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Sozialökonomie

*Paper*

The impact of social relationships on the process and outcome of meetings

Interdisciplinary Basic Course: The relevance of meetings to organizational success

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# 1. Introduction

“You have a meeting to make a decision, not to decide on the question.” (Unknown)

This quote about meetings given by the famous businessman Bill Gates illustrates the controversy one is faced with when dealing with the topic of meetings on any occasion. It is no longer a secret that meetings are essential for teams to work productively and goal- orientated (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012, p. 131) and therefore are essential for the growth and success of a company. The controversy though lies in the human nature which is not always productive and goal- orientated but controlled my emotions. The following paper will take a closer look what these emotions rely on and what impact they can have on the process of a meeting. I am therefore going to start with an analysis of the different forms of interactions, relationships or hierarchies that exist among employees but also between employers and employees. The following step will be a closer look on the impact that these structures have in a meeting context to work out possible disruptions or in opposite highly effective structures that should either be abandoned or integrated more often. The basis and leitmotif of the paper will be the question:

What impact do social relationships have on the dynamic process and outcome of a meeting?

## 2. Social Relationships and Meetings

Since this paper aims to understand the connection between social relationships and their effects on meeting processes, the following part will give an overview about both these terms, explain, and integrate them in the right context. This will help to get a fundamental understanding of the topic and its theoretical background.

2.1 Dimensions of Social Relationships

A social relationship can be defined as a connection that is shared by people with “recurring interactions”. It is to differentiate between informal relationships that include friends, family members and everyone who is important in a persons’ life and formal relationships that occur with doctors, lawyers, employers or even employees. Depending on the form of relationship two people share their social interactions will vary in an either positive or negative direction (August & Rook, 2013). The authors differentiate between structural and functional aspects of social relationships. “Structural aspects refer to the existence and objective characteristics of social relationships, whereas functional aspects refer to the functions performed by and subjective qualities of social relationships.” (August & Rook, 2013). Basically, structural aspects describe the nature of a relationships (e.g. co-workers) in general while functional elements describe what effect the relationship has on both sides. When it comes to examine functional aspects of a relationship a very important keyword is social support (August & Rook, 2013). “Social support refers to the belief that one is valued, cared for, and loved by others in a social network” (Ruiz, Prather, & Kauffman, 2013). In other words, social support reflects all the benefits of a social relationship. Again, it can be divided into structural and functional elements. The first aspect is about the size of a social network or the degree of social interaction while the second one is about e.g. support processes (Ruiz et al., 2013). The interesting aspect is that Ruiz et al. (2013) conclude that social support, whether received or perceived, can decrease stress. This is due to supportive communication, verbally and physically (Ruiz et al., 2013). Karen S. Rook is another academic who studied the interdependence between health and social support. She found out that the stress decreasing effect of social support is stronger when a person faces “multiple major life stresses” (Rook, 1987, p. 1137). […]

In another paper written by Sauer & Kauffeld (2015), they quote a study by Brass and Ibarra which researched *homophily.[[1]](#footnote-1)* It says that while women tend to share “social support ties” like friendships with the same sex they rather have “instrumental ties” with men. On the other hand, men tend to have “stronger homophilous ties across multiple social relations”. They both conclude that there are complex social relations among employees from being friends to being a mentor and that these relations shape the interaction between team members in a meeting (Sauer et al., 2015, p. 375).

2.2 Workplace Meetings and its Structures

Deidre Boden, who has “written extensively about meetings” (Asmuss & Svennevig, 2009, p. 9), defines the term *meeting* in the following way:

*“a planned gathering, whether internal or external to an organization, in which the participants have some perceived (if not guaranteed) role, have some forewarning (either longstanding or quite improvisational) of the event, which has itself some purpose or “reason,” a time, place, and, in some general sense, an organizational function.”* (Boden, 1994, p. 84)

This quote intends to list the main characteristics of a meetings, which are its organisational background, the role of the participants and a certain place and time frame.

There are various reasons for holding up a meeting including talking about problems, developing solutions, generating ideas, reaching a consensus, or making decisions (Lehmann-Willenbrock, Rogelberg, Allen, & Kello, 2018). At the same time, a meeting can be the base for analysing and reorganising the social structure among employers and employees through e.g. relationship building, team dynamics, leadership influence or the potential for conflict (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2018). What all formal meetings have in common is that they are planned in advance and that participants “act in their institutional roles”, whereas informal meetings often take place at the copy or coffee machine which not necessarily make them less significant especially in regard of social relationships.[[2]](#footnote-2) source!!!

