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Commentary on Cionea and Hample

Michael Hoppmann
Northeastern University

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Commentary on “Couples’ Dialogue Orientations”

MICHAEL HOPPMANN

*Department of Communication Studies
Northeastern University
360 Huntington Avenue, Lake 204
USA
m.hoppmann@neu.edu*

1. Introduction

Commenting on a paper that optimally combines high levels of clarity, with relevance and academic rigor is a serious challenge. Cionea and Hample’s study is such a paper. The authors follow up on some of their previous work by using Douglas Walton’s concept of dialogue types as a tool for analysing couples’ communicative interactions and relationship satisfaction. The resulting complex study shines light on a variety of fascinating questions regarding gender differences in dialogue preferences, ordinary arguers’ understanding of dialogue types, spousal relationships in dialogue type preference, possible influences of long relationships on each other’s communicative behaviour, and relational satisfaction in correlation to communicative behaviour. Given that each of these questions is well addressed and a number of them produce very interesting results, I will – in the interest of avoiding any repetition from the paper – limit myself to four very brief comments and a final note.

Since the first three notes concern questions of the “wouldn’t it be nice to also...?” type, I want to preface this section with a brief disclaimer: Of course studies of this kind have severe restraints regarding time, components and pages. It is important to acknowledge these restraints and I think the authors have done a great job in making strategic choices about what to include and what to omit. Nevertheless, from a reader’s perspective it is natural to want more details and follow up with more questions. In the following sections I am this reader and I have these questions.

2. Small questions

I address the following three questions in chronological order and without regard to relative importance. As a matter of fact, the first one of these is probably the least important since it addresses a hypothesis that is later falsified in the paper. In case of a replication of the study in a different setting it might nevertheless be of some interest

In their research question three (RQ3) Cionea and Hample inquire into the reasons of a potential correlation of dialogue preferences in couples and present two possible explanations: selection or accommodation. They furthermore point out that while the data of this study might not be sufficient to prove either explanation, it could present at least a tentative argument against the latter, if the correlation is independent of length of relationship; whereas an influence of relationship length on dialogue preference matching might indicate support for the accommodation hypothesis. One aspect that Cionea and Hample do not explicitly address, but which I think is worth keeping in mind, is the potential influence of a change in culture with regard to gender roles on the interpersonal relationships that the authors study. The relationships studies range all the way up to 58 years with an average of 19 years. That puts the courting and

selection phase of the oldest samples into the 1950ies and even the average couple stated dating in the last century. If the age of the relationship was a predictor for match in dialogue preference this might not be evidence in favor of the accommodation hypothesis, but could instead be an indicator of a change of selection behaviour during some of the key decades of emancipation. As it turns out, it is not a significant indicator, so at least for the present study the point is interesting but moot.

My second question regards the data collection on arguing orientation and dialogue type preference. The way I understand the study (and – with the disclaimer above in mind and full respect to the fact that this study is embedded in a large body of earlier work – I would have appreciated a slightly more extensive description of the details in the instrumentation section of the paper) the authors exclusively rely on self-report data for dialogue type preference. I think that this choice leads to very interesting and relevant results. But it also immediately triggers the interested reader's question of "How well do they know their own preferences?". And as a result the question to the authors: Might it be feasible and desirable to compare the participants self-reported preferences with either a) the observation of partner A about partner B's apparent dialogue type preferences and/or b) the participants actual dialogue or argumentative choices in a separate section of the questionnaire? Adding these data might enrich our understanding of the questions the authors address and could even lead to further results about dialogue type preference and self-perception.

My final small question regards the relationship of argument orientation and relational satisfaction (RQ5). Hample and Cionea look at four regressions concerning "*(1) predicting men's relational satisfaction from their own argument orientations; (2) predicting men's relational satisfaction from their partner's orientations; (3) predicting women's relational satisfaction from their own arguing orientations; and (4) predicting women's relational satisfaction from their partners' orientations.*" At the danger of having gotten lost in the methods section and revealing myself as a less than ideal reader for this study, it seems to me that one of the most evident points of comparison is missing: What influence does the matching or mismatching of both partners' argumentative orientations have on either partner's relational satisfaction? Am I more likely to be satisfied if I have argument orientation A and my partner has orientation A than if I have A and she has B? How about if she has A and I have B? I think the four sets of data the authors present and analyze are fascinating and very insightful, but I would love to receive additional information about the influence of this matching – by either providing a more detailed discussion of existing data or by widening the data collection in this regard.

3. Future integration

As it stands Cionea and Hample's study presents some strong data and fascinating information. Arguably one of the most practically useful of these is their ability to partially predict each spouse's relational satisfaction from a combination of both partners' dialogue preference. This is academically intriguing and practically useful – but it is also a predictor that might come too late for some purposes, i.e. it addresses relational satisfaction at a time at which the partners are already engaged in a relationship. Could future scholarship start one step earlier? Given that there is a growing recent body of work on courtship strategies and styles that at least partially indicate individual preferences for certain kinds of courtship interaction (not entirely unlike the

dialogue type orientations the authors use), would it be possible to correlate courtship preferences with later relational satisfaction?

Hall et al. (Hall 2013; Hall, Carter, Cody, and Albright 2010; Hall and Xing 2015) list five flirting styles:

- 1) Traditional Flirting Style
- 2) Physical Flirting Style
- 3) Sincere Flirting Style
- 4) Playful Flirting Style
- 5) Polite Flirting Style

While there is no obvious connection between this division and the dialogue types, it is nevertheless evident that there is a strong communicative element in each of the flirting styles that might translate to similar orientations as in Cionea and Hample's study.

Similarly, but on a different level Clark, Shaver and Abrahams (1999) distinguish between eight courtship strategies:

- 1) Emotion: "becoming emotionally involved (revealing personal information)"
- 2) Direct: "directly initiating a relationship (making physical contact, directly asking a potential partner to start a relationship)"
- 3) Indirect: "signaling indirectly (hinting, talking generally about romance)"
- 4) Manipulate setting: "manipulating the situation (making the setting romantic, maintaining close physical contact)"
- 5) Joking: "joking (teasing, playfully insulting)"
- 6) Resources: "demonstrating resources (gift-giving, showing off possessions)"
- 7) Third party: "using third parties to initiate a relationship (getting friends or family members to assist)"
- 8) Passive: "acting passively (waiting for the other person to make the first move)"

Once again the communicative component in at least some of these is very evident. Would it then be possible to expand the fascinating work that Cionea and Hample have done for dialogue type preference and relational satisfaction to courtship style preference and relational satisfaction?

4. Conclusion and final note

Cionea and Hample's study answers a number of fascinating questions and gives rise to many more. Given its presentation at the conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation, it might also give some of its audience members some personal food for thought. Somewhat simplifying their findings, one might say that two of the statistically most relevant results they found are, that a) men who have a preference for argumentation as play (i.e. debaters), and b) men who are interested in the (theory and) practice of persuasive dialogues are most likely to make their partners miserable. In a conference full of debaters and rhetoricians this might be a useful reminder for the participants to communicate with care.

References

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