Communication accommodation in a divided society: Interaction patterns between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 16 September 2013
Received in revised form 30 January 2014
Accepted 7 March 2014

Keywords:
Communication Accommodation Theory
Northern Ireland
Attraction
Interpersonal
Intergroup
Contact

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the impact of religious affiliation on dyadic interactions between university students in Northern Ireland. Despite over 30 years of concerted internecine strife and acute civil violence, few attempts have been made to study the patterns of face-to-face communication between those from the Catholic and Protestant communities when political-religious identity is made salient. Significant differences were found in strategies of accommodation employed by students during communication with those from the in-group as compared to interactions with out-group members. Dyadic interaction with the in-group was marked by cues identifying group identity, more instances of verbal agreement, protracted topic discussion and convergence. Communication with members of the out-group tended to be characterized by accommodation through discourse management, especially in relation to topic selection appropriate to the religious background of the interactive partner. However, measures of interpersonal attraction failed to demonstrate any significant differences across religion. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of the utility of Communication Accommodation Theory as an explanatory framework for interaction patterns between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.

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Attempts to understand and make sense of the complex process that is human interaction have led to a proliferation of explanatory theoretical accounts. This paper examines one of these theories, Communication Accommodation Theory, in the context of the divided society that is Northern Ireland (N.I.). Accommodation is a complex topic, and situations of internecine community conflict introduce an added layer of complexity to the interactive process, since ‘the combatants permanently inhabit the same battlefield’ (Cairns & Darby, 1998, p. 754). Such is the case in N.I. Before examining CAT per se it is therefore necessary to set the study in this context.

1. The Northern Ireland context

In terms of inter-group communication, N.I. represents a fascinating laboratory for the study of the effects of conflict upon communication, not least because the problems that have spawned violence are multi-layered and multi-faceted. One instance of this is what has been termed the ‘minority–majority conundrum’ (Stevenson, Condor, & Abell, 2007). For example, in N.I. the population is relatively equally divided, with Protestants comprising some 53% of the population and Catholics 44%. However, in the neighboring Republic of Ireland (RoI) there is a small Protestant minority, of around 2% of the population. Thus, on the island of Ireland Protestants are a sizable minority (representing about 20% of the total island population), but they are a tiny minority in the RoI. At the same time, Catholics are a large majority on the island of Ireland, a significant minority in Northern Ireland, and a small minority in the United Kingdom as a whole. These imbalances, coupled with the injustices endured by minorities in both parts of Ireland, have contributed to a situation of mistrust and a lack of shared identity between the two religious groupings (for a full analysis see Hargie & Dickson, 2004).

Not least of the problems has been that of diametrically conflicting political aspirations. Support for a political settlement is divided along mainly religious lines. The Protestant/Unionist community wishes to remain part of the United Kingdom, and the Catholic/Nationalist community seeks unification with the Republic of Ireland. The entrenched divisions emanating from these politico-religious differences have led to overt physical combat. The ongoing conflict, or ‘Troubles’, has culminated in a mortality toll of over 3700 people (Smyth & Hamilton, 2004) – the pro rata...
equivalent of some 600,000 deaths in the USA. The number of people seriously injured is, of course, much higher. Not surprisingly, this violence has impacted upon almost every aspect of the lives of the population. Despite ceasefires by the main paramilitary groups, and the formation of a power sharing government, deep divisions remain. So-called ‘dissident’ republican terrorist groups continue to perpetrate bomb attacks and shootings, some of which have resulted in fatalities, and the separation of the two communities is entrenched (Cochrane, 2013).

Most Protestants (P) and Catholics (C) are segregated at birth through area of residence, have mainly in-group friends and romantic partners, and attend segregated schools. In relation to the former, over 90% of public sector housing in N.I. is separated along religious lines (Housing Executive, 2011), and in the city of Belfast public housing is almost completely segregated. In parts of Belfast, physical barriers, or ‘peace walls’, have been erected to offer these homogenous communities protection from the threat posed by the other side (Hargie, O’Donnell, & McMullan, 2011). Not surprisingly therefore, when it comes to relationships, adult friendships are mainly in-group as are over 90% of marriages (O’Donnell & Hargie, 2011). In terms of education, elementary and high schools are segregated into maintained (C) and state controlled (mainly P) schools. Over 90% of pupils are educated with co-religionists, with only some 6% of pupils attending desegregated or ‘integrated’ schools, which are designed to cater for children from both religious denominations (Boroolah & Knox, 2013). As a result, for many young people the first real experience of interacting with those from the other religion comes at the stage of tertiary education (Somerville, Purcell, & Morrison, 2011).

