

ASSESSING BELIEF IN COORDINATING MEANING IN ROMANTIC  
RELATIONSHIPS

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2004

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Martin Heesacker, for his invaluable input into this project. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Ruperto Perez and Dr. Connie Shehan, for their wisdom and insight. Additionally, I am grateful for my family and friends for their support throughout this process and throughout my education.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	5
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
2 METHOD .....	8
Participants .....	8
Procedure .....	8
3 RESULTS .....	10
4 DISCUSSION .....	12
APPENDIX MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND FACTOR LOADING OF CMM SCALE ITEMS .....	17
REFERENCES .....	18
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	21

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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August, 2004

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Research has consistently shown a substantial gap between the specific behaviors people desire from their romantic partners and those they actually receive, as well as a strong link between this gap and relationship dissatisfaction. The current proposal describes the development of a scale to examine one potential source of that gap, namely the absence of belief in the coordinated management of meaning. Coordinated management of meaning is defined as the process of people creating a shared understanding regarding the meaning of words and behaviors within their relationship. The scale assesses the extent to which a person believes in a constructivist, postmodern approach to communicating in romantic relationships.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

To say that intimate relationships are important to human beings is an understatement. The quest for love abounds. For example, from September 2000 to September 2001 there were 2.4 million marriages in the United States alone (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Love relationships are central to the lives of many people. Illustrative of this is the fact that six of the top fifteen most stress inducing items on the social readjustment scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) in some way concern intimate relationships.

It is clear that relationships are important, but it is also no secret that occasionally people struggle to maintain healthy relationships; that the sea of love is prone to a squall from time to time. In a report issued by the Center for Disease Control within five years a marriage has a 20% probability of ending in divorce. By ten years of marriage that number jumps to 33% (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Another indication of stormy relationships is rampant infidelity. By their very nature, statistics on extramarital affairs are hard to ascertain, but various sources claim that in approximately 50% of marriages at least one partner will be unfaithful (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Tavris & Sadd, 1975).

Relationship difficulties are not limited to married couples. Heesacker, Stanley, and Tiegs (2004) found similar rates of infidelity in dating relationships. According to Carlson (1987) 36% of college students will experience some form of abuse in their

dating relationships. Infidelity and abuse represent relationships at their worst, but what about when people are simply dissatisfied with their partners and want to improve their relationships? Three primary theories have attempted to articulate the factors that nurture and sustain relationships as well as those that lead to heartbreak. A brief review of these theories will be presented next. Understanding these theories is vital to understanding the rationale for the proposed research.

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) proposed the social exchange theory. Social exchange theory posits a cost-benefit analysis of the relationship as central to relationship satisfaction. An individual considers the rewards and costs of being in a relationship as opposed to other alternatives. This model predicts that as the rewards increase and costs decrease a person will be more satisfied and place a higher value on the relationship.

Building on social exchange theory, Adams (1965) took into account the extent to which each partner benefits from the relationship. The theory suggests that it is possible that one partner benefits too much while the other partner benefits too little from the relationship. Both partners will become dissatisfied in this situation; so, for a couple to be satisfied, equity is needed in terms of costs and benefits.

Rusbult's Investment Model (1980, 1986) is also related to Thibaut and Kelley's social exchange theory. Rusbult created the Investment Model Scale to measure commitment level, investment size, and quality of alternatives, as well as relational satisfaction.

What these theories share is a perspective on relationship satisfaction that Abelson (1963) would characterize as "cold cognition." Abelson was the first scholar to publish work distinguishing between cold and hot cognition. Cold cognition is relatively

devoid of affective tone and is characterized by logic and facts whereas hot cognition is relatively saturated with affect. Abelson's distinction suggests that a theory that includes hot cognition may provide important additional understanding of the sources of relationship satisfaction of that provided by the cold-cognition models. One such affect-based, hot cognition model is Heesacker's desired loving behavior theory (Heesacker, Smith, & Lawrence, 1998; Mejia-Millan & Heesacker, 2003).