The process of a meeting is dynamic in its nature because it consists of social interactions between humans with a different background, a different knowledge, and a different meaning. At the same time “a large amount of organisational resources go into meetings” (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2018, p. 32). There are about 55 Million meetings happening every workday, in which a huge amount of time and money is invested although it is not an exception that the members of a meeting describe its outcome as “poor” (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2018, p. 32).

With the help of social network analysis scientists found out that centralization plays an important role for the success of a meeting. E.g. there is the so called “star network” where only one person has ties to all the other team members which results in a significant negative team performance. So the more decentralized the structure of a meeting is the better will be its outcomes (Sauer et al., 2015, pp. 368–369). In another paper written by Meinecke and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2015) they introduced the study of “Team Meeting Behaviour” that researched communicative behaviours that follow one another “embedded in a social interaction process” in order to find out what makes a team successful. They carved out certain functional behaviours like generating ideas, managing the discussion process or planning actions and dysfunctional behaviours like criticizing others or complaining that were correspondingly linked with team productivity and organizational effectiveness (Meinecke & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2015, p. 339). The authors also introduce the “interpersonal theory”, which is about specific behaviours that trigger other behaviours so that interactions in team meetings are never independent from one another (Meinecke & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2015, p. 339). Another study earlier quoted in this text, which was also done by Lehmann-Willenbrock in cooperation with Kauffeld (2012), aimed to understand the interaction processes taking place during a meeting and therefore observed different forms of communication including socioemotional communication that carries social influence “both inside and outside the workplace”. They differentiate between positive socioemotional communication which include showing solidarity, releasing tension, and agreeing and negative socioemotional communication which include all kinds of relationship conflict. I will come back to these results in chapter four of the paper.

3. Methods and Literature Analysis

This study will be a literature-based evaluation of different papers, amongst others the ones that were previously mentioned, written by various authors. The aim is to work with studies that represent different approaches to the topic to get a complex conclusion. I am going to start with an analysis of the different forms of interactions, relationships or hierarchies that exist among employees but also between employers and employees. The following step will be a comparison of these forms and the effects they can have on how people deal with each other in general. Those behaviours can be transferred into the setting of a team meeting to be able to work out their impact on its process and outcome. First, there will be an overview on how the papers that were used for my study have been found followed by a description of the sample in form of a table.

3.1 Literature Selection

There are various data bases one can use to find suitable papers and studies on certain topic. In my case, three different data bases offered by the faculty of economic scientists of the university of Hamburg which are “Web of Science”, “Business Source Complete” and “wiso

Wirtschaftswissenschaften” were used. In that way I made of sure of the quality and relevance of the papers for my personal topic from the very beginning. Especially the first two data bases were quite helpful in terms of finding literature written in English. I also used “Google scholar” as the only non-licensed information system.

The following keywords were combined to get to useful and informative results: “team”, “meeting”, “work”, “business”, “social relation”, “social relationship”, “social network”. All the keywords were connected by the operator “AND” while I also put the wildcard “\*” behind every word. In that way a wide range of results that, at the same time, are as related to the research question as possible (e.g. “social network\*” AND “work\*”) could be ensured. The search field was limited to “topic” since I made the best experience in view of quantity and quality of results with that field compared to “title” or “keywords”.

Since all the keywords were very basic and only the search field “topic” has been used the primary number of hits encompassed between 7.000 and 12.000 results. Due to decrease this number some constraints were necessary. On the one hand the results were limited to only academic journals, papers, and book chapters and whenever possible I made sure the studies were peer-reviewed. Also, the publishing date has been set to years 2015-2020. These steps not only helped to decrease the number of hits but also made sure of the up-to-datedness of my later sample. On the other hand, the results were reduced by only searching within certain categories. For example, when I used the data bases “Web of Science” and searched for the keywords “team\*” and “meeting\*” 7.823 hits were shown. The following step included a limitation of these hits to the categories “communication”, “business” and “economics” and added the topic “social relationships” so that the number was reduced to a sample of four articles. Depending on the data base and keywords that were used the categories varied from “social interaction”, “consensus”, “cooperativeness” and “oral communication” to “social network analysis”, “communicative competence” and “social interaction”. That way I tried to decrease the hits down from a few thousand to ten to 15. In general, all the papers were classified by relevance which made it easier to generate highly qualified material.

