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# INTERPRETING INSTANT MESSAGING

## Context and Meaning in Computer-Mediated Communication

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*Little attention has been paid to knowledge as a context of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and to differences in meaning attributed to the same message when located in different contexts. Drawing on concepts in anthropological usage and on those used in other disciplines, especially the constructs of "common ground" and "relational cultures," this paper addresses that gap. It examines in instant messaging, a particular mode of computer-mediated communication, how individuals with different kinds of knowledge interpret online interaction.*

ONLINE AND OFFLINE, PEOPLE INTERPRET BEHAVIOR BY PLACING IT IN CONTEXT. However, different people contextualize the same behavior in different ways, thereby attributing different meaning to it. This is especially evident in the ways in which people attribute meaning in instant messaging (IM), a particular form of computer-mediated communication (CMC). In this paper I examine contexts that shape the interpretation of such messages, focusing on the kinds or levels of knowledge shared (or not shared) by correspondents. In doing so, I want to draw anthropological attention to this new mode of communication (since anthropologists have paid little attention to it) and to complement the ways in which other researchers approach the study of computer-mediated communication.

### KNOWLEDGE AS CONTEXT

Interpreting the meaning of behavior by placing it in context is a pervasive strategy in the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> Bateson (1991:143), for example, argued, "The notion of 'context' is primary and fundamental for all communication. No message or message element—no event or object—has meaning or significance of any kind when totally and inconceivably stripped of context." Indeed, analysts posit that failing to understand the relevant context of an event or an interaction is a primary cause of misinterpreting it. Pitt-Rivers emphasized this point (1967:23; see also Goffman 1974:302–8), noting "Communication is endangered not by the ambiguities of . . . language but by ambiguity with regard to the recognition of social context."

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However, different researchers define social context in different ways. In studies of computer-mediated communication, Lea, Spears, and their collaborators, for example, conceptualize context in terms of the group or social identity of communicators (see Spears and Lea 1992; Spears, Lea, and Postmes 2001; Watt, Lea, and Spears 2002).<sup>2</sup> Others examine the structural settings of computer-mediated communication (Bargh and McKenna 2004:578), including “communication networks, formal work groups, electronic communities, superior-subordinate dyads, and organizational cultures” (Fulk, Schmitz, and Schwarz 1992:7).

In contrast to these conceptualizations of context, this paper describes the ways in which different kinds of knowledge constitute different kinds of contexts, each of which shapes the ways in which people behave and interpret the behavior of others when engaged in CMC. In anthropological studies, context is typically defined in terms of two general dimensions or aspects. One is the spatial and/or temporal setting or milieu of an event or an encounter (Dilley 1999; Malinowski 1935; Pitt-Rivers 1967)—where and when it takes place and who participates in it.<sup>3</sup> The other is a cognitive dimension and refers to the knowledge, beliefs, norms, and values in terms of which people behave as well as interpret their actions and those of others. These cognitive elements are described by various terms, including “premises” (Barth 1993:160; Bateson 1972:187; Goffman 1974:247), “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman 1974:21), “knowledge schema” (Tannen and Wallat 1993:60), “sociocultural assumptions” (Barth 1993:160; Gumperz 1982:153), “presuppositions,” “background knowledge,” “sociocultural knowledge,” and “knowledge of the world” (Gumperz 1992:230), and “background knowledge and frames of interpretation within which [communication] is embedded” (Goodwin and Duranti 1992:8).<sup>4</sup>

“Common ground” is another concept incorporating a view of knowledge and related ideas as a context of communication. Clark (1992:6) defines it as “the mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, mutual assumptions and other mutual attitudes shared by people,” all of which serve as a framework of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> A community or subcommunity can share common ground. In this sense, the concept of “communal common ground” (Clark 1996:115) is akin to that of a speech community, which Gumperz (2001:43) defines as “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use,” adding that speech communities can include “small bands bounded by face-to-face contact, modern nations divisible into smaller subregions, or even occupational associations or neighborhood gangs.”<sup>6</sup>

Common ground can also refer to the knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions shared by a dyad. That is, there can be a “community of two people” (Clark 1992:56). The common ground between two people—“personal common ground” in contrast to “communal common ground” (Clark 1996:115)—“consists, roughly, of the knowledge, beliefs, and even suppositions” they share (Clark 1992:68; cf. Clark 1996:93).

The idea of common ground in a dyadic relationship is also found in the concept of a “relational culture.” Wood (1982:76) describes a relational culture as a

privately transacted system of understandings that coordinate attitudes, actions, and identities of participants in a relationship. . . . Like any culture, a relational culture consists not of objective things and cognitions, but rather of the interpretive orientation to them. It is the forms and definitions of experience that people have in mind, their models for perceiving and acting, the world view imagined together which two individuals agree to believe in . . . .<sup>7</sup>

Different types of relationships entail different degrees or kinds of shared understandings. As Clark (1996) notes,

If communal common ground defines cultural communities, then personal common ground defines friends versus strangers. Ann and Ben may jointly belong to many cultural communities and still be strangers. They won't be friends or acquaintances until they have a history of joint personal experiences—things done, talked about, or experienced together. A third party, Connie, may be a clever spy and learn as much about Ann as Ben knows, but that doesn't make her Ann's friend or acquaintance. The information she gathers must be in their common ground—part of their personal common ground. Whereas ophthalmologists are experts in ophthalmology, friends are experts about each other (1996:115).

