Relational Presence in Distanced Interdependent Relationships

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes research from the presence literature (i.e., social presence, co-presence) as well as organizational and relational communication literatures to introduce the concept of relational presence: the perceived salience of human-to-human connection in mediated contexts. Relational presence ranges from "fully present" to "absent", and involves 4 dimensions: degree of mutuality, proximality, cognitive orientation, and tangibility. Understanding relational presence may be the key to explaining the difference between successful and problematic distanced interdependent relationships.

Keywords--- **social presence, distanced relationships**.

Distanced interdependent relationships (DIRs), across several contexts, are an ever-increasing occurrence. Up to one million marriages and as many as one-third of college premarital relationships experience long-term separations annually [1]. Distanced relationships are also common in organizational contexts. Indeed, distributed organizations and teams are an integral part of governmental, political, business and military organizations. Although some argue that DIRs are fundamentally different from proximal relationships, we argue that they are actually quite similar in that unit members in both situations must depend on one another to achieve their goals. The difference, we suggest, lies in the preferred and/or available means of interaction. Furthermore, although scholars have identified several disadvantages of DIRs, advantages have been noted as well [2-3]. A central question posed in much of this research is: What makes distance "work" in some relationships and not in others? In response, we introduce the concept of *relational presence* (i.e., the perceived salience of human-to-human connection in mediated contexts) to explain the difference between successful and problematic DIRs.

On the surface, relational presence might seem similar to the concept of *social presence*, which has been defined as the "sense of being with another" [4]. Indeed, we view relational presence as a specific type of social presence that is limited to human-to-human connection (as opposed to connections with artificial intelligence) and facilitated by communication technologies within the DIR context. Relational presence also seems similar to *co-presence*, a person's sense of the salience and accessibility of another [4]. Whereas co-presence implies that social actors have a sensory awareness of one another, relational presence suggests a cognitive orientation to the connection itself, above and beyond the unit members, which can happen with or without interactivity. As Sigman states, "relationships are 'larger' than the physical presence or interactional accessibility of the participants. Social relationships can therefore be said to be continuous, or to be oriented to and produced as such by relationship partners" [5]. Building on Sigman's argument, we suggest, that unit members can experience varying degrees of relational presence *independent* of other unit members.

Relational presence exists along a continuum ranging from fully present absent, and it consists of four dimensions: degree of mutuality, proximality, cognitive orientation, and tangibility. A fully present relationship is one in which unit members are physically proximate to and focused on one another; thus, the connection among unit members is at more apparent and is reinforced through direct sensory input as they work towards unit goals. An absent relationship, on the other hand, is one in which members are physically and psychologically distanced from one another; a connection is less apparent as unit members focus on their own goals. We hypothesize that unit members in successful DIRs are able to cultivate the degree of relational presence needed to accomplish particular goals, some of which may require a higher degree of relational presence while others necessitate greater distance among unit members. Future research is needed to explicate *relational presence* and test the propositions offered in this presentation.

References

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