Given this backdrop, division and difference are readily assimilated and learned as part of the developmental process. As a result, methods for deciphering the religious background of the other person have been well developed and refined. For example, a common method for discerning the religious affiliation of new acquaintances is by categorization of name. Thus, one study showed how names such as ‘Bernadette O’Flagherty’ and ‘Therese O’Reilly’ were categorized by N.I. university students as definitely Catholic, while others such as ‘Elizabeth Bamford’ and ‘Jane Richardson’ were viewed as exclusively Protestant (Hargie, Dickson, & Hargie, 1995). Therefore, at initial introduction pivotal decisions begin to be made about the religion of the interactive other, and these in turn are likely to influence attitudes, dialog and behavior. This facility for religious categorization has been shown to begin at the age of three, by which stage children have begun to differentiate between the two religious groups, are able to identify signs and symbols associated with each, and attribute negative characteristics to out-group members (Connolly, 2009).

2. Communication with out-group members

So what actually happens, in terms of behavior, when individuals from the two communities interface? Surprisingly little research has addressed this fascinating question. A common method for dealing with such situations has been the adoption of an entrenched silence: a consensual unwillingness to discuss the Troubles with those from the other side (Dickson & Hargie, 2006; Hargie, Dickson, & Nelson, 2003). This mechanism of polite avoidance permeates both friendship and work relations, and is adopted to ‘manage’ interaction (Brown, 2010). The echoes of this silence permeate every echelon of society. One drawback is that the tactic of avoidance of contentious topics may work in the short-term, but at the long-term cost of forestalling cross–community relational development (Hargie & Dickson, 2007).

Despite considerable interest by researchers in the N.I. conflict, there remains an over-reliance on a limited range of theories to account for those findings that have emerged. Of these, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) has dominated attempts to conceptualize the nature of inter-group behavior in N.I. (Hargie, Dickson, Mallett, & Stringer, 2008; Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004). However, empirical support for Social Identity Theory (SIT) from research conducted in the N.I. setting has been equivocal, and its limitations as an explanatory framework for interpreting inter-group conflict in N.I. have been highlighted (Blommer & Weinreich, 2004).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is an alternative explanation for group-influenced behavior applicable at the interpersonal level. It has been described as “a theory of language use that seeks to examine the attitudes, motivation, intentions, and identities that mediate between objective social and contextual variables and an individual’s language use” (Jones, Gallois, Callan, & Barker, 1999, p. 123). CAT purports that during social encounters participants convey their feelings toward one other by converging or diverging their linguistic and nonverbal behaviors (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2006). Convergence through adapting accent, language or behavior to increase similarity to the other, is considered to be facilitative in reducing difference, increasing communicative efficiency, and fostering shared identity. Divergence, or the emphasis of group identity-based difference, may signal dislike for or disapproval of another’s culture. Maintenance of existing interactive style is also considered to represent a form of divergence (Coupland, 2010; Tong, Lee, & Chiu, 1999). More recently, the strategies of convergence and divergence have been incorporated within a single process label ‘approximation’, which has been defined as ‘adjustment of communicative features . . . used by individuals in order to be more similar or dissimilar to their interaction partner’ (Lee & Giles, 2008, p. 8).

Discourse management, interpretability and interpersonal control are core strategies that are used during communication accommodation (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006; Shepard, Giles, & Le Poire, 2001). Discourse management strategies occur when the speaker shapes the conversation to make it compatible with the other person’s interests, beliefs, values and intellectual capacity. Interpretability refers to one person’s accommodation to the other’s ability to comprehend what is being said. This is based upon perceptions of the other’s interpretive abilities. Interpersonal control strategies relate to the speaker’s attempts to manage and direct the interaction through tactics such as interruptions or direct power claims. In their workplace study of communication between United Arab Emirates (UAE) Nationals and Western expatriate employees, Willemsyns, Hosie, and Lehaney (2011) used the presence or absence of these strategies, as perceived by UAE nationals, to measure communication accommodation between the two groups.

