication. Ebesu Hubbard (2001), for example, used RFT to demonstrate that meeting partner expectations of dominance and affiliation during episodes of conflict is associated with greater communication satisfaction. Since the reoperationalized framework is more sensitive to frame displacement, it can extend this work. For example, perceptions can be examined for instances where relational partners frame interactions in ways conducive to perceptions of communication competence, all for the sake of creating desirable outcomes (e.g., communication satisfaction, relationship satisfaction). Such a study could shed light on the way couples deliberately manage conflict episodes to avoid dysfunction.

Critical and interpretive communication studies represent other arenas that can be aided by the use of RFT. Typically, critical and interpretive studies work toward understanding the way discourse constructs meaning through the constitutive potentials of communication (Braithwaite and Schrodt, 2015). Such scholarship typically eschews prediction and explanation as the goals of inquiry, in favor of empowerment or sensitization functions. Despite its heritage as a post-positivist theory of communication science, RFT can be implemented in critical and interpretive capacities. For example, Henningsen et al. (2013) used RFT to sensitize findings about social and personal attraction when they argue “the dominance frame is most salient when considering social attraction” (p. 88). In this study, Henningsen et al. (2013) never

operationalized RFT, merely invoked it as a guide for making sense of the patterns they saw. Such a task is at the heart of rhetorical criticism, which "on the most basic level…is pattern recognition and creation" (Campbell, 2010, p. 93). There is a foundation, then, to treat RFT as a type of criticism, which is to say, as a lens through which to view discourse. RFT can provide a mode or posture for viewing "the recurring patterns that inhere in and constitute our language and its use in human communities and cohere into complex symbolic works that amaze, delight, and sometimes horrify us" (Campbell, 2010, p. 101). To borrow terminology from Baxter and Montgomery (1996), RFT can be *translated* to serve inquiry efforts for which it was never intended.

There are advantages to using the reoperationalized framework in critical or interpretive capacities. First, RFT places heavy focus on the theme of dominance, and therefore, on power. The vocabulary of the dominance frame and its attendant operational language can aid critical inquiries to expose and thwart meanings that occupy privileged discursive spaces (McKerrow, 1989). Such a function is relevant to both critical qualitative studies (e.g., Baxter, 2011) and ideological rhetorical criticism (e.g., Wander, 1983). Second, the reoperationalized RFT has been screened through a dialectical framework (DPOI) and thus primed for use alongside frameworks that centralize basic dialectical concepts, like contradiction, change, praxis and totality (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Such counterpart frameworks might include relational dialectics theory (i.e., Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011), dialogism (e.g., Bakhtin, 1986), or even deconstruction (e.g., Biesecker, 1989; Derrida, 2001).

Finally, the framework of RFT presents metatheoretical implications that can impact the philosophy of communication. Considering the research tradition from which it spawned, RFT is primed to enter discussions about the very structure of human communicative practice—that is, RFT contains the potential to structure what Anderson and Baym (2004) describe as a

communicative ontology. In trying to map a basic conception of reality, a communicative ontology prioritizes the notion of intersubjectivity and shared meaning between social actors. Reality in this sense is the product of the cross-referenced subjectivities of self and other. This conception of social reality is a key assumption with the RFT framework which seeks to offer an explanation of the *relations* between *selves* through cognitive processing vocabulary. If we accept the notion that one of central problems of communication is, as Peters (1999) puts it, the reconciliation of self and other, then RFT can help in explaining the meaningful dimensions along which self and other relate. Moreover, such a project lends a kind of empirical stability to an otherwise shaky thematic of the *distinction* between self and other (cf. Davis, 2008). In short, RFT may contain the mechanism by which communication scholars can advance a stable ontological positionality that not only structures but also authorizes their inquiry efforts.

Limitations

As with any empirical effort, this study had some limitations. Each limitation is suggestive of a corrective that could be applied to future replication work. The section will focus on three such limitations: first, the single-item measurement of potential (non)correlates; second, the use of a hypothetical conversation as stimulus; and third, the conceptual status of affiliation in RFT.

The principal limitation of this study was the single-item measurement for variables used in construct validation. This was particularly true of relational polysemy and interpersonal effectiveness. The complexity of these variables could not be adequately reflected in single-item measurements. Polysemy, for example, is an abstract concept that might not have resonated properly with lay-person participants. The item used to measure it (i.e., “Judging from this conversation, I am certain that Sam and Alex are good friends”) did not quite capture the essence of the construct, which has to do with the interpretability of the nature of a relationship. In the

case of effectiveness, the items corresponded to specific goals (i.e., persuading and showing liking/disliking). This measure was probably obscured because goals were deliberately shifted throughout the conversation, making judgments of effectiveness difficult to accurately elicit. Moreover, these variables were only measured once after participants had read the entire conversation. This means that composited relational framing variables had to be computed in order to test for association. This computation flattened the nuance of the data, obscuring the results of certain construct validity tests. Future research should take more care in conceptualizing and operationalizing potential (non)correlates of relational framing.