3.2 Literature Analysis

At this state of my research the sample covers 15 sources including eight empirical studies that are compound by the literature research I described previously, sources I earlier used for the exposé of this work and material that was given by the responsible lecturer, e.g. the “Meeting Science Handbook”. All the studies in this sample either work with quantitative or qualitative methods (no mix-methods). Through the literature research the attempt of illuminating the topic form various perspectives has been made. The selected studies examine social relationships (against the background of a work environment) and then bring this together with the influence certain behaviour can have on work habits especially in terms of meetings. The following table will give an overview about the content of the studies that this paper relies on.

The first three studies deal with the interdependence between certain types of communication (humour, internal communication, positive socio-emotional statements) and social interaction respectively relationships. The following two studies broach the issue of status and gender while the last three papers concern the structures and dynamics in meetings themselves.

Table 1: Selection of current empirical research

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Source** | **Object of Investigation** | **Variable** | **Sample** | **Results** |
| Ponton, H.; Osborne, A.; Thompson, N.; Greenwood, D. (2020) | How does humour, as an aspect of group dynamics, influence social interaction and task-related performance? | -Humour function  -Meeting duration  -Number of meeting participants  -Number/Duration of humour events  -Cohesion  -Conflict  -Relief  -Support from others | 17 h hours of video data from 8 consecutive contractor-led design team meetings (7-11 participants) during a live building project over 5 months | The team demonstrates the use of humor as a social mechanism to foster cohesion and to manage conflict. |
| Glińska-Neweś, A.; Sudolska, A.; Karwacki, A.; Górka, J. (2017) | Do positive relationships at work stimulate internal communication facets supporting employee innovativeness? | -Individual commitment to innovations  -Positive relationships  -Openness  -Time for informal meetings | 200 Polis companies | Positive employee relationships influence the individual commitment to innovations.  Positive employee relationships influence the individual commitment to innovations. |
| Kauffeld, S.; Lehmann-Willenbrock, N. (2012) | Can positive socioemotional statements be linked to positive team success and vice versa? | -Socioemotional interaction (positive/negative)  -Meeting satisfaction  -Organizational success | 92 teams from 20 medium-sized organisations (processing industry) | Negative socioemotional statements are associated with decreased meeting satisfaction and lower organizational success. Positive socioemotional statements do not show a significant negative association with meeting satisfaction and no significant link to team productivity. |
| Lehmann-Willenbrock, N.; Chiu, M. (2018) | Are team members less likely to initiate  disagreements with high‐status individuals than with low- status individual? | -Start/End of disagreement  -Team attributes  -Individual characteristics (e.g. professional education) | 259 employees nested in 43 teams from two medium-sized German firms | Speaker characteristics and behaviours are linked to starting a content disagreement- |
| Merluzzi, J. (2017) | Are women more likely (than men) to cite a negative work tie with a woman? (compared with a man, or not naming a negative work tie) | -Respondent characteristics (gender, age)  -Respondent job characteristics (Tenure at firm, job rank)  -Respondent network characteristics (size, density, composition) | Two firms: “Consult” (one practice group with 227 employees; final sample: 113) and “Midwest” (management targeted; 53 individuals; final sample: 46) | There is a positive significant association for women on citing women as a negative work tie. Men were statistically not more likely to cite a man as a negative work tie. |
| Straube J., Kauffeld S. | What impact do faultlines have on the meeting process? | -Team size  -Context (virtual or non-virtual)  -Intersubgroup Communication | Use of Faultline Communication Index (FCI) and real-time video data | Faultlines are often described as a barrier to team communication. |
| Sauer, N. C.; Kauffeld, S. (2013) | What effect does the centralization of a team meeting have on its outcome? | -Meeting centralization  -Team meeting size  -Team performance | 332 employees (54 teams) from 2 medium-sized German companies | Meeting centralization has a negative significant relationship with team performance. |
| Meinecke, A. L.; Lehmann-Willenbrock N. (2020) | Do patterns of interaction differ as the meeting progresses? | -First Half/Second Half  -Meeting behaviour | Regular team meetings in 24 semi-autonomous teams (2 different medium-sized organisations from Germany) | The teams changed their way of working between phase 1 and phase 2. Team members were more likely to drift off topic and criticize or interrupt each other. |

4. Analysis of Influencing Factors

[…]

4.1 Networks in Meetings

When researching social relationships it necessarily leads to researching social networks since “a network is defined as a set of actors (“nodes”) and the relations (“ties”) between them” (Sauer et al., 2015). That means that wherever people come together for a shared goal or in the same context their relationships tend to build a network. For this paper, the nodes represent the different characters of a meeting while the ties reflect the way they are connected.