As previously mentioned, communication with out-group members in N.I. is reported to be heavily managed, with an avoidance of topics that might be contentious (Brown, 2010; Nelson, Dickson, & Hargie, 2003; Stringer & Irving, 1998). Given the loaded nature of interaction, and the subsequent management of dialog, it is perhaps surprising that the present study represents the first application of CAT to understanding interpersonal processes in the N.I. context.

Both CAT and SIT suggest that during intercultural or inter-group interaction, communication is perceived to be either inter-personal or inter-group, with the latter in particular occasioning judgments of others in terms of ‘similar to’, or ‘different from’ me/us. This means that at times we may communicate purely on personal terms - as an individual, while on other occasions we speak as someone representing a particular group and so display the attitudes, beliefs, etc. of that group (Gallois & Callan, 1988; Giles, Willemsyns, Gallois, & Anderson, 2007). Convergence is less likely to occur when group identity is salient. In this case, interaction is more likely to be guided
by stereotypes, and individuals tend to be less tolerant of mistakes or violations of social rules by those from the out-group (Gallois & Callan, 1997). An important aspect here is that during interaction salient aspects of identity can be ‘switched on’ or ‘switched off’. Thus, interaction with a member of the out-group in N.I. can take place with politico-religious identity turned on or off (Niens et al., 2004). Hargie and Dickson (2004) found that in the N.I. workplace, there was a clear preference amongst employees for it to be disengaged, and for potential identity on–triggers (i.e. sectarian symbols and ensignia) to be banned.

Niederhoffer and Pennebaker (2002, p. 340) noted that in relation to CAT: “The premise of the theory rests in individuals’ ability to strategically negotiate the social distance between themselves and their interacting partners: creating, maintaining, or decreasing that distance. This can be done linguistically, paralinguistically, and nonverbal”. In the N.I. context, it is likely that such distance can be negotiated through subtle selection of topics for discussion, monitoring the subsequent verbal and nonverbal reactions of the other person to the chosen topic, and responding accordingly. However, as noted by Fortman (2003, p. 108) in her analysis of CAT: “it is not just the characteristics of the individual that are salient in the communicative interaction but those of the social group to which the individual perceives the other to belong”. Important here is the concept of typicality, which refers to the way in which the goal of the speaker is to converge toward, or diverge from, a group stereotype (Krueger, Hall, Villano, & Jones, 2008). Where typicality is the goal, the speaker wishes to underline a particular group identity during interactions. This may be carried out overtly, by the person actually labeling the fact that they are speaking as a member of their in-group e.g. ‘As a nationalist/unionist my view is. . .’. However, it can also be achieved in more subtle ways both through what one says and how one says it.

The present study therefore examines the effects of religious denomination on strategies of accommodation, and post-interaction attraction. It builds upon previous work in several ways. First, research to date in the N.I. setting has focused on an almost exclusive extrapolation of SIT, with inconclusive results. This paper provides the first application of CAT to the N.I. context. Second, this research differs from previous studies that have focused on group-based predictions of behavior, by examining the influence of group affiliation on interaction at an individual level. Third, nonverbal analysis has not previously been conducted in the study of intergroup relations in N.I. Fourth, many investigations of CAT have focused on taped interactions using prepared scripts and analyzing perceived strategies of accommodation. This study is part of a growing body of research which focuses upon unscripted interaction wherein verbal and nonverbal indicators of willingness to accommodate are studied. Fifth, and again in line with recent research trends in the field, the study includes a post-interaction analysis of partner’s attractiveness as a measure of the likelihood of convergence. Finally, CAT also predicts how an individual will rate a conversational partner (such as socially attractive), where the partner agrees that speech strategies have been adopted (Hornsey & Gallois, 1998).

3. Research Questions

If, as previously discussed, the choice of interactive topic in Northern Ireland is influenced by whether the other person is perceived to be a member of the in-group or out-group, it is also likely that communication accommodation will be differentially affected. In terms of convergence, it might be expected that strangers who are from the same religious in-group will find it easier to select mutually acceptable topics for discussion and to have more protracted discussion on these. This is because they will have more activities (and beliefs) in common, and so will be able to engage in more extended analyses of selected topics. The first Research Question in this study was therefore:

RQ1: Will there be greater convergence amongst same-religion (C-C, P-P), as compared to other-religion (C-P), pairs, in terms of more protracted discussion of topics?