Acquaintedness comes in degrees defined largely by the type and amount of personal common ground two people have. Here, for illustration, are four degrees: Strangers: no personal common ground; Acquaintances: limited personal common ground; Friends: extensive personal common ground; Intimates: extensive personal common ground, including private information (1996:116).

Planalp and Benson (1992) observed these differences in their study of the conversations of friends and acquaintances:

The most common reason for distinguishing between acquaintances' and friends' conversations was that friends had mutual knowledge, whereas acquaintances lacked mutual knowledge. Mutual knowledge took a number of forms, including (1) friends knowing basic demographic information about each other and knowing each other's habits and dispositions; (2) friends knowing about each other's activities, schedules, and plans; and (3) friends referring to other people, events, or places without having to explain who, what or where they were (1992:497).

Mutual knowledge plays a major role in facilitating communication by making it more efficient. As friendship progresses, people become virtual experts about one another and reap all the communication advantages of experts. They are able to ask more sophisticated questions, notice inconsistencies in the other's stories, remember more of what the other

says, determine what is important and anticipate consequences of events (1992:499).

In short, dyadic relationships (and their relational cultures) are differentiated by the kinds of knowledge each party holds about the other. That family, friends, and acquaintances, for example, attach different significance to the formulations of their correspondents is not surprising since close relationships entail the extended conversational processes by which individuals establish a common definition of the situation (see Berger and Kellner 1964).

Drawing on such concepts of context, this paper considers the ways in which different kinds of knowledge affect the interpretation of instant messages. People who do not understand how instant messaging programs work, who do not know the linguistic styles conventional to instant messaging, and/or who are unaware of the reasons people post away messages and profiles attribute different meanings to them. This paper also examines the kinds of knowledge people have of one another, typically embedded in the kinds of relationships in which they are involved, and their relevance to interaction. (For a discussion of the kinds of knowledge people have of one another and the kinds of relationships in which they are involved, and the relevance of both to interaction, see Simmel 1950.)

It should be noted that the focus here is on the ways in which extant relationships and the bodies of knowledge they contain influence the meanings people attribute to their online communication. This perspective differs from, but complements, studies that examine the role of anonymity in CMC (e.g., Bargh and McKenna 2004; Spears and Lea 1992; Spears, Lea, and Postmes 2001; Watt, Lea, and Spears 2002), the processes of online relationship formation (Parks and Floyd 1996; Parks and Roberts 1998), or “communicative activity that establishes feelings of connection that ready people for further interaction with each other” (Nardi 2005:92).

The research reported is based on the IM experiences of college students. IM first became (and continues to be) popular among adolescents, leading Lenhart and colleagues (2001:3) to describe teenagers as “the instant-message generation” (see also Schiano et al. 2002, Gross et al. 2002). There have also been studies of the use of IM in the corporate world (see, for example, Isaacs et al. 2002; Nardi et al. 2000; Volda et al. 2002). Although there have been accounts of IM use among college students in the popular press (e.g., Cohen 2003), there have been few scholarly studies of this population’s usage of the technology. Jones (2002) reports on the frequency with which college students employ it; Baron (2004; Baron et al. 2005) focuses on linguistic analyses of message length and content, turn-taking, conversational sequences, openings and closings, conversation management, and the role of gender in IM use; Hu et al. (2004) examine the relationship between amount of use and perceived intimacy; and Natri et al. (2006) present a speech act analysis of away messages. None of these researchers examines IM behavior across different types of relationships or the role of common ground and/or relational cultures in shaping behavior in this mode of CMC.

## METHODS

The ethnographic account presented here draws on analyses of naturally occurring behavior, on specifically constructed communications with IM correspondents, and on qualitative interviews with IM users. This approach to gathering data supplements those used in the kinds of short-term laboratory or experimental studies that have characterized much CMC research; the need for it has been identified by various researchers in the field of CMC in general and in work on IM in particular (see Lea and Spears 1995; Nardi 2005; Parks and Floyd 1996; Spears, Lea, and Postmes 2001; Walther 1996). In the context of offline behavior, researchers in the field of interpersonal relations have also called for ethnographic methods in the study of communication (see Sahlstein and Duck 2001:374; Wood 1982:82).

The research is based on the reports of thirty college students who, serving as informants, interacted, via IM, with almost two hundred people, including those in relationships they categorized as close friends, friends, acquaintances, and family.<sup>8</sup> These students, participants in a course on computer-mediated communication, were asked to observe and/or record their interactions with people with whom they normally communicated using IM. The student-informants are a convenience sample; neither they nor those with whom they communicated were randomly selected; however, these informants and their correspondents represent a range of levels of knowledge and types of relationships that are relevant to understanding the role of common ground and relational cultures as contexts of CMC.<sup>9</sup> The reports include data on real-time instant messages, away messages, profiles, and the stated intentions and interpretations of those who posted and/or read them.

