

Short Note

**The structure of social substitutions:
a test of relational models theory**

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Abstract

People often select a substitute to replace an intended interactant, thereby revealing how they represent their social intentions. Naturally-occurring substitutions preserved the relational model governing the interaction but not the characteristics of individual participants, indicating that social intentions are formulated in terms of relational rather than individual characteristics. © 1997 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Relational models theory (Fiske, 1991, 1992) proposes a four-fold taxonomy of cognitive models that underpin the construction, interpretation, coordination, representation, and evaluation of social relations. Relationships marked by *Communal Sharing* involve a sense of shared identity in which the distinctiveness of individuals is ignored. *Authority Ranking* relationships are asymmetrically organized in terms of a linear hierarchy, in which participants are rank-ordered by status markers. In *Equality Matching*, the point of reference is an even balance

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among the participants. *Market Pricing* relationships, finally, are organized in terms of ratios and proportions.

Many empirical studies have documented the existence of the four models and their role in social cognition. Haslam and Fiske (1992) showed that people's free classification of their personal relationships corresponds closely to the models, and Fiske (1995) demonstrated that the models organize people's free recall of their acquaintances. Analyses of ratings of relational features indicate that the relational models are factorially coherent (Haslam, 1995), and that, as predicted, they correspond to discrete categories rather than continuous dimensions (Haslam, 1994a,b). Finally, several studies (Fiske, Haslam, & Fiske, 1991), replicated in diverse non-European cultures (Fiske, 1993), demonstrated that the models can predict the patterning of social errors. In naturally-occurring slips where people are misnamed, misrecalled, or targets of misdirected actions, the two people substituted tend to relate with the substituter according to the same model. This finding indicates that the schemas operating in implicit social cognition are partly relational in character, and correspond well to the four models.

Further support for the role of the relational models in everyday social cognition was sought by extending the findings on inadvertent substitutions to the phenomenon of intentional substitutions, in which a replacement is selected for an originally intended interactant. Just as slips reveal who is considered equivalent to whom in implicit social cognition, intentional substitutions reveal equivalence in explicit social cognition. If people formulate social intentions in terms of the relational models, then substituted individuals will relate to the substituter according to the same relational model. If they are formulated in terms of the individual characteristics often studied in social cognition research—sex, age, ethnicity, personality—then substitutions will preserve these characteristics.

METHOD

Twenty-seven paid undergraduates recorded episodes in which they intended to interact with someone and then, by choice or force of circumstance, selected a substitute. Subjects for a study on 'Decision making style' recorded retrospective substitutions at a first session, and then recorded additional prospective substitutions over a 1-week period before a second session. Under the guise of a separate study on 'Time allocation', administered by a different experimenter, subjects then recorded the following information for a sample of their acquaintances, including all whom they had substituted in the earlier study: the relational model governing their relationship with the person (selected from four paragraph-length descriptions of the models); the person's age, gender and ethnicity; and the person's personality on the popular 'Big Five' personality dimensions (McCrae & Costa, 1987), assessed by 10-point scales anchored by published adjectival descriptors (John, 1990).

RESULTS

Subjects recalled on average 3.33 retrospective substitutions and recorded 5.30 prospective substitutions. The pattern of findings did not differ between the retrospective and prospective substitutions so these were combined. We also analysed one randomly selected prospective substitution per subject to ensure strict independence of cases, and the pattern of findings was unchanged. As in our studies of slips, we used the del statistic (Hildebrand, Laing, & Rosenthal, 1977) to test the prediction that the substituted individuals were concordant for the relational models and individual characteristics. Table 1 presents results for the combined substitutions.

Del values are affected by properties of the specific cross-tabulation, so their magnitudes cannot be directly compared. However, inspection of Table 1 shows that substitutions were strongly concordant for the relational models classification and the demographic variables, and generally non-significant for the personality dimensions.

The obtained results have a possible artefactual explanation. Subjects might differ in the base-rates of the various characteristics—having different profiles of relationship types or different proportions of acquaintances of a particular demographic group, for instance—so that even if there was no significant concordance for the characteristics within each subject, concordance might emerge in the sample as a whole. To test for this possibility, we randomly selected for each subject one pair of acquaintances who had not been substituted, and tested for aggregate concordance, which would indicate the presence of this base-rate artefact. There was no concordance for the relational models ($p > 0.05$), but the artefact was present for gender ($p < 0.0001$), age ($p < 0.05$) and ethnicity ($p < 0.005$). Consequently, the concordances reported for these *individual* characteristics in Table 1 are partly or wholly artefactual.

Table 1. Del values for the relational models and individual characteristics

	Del
Relational models	0.25***
Gender	0.22***
Ethnicity	0.41***
Age	0.37***
Personality	
Extroversion	0.06
Agreeableness	0.13*
Neuroticism	0.03
Conscientiousness	0.08
Openness to experience	0.16**

* $p < 0.05$;

** $p < 0.01$;

*** $p < 0.001$.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study extend the support for the role of the relational models in everyday social cognition. Subjects tended to select substitutes with whom they use the same relational model that they use with the originally intended interactant. This finding indicates that social equivalence (i.e. substitutability) in social intentions is partly figured in terms of the models. The models therefore organize some aspects of explicit social decision making as well as the implicit social cognitive processes investigated in earlier research (Fiske *et al.*, 1991; Fiske, 1993).

In addition to yielding support for the theory of relational models, the study failed to support the importance of the individual characteristics in the formulation of social intentions. Subjects showed no consistent tendency to select substitutes on the basis of similar personality. Substitutions concordant for gender, age, and ethnicity appeared to result from demographically differentiated patterns of affiliation, not cognitive equivalence with respect to intentions for social interactions *per se*. Although individual characteristics have figured prominently in North American social-cognitive research, characteristics of relationships appear to play a more potent role in social intentions. Relational characteristics are more important in everyday interactions and natural cognition than the individualistic tradition in social cognition has generally recognized (Fiske & Haslam, 1996).

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