The corollary of protracted discussion is, of course topic avoidance. In addition to making decisions about the choice of appropriate topics for discussion, in N.I. the avoidance of inappropriate or contentious topics (i.e. those that are politically sensitive or religiously marked) has to be managed in cross-community interactions (Dickson, Hargie, & Wilson, 2008). As mentioned earlier, one strategy used when dealing with out-group members is simply to steer clear of any discussion on contentious matters, and to keep to ‘neutral’ issues (e.g. social locations not associated exclusively with one or other group; sports played by both Cs and Ps; university course) when talking with a member of the out-group (especially in first encounters). To investigate the extent to which topic avoidance actually occurs, the second Research Question was formulated:

RQ2: Will contentious topics be avoided in opposite religion dyads, with a main focus on the discussion of ‘neutral’ topics?

Some previous research has suggested that Cs have a greater sense of in-group identity than Ps (e.g. Dickson, Hargie, & Rainey, 2000). Given this backdrop, it was decided in this study to investigate whether C students would therefore show greater accommodation and convergence by employing a sense of ‘weakness’ through a greater number of references to collective pronouns referring to in-group identity (‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’, etc.). As such, Research Question 3 was:

RQ3: Will C students use significantly more collective pronouns demarcating in-group identity (‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’, etc.) than P students?

One central feature of effective personal relationships is the use of rewards for the interactive other (Cairns, 2006; Hargie, 2011). Such rewards include verbal and vocal expressions of agreement (‘Yes’; ‘Absolutely’; ‘I agree’; ‘Exactly’; ‘That’s right’). These rewards relate to the process of communication accommodation. It was therefore decided to investigate whether, as might be expected, greater levels of this form of social reward would occur in same-religion than opposite-religion dyads. Thus, Research Question 4 was:

RQ4: Will in-group interactions be marked by a significantly greater occurrence of verbal agreements than out-group interactions?

It could be argued that students entering an interaction with an in-group member would be able to adjust and accommodate more readily to the interaction ‘rules’ of turn-taking, as this will have been a situation encountered by them on numerous previous occasions. On the other hand, many students will have had little or no contact with those from the out-group and so opposite-religion dyads could be anticipated to experience greater problems in terms of interactive ‘flow’. This is likely to be particularly the case in relation to those behaviors indicative of turn-taking problems, namely interruptions and incidences of over-talk. It could also be that out-group pairs will use more questions to maintain the flow of communication. Thus Research Question 5 was:
RQ5: Will turn-taking be ‘smoother’ in in-group dyads, in that there will be a significantly higher frequency of interruptions, over-talk, and questions, in out-group dyads?

In terms of CAT, nonverbal behaviors indicating divergence should be displayed significantly more during different-religion than same-religion dyads. Such differences in nonverbal aspects of communication have been reported across cultural (Rozelle, Druckman, & Baxter, 2006), and subcultural (Knapp & Hall, 1992) contexts. Divergent nonverbal behaviors include tense (as opposed to relaxed) body posture; direction of upper and lower body lean away (as opposed to toward) from the other person; higher use of adaptors; more closed arm positions; reduced smiling; and less incidence of mutual eye contact. As such Research Question 6 was:

RQ6: Will nonverbal signals of divergence occur more frequently in out-group dyads than in in-group dyads?

It has long been known that attraction is a central feature of relationship formation and maintenance (Byrne, 1997). Indeed the law of attraction postulated that the more similar people are the greater will be their liking for one another (Byrne, 1971). As we are more likely to develop relationships with those that we like, it follows that attraction should be a key feature of convergence. Indeed, Fortman (2003) argued that “the more similar the attitudes, the greater the attraction and the more likely accommodation will occur” (pp. 107–108). Thus, Lee and Giles (2008) found that attraction was predictive of the accommodation strategy of discourse management. Despite the predictive role that attractiveness plays in judging the future likelihood of friendship being offered and reciprocated (Burgoo & Guerrero, 1994), few CAT studies to date have focused on post-interactive speaker-attractiveness. Thus, Research Question 7 was:

RQ7: Will participants rate in-group dyadic partners significantly higher on measures of attraction than out-group partners?

Research in CAT has tended to reveal gender differences in accommodation in that females accommodate more readily than males (Giles & Ogay, 2007; Jones et al., 1999). As summarized by Namy, Noldus, and Sauerwein (2002, p. 423), “In general, women are more likely to accommodate to a conversational partner than are men”. In order to ascertain whether this pattern existed in the context of the present research investigation, the final Research Question was:

RQ8: Will female dyads be more likely to demonstrate convergence that male dyads?