## INSTANT MESSAGING

Before analyzing the perceptions and practices of IM users, it is useful to describe instant messaging programs and what they permit people to do.<sup>10</sup> The application, as the name implies, is a technology intended to enable people to communicate with one another synchronically or in "real time." After installing client software, an IM user connects to a server that logs the connection and informs other IM users, who are included in a contact (or "buddy") list created by him or her, of the online presence of the user. Simultaneously, the user is informed of the online availability of others included in his or her contact list.<sup>11</sup> When connected, a user can click on the name of another user who is also online, opening a window to that person which permits direct, real-time exchanges of messages between them, a sort of chat room for two. (It is also possible, via the "Chat" feature of the application, to include several people in one window that serves as a type of private chat room.) Communication is typically textual, although the technology permits audio and video exchanges as well. When a user disconnects from the server, others who include him or her in their contact lists are informed that the person is no longer online.

The application lets users interact asynchronously via "away messages." The away message feature of IM enables a user who is online but who is not

available (or who does not want) to communicate in real time to inform others of her or his status and to automatically respond to instant messages sent to him or her. A person can choose a default message (“I’m away from my computer right now”) or she or he can create new messages. The relationship between sender and receiver and the knowledge that a reader of an away message has about its poster typically influences the interpretation of the message.

The application also permits a user to create a profile in which information can be included about one’s real name, email address, interests, hobbies, profession or work, and one’s availability for chatting. A user may choose to have her or his profile included in a directory that can be perused by others, including “buddies” as well as individuals who are strangers and/or who have not included one another in their contact lists. However, people may also choose not to permit strangers to contact them, using the privacy and/or blocking features of the software to restrict communication to those included in their contact lists and/or to specified others.<sup>12</sup>

### **KNOWLEDGE ABOUT COMPUTERS AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION**

From the perspective of the significance of context for the meaning attributed to messages, it is relevant that differences in the kinds of knowledge people have about computers, the Internet, and/or the conventions of writing away messages influence the ways in which they interpret them.

One informant posted an away message and then asked people whom she categorized as “techies” and “non-techies” to interpret it. Her message was:

404 ERROR. Not found.

The person you requested could not be found at the given screenname.

Please refresh your buddy list.

Or just leave me a message ☺

Different readers of the message interpreted it differently, depending on their technical knowledge and their familiarity with the Internet in general and with IM away messages in particular. Among the non-techies, a student majoring in advertising said:

I felt [the poster] was messing with my mind because I really believed the message and repeatedly sent the same message [i.e., reply], hoping it would go through.

Another student, a history major, said:

what the fuck! I thought something was wrong with my IM. . . . I thought I had to erase your name and re-add you.

Still another reader, an anthropology student, explained,

I tried to refresh you even though I had no idea how. I felt stupid b/c I didn't know how to fix it. As you know I have no computer knowledge, I didn't know what to do.

All of these recipients tried to inform the poster of the "error" in the away message and/or tried to resend their responses to it.

On the other hand, the "techie" informants understood the message and appreciated its intended humor. A computer science major responded: "It fools around w/ people who do not know how computers work." Another student, majoring in science, said: "It cracked me up!" Still others, all science majors and/or experienced Internet users, said they laughed when they read the message, making them think the sender was a "computer geek." When the informant inquired whether the last line, which included a smiley emoticon, made a difference in their interpretation, the "non-techies" claimed that they didn't even see it, and one noted "I was too nervous about the IM problem to notice that!"

### RELATIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN REAL-TIME INSTANT MESSAGES

Common ground and relational cultures constitute contexts in which meaning is attributed to CMC. That familiarity with interlocutors or correspondents makes a difference in the ways in which people interpret IM messages is evident in the following exchange. One informant (Joe) used the phrase "please kill me" as an exaggeration in a time of stress—specifically, in the situation of writing a paper for a class. Joe's acquaintances and friends understood the expression in different ways, a reflection of the differences in their knowledge of his habits and style. The first example is an IM communication between the informant and an acquaintance; the second is between the informant and a friend:

Joe: hi

Acquaintance: heya

Joe: please kill me

Acquaintance: what's wrong?

Joe: Just working on a paper.

Acquaintance: ah, no fun.

Joe: exactly.

Acquaintance: well, I'll let you get back to your paper. Have fun. Talk to you later.

Joe: please kill me.

Friend: hahaha

Joe: funny?

Friend: very. How's the paper coming?

The relevance of common ground in understanding instant messages (and in avoiding or repairing misunderstandings in them) is also apparent in what users say about when conversations should be taken offline. For example, one informant explained:

I don't like discussing important issues on IM. I won't have arguments over IM. Those things all lead to misunderstandings and arguments, generally when no ill will was intended. Also, I think the nature of IM plays into that. You're not looking the person in the face, you should take into account that you can't hear their inflection or see what they're doing/going through. IM is just text, it can be taken so many ways, and you may hurt someone really terribly while not meaning that at all.

Another informant said:

when there is an important subject matter – something serious where tone is really important and needs to be conveyed verbally. there is a greater chance of miscommunication of tone or meaning by using IMs.

Still another stated:

i refuse to fight over IM. there is no way to vent the anger, like yelling, and it just builds quickly. plus, without access to the intonation in a person's speech, things can easily be misinterpreted.