One possible variable to be used for convergent validity testing of relational framing is attachment-anxiety. Solomon et al. (2002) found attachment-anxiety is positively correlated with both Dillard et al.'s (1996) dominance and affiliation variables. Solomon et al. (2002) theorized that individuals who are generally anxious about relationships are more attentive to relational cues and thus likely to experience relational judgments of greater intensity. Coding the revised relational framing scale for intensity could produce a direct test of this association.

A second limitation stemmed from the use of hypothetical scenarios. While McLaren and Solomon's (2015) list of limitations did provide this study with direction, not all of their concerns could be addressed in this effort. As previously noted, hypothetical scenarios are convenient and controllable choices. Yet, they do not sufficiently mimic everyday talk. Future work should apply RFT in interaction studies that focus on the real conversation between interpersonal communicators. Such work could build upon that of other studies that have used live conversation as a stimulus (e.g., Henningsen et al., 2003; Knobloch et al., 2007; McLaren et al., 2012; McLaren & Pederson, 2014). In order to preserve the process-orientation of the revised scales, such interaction analyses could be accomplished through video-assisted recall methods (e.g., Keck & Samp, 2007) that facilitate collection of repeated-measures data.

A third limitation of the present study is reflected in the conceptual status of affiliation in the RFT framework. The complex nature of the affiliation construct represents a plausible explanation for the issues of structural validity experienced by the revised relational framing scale. As demonstrated by Dillard et al. (1999), affiliation is composed of a far greater number of themes discussed by Burgoon and Hale (1984) than is dominance. In the present study, the highly correlated error variances of the structural equation model for the relational framing scale suggest that important constructs are being ignored in the hypothesized model. It is plausible that the conversion of Dillard et al.'s (1996) and Lannutti and Monahan's (2002) items into a single scale destabilized the measurement of relational framing as a result of an unnuanced consideration of the affiliation construct. Future research should rethink the role of affiliation by incorporating semantic differential anchors that reflect a more cohesive construct.

Revision of the affiliation items should follow one of two potentially productive strategies. First, the items could more closely follow the dimensions and vocabulary traced by Burgoon and Hale (1984), such that the measure can be rewritten to minimize confounds. Such an approach has been practiced by others. For example, Knobloch et al. (2007) adapted four items from Burgoon and Hale's (1987) intimacy subscale to measure affiliation, and Frisby et al. (2011) adapted the similarity, affect, and trust subscales. In both cases, principal axis factoring methods eventually derived structurally sound measures that reflected adequate reliability. A close analysis of Burgoon and Hale's (1987) items could reasonably guide the revision of the affiliation-related anchors in the revised scale.

Second, the items could be structured around the evolutionary claims central to RFT developed by Dillard et al. (1996, 1999). By re-deriving dominance and affiliation through evolutionary theory, RFT created the groundwork to theorize those themes not only as abstract organizing principles for all relational phenomenology but also as empirically detectable

cognitive phenomena. In a sense, the evolutionary argument provides the abstracted conceptual landscape to pursue RFT research. As such, the conceptualization of affiliation could follow these more abstracted lines of logic. A systematic rethinking in this style would not try to approximate the fusion of the numerous, granular themes discussed by Burgoon and Hale (1984, 1987); instead, it would derive items correspondent to a dialectical analysis of dominance. By deriving affiliation through considering its status as a *functional* opposition to dominance, scholars would be acknowledging "the complexity of multiple oppositions" that would be entailed in the dominance-affiliation dialectic (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 9). The binary would open up to the possibility of multivocal oppositions—for example, dominance-affiliation, dominance-similarity, dominance-liking, dominance-immediacy, etc. The overlap of these radiants of affiliation, theorized as evolutionarily relevant, could structure the rethinking of the more parsimonious concept within the framework proper. As discussed, social distance is one plausible concept—with empirical history—that might guide this revisionary effort.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

It is with good reason that relational framing theory (RFT; Dillard et al., 1996) is a staple of the interpersonal communication literature (e.g., Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2015). With its abstracted level of analysis and clear theoretical mechanism, RFT has the potential to shed light on fundamental questions about human communication and meaning making processes. By examining interaction and social action through the lens of RFT, scholars gain the vocabulary necessary to productively describe the phenomenology of relating. It is due to this tremendous potential that this thesis sought to bring the operational components of the RFT framework into sharper focus than has been the norm to date. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the preceding work into a succinct statement of a central argument, with particular attention paid to drawing conclusions about and tracing implications for communication knowledge.