4. Method

4.1. Sample

Participants were 60 freshers (20 males, 40 females; 30 C, 30 P) enrolled in the largest faculty of a university in N.I., and whose country of origin was N.I. Analyses using video interactions are time-consuming and difficult, and so studies in this field are normally associated with small sample sizes (e.g. Caris-Verhallen, Kerkstra, Bensing, & Grypdonck, 2000; Dowrick & Biggs, 1983). A sample size of 60 was large by these standards but necessary in this study to facilitate the experimental design and enable statistical analysis. The Faculty in which this study was conducted has a high proportion of female students and a higher percentage of C students. Thus, a random stratified sample was employed, to account for the unequal ratios of gender and religion.

4.2. Experimental design and procedures

The study took place at the beginning of the first academic semester when students would have experienced little or no contact. A between-groups design was employed. Participants were strangers, allocated to one of three conversational conditions: P dyad (n = 20); C dyad (n = 20); inter-group dyad (n = 20). A procedure used successfully in other studies (e.g. Reno & Kenny, 1992; Segrin, 1996) was adopted to allow participants to deduce the religion of their dyadic partner. Students were told that they were participating in a study exploring relational development at University, and that this involved them being allocated to either a ‘same religious background group’ or a ‘different religious background group’. To ensure that students knew the background of their interactive partner and hence to promote the saliency of religion-based group identity, the following instructions were read verbatim to the students by the experimenter: “I have been asked to give the instructions to pairs from the (same/opposite) religious background. Let me just check … (participants names read out from a list) … yes, this is (same/opposite) religious background.” Religious affiliation had been established from biographical details surveyed earlier. Students were also asked if they knew one another before the experiment took place, and if they did know a particular student, they were then separated for the dyadic interactions.

Participants were seated in armchairs at a 90° angle toward each other and a low coffee table was placed between participants upon which a poster was placed stating either “DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND” or “SAME RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND”. They were then instructed to spend 10 min discussing events of the week, i.e. what they had done, or been involved in, seen, watched, experienced, or directed, in the past 7 days, but to feel free to discuss any other topics that emerged during conversation. They were told that the interactions, which would be recorded, would be strictly confidential. They were asked if they wished to participate, and, if they agreed, to sign a consent form. They were also assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they so wished. Recording took place in a seminar room with a video camera filming from an adjacent room through a masked window. Immediately following interaction, participants were taken to separate rooms and asked to complete the Interpersonal Attraction Scale.

4.3. Measures

Two main forms of measurement were employed.

4.3.1. Behavioral measures

The 30 videotaped interactions comprising some 5 h of recordings were analyzed using the Noldus Observer 4.0 System (see Hall, 1995, for a review). This enables video clips to be viewed on a computer monitor permitting sophisticated, fine-grained defining, coding and analyzing of verbal and nonverbal elements. The behaviors selected for analysis, based upon a review of those behavioral cues associated with relational communication during interaction, are listed in Appendix A. Both frequency and duration (where appropriate) of each measure were taken. Following coding training, inter-rater reliability checks were conducted, until a level of agreement of 80% was attained for each variable.

4.3.2. Interpersonal Attraction Scale

The Interpersonal Attraction Scale (McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006) is a three-factor measure of Attraction/homophily recommended for use with students or other mature adults. It produces scores for social attraction, physical attraction, task attraction, and an overall total attraction score. The item stem requests participants to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement as it applies to their ‘partner in the
exercise’. Attitudes are measured using a 7 point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (7) to Strongly Disagree (1). This scale is reported to have an internal reliability of sub-scales ranging from .80 to .88 (McCroskey et al., 2006).

5. Results

One-way analyses of covariance examined differences in behaviors across the three experimental conditions (C-C; P-P; C-P) incorporating gender as a co-variate. The power statistic partial eta squared (η²) is reported for all significant results.

In relation to RQ1, as to whether in-group dyads would be marked by greater convergence through protracted discussion of topics, content analysis identified those topics that comprised the main conversational themes (see Appendix A). Results revealed that a significantly greater number of protracted discussions of specific topics occurred amongst same-religion, as compared to other-religion, pairs [F (2,55) = 3.7, p < .05, η² = .24]. Gender differences in scores of total attraction also emerged [F = 2.57, p = .058]. Higher scores occurred for same-gender interactions than mixed-gender interactions, with female pairs scoring highest overall. No significant gender differences were reported in physical attraction. Higher ratings of social attraction were found in same-gender pairs, with female pairs scoring higher than other pairs [F = 4.6, p < .05]. Ratings of task attraction were lower for mixed-gender interaction than same-gender interaction [F = 3.7, p = .05]. One other finding here was that gender had a more significant impact on ratings of interpersonal attraction than did religious affiliation.