On the other hand, informants say that using IM is acceptable when people feel there is little fear of misunderstanding owing to the closeness of the relationship and/or the depth of the knowledge each person has of the other. One informant offered this view:

If I use sentences that could be taken the wrong way, I either have access to the person on a day-to-day basis, and can apologize and work something out face to face soon, or I know their online style and online reading style very, very, very well.

Another informant stated:

i guess what i consider appropriate and inappropriate online depends on the nature of the relationship. the closer i am with someone, the more likely i would have a personal conversation with them on IM. i will talk to my best friend about anything online, because i trust that she won't copy and paste the conversation or something. . . .

Still another informant said:

I will have personal conversations with close friends on IM. I trust them. It's like talking to them on the phone, just over the computer. We're close, so I know how they are saying certain things – I can tell the intonation of their voices over IM.

The significance of differential knowledge of the sender of a message is also

apparent in responses to changes in that person's IM "style." Style here means a distinctive custom or convention in the way in which one expresses oneself in IM communication. As part of a data-collection exercise, one informant systematically changed selected features of her usual style of communicating when IM'ing with people in three categories of relationship. The style changes consisted of choice of font, buddy icon, language, and salutation; the recipients of messages were divided among best friends, friends, and acquaintances. The informant described the changes in her IM style as follows:

1. Font Style: Ever since I became an IM user, I have used the standard Times New Roman, point 12, Black font. I changed my font from this default setting to a Comic MS Sans, point 10, Light blue font.

2. Buddy Icon: My buddy icon has always reflected an aspect of who I am, such as a hobby or a favorite store, singer, etc. In fact, for the last five months, my buddy icon was one of Christina Aguilera, my favorite music artist. This Christina Aguilera buddy icon was colorful; and it repeatedly flashed various images of the artist. Upon implementing a change, I chose to entirely eliminate the use of a buddy icon.

3. IM Language: I eliminated the use of words that I consider to be characteristic of my online jargon such as "like" and "hehe." Also, I began to use capital letters at the beginning of my sentences, as I usually tend to type using only lowercase letters when communicating on IM. Additionally, I used proper punctuation in my sentences, as I tend to use ". . ." or "---" in between sentences rather than the appropriate punctuation marks.

4. Online Greeting and Parting: First, I frequently "greet" the person with whom I am chatting on IM by typing "helloooo" or "heyyy." Essentially, I have a tendency to add extra letters at the end of words; this has become characteristic of my IM style. Therefore, I refrained from using such greetings; rather, I typed, "Hey, what's up?" or a simple "Hi." Second, my online parting has always included the phrase "byes." This phrase has too, become characteristic of my IM jargon. In fact, there have been occasions when I accidentally typed "bye" and the other user immediately thought something was wrong. Thus, I changed my online parting from "byes" to simply "Bye."

She differentiated her relationship categories as follows:

Best friends are people I've known for years. We IM daily, and our conversations tend to be more personal, as they deal more with private issues, things that extend into a personal emotional side. Friends are people from college classes, from when I studied abroad, and from high school. We communicate on IM several times a week, and our conversations consist of small talk and catching up on the events of our lives. Acquaintances

include friends of friends—specifically, college friends of my friends from high school, friends from freshman year—people I don't see often but maintain a relationship with by communicating on IM, and friends from high school with whom I would most likely lose contact without IM. My acquaintances and I communicate on IM once or twice a week at most, and the conversations tend to be impersonal.

The informant changed elements of her IM style in several steps over the course of five weeks. In the first week of her research, she changed her font. The following week she changed her IM language and online greeting and parting. Lastly, she changed her buddy icon; she expected that change to elicit the greatest response. At first she simply observed the responses, if any, of her IM partners to each change in her style, focusing especially on the time it took them to respond to the changes in her communicative style. (She measured the time variable by enabling AIM's "timestamp," which shows the time at which she entered a message and the time at which the other person responded to it.) Subsequently, she did follow-up interviews to inquire about her interlocutors' responses.

The responses of people in her different categories suggested the importance of relationship in IM communication. All of those in the category of best friends commented on the change in font style, 75% of the friends noted it, but none of the acquaintances remarked upon the change. Moreover, best friends commented on or questioned the change almost four times faster than friends—best friends averaged 76 seconds and friends, 276 seconds. With regard to IM language, all of the best friends observed the change, 25% of friends noted it, and none of the acquaintances commented on it. Again, best friends responded more quickly than did friends, although they did so more slowly—an average of 165 seconds—than to the change in font style. The comments of best friends included the following: "Why are you typing grammatically correct?" "Why are you writing in caps . . . first letter?" "Why are you writing all proper?" "Why are you using CAPS?" None of the IM partners noted changes in online greetings, but all of the best friends and 75% of the friends commented on the leave-taking message. None of the acquaintances commented on it. Best friends responded rapidly to the change in leave-taking, averaging about 5 seconds, with comments including:

byes ;) not bye!!!!!!;

Are you mad? you said bye, not byes

why don't you say byes anymore?

The change in buddy icon engendered a response from all of the best friends, 75% of the friends, and 25% of the acquaintances. Best friends responded, on average, within a minute; friends and acquaintances took slightly longer, averaging 72 seconds. Comments on this change included:

lol why did you get rid of xtina?

where's Christina? Lol

ohhh no more Christina. what happened?