Sauer et al. (2015) speak about similarities, formal relationships like hierarchies, affective relations like friendship, cognitive relations like those in the known, interaction like communication and flows like information as different form of ties. These ties can either be strong or weak depending on how good two people know each other. Among other things strong ties benefit from socioemotional support (Sauer et al., 2015) which positive side effects on the health were already mentioned. Four main dimensions when analysing the social network of a meeting are mentioned by the authors: The first one is *centralization*, which refers to the intensity of participation among the members. The second aspect is *distance*, which describes the probability of two people to interact with each other. Fourth comes *core-periphery models*, a way of recording the composition between “a core of heavily interacting participants and a periphery of detached participants” (Sauer et al., 2015, p. 364), which slightly refers to the possible formation of a faultline[[3]](#footnote-3) between more outgoing and integrated members compared to the introverted and less integrated ones. The last dimension is *transitivity*, which basically measures the frequency of dyadic and triadic interactions[[4]](#footnote-4).

Through the analysis of various studies, the authors conclude that for the functioning and satisfaction relating to meetings communication and decentralized structures are essential. Strong task work ties and teamwork ties develop by working on the same task, setting up shared goals and coordinate effort which can be achieved best by decentralization (Sauer et al., 2015). The different relationships among meeting participants also have an influence on the way subgroups are formed since people prefer to interact with others like them. This in turn can support communication among members of a subgroup as well as hinder communication between the groups (Sauer et al., 2015). A closer look at this mechanism will be taken later.

Getting back to the importance of (work) ties there is another aspect studied by Merluzzi in 2017 that has an impact on these ties, which is gender. Since men and women are still socialized differently by their environment and therefore get implicated with certain characteristics (women as warm-hearted, calm and consensus-driven; men as individualistically and competitive) it is to be expected that this characterisation has an effect on working ties of men and women[[5]](#footnote-5) to either be positive or negative (Merluzzi, 2017).

The author found out that for women it is more likely to cite a negative work tie with another women than for men, while men were not more likely to cite another men as a negative tie compared to citing a women. On the one hand Merluzzi (2017) justifies these findings by explaining that for men it is common to cite nearly only same-gender work ties - having women as friends might even lead to more negative ties with men. On the other hand, relationships between women are more emotional-shaped and therefore leave space for negative language and conflict. At the same time a women who counts more other women as part of her social support network is less likely to cite negative ties (Merluzzi, 2017), which underlines the previous statement.

These results can be very helpful against the background of upcoming conflicts in meeting situations.

4.2 Faultlines in Meetings

After having explained to relevance of network structures in meetings and how they are affected by social relationships, I will now shift the focus on the building of faultlines and subgroups within team meetings.

Faultlines can be defined as “hypothetical dividing lines that split a team into more or less homogenous subgroups” (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020, p. 165). This refers to the phenomena of “homophily” to interact with similar other which was already mentioned earlier in this paper. There are *demographic faultlines*, which include attributes like age, gender, and cultural background as well as *functional or knowledge-based faultlines*, which imply tenure, functional background and educational level (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020).

Subgroups can also be classified differently by components, cohesion, cliques and structural equivalence(Sauer et al., 2015). Groups in which all actors (or nodes) are directly or indirectly connected to each other are called *components.* *Cohesion* is a more relational way of grouping people while *structural equivalence* refers to a structural method in which actors are “clustered based on similar patterns” (Sauer et al., 2015, p. 363) meaning they share a similar position in the group structure not are not directly linked to each other. A *clique* in contrast describes a group in which “everybody is connected to each other” (Sauer et al., 2015, p. 363)

In their study, Straube and Kauffeld (2020) show that whenever faultlines occur in a meeting situation they have an impact on the interactional patterns, informational flow, and social support. While homogeneity within a group of people fosters communication and team performance Faultline-building during a meeting hinders the information exchange and productivity due to higher centralization (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). Teams that do not have a prior history are easily affected by separation into (demographic) subgroups which can increase conflict potential as these subgroups interact. Besides, the larger a group of people is and accordingly the more social relationships exist in context of a meeting, the higher is the probability of subgroups to be formed (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020).