6. Discussion

This study investigated CAT as a conceptual template for interpreting dyadic interaction between Protestant and Catholic students in N.I. The outcomes support the view that further analysis of CAT in the study of inter-group relations in N.I. is warranted. Results showed that strategies of accommodation were adopted during interactions with both same and opposite religion others. However, communication within same-religion dyads evidenced significantly greater signs of convergence. This was indicated by more protracted discussion on a smaller number of issues (convergence of topic), greater use of collective identification pronouns (convergence of identity), and increased levels of expressed agreement (convergence of opinion).

CAT proposes that one reason to modify communication is to signal in- and out-group membership (Willems, Gallois, Callan, & Pittam, 1997). In this study, the saliency of social identity was significantly more evident during communication with in-group members. Converging speakers used a wider variety, and a greater number, of speech markers which identified group membership, including: reference to (e.g. ”Do you know [name] from [segregated area]’ or ”Isn’t Father X the parish priest in [village]?”) during single religion dyads, than during mixed religion dyads.

RQ4 investigated whether in-group dyads would be marked by greater verbal agreement than inter-group pairs. The results showed that this question was answered in the affirmative, in that significantly more frequent agreements occurred during same-religion dyads, than during mixed-religion dyads [F (2,55) = 4.7, p < .01, η² = .12]. One other finding here was that significantly more cues to mark identity occurred in same-religion than different-religion dyads. Thus, a significantly greater number [F (2,55) = 4.7, p < .01, η² = .12] of references were made to other in-group members (e.g. ‘Do you know [name] from [segregated area]’ or ‘Isn’t Father X the parish priest in [village]?’) during single religion dyads, than during mixed religion dyads.

RQ5 investigated whether nonverbal behaviors indicating divergence would be displayed significantly more during different-religion than same-religion dyads. Results revealed no significant differences across conditions in the frequency of non-verbal behaviors, including tense or relaxed body posture; direction of upper and lower body lean; use of adaptors; open/closed arm positions; or smiling. Nor were there differences in the frequency or duration of mutual eye contact. Therefore, these relational aspects of nonverbal behavior were not significantly influenced by religious affiliation of dyadic partner. RQ7 investigated whether participants would rate in-group dyadic partners higher on measures of attraction than out-group partners. Analysis of variance tests to examine responses on the Interpersonal Attraction Scale, for social, task, physical and total attraction, revealed that there were no significant differences between groups on these dimensions.

Finally, RQ8 examined whether females would demonstrate greater convergence than males. Significant main effects for gender were found on social rewards, with females displaying more utterances indicating agreement/support than males [F (1,55) = 4.1, p < .05]. Gender differences in scores of total attraction also emerged [F = 2.57, p = .058]. Higher scores occurred for same-gender interactions than mixed-gender interactions, with female pairs scoring highest overall. No significant gender differences were reported in physical attraction. Higher ratings of social attraction were found in same-gender pairs, with female pairs scoring higher than other pairs [F = 4.6, p < .05]. Ratings of task attraction were lower for mixed-gender interaction than same-gender interaction [F = 3.7, p = .05]. One other finding here was that gender had a more significant impact on ratings of interpersonal attraction than did religious affiliation.
or collective group terms. In other words, the results confirmed earlier findings (e.g. Nelson et al., 2003) that when communicat-
ing with members of the out-group, individuals used the discourse management strategy of studied avoidance of contentious or divi-
sive issues.

However, negative strategies were also identified during com-
munication with out-group members. According to research by
Hornsey and Gallois (1998) some of the strategies adopted during communication with an out-group are used to indicate mainte-
nance. They postulated that maintained speakers were identified as
showing a lack of markers adopting shared topics, lack of reinforce-
ment, and a greater diversity of topic coverage (lack of convergence
to discuss similar items of interest). Each of these may be applied
to the current results, and, in addition, communication with out-
group students was also marked by lower agreement than occurred
during interactions with those from the in-group.

