



What happened to body-to-body sociability? ☆

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate how the body-to-body forms of sociability evolved from 1996 to 2009 simultaneously with the proliferation of ICTs in Europe and why this happened. The article also aims to find out how the socio-demographic profile of Europeans practising these forms developed in the same period of time. The analysis is based on two surveys carried out in Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Spain in 1996 ($N = 6609$) and 2009 ($N = 7255$). Results show that although the internal diffusion and frequency of the forms of communicative sociability changed, on the whole the amount of sociability has increased so slightly that it would be more appropriate to speak about real stability over the time. Secondly, results reveal that the possession of mobile phones and personal computers in 1996, and respectively the Internet in 2009, was especially associated with the increase in sociability. Lastly, the socio-demographic profile of the Europeans practising these forms of sociability changed between 1996 and 2009, although less than one might have expected.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, a vast amount of research has been published on the relationship between sociability and information and communication technologies (ICTs) (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Rice, 2002; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002; Rice et al., 2007). Sociological studies have mainly investigated whether the adoption and use of ICTs have (1) weakened (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie and Erbing, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Turkle, 2011), (2) reinforced (Wellman et al., 2001; Kraut et al., 2002; Ling, 2004, 2008; Fischer, 2010) or (3) supplemented the forms of co-present sociability. This question has remained interesting to investigate because previous results are contradictory. Their inconsistency depends on many reasons. First of all, various concepts, such as contact, social bond and relationship, are arbitrarily used synonymously with sociability, creating a lot of confusion because they refer to different notions. The term 'contact' puts the accent on the beginning of social interaction, the phatic dimension of the relation, to borrow Jakobson's definition (1960), and indicates merely that one knows how to trace the person in question. Hence, this term does not grasp the intensity and solidity of the relationship. The phrase 'social bond' stresses the outcome of meaningful social relationships that cement close ties between individuals (Hirschi, 1969; Krohn and Massey, 1980). Finally, social relationship makes a reference to the social interaction that occurs between two or more individuals (Giddens, 2006). Using these words indifferently does not promote clarity of analysis and research. Secondly, sociability is associated with a wide range of practices, which have been investigated one by one and by using different methodologies. Thirdly, the inconsistency of the available results stems from the differences in research

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designs and the lack of standardized measures (Zhao, 2006). Furthermore, diverse variables have been applied to explain the variability in people's sociability. This results in theoretical dissatisfaction with regard to a casual, taken-for-granted and careless application of the concept of sociability.

The aim of this article is to investigate only the most common forms of body-to-body sociability. The forms of sociability chosen were based on a careful analysis of previous sociological studies. This analysis was followed by an empirical pretest of the questionnaire with 100 respondents which verified the most practised sociability forms. This present study focuses on how these forms evolved from 1996 to 2009 – the time when ICTs truly proliferated in Europe – and on the main reasons for their evolution. The expression 'body-to-body sociability' is utilized by drawing upon a theoretical work published by Fortunati (2005) in which she challenged 'face-to-face' expression. Fortunati posits that a huge amount of research shows that we communicate not only with our words, gazes and facial expressions but with all our body, which is the main site of the non-verbal language (i.e. sweats, tremors, gestures, spatial positions and postures). Thus, it is paradoxical that communication studies continue to use the reductive metaphor 'face-to-face communication', while as Fortunati (2005: 1) writes body-to-body communication 'expresses more accurately all the richness of communication between copresent individuals'.

This article, furthermore, aims to find out how the socio-demographic profile of Europeans practising these forms evolved simultaneously, elaborating reasons for this evolution. The study will look at how the possession of various media and newspaper reading are related to practising concrete forms of body-to-body sociability. Newspapers are investigated among ICTs since a recent study (Fortunati et al., forthcoming) shows that print, online and free newspaper users are more likely than non-users to actively engage in socio-cultural forms of sociability.

From the above aims of this study it follows that the electronically mediated forms of sociability are not addressed here. Instead, while previous studies have mainly focused on one technological medium at a time (e.g. about the Internet, Rice et al., 2007; about the mobile, Campbell and Kwak, 2010), the aim of this study is to contribute to a broader picture by looking at the possession and use of different technologies in one and the same study. These technologies include television, mobile phones, personal computers and the Internet as well as newspaper reading. The most common forms of sociability will be summarized in an index that is envisaged to help us to analyze trends in people's sociability. The study is based on two telephone surveys carried out in Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Spain in 1996 ($N = 6609$) and 2009 ($N = 7255$).

Finally, we suggest that as previous studies have not presented a systematic exploitation of the concept and measures of sociability, this has negatively affected the consistency of some previous findings and the possibility of comparing them. Hence, in the following section the concept of sociability will be scrutinized with the purpose of clarifying the theoretical premises of our study. It will be shown that this study is grounded on the meaning of sociability, which emphasizes its concrete expressions. Furthermore, it will be shown that the forms of sociability that are under investigation represent a fundamental part of the historical development of this concept in sociological discourse. The next section will also reveal the need to expand the concept of sociability in the light of other fundamental sociological categories, such as communication, mobility and labour.

1.1. The concept of sociability

The term *sociability* has two meanings, the first of which is the tendency to live in society understood both as an attitude of human beings to do so and as a psychological disposition to do good things for others (Amirou, 1989). The second meaning is the ensemble of intercurrent relations or interactions among the individuals who are part of a given society. However, another term, *sociability*, which refers to the capacity to socialize, intersects with sociability. Sociability has a positive meaning as benevolence towards others, but also a negative one as behaviour against the common and general good. Over time, the meanings of politeness, kindness, pleasantness and civilization have also converged in this tenable sociological concept (Gemelli and Malatesta, 1982: 11).

Several disciplines, one after another, have contributed to the sociability concept: from sociology to history, from anthropology to economy, and from psychology to ethnography. In German philosophy, Kant (1784/2010), for example, introduced the notion of 'unsocial sociability' whereby human beings are inclined both to associate themselves with and to isolate themselves from others. Schleiermacher (1799/1995), for one, considered that free sociability is recognized as a fundamental need of every educated human being. Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson (1767) discovered the 'law of sociability', which says that living in society comes naturally to humankind and hence the state of nature is a social state.

In German sociology, the discussion about sociality was furthered by the sociology of forms through scholars such as Tönnies, Weber, Simmel and von Wiese. But in general, the study of sociability became the specific purpose of social morphology which had the mandate to investigate the forms of sociality. In the French world, the contribution of Gabriel Tarde (1893) was fundamental in examining the historical transformation of sociality forms, in particular of friendship and its change after the development of urbanization. A few years later, Bouglé (1902) broadened the idea of sociability by proposing that association and cooperation should be included in it as well. By studying pauperism and the life of the working classes, social economy focused on moral education and rationalization of leisure time. Social economy saw education and leisure time as areas where it was possible to impose a model of a controllable and ordered sociability (Gemelli and Malatesta, 1982: 19).

Simmel's (1910/1949) contribution to the elaboration of sociability is generally considered fundamental. But while Simmel reduced