The desired loving behavior theory proposes that individuals want to feel loved by their romantic partners, that specific actions by the partner signal the degree to which people feel loved, and that people differ in the amount and type of behaviors they desire in order to feel loved. According to this theory, the extent to which their partner provides these desired loving behaviors affects relational satisfaction. Heesacker and colleagues developed the Desired Loving Behaviors Scale (DLBS; Heesacker et al., 1998) to test the theory. The scale allows the calculation of a score that assesses the degree of discrepancy between what desired loving behaviors one person wants and what that person reports receiving from the partner. This discrepancy is inversely related to satisfaction. Also, current relationships reported lower discrepancy scores than failed relationships. Furthermore, Mejia-Millan and Heesacker (2003) found that the desired loving behavior discrepancy theory significantly predicted relationship satisfaction above and beyond variance accounted for by the equity and investment models. They also found that the degree to which the received behavior was believed to represent feeling loved consequently determined the importance of the behavior in influencing relationship satisfaction, thus supporting the importance of a hot cognition perspective.

Not only are these discrepancies important, research indicates that they are also large. Across two studies (Smith, 2000; & Mejia-Millan & Heesacker, 2003) the average discrepancy ranged from .8 to 1.2 (on a 5-point scale). Cohen (1988) would characterize the effect sizes of desired-received loving behavior discrepancies as large (Heesacker et al., 2003).

But what is the source of these discrepancies and why would couples allow much loving behavior want-get discrepancy? One study sheds some light on these questions. Samson (1996) attempted to reduce this discrepancy in couples through simple awareness training. Couples were taught about the idea of discrepancies in desired loving behaviors in an attempt to bridge the discrepancy gap. Increasing awareness of discrepancies, though logical, failed to achieve the expected results of reducing discrepancy. Also, more research was needed to determine possible sources of loving-behavior discrepancies.

Coordinated management of meaning theory (CMM, Pearce, 1999; Pearce & Cronen, 1980), from the communications research literature, has the potential to explain the source of the large discrepancies between wanted and received behaviors in previous studies. Based on Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory, CMM is a post-modern theory developed to explain how people establish and share meaning (Cragan & Shields, 1998). One of the basic tenets of CMM is that meaning is subjective. According to this theory, people encounter communication problems because meaning differs from person to person, though people often perceive meaning as objective or general. "A common error in this regard is the tendency to forget that things have different meanings for different people" (Rossiter & Pearce, 1975, p. 14). Because of this not-fully-appreciated

subjectivity, communication is intrinsically vulnerable to flaws. As Cragen and Shields (1998, p. 38) summarized, “Error-free information sharing is impossible.”

Communication theorists Pearce and Cronen suggested CMM to compensate for these inherent communication misunderstandings. One implication of CMM is that to avoid these pitfalls, people must work to share understanding. “When we communicate with another person, we seek to create common perception of feelings, attitudes, goals, desires, ideas, experiences and so forth” (Wood, 1998, p. 5).

In CMM constitutive rules specify the established behavior within a given context (Cragen & Shields, 1998). Constitutive rules are developed in an attempt to explain the meaning of specific behaviors within a particular communication dyad. For example, a young lady might consider an animated and engaged conversation to indicate her desire for friendship, whereas the young man receiving her animated and engaged conversation might wrongly conclude more amorous intentions on her part (Abbey, 1982, 1987). A multicultural example may also be useful in explaining constitutive rules. In the United States shaking hands shows respect whereas in Japan shaking hands might be construed as inappropriate.

According to Cragen and Shields (1998) three, specific, ontological assumptions directly pertain to constitutive rules. First, humans create or impose systems of meaning and order, even when there are none. This means that people are always assigning meaning to things. Second, humans adhere to meaning temporally; that is, what means one thing one day might mean another thing or nothing the next day. Last, humans’ meaning systems differ from one person to another; that is, meaning is subjective.