An important finding was the lack of significant differences in
nonverbal markers of relational concordance across conditions. This could suggest that there was an equal degree of openness
to relational development regardless of religion, and that reli-
gious affiliation was not a major factor in inhibiting facilitative
interaction between students. This is further supported by the
lack of significant differences across conditions in measures of
interpersonal attraction. One consideration here is that partners’
prototypicality to their social group is an important factor in estab-
lishing degree of liking and attraction (Gardner, Paulsen, Gallois,
Callan, & Monaghan, 2001; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988). It is possi-
ble that students during interactions with those from the out-group
may have had a salient group identity as students per se, particu-
larly given their joint status as freshmen at university. This shared
identity as fellow freshmen in a new university environment, both
taking part in an ‘experiment’, may have facilitated a sense of soli-
darity and attraction. The task of accommodation often lies with
the sojourner, whereby accommodation will occur according to
the host culture (Kim, 1995). Students facing a new and uncertain
environment may have responded in a neutral fashion as much as
possible. This could account for the lack of significant differ-
ces in nonverbal relational behaviors, interactional ‘flow’, and
interpersonal attraction.

With regard to the likelihood of relational development among
students in N.I., there was a mixed message. Indicators of in-group
identity were certainly prevalent in co-religion pairs, indicating
the saliency of denominational identity during interaction with
strangers. Likewise, maintenance, as indicated by strategies such
as reduced agreement, suggested less enthusiasm for communi-
cation with out-group students. On the other hand, there were
no differences in communication flow (overtalk, interruptions,
use of questions), in contrast with previous studies that have
shown accommodation differences in such areas when dealing with
out-group members (e.g. Werner-Wilson, Price, Zimmerman, &
Murphy, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1983; Williams, 1999). Strate-
gies of discourse management during communication with those
from the out-group helped to facilitate dialog, and this could sug-
gest a willingness among students to form facilitative working
relationships, or cross-community friendships. Research supports
the former view, that what students from opposite religions tend to
achieve is amicable everyday working relationships (Nelson et al.,
2003). In essence there still exists what Cairns (1998) referred to
as a state of functional desegregation in N.I. university life, in that,
although cross-community contact occurs between members of the
two groups, relationships tend to remain at a superficial level, and
students avoid contentious politico-religious topics.

There was no support for the assumption of CAT that speakers
who spend greater time converging will be evaluated more posi-
tively (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995). In this study there
was a lack of significant differences in interpersonal attraction
across conditions. In relation to gender, findings support those of
Jones et al. (1999) and Namy et al. (2002) that females attain and
achieve relational harmony to a greater degree than males. For
example, females used significantly more verbal agreement than
males. Females did however rate attractiveness of their partner
higher than males, as expected.

Research in N.I. has previously indicated a decrease in trust
and an increase in sense of belonging to one’s in-group, amongst
students over the period of a year at university (Dickson et al.,
2000). The present study has also shown some relational commu-
nication differences between Protestant and Catholic students in
first year. Since university for many represents one of the first
experiences of integration with members of the out-group, fur-
ther research is required to chart the patterns of communication
between the two groups in their later years in university and there-
after. It may be that students find on initial meeting that they have
more in common with other in-group members, and this facili-
tates communication flow and convergence, leading to friendship
formation. The initial differences may then become accentuated
and subsequently ‘hard-wired’. Alternatively, as students become
accustomed to interacting with those from the out-group, barriers
may be broken down, and cross-community friendships formed.

Previous research has highlighted tensions between interper-
sonal and inter-group approaches to the study of interaction (e.g.
Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004). The interpersonal perspec-
tive purports that to effect harmonious inter-group relationships,
the saliency of in-group identity needs to be reduced during
interactions and attention devoted to other elements of personal
information. One problem here is that by adopting this approach
the interactive partner is no longer perceived as an out-group
member. As such, issues that are likely to cause difficulties in
communication with out-group members are ignored rather than
resolved. By contrast, the inter-group approach asserts that when
interacting with members of the out-group the individual must
be aware, at least to some degree, of the other person as a mem-
ber of the out-group, rather than just another person. However,
this means that the individual is likely to respond to the group
stereotype rather than the particular individual. In terms of CAT,
an important question is how convergence is interpreted in dyadic
interactions between members of in-group and out-group. For
example, does evidence of convergence indicate that the interactive
partner is then perceived either not to be a member of the out-
group, or as having a lower strength of identity with the out-group?
Further research is required to investigate these interpersonal and
inter-group dimensions. The relationship between interpersonal
and inter-group attraction, and how these in turn relate to com-
munication accommodation, also warrants further investigation.
A more longitudinal study is required to assess how in-group and
out-group relationship patterns are formed and maintained over
time, and to examine the communication strategies adopted therein,
before definite conclusions can be drawn.