Differences in responses to the style changes are related not only to the knowledge respondents had of the message sender, but also to the ways in which they viewed the expectations of their relationships. For example, when an acquaintance was asked, after the sender's original IM style had been restored, why she had not commented on the changes, she replied:

Acquaintances don't have the right to know everything about each other because they're not that close.

Another acquaintance responded:

if you're not terribly close to a person, the person who's changed their im might think "why do you care" or "it's none of your business." if you are close with someone you can ask about anything without the risk of sounding stupid. With acquaintances or just friends there is that risk. if i had noticed your changes, i prob woudnt have mentioned it honestly.

On the other hand, a best friend explained why she had responded:

we have the right to know about each others lives. i have the right to ask you why you are happy or sad or mad, etc., and you have the right to ask me the same . . . we have the right to ask about emotions as well as trivial everyday stuff. i'd say that the closer you r the more appropriate it is to ask about random things, im being one of them. i think that its more appropriate because with best friends usually u can ask about anything, but with just acquaintances, it's not all that appropriate . . . its kind like stalking. With acquaintances it'd be weird to ask about random things like IM things.

### RELATIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN AWAY MESSAGES

In addition to real-time interaction, IM technology permits asynchronous communication in the form of "away messages." A user can post an away message, typically signaled by the appearance of a notepad icon next to his or her screen name on a contact list, that informs others of his or her availability to "talk" online; the technology also permits people to leave a message in response to the initial away message posting. In both ways, the feature of away messages functions as a kind of answering machine.<sup>13</sup> In AIM, the default away message is "I am away from my computer right now." However, users go to great lengths to expand the kinds of messages they post and the uses to which such messages are put. As reported in the *New York Times* (Cohen 2003; see also Baron et al. 2005), users, especially college students who have access to broadband connections, employ away messages as a kind of bulletin board to inform, to entertain, and to manage

social relationships. As Cohen notes (2003:E4), "They post a little of everything: news, quotes, schedules, song lyrics, birthday greetings, party invitations, jokes, veiled insults, confessions, exclamations, complaints." The possibilities of away messaging as well as its popularity are evident in the number of websites that collect and categorize away messages, serving as a resource on which users may draw, and software that enables users to keep track of those who are reading his or her away messages.<sup>14</sup> In addition to these communicative and social uses, the away message feature of IM may also serve a psychological function, providing users a sense of presence and of attachment (Baron et al. 2005). For example, users report logging on to look at the away messages of friends as a way of keeping in touch with them and of warding off feelings of loneliness (see Baron et al. 2003; Cohen 2003; Gross et al. 2002).

The pattern of different meanings being attributed to the same message is evident in data collected about people who were in various relationships with a poster and who had different knowledge of him or her. For example, one informant posted what she described as an "inspirational" away message because she was "interested in knowing people's opinions and feelings on the subject, because it was an issue in her own life, and because she wanted her boyfriend in particular to pause for a moment, to think about their own romantic relationship." The message was:

Do I love YOU because you're beautiful or are you beautiful because I LOVE you?

Different people read the message in different ways. The poster's boyfriend said of the message, "Stop thinking so much and just looooooove." Her best friend said, "I think its a little bit of both sweetie pea. . . . You know where to find me, so holla!" Her younger brother said, "Never really thought about love??%&^#@ Guess I wouldn't really know." Her mother said, "Are you reading too many trashy novels? I told you to get rid of them."

In another example, an informant posted the following message with the intention of informing her friends of the latest gossip and embarrassing highlight of the week and to add humor and entertainment to the lives of her buddies.

So did you see him last night. . . . OOOOHHHHH!! He checked you out. Do you really think so? Yep he did, indeed. He did me too\*\*\*\*check me out, that is. LOL. Sexy eyes I want to take him to paradise J What a loser! We'll find better ones. . . . There are so many fish in da sea. . . . But WHEN???aaaaaah. My clock is ticking chica. OH MY GOD he's next to me as we speak. . . .

Different readers interpreted the message in different ways. Unless he or she was familiar with the fact that the poster had a habit of posting a bizarre (inside joke) type of message every Monday morning, the interpretations did not reflect the poster's intentions.

Mack [a male friend]: It must be Monday---I know I have sexy eyes.

Sarah [a female friend]: The nerve of him to ask me if I still wanted to go on a date. Ugh, I feel sick.

Tom [another male friend]: I suppose you have some eventful dramas to tell me about. Sorry we keep missing each other. I miss you, so call me soon . . . and please be safe J

Bill [an acquaintance]: Ummmm do you still want to meet to go over Econ? I think this is your screen name.

The first two readers partly understood the poster's intentions because they were used to the type of messages she posted on Monday mornings or were with her when the conversation occurred. However, the first reader was unaware of the specific encounter the poster had had, so he responded with a light joke about his own eyes. (The poster said the "sexy eyes" referred to the song that was playing at the time the conversation took place.) The third reader was a friend who, because he had been studying overseas, had not been in contact with the poster recently. His interpretation of the message was "clueless" because he was unaware of the poster's Monday morning ritual posting and perhaps was worried about the poster, cautioning her to protect herself. The fourth reader was an acquaintance of the poster, had never IM'ed her before, and appeared to have a hard time making sense of the away message. He said he was merely "expecting" to see a contact number and instead was "bombarded by a load of inconsequential information."