4.3 Communication in Meetings

Having broached the issue of networks and faultlines and their cohesion with social relationships and meetings there will now follow a more detailed perspective by analysing the communication in meetings and how it is affected.

In a study conducted by Glinska-Newes, Sudolska, Karwacki and Gorka in 2017 they found evidence that positive relationships at work stimulate the innovation creation by employees. So how exactly do relationships trigger innovations and therefore can have a positive impact on meeting outcome? It is said that positive relationships are linked to open communication and time for informal meetings on work (Glińska-Neweś, Sudolska, Karwacki, & Górka, 2017). By open communication the authors mean communicating “both the good and the bad things” (Glińska-Neweś et al., 2017, p. 91), which shows that honesty and trust are essential for organizational innovativeness. An individual who shares more positive relationships on work is more committed to the organisation, has a higher carrying capacity and is able to consider critical feedback as an opportunity to develop (Glińska-Neweś et al., 2017). This emotional-open atmosphere creates room for employees to also engage more in informal meetings that can be used for idea and information exchange (Glińska-Neweś et al., 2017).

Another similar aspect studied by Ponton, Osborne, Thompson, and Greenwood (2020) is the “power of humour”. They act on the assumption that humour influences social interaction and, in a work environment, task-related performance. Indeed, the use of different forms of humour[[6]](#footnote-6) seem to develop cohesion among the participants and helps managing conflicts during meetings. Banter e.g. often occurred within a certain subgroup which demonstrated comfort and familiarity without hindering the constructiveness of the meeting. Self-direct humour has been observed as a sign of self-reflection and psychological safety (Ponton, Osborne, Thompson, & Greenwood, 2020), both relevant for successful working. Also, humour has the ability to reduce tension within the group which does not necessarily prohibit conflict situations completely but might hinder further escalation (Ponton et al., 2020).

But since meetings are social, dynamic events conflict will appear which makes it necessary to look on content disagreement[[7]](#footnote-7) and its connection to social relationships. Lehmann-Willenbrock and Chiu (2018) suggest that there exists a coherence between disagreements among team members and their status[[8]](#footnote-8). High status individuals tend to engage less often in content disagreements than low status individuals do, because they are valued more by their team members. If they do, it is more likely that conflicts get settled by an agreement due to stronger social skills (Lehmann-Willenbrock & Chiu, 2018). These findings indicate that hierarchy seems to play a role in the way teams are communicating. Agreeing and active listening were found to be very constructive to support agreement. In contrast to the study presented before, the authors regard off-task-behaviours as rather problematic since they “do not address the content of the disagreement, so they are unlikely to build the necessary shared understanding to resolve the disagreement via an agreement” (Lehmann-Willenbrock & Chiu, 2018, p. 1148). According to that, behaviour like joking and side-conversations only distract people from the actual situation. These two different approaches show that in terms of off-task-behaviour, it is highly recommended to take a closer look on the composition and background of a team. If the members are friends or share a long-term work relationship humour and side-conversations might loosen up the meeting and foster creativity while the same behaviour might lead to the opposite in a less familiar environment.

Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012) found out, that positive socioemotional statements[[9]](#footnote-9) are helpful especially in the context of new teams since they needed to get to know each other. Teams that have been working together for a longer period of time did not necessarily benefit from those statements, because they offered the opportunity for complaining cycles to develop and hinder meeting success. (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012).

5. Promoting Functional Behaviour

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1. Homophily describes a persons‘ “preference to interact with similar others”. Sauer, Meinecke, and Kauffeld (2015, p. 365) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This study will be about the effects of social relationships on formal meetings. Hereinafter the word “meeting” is equivalent to “formal meeting”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. see chapter 4.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A dyadic interaction is described as an interaction between two people. (“DYADIC | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary,” 2020) Thus a triadic interaction includes a third person. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The quoted study is limited to a binary understanding of sex and gender. It is not the intention of this paper to discriminate anyone who does not relate to only one of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Objects of the study were the use of banter, humour at the expense of self or others and in-jokes. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Content disagreement can be understood as the expression of an opposite opinion related to a prior discussed topic by another team member. (Lehmann-Willenbrock and Chiu (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In this study status refers to the education, age and organisational tenure of an individual. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. showing solidarity, releasing tension, agreeing [↑](#footnote-ref-9)