Traces of CMM can be found in the social psychology literature. For example, Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, and Dolderman (2002) found that couples were more satisfied in relationships when they could shift their perception of one another to match their ideals of what a partner should be. Murray et al. (2002) suggested that the more the partners think they are similar to one another, through a process of ego assimilation; the more satisfied they would be. In essence, the more their self-meanings coordinate with their partner meanings, the greater the relationship satisfaction.

CMM also borrows support from the psychological literature based on the work of John Gottman. Gottman created a powerful theory and method to predict divorce among couples. His oral history interview technique can accurately predict divorce 87.4% of the time (Carrere, Buhlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000). In his work, Gottman (1994) found that couples who maintain a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative interactions are much more likely to stay together. If a couple doesn't maintain this ratio, or if they have more negatives than positive interactions, they are more prone to divorce. But what if a lack of coordinated meaning confuses a partner's understanding of what is positive and what is negative? According to Carrere et al. (2000), "There is support for causal linkages between perceptual biases and selective attention on the path of marriage." The current research might suggest that if partners better coordinate meaning, they may be more likely to reach the five-to-one ratio.

Based on the literature, coordinated management of meaning emerges as a possible explanation for relationship satisfaction and desired loving behavior discrepancy. Because no other such measures exist, the current research developed a scale to assess the extent to which people believe in creating a shared understanding of

the meaning of words and behaviors within relationships. The scale examines constructivist thinking in individuals, specifically in regards to romantic relationships. The current research hypothesized that the scale would be a consistent measure of coordinated communication styles in individuals.

## CHAPTER 2 METHOD

### **Participants**

Two hundred-twenty participants were recruited for scale development from undergraduate psychology classes. Of those reporting sex, 173 (80%) were women and 44 (20%) were men. Although disparate in number, a t-test revealed no sex differences ( $t = 1.31, p > .19$ ). Of participants reporting age, 27 (12.3%) were 18, 66 (30%) were 19, 75 (34.1%) were 20, 31 (14.1%) were 21. 21 (9.5%) participants reported age as other. The majority of participants identified as single (194, 88.2%). Four (2%) reported being married, 16 (7%) reported cohabiting, and 6 (3%) reported marital status as other. Participants that indicated race were mostly White, non-Hispanic (71%), followed by Hispanic (14%), Asian-American (6%), other (5%), and African-American (4%). Participants received extra course credit for completing the survey.

### **Procedure**

A scale was developed to measure coordinated management of meaning. This Coordinated Management of Meaning Scale (CMM) was designed to assess the extent to which people believe that actions can have multiple meanings and the importance of sharing understanding within interpersonal relationships. The author and his advisor generated sixteen potential scale items based the writings of Pearce and Cronen (e.g., Pearce, 1999; Pearce & Cronen, 1980) on the central tenets of coordinated management of meaning of theory. These were each Likert-type items to which participants responded

on a five-point rating scale with the anchors “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” “Neutral,” “Agree,” and “Strongly Agree.” Sample items include, “People often have misunderstandings because the same actions have multiple meanings” and “When we build relationships with other people, what we are really building is a common understanding of what our actions mean.” Higher scores on the scale indicate greater belief in coordinating meaning in communication. Item two is reverse scored.

Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at a large Southeastern university. Data were collected both in regular class times as well as separate sessions outside of class. Participants were instructed they would be filling out a brief survey on communication styles. All participants were told that involvement was completely voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that all data are kept anonymous and confidential. After completing the informed consent the scale was passed out and completed. Students received one extra credit point for completing the survey.