Another informant constructed a set of away messages and then asked various people, who had different kinds of knowledge about her and who were in different kinds of relationships with her, to interpret them. One message was:

class till 3:30. gym. class till 6:30. food. studying.

She described her intention for this message as follows:

My intent was to let people know my schedule for that day. During those days, which happened to be Mondays and Wednesdays, I am often not near my computer, so if I leave that message up, perhaps people will find another way to reach me if it is important, if they have read that message.

Although most readers of the message understood that the poster was stating her plans for her day, those who had detailed knowledge of her daily schedule attributed greater meaning to it. For example, her housemate and one of her closest friends interpreted it as follows:

You're busy, I probably won't see you much that day, but we might chat later at night, and I'll have to find you. My reaction would be that you're stressed out – the punctuation causes that. Also, I would know that it is a

Monday or a Wednesday, because that is when you have those scheduled classes. I also know I won't see you because of my schedule on those days. I would assume you were in a sad mood, just because there is no smiley face. If you are in a good mood you usually use the smiley face.

Another message she posted was "leave me alone!" She said: "I leave it up when I'm in a bad mood and do not want to talk to anyone. I do not want to respond to IM's or be bothered by the phone." When interpreting this message, most people got the point that the poster was in a bad mood. However, the importance of knowledge of the poster was evident in informants' responses to that reading. Those who knew her well understood that the poster likes to be left alone when she is in a bad mood and said they would leave her alone or, at most, leave an IM message in response to the away message. On the other hand, acquaintances and strangers, not knowing her preferences, said they would try to call her, reasoning that if they felt upset that is what they would want others to do for them. One acquaintance misinterpreted the meaning of the message as intended by the poster: "It looks like you are being sarcastic. If you really want to be left alone, you would have turned off IM. I would leave a message."

A male informant posted the following away message: "I am currently not available because I am at the hospital. My head is bleeding." When asked about his intention in doing so, he explained it in the following way:

Well its kinda a long story. My roommate was on the phone with this girl we know who I started to like. To see how she felt about me, when they were on the phone, I pretended to fall off the top bunk and hit my head, and we both put up messages about going to the hospital. We wanted to see how she reacted and if she was concerned, and hopefully see if I meant anything to her. I put it up because I wanted to hang out with her the next night.

People in different relationships with the poster interpreted the message in different ways. The girl who was the target of the message read it at face value: she believed he was hurt and expressed concern. Others who did not know him also said they believed he was injured and had gone to the hospital. On the other hand, the poster's best friend had a different view of the message. He said:

Too informative . . . I don't need to know that he is at the hospital, if his head is really bleeding . . . why he is telling me that . . . most people who's heads are bleeding last concern should be putting up an away message to let the whole world know. It's a joke. He is looking for attention or to cause someone a great deal of concern about him. He should take life more serious.

### KNOWLEDGE IN READING PROFILES

IM users may provide information about themselves by creating a personal profile.<sup>15</sup> Interpreting a personal profile raises a question similar to that posed when interpreting synchronic messages and away messages: How does the kind

of knowledge readers have about profiles and/or about those who place messages in them shape the ways in which they understand its information? In the research reported here, the main types of knowledge are assumptions about the uses of the IM profile feature, including differences between away messages and profiles, and the knowledge a reader has about a particular poster.

People's assumptions about the differences in the ways in which away messages and profiles are used shape their interpretations of the messages provided in both formats. Typically, away messages are seen as reflecting a temporary state or situation. As one informant put it:

An away message is something that states current information, such as "I am in class," whereas a profile is often something that will last for a while, a favorite quote, etc. . . . from my experiences, an away message is most often used to tell people where you are and what you are doing. . . . I don't want to read your life story just to see if you are "at class," "at the movies," "sleeping," or perhaps "sitting at the computer ignoring you." The profile usually is used for your "life story" or at least part of it.

This difference is evident in the ways in which informants construe the meaning of the word "busy" when it occurs in an away message and in a profile. One informant stated:

busy in away message = busy with something right now. busy in profile = busy for a while (like life is busy, middle of finals type of thing)

Another opined:

busy would make no sense in a profile. if it was in an away message, it would make sense. busy is a temporary thing, it's like an in the moment thing. . . . away messages are for what you are doing or feeling right at the moment. no one is constantly busy. profiles are representations of oneself.

The way in which the relationship between the poster and reader of a profile influences its interpretation is seen in the following examples. A student asked people who had different kinds and amounts of knowledge about her and especially about her daily activities, to interpret several profiles she had posted (at different times in her life). The first profile included this message:

change has been  
change will be  
time will tell  
time will ease.

it's hard to escape who you are.

The second profile included this message: "35 cents."

Before examining the interpretations of these profiles, it is useful to look at her account of her intentions when posting them. She explained them as follows:

In Profile 1, the first quote is part of the lyrics of a Collective Soul song entitled "Reunion." I love the song and I used to listen to it during a rather emotional, unhappy part of my life. I put these up as a reminder that I will not always be unhappy. As the lyrics say, 'change will be.' Things will change and I have survived change before, including going from high school to college and recovering from multiple sports injuries. I put a space in between the two quotes because I know a lot of people are too lazy to scroll down when they read a profile. So, it's a little joke to myself that I can put something in my profile that some people will not read. The second quote is a reference to a friend. She gave me that quote and I thought it was particularly relevant to that same unhappy period in my life. I had trouble being myself. . . . So this is a reminder to me to always be who I am.