In the first chapter, I examined the basic propositions and past operationalizations of RFT and provided an evaluation of the theory based on McLaren and Solomon's (2015) criticisms. The essential claim of the theory—that interaction can be understood in terms of dominance, affiliation, and involvement—was derived from a long line of relationship research (see Tusing, 2000) and most directly related to Burgoon and Hale's (1984, 1987) influential topoi of relational communication. Thus, RFT's theoretical-conceptual heritage is quite robust. Criticisms of the theory rested mainly on the way it has been operationalized—with focus specifically on the imprecise measurement of frame activation. Therefore, in order to maximize RFT's potential utility for communication researchers, a reoperationalization was warranted.

In the second chapter, I detailed a proposal for reoperationalizing RFT that hinged on revised quantitative measures of frame activation. I adopted a stance of dialectical process-oriented inquiry (DPOI) to inform the revised measurement protocols (Appendix C). By repositioning dominance and affiliation as two poles of the single bipolar construct of relational framing—rather than as two separate bipolar constructs—the dialectical nature of the frames was realized. The reoperationalized framework retained involvement as a unipolar construct. These new measurement protocols more precisely reflect the conceptual claims of RFT. Thus, the reoperationalization hinges on the alignment of conceptual and operational components of the theory. The second chapter also proposed a series of hypotheses that predicted reliability, validity, and replication outcomes using the revised measurement protocols.

In the third chapter, I set forth the methodology used in an empirical test of the hypotheses presented in the second chapter. This 2 by 4, online, mixed, quasi-experiment manipulated communication goals and measured relational framing, as well as some proposed (non)correlates. Importantly, the repeated-measures design of the experiment reflects a commitment to the process-orientation that is inherent in RFT and explicit in the DPOI-based reoperationalization. Further, the stimulus—a conversational script between friends—provides an example of the kind of analytical unit preferred in an RFT analysis. This chapter also described the sampled participants and reliability statistics for the revised measures. The sample provided adequate statistical power for the proposed analyses, and reliabilities were uniformly higher for the revised scales when compared to their predecessors.

In the fourth chapter, I presented the results of the empirical tests of H1-H11 in three phases. Phase one, dealing with reliability and structural validity, showed that the revised relational framing scale was reliable but not valid and that the revised involvement scale was both reliable and valid. The error variance patterns suggested that there are confounds in the

relational framing scale, and most likely those confounds are related to the multi-faceted nature of the affiliation construct. Phase two, dealing with construct validity, demonstrated again that the relational framing scale was not correlating as predicted, while the involvement scale was correlating as predicted. The chosen (non)correlates for relational framing—relational polysemy and interpersonal effectiveness—needed more sophisticated operationalization for confident conclusions to be drawn. And phase three, dealing with past RFT findings, successfully replicated the differential salience hypothesis (DSH), the general intensifier hypothesis (GIH), and the non-role of gender in relational framing. McLaren et al.'s (2014) affiliation bias was not replicated in these data. Thus, the results of the empirical tests of H1-H11 were mixed in support, but promising overall—as they suggest clear directions for future work in the effort to reoperationalize RFT.

In the fifth chapter, I discussed the results in greater detail with particular attention paid to the way they inform insight about RFT in particular and relational communication in general. Concerning the future of RFT, efforts should be made to clarify the conceptual status of affiliation in order to engender structural validity in the revised relational framing scale. At that point, careful construct validity testing should be carried out to validate the scale further. Involvement, in contrast, appears to be reliable, unidimensional, and behaving properly. Further testing will strengthen the validity portfolio. In addition, the successful replication of the DSH and the GIH suggests RFT remains a useful framework for understanding relational communication at an abstracted level. Future work should apply the reoperationalized framework to familiar and new contexts in order to glean insight about the way relational meaning is managed. Finally, the present study shed light on the fleeting nature of relational framing. The process of frame displacement seems to play a more central role in the meaning making process than has been previously theorized. Present data suggest that individuals undergo complex

processes in navigating the interpretability of utterances in the flow of conversation. Future work should focus on capturing this process in the flow of everyday talk, outside of hypothetical stimuli. Further investigation along this research trajectory will bring greater insight into the cognitive processes that govern interpretability in social action.

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APPENDIX A

DILLARD ET AL.'S (1996) RELATIONAL FRAMING SCALE

The following scale was created by Dillard et al.'s (1996) to assess relational framing.