## CHAPTER 3 RESULTS

Two factors emerged in the scree plot of a principal-component factor analysis. Items were included if they had a factor loading of .4 or greater. The first factor had an eigenvalue of 2.13 and accounting for 58.08% of the variance. The second factor had an eigenvalue of 1.05 and accounted for 28.4% of the variance. A varimax orthogonal rotation was employed. After rotation, the second factor had only three items and was consequently dropped. Factor one retained seven items (see Appendix A), achieved simple structure, and was internally consistent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ). According to Nunnally (1967), a Cronbach's value of .50 or higher is valid for research and a value of .70 or higher is a valid internal consistency for other applications. Of the original 16 items, seven comprised the scale and nine were dropped. Examination of the nine items that did not make the scale suggest they were assessing subtly different constructs. Face validity of the dropped seems adequate, but they did not hold up under statistical scrutiny. Some items may have been too confusing for the sample (e.g. "Implicit meanings often accompany actions" and "The biggest source of 'analysis paralysis' is the attempt to figure out what the behavior of another person really means.") Because the construct being tested is conceptualized as a dynamic one, which could change readily over time, test-retest reliability was not examined. A scale score is achieved by tabulating a mean score on the seven items. A higher score indicates a more constructivistic communication

style, a higher willingness to work at understanding communication in relationships, and a higher likelihood of coordinating meaning in relationships.

## CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION

Pearce and Cronen proposed the theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) to better understand how people communicate and the intrinsic troubles people have in communicating. Nowhere does healthy communication seem more pertinent than in intimate relationships. As discussed earlier, intimate relationships are central to many peoples' lives. It is also known that intimate relationships are not always healthy and often fall victim to infidelity and abuse. Various relationship theories have attempted to explain relationship satisfaction. A few of the main theories focus on relatively cold cognition, that is, they consider the quantifiable trade-offs within the relationship. One theory that approaches intimate relationships from a hot cognitive viewpoint is the Desired Loving Behavior theory (DLBS). The DLBS theory asks people what they deem meaningful and whether or not they are receiving that behavior from their partner. The current research developed a scale based on the DLBS/hot cognitive model. The scale incorporates the ontological assumptions of CMM; namely that meaning is subjective, temporal, and personal. It was theorized that the more people coordinate meaning in their relationships, the more they work to share understanding of feelings and actions, the less discrepancy they will experience in their relationship. The current research developed an internally valid scale assessing the construct of coordinated meaning. Many potential research opportunities exist using the newly created CMM measure. Implications, future research and limitations are also discussed.

The implications for the scale abound. As already described, CMM may explain DLBS discrepancies and relationship satisfaction. If a link between communication style, discrepancies, and relational satisfaction is found, much can be done by counselors to aid couples in therapy. Combined with the Desired Loving Behavior Scale the CMM scale may be used to determine where couples are experiencing difficulties in their relationships. From this, counselors can educate couples and help them practice coordinating meaning within the relationship.

In hindsight, one limitation of the current scale is a slight bias towards heterosexual relationships. In order to compensate for diversity in romantic relationships, wording of items may be changed to reflect a broader range of experiences in the dating arenas. Another limitation resides in the demographic section. The current study failed to ask for experience in dating relationships, a factor that may likely influence how much a person believes in coordinating meaning in relationships. A third limitation of this study is its relatively low internal consistency. While statistically adequate for research purposes, the scale does not indicate enough internal consistency for use with clinical populations. The items on the scale may also be subject to social desirability, representing another limitation of this study.

Future research on the topic of coordinating meaning offers a wide variety of possibilities. Research in this area might look at couples, both dating and married, to see the extent to which people continue to coordinate meaning within their relationships. For example, do couples decline in coordinating meaning once they've "figured out" what various behaviors mean in the relationship? If so, what are the implications of that decline for relationship satisfaction and divorce? Does failure to coordinate meaning over

time result in partners “falling out of love?” In a related vein, is coordinating meaning necessary to maintain over the years, so that as people change and grow meanings change and grow with them? Does the need for coordinating meaning decline when both partners are in similar and stable situations (e.g. both are college sophomores). Future research may also consider looking at intra-partner discrepancy on belief in, and need for coordinating meaning.