In Profile 2, "35 cents" was an inside joke between my group of [best] friends and me. I leave it up to remind them that I miss them.

People who knew more or less about the poster interpreted each of these profiles differently. For example, an acquaintance that read Profile 1 was not sure what it meant:

I wonder if you are questioning something in a way. You are relating to a transition in life, but at the same time, are hopeful that things will work out. The second part of the away message makes me feel that you can't change WHO you are, and you shouldn't have to.

Friends and family reading the same profile had a better grasp of its intended meaning. One said:

I think you're going through some difficult changes, hence the first quote. the extra [space] is an effort at privacy . . . most people will not see the second quote since they will think the profile ends at the first quote

Another offered:

I think the first one sounds like you are prepared to handle change and realize that change is inevitable. The second one indicates that you have some sort of value system in place and it's hard for you to change that. You are a senior in college about ready to graduate and enter the job force and the real world. Plus you have handled change before going from high school to college and going from sports injury to sports injury.

The reading that best friends gave to Profile 1 was closest to what the poster intended. For example, one offered this interpretation:

the first quote is from a song that I know you like and I think it was a thing for you, as a way to remind yourself that change happens and that time will tell what will happen in the future, but now I think it's there sometimes to remind me. the second [quote] is something I said one day when I was frustrated and in regards to you, I think its purpose is to remind you and others to be themselves and not try to fight who they are, just go with it. be who you are cause there is nothing better than that

Another suggested:

This went into effect when you were going through a whole lot of shit, I remember, personal stuff that was throwing you for a loop. I think it's both a communication to yourself -- that you'll be okay -- and a communication of that to others, as well, representing that it isn't going to bring you down.

Individuals in the different relationship categories also read Profile 2 ("35 cents") differently. Acquaintances did not understand the meaning of the message. One reported: "I have no clue." Another stated, "that could be a joke between friends . . . or the simple fact that they have or need 35 cents." A third said, "I don't know the meaning of it, so I would assume it is a personal joke between you and a friend and would think nothing more of it than that."

Friends and family did not fare much better, as evident in the following remarks:

I don't have a clue here. But I would guess that you are short on money and are indicating that you cannot go anywhere or do anything, because you are broke.

and

I would assume 35 cents is equivalent to a phone call. Or maybe one IM conversation in this case. I would think that it means you are willing to listen or communicate.

The interpretation a best friend placed on the profile's message came closest to matching the intent of the poster:

thats a reference to this summer and the fun we had at Erma's expense at summer league. it was our inside joke and way to bond with someone new. we made fun of her "nightly activities"

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the idea that the same behavior may have different meanings to different people is well established in anthropological studies (see, for example, Barth, 1989, 1993; Hannerz 1992), it is not well developed in the study of computer-

mediated communication in general or in studies of instant messaging in particular. That is not to say that communication researchers do not attend to the meaning of a message. For example, Walther (1996) and Walther and Parks (2002) note that, in various contexts of computer-mediated communication, including email, chat rooms, blogs, social networking sites, and online dating services, senders of messages optimize self-presentation and receivers idealize senders. Although this view implies that meaning of a message may differ between correspondents, most research on computer-mediated communication has focused on senders' messages; much less attention has been given to assessing how receivers interpret messages and especially to the differences in the ways in which different people interpret the same message. This oversight is especially problematic since equating the meanings of messages sent and messages received confounds intention and interpretation.

Understanding both intention and interpretation is critical to analyzing and unraveling human interaction. As Barth argues (1993:158), interacting individuals respond to "each other's acts in unfolding chains," a process in which the meaning attributed to an action is shaped by the meaning attributed to a preceding one. In this process, Barth notes, an individual attributes meaning to his or her behavior by virtue of his or her intention; to an observer, however, an "event becomes act through interpretation." This duality of meaning, the intention of one person and the interpretation of another, requires that the meaning(s) of a message be understood from the perspectives of both senders and receivers, perspectives that may or may not coincide, as the above examples of instant messages make evident.

Analyzing behavior at different levels of knowledge also enhances our understanding of it. It is insufficient, as these data show, to assume that membership in a (speech) community ensures that individuals attribute the same meaning to a message. As Clark notes (1992:36), "there are things everyone (or almost everyone) in a community knows and assumes that everyone else in that community knows too," but people "can belong simultaneously to many communities and subcommunities, each of which has its own distinct areas of knowledge." This also applies to personal relationships and to the communications they entail. Relationships are differentiated by the scope of their common ground: those who have particular, or more detailed, knowledge of one another understand one another better than those who have generic, or less detailed, knowledge of one another. This is evident in the ways in which individuals who have different experiences with and knowledge of instant messaging programs interpreted messages and in the ways in which people in different kinds of relationships (e.g., best friend, friend, acquaintance, stranger) interpreted the same messages.