One limitation of this study is that it is a snapshot of a random
sample of one year group in one Faculty of one university, and more
research is required in this area before any firm conclusions can be
reached. It is also recognized that the ‘artificial’ scenario of giving
students overt information about their partner’s religious affilia-
tion may have influenced ‘natural’ behavior. In addition, it could
be that the 10 min duration of the interactions would not allow for
any depth of conversation, especially on contentious issues. It is also
possible that the set duration of the interaction could have affected
behavior patterns. However, given the time-consuming nature of
video analysis, and the fact that this study already involved the
detailed analysis of a total of 5 h of dyadic communications, longer
interactions were not possible. Furthermore, the between-group
design precluded an intra-dyadic analysis of interaction addressing
such issues as comparative convergence/divergence between P and
C students in mixed conversational arrangements. Another limitation, as recognized by both CAT and SIT, is that participants may fluctuate between interpersonal and inter-group identities. Separation of such identities was not the aim of this study and requires greater attention in future research.

In conclusion, CAT provides a promising perspective through which to explore communication and assess the likelihood of relational formation between individuals representing two distinct politico-religious groups. Predicted aspects of in-group convergence and out-group divergence emerged in this study. At the same time, anticipated effects of religion upon behavior also failed to occur. One reason for this may be because identity is a technicolor, multi-faceted, and variegated concept, influenced by a whole panoply of personal, social, and historical variables (Allen, 2011). In N.I. other identities (e.g. age, gender, work status) interact with, and in certain contexts will take precedence over, the politico-religious one (Hargie & Dickson, 2004). For example, in this study in terms of ratings of interpersonal attractiveness, gender was a more salient dimension of identity than religion. Thus, the overlapping matrix of personal identities needs to be considered in future research into the utility of CAT as an explanatory model for communication.

Appendix A. Behavioral definitions

Frequency and/or duration of the following behaviors were measured using the Noldus Observer 4.0 system

Identity Markers
Use of group identity labels such as ‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’.
Additional social identity markers, such as reference to school attended, area of residence.
Cues to other co-religionists (Do you know [Joe XXX] from [segregated religious area]?)
Reference to religious orders

Discussion Topics
University course
Boyfriend/girlfriend
Political issues relating to N.I.
Catholic Sports including Gaelic, Hurling, Camogie
Protestant Sports, including Rugby, Hockey
Integrated sports, such as Soccer

Religion
Socializing
In-group socializing, including references to cues which relate to one religious group only
Home life
Additional topics

Supportive/Unsupportive Communication
Verbal disagreement, notification of non-agreement or alternative view expressed.
Verbal reprimands (expression of agreement, confirmation of holding the same opinion).
Reinforcement, including expressions, words and phrases and non-lexical vocalizations such as ‘mmm-hmm’.
Head nods.
Breakdown in communication, collapse of conversation
Questioning
Overtalk/Interruption, to begin speaking at the same time as dyadic partner where dyadic partner has initiated dialog/to break continuous speech of another’s expression
Individual laughter.
Shared laughter, where both dyadic members engage in simultaneous laughter.
Individual smiling.
Affiliative smiling, when one dyadic member smiles at partner and smile is reciprocated.

Eye Contact
Gazing in direction of partner.
Gazing at partners’ eyes only.
Mutual eye contact, where both dyadic members maintain eye gaze.
Gazing elsewhere, staring away from dyadic partner.

Posture
Relaxed posture, asymmetric and lack of stiffness in upper and/or lower body
Tense posture, rigidity and symmetry in upper and/or lower body

Adaptors
Adaptors, or self-manipulations
Non-adaptors – cessation of adaptor behaviors
Leakage, non-verbal activity in one channel together with reduced activity in another

Upper Body
Open arm position, arms open exposing the body
Closed arm position, arms closed across or obstructing the body

Toward lean, body leaning toward partner
Away lean, body leaning away from partner

Other leaning behavior (neither toward nor away body lean)

Lower Body
Toward lean, lower body directed toward dyadic partner
Away lean, lower body directed away from dyadic partner

Other (lean neither toward nor away)

References