In addition to assessing beliefs in coordinating meaning, it may be more practical to examine how much partners actually do coordinate meaning in their relationship. Future studies may also examine motivation to coordinate meaning compared to the ability to coordinate meaning. If partners want to understand one another, but simply lack the communication skills to do so, it may have negative ramifications for their relationship. Another possible research idea in this realm is to assess relationships in how traditional or egalitarian they are and correlate this finding to CMM. One might predict that a more traditional relationship would find the women engaging in coordinating meaning more than her partner whereas more modern relationships would find a more equal ratio of coordinating meaning between partners.

Since the creation of the CMM scale and the writing of this document, one such future research project has been run and completed using the CMM and is briefly described here. Four factors were hypothesized to predict relationship satisfaction: Adversarial Sexual Beliefs (ASB; Burt, 1980), the previously described Desired Loving Behaviors Discrepancy (DLBS; Heesacker et al., 1998), Beliefs About Emotions (BAE; Heesacker et al., 1999), and Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). The ASB assesses peoples’ beliefs that gendered relationships are inherently conflictual. The BAE

examines participants' beliefs in the gender stereotype of men as hypo-emotional and women as hyper-emotional. ASB, BAE, and DLBS discrepancy were hypothesized to inversely predict relationship satisfaction. Based on the theoretical underpinnings previously discussed, the extent to which people coordinate meaning in their relationships was hypothesized to inversely predict DLBS discrepancy and positively predict relationship satisfaction. One hundred and nineteen participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses. A multiple regression model was run and found to be significant,  $F(4, 112) = 5.16, p < .001$ . The DLBS ( $\beta = -.32, p < .001$ ) and the ASB ( $\beta = -.17, p < .05$ ) were the only two significant predictors in the model. Beliefs about emotions did not significantly predict relationship satisfaction. Contrary to the hypotheses and purpose of creating the CMM scale, no significant relationship was found between CMM and DLBS discrepancy or between CMM and relationship satisfaction.

The CMM, although internally valid, failed to achieve convergent validity, namely it didn't correlate to the constructs that theory might suggest. In light of these findings, the items are undergoing scrutiny to determine where improvements can be made. One possibility currently under consideration is to revise the scale by instructing participants about the pertinent construct and then ask them to create statements that reflect the construct. These items would then be administered to a different sample and a factor analysis would be run to test the construct and condense the scale.

The basic principle in CMM, the idea that people must strive to understand shared meaning has strong research potential and important implications for explaining difficulties in relationships and communication. The troubles encountered with the CMM scale suggest that understanding the process and outcomes associated with CMM may be

more problematic than originally predicted. Future research in this area should include revising scale items, examining test-retest reliability as well as examining convergent validity with other measures of communication styles.

The sea of love and relationships will always have potential to be rough and stormy. With the help of the current and future research, dating partners may be able to chart a course for smooth, coordinated sailing.

APPENDIX  
 MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND FACTOR LOADING OF CMM SCALE  
 ITEMS

Item	Mean	SD	Factor Loading
People often have misunderstandings because the same actions have multiple meanings.	4.06	.79	.50
People can argue endlessly about the meaning of someone's behavior.	4.01	.89	.52
One of the biggest problems in people getting along is that they think they understand each other's actions when they really don't.	3.76	.87	.61
Good friendship takes time mostly because only over time do people come to understand the meaning behind the other person's actions.	3.61	1.01	.45
When we build relationships with other people, what we are really building is a common understanding of what our actions mean.	3.13	.94	.49
The reason marriage is hard work is because couples must learn what their spouses' actions really mean.	3.24	.91	.51
It takes time to understand people's actions and what they mean.	3.65	.87	.61

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Thomas Joseph Tiegs was born July 20, 1976, near Minneapolis, Minnesota. Tom grew up with his parents, Bill and Colleen, and his two older sisters, Suzanne and Heather. He attended high school in Prior Lake, Minnesota, and graduated in 1994. After graduating Tom worked various jobs until he decided it was time to continue his education in 1998. Tom enrolled in the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and a double minor in communications and theology. After completing his bachelor's degree, Tom continued his education in the counseling psychology department at the University of Florida. Tom will receive his Master of Science degree in 2004 and plans to continue on to receive his Ph.D.