This analysis of the meaning of instant messages suggests directions for further inquiry. The focus of this paper is on the knowledge that people have about IM and about their correspondents. Future research could include the study of other kinds of knowledge relevant to the ways in which people write and read instant messages. For example, it seems reasonable to suppose that people's beliefs, values, and/or norms about IM as a channel of communication, compared with other channels, including other modes of CMC as well as offline ones (e.g., face-to-face, telephone, letters), inform their IM behavior and the

meanings they attribute to it. Since IM is primarily a text-based form of computer-mediated communication, with a paucity of nonverbal cues, the likelihood of misunderstandings is increased, as is commonly noted by CMC researchers (e.g., Walther and Parks, 2002). Does an awareness of that possibility (or, more to the point, experience with it) regulate how people use IM? Does it influence their ideas about what is or is not appropriate to communicate in this form of CMC? Does content dictate the choice of mode of communication (or vice versa)? These questions are worth exploring because IM has become a widely popular mode of computer-mediated communication and because its technical features do not fully determine its use; rather, the ways in which people contextualize IM significantly shape the ways in which they use it.

### NOTES

1. Geertz (1973:12), in an influential account of the search for meaning in social anthropology, argued that “[culture] is a context, something within which [social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes] can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described.” Culture as context entails “structures of signification” or “frames of interpretation” (Geertz 1973:9), and, as Tannen and Wallat (1993:59) note, a “frame of interpretation” or “frame . . . refers to a definition of what is going on in interaction, without which no utterance (or movement or gesture) could be interpreted.” For other statements of the relationship between context and meaning and for the significance of contextual analysis for understanding behavior, see Barth 1989, 1993; Bateson 1958, 1991; Dilley 1999; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Knapp et al. 2002; Malinowski 1935, 1938; Mishler 1979; Pitt-Rivers 1967; Strathern 1995; Tannen 1993.

2. Walther and Parks (2002:540) note the difficulty associated with focusing on group identity as a social context: “Although SIDE theory offers a powerful lens through which to view certain CMC relationships, its application to interpersonal relationships (in the sense of dyadic or close relationships) is less clear. The implication that all on-line interaction stays fixed at the social or group level, never reaching the personal level, is particularly troubling. Almost all of the studies supporting SIDE theory have experimentally manipulated group identity or created contexts in which group identities were especially likely to be salient.”

3. Malinowski, in writing about problems in translation, argued that the meaning of a term could be adequately grasped only when it is placed in the “context of culture” (1935:17) or “the context of cultural reality” (1935:22), adding that the “concept of context . . . embraces not only spoken words but facial expression, gesture, bodily activities, the whole group of people present during an exchange of utterances and the part of the environment on which these people are engaged” (1935:22). It also meant for him, “the material equipment, the activities, interests, moral and aesthetic values with which the words are correlated” (1935:22).

4. In *Balinese Worlds* (1993), Barth devotes an entire ethnography to analyzing the different kinds of knowledge that constitute the multiple contexts in which people live and interpret their lives. He argues (1993:171–72): “The context in which any act belongs is contingent and depends on the (probably various) constructions that actors and participants place on it. A major task of ethnography must be to discover and give an account of how acts are placed in these particular contexts, frameworks or worlds in which people themselves embed those acts through their interpretations of them.” Barth envisages the systematic examination and explication of such contexts as a step in the development of an “anthropology of knowledge” (1993:160).

5. Clark notes (1992:6) that “common ground” or “mutual knowledge” may entail “knowledge, belief, assumption, supposition or even some other term. . . . For simplicity, we will use *know* as the general term. . . .”

6. Morgan (2004:3), following Gumperz, holds that a speech community entails “prolonged interaction among those who operate within shared belief and value systems. . . . [The concept] assumes that a mutually intelligible symbolic and communicative system must be at play among those who share knowledge and practices,” adding that a speech community can take different forms, ranging from nation states to chat rooms.

7. For other accounts and analyses of relational cultures, see Baxter 1987; Bell and Healey 1992; Hopper, Knapp, and Scott 1981; Planalp 1985; Sahlstein and Duck 2001; Wood 1995.

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9. For the rationale of and arguments for using convenience samples when doing qualitative ethnographic research, see Weiss 1994.

10. Although there are several instant messaging programs (e.g., ICQ, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger), the application used by the informants in this research is AOL IM or AIM, and description of the technology refers to it.

11. The application permits an individual to define the population with which she or he will communicate. That is, the program enables a user to include or exclude those with whom she or he will exchange messages. Employing its blocking and/or privacy features, the program enables individuals to block either a specific user or all others from sending messages to him or her.

12. In a study of IM practices among young adolescents (11–13 years old), Gross et al. (2002) found that most of them used IM to interact with friends they first met offline.

13. As with conventional answering machines, the functionality of IM away messages is sometimes used as a way of screening or filtering communication (see Oldendick and Link 1994).

14. For the former, see <http://www.aimawaymessages.com/> and <http://awaymessages.com/>; for the latter, see <http://www.imchaos.com/>

15. AOL IM (AIM) profiles provide a way for users to let others know about them. When creating a profile, users can indicate their interests, hobbies, profession, or other personal information, including links to one’s email address and/or web pages. One reads a profile by clicking on the People category (which lists the names on one’s buddy list) and then clicking on “Get Buddy Info,” or by right-clicking on a contact’s name and then clicking on “Get Buddy Info.”

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