Participants are typically first given the example question. Next, they are exposed to a stimulus and told to respond to the items printed after the example. Participants evaluate the word pairs on Likert-type scales, ranging from "completely irrelevant" to "completely relevant."

Example Question:

You have been given several different kinds of materials—wax paper, sandpaper, velvet, a rubber eraser, and a brick—and asked to feel the surface of each of the different materials. [Your task is to judge the relevance of each word pair to making a judgment about the materials.]

Rough/smooth	1	2	3	4	5
Loud/quiet	1	2	3	4	5
Hard/soft	1	2	3	4	5
High-pitched/low-pitched	1	2	3	4	5

Most people would say that they rough/smooth and hard/soft dimensions were relevant to the task and that the loud/quiet and high-pitched/low-pitched dimensions were irrelevant. Note that you are NOT evaluating how rough, smooth, loud, quiet, hard, soft, high-pitched, or low-pitched the surfaces are. Instead, you are indicating whether the dimensions defined by the word pair is relevant to evaluating those surfaces. Of course, your judgments might be reversed if the task were to judge sounds rather than surfaces in this example. In that case, the rough/smooth and hard/soft dimensions would be irrelevant, and you would probably rate the loud/quiet and high-pitched/low-pitched sounds as relevant.

Scale Items:

Dominance Items:	Affiliation Items:	Involvement Items:
Dominance/submission	Affection/disaffection	Engaged/withdrawn
Persuade/concede	Liking/disliking	Involved/uninvolved
Influence/comply	Attraction/aversion	Interested/disinterested
Controlling/Yielding	Positive regard/negative regard	Active/inactive

APPENDIX B

PRETEST STIMULI

The following two conversations were used in the pretest. Different conversations represent different experimental conditions. Participants were told to focus on either Jane or Martha. Solid lines indicate screen breaks in the conversation.

Conversation 1:

Martha: Hey, Janie. I'm calling 'cause I need you to help me decide on a ring. James and I are getting engaged. Check your e-mail, I sent you pictures.

Jane: Wait, you're getting engaged? You've been dating for what--three months?

Martha: Yeah, about that long.

Jane: That's not long enough to really know someone. Plus, you've both been divorced and you rushed into an engagement just last year and that ended terribly! I guess I thought you'd be more cautious. Please think of Leo--he's been through so much already.

Martha: What Leo needs is a happy mother and to have the things that other kids have--a father, a house, a dog. I know people might think it impulsive, but this time is different.

Jane: How is it different?

Martha: I can't explain it. We just *know*. So, there's no reason to wait.

Jane: But, if you *know* then there's no reason to rush!

Martha: I appreciate your concern, but I just need your support as my sister like always.

Jane: I'm *trying* to give you support--by keeping you from making the wrong decision! I've been there for you through the highs and lows, and I kept quiet because I didn't want to tell you how to run your life. But, I have to be honest now or I'll regret it.

Martha: Look, I'm not going to change my mind.

Jane: Well, it's obviously your decision and as sisters we have to stick together. So, I'll be supportive by being happy for you without agreeing with you.

Martha: Thanks for understanding, Janie. I understand your concerns and appreciate your support.

Conversation 2:

Martha: Hey, Janie. I'm calling 'cause I need you to help me decide on a ring. James and I are getting engaged. Check your e-mail, I sent you pictures.

Jane: Wait, you're getting engaged? You can't be serious!

Martha: What do you mean?

Jane: 3 months, Martha? That's not long enough to know someone. Plus, you've both been divorced and you rushed into an engagement just last year and that ended terribly! I guess I thought you'd be more cautious. Please think of Leo--he's been through so much already.

Martha: Oh, well I suppose you have a point. But I've thought about that stuff before, and came to the conclusion that this is a smart idea--for me, James, and Leo.

Jane: Smart? I don't think you've thought this through. How is this any different from your past engagements?

Martha: I--I don't really have an answer for that. Maybe I haven't thought about this enough.

Jane: You can't even answer that? Look, I'm not saying James is a bad guy, or even that he isn't the right guy for you. But if it's the right thing to do, then there is no reason to rush.

Martha: That's true. "Good things come to those who wait," right? I think I got so wrapped up in the romance of it all. I appreciate you helping me step back and think about this.

Jane: That's what I'm here for, Martha. You're a grown woman, so I can't tell you how to live your life. But, as your sister, I can at least offer my honest opinion. Thinking about this rationally, I'm not sure getting engaged right now is the best decision.

Martha: I think you may be right, Janie. James is a good man, so he'll understand why I want to wait.

Jane: Good to hear you're thinking straight again. It is easier to be supportive of you and James as long as you're thinking these things through.

Martha: Thanks for you help, sis. I can always rely on you to help me reason these things out.

APPENDIX C

PROPOSED RELATIONAL FRAMING AND INVOLVEMENT SCALES

The following semantic differential scales are proposed for relational framing and involvement.

Instructions refer to a stimulus in present study (Appendix D). Asterisk denotes a reversed item.

Instructions:

"Now indicate which of the following words you thought [Sam's or Alex's] statement had more to do with. Selecting a bubble closer to a word indicates that you think that word has more relevance to your understanding of [Sam's or Alex's] statement."

Relational Framing Items:

Persuasion	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Liking
Influence	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Attraction
Affection	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Control*
Esteem	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Dominance*
Convincing	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Caring
Coaxing	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Fondness

Instructions:

"Now indicate which of the following words characterizes [Sam's or Alex's] attitude toward the conversation conveyed by their statement. Selecting a bubble closer to a word indicates that you think that word has more relevance to your perception of [Sam or Alex]."

Involvement Items:

Disinterested	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Interested
Uninvolved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Involved
Inactive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Active
Withdrawn	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Engaged

APPENDIX D

STIMULUS CONVERSATION IN PRESENT STUDY

The following script is the conversation read by participants across conditions. Lines indicate page breaks in the conversation. Superscript "A" indicates where relational framing and involvement measures were taken for participants in condition 1 (i.e., Sam's perception of Alex), why "B" indicates measures in condition 2 (i.e., Alex's perception of Sam). Parentheticals categorize utterances in terms of compliance- or affinity-related goals; this information was not presented to participants.

Instructions:
Over the next several screens, you will read a conversation unfold between two friends, Alex and Sam. They are part of a larger friend group that socializes regularly. On this occasion, they are trying to decide on what restaurant to go to in order to celebrate Alex's birthday. Unfortunately, the group has become sidetracked. Alex and Sam have the following conversation.

You should imagine yourself in [Sam's or Alex's] position. This means you'd be talking to your friend, [Alex or Sam], and listening to *their* words. As the conversation unfolds, you'll be filling out questionnaires about how you perceive [Alex's or Sam's] words. Remember, this is about your perceptions.

Stimulus:
Sam: You're why we're celebrating, so I don't think where we eat matters as long as you're happy. (Affinity, offer positive evaluation)[b]

Alex: Well if I'm in charge tonight, I say we vote on a few places. (Compliance, enforce rights)[a]

Sam: But we all care about you and want you to like the food. So what sounds good? (Affinity, seek disclosure)[b]

Alex: I personally liked that seafood spot you took us to last month. (Affinity, offer positive evaluation/give disclosure)[a]

Sam: Can't do that one. I don't eat there anymore since they got a new manager. Let's do the burger joint next door. (Compliance, promote shared activity)[b]

Alex: Okay, but we still have to vote. How should we get everyone's attention? (Compliance, seek advice; enforce obligations)[a]

Sam: Let's just grab our coats and head out. Maybe they'll take the hint. We'll vote at the cars. (Compliance, promote shared activity; give advice)[b]

Alex: Good idea. Not even they could miss that. How does this always happen to us? (Affinity, show inclusion/exclusion)[a]

APPENDIX E

EXAMPLE SURVEY QUESTION

Participants read the following example question to prepare them for completing the rest of the survey. They were given an option to click the survey bubbles before reading the debriefing statement. The question is based on Dillard et al.'s (1996) example question (Appendix A).

The following screen contains an EXAMPLE question that is intended to prepare you to complete the remainder of the survey. Read the example question, select through its options, and then read the debriefing that follows.

Suppose you were given a piece of sandpaper and told "This paper is rough." What does that mean? Reading the options below, select bubbles closer to words that are relevant to your understanding of what the sentence "This paper is rough" means. Bubbles closer to a given word indicate a greater degree of certainty about that word's relevance to your understanding.

Texture	1	2	3	4	5	6	Sound
Hearing	1	2	3	4	5	6	Feel
Touch	1	2	3	4	5	6	Listening
Audio	1	2	3	4	5	6	Physical

DEBRIEFING - Read this after making selections.

What words did you select for? The one's dealing with physical touch (i.e., texture, feel, touch, physical) or those dealing with sound (i.e., sound, hearing, listening, audio)? Note here that no "correct" answer to the question exists. The sentence "This paper is rough" is somewhat ambiguously worded; it might mean the paper is rough to touch but it might also mean that the paper is rough to listen to when scratched for example.

The following survey, like this example, is NOT about selecting some "right" answer. The answers you select are useful for understanding how you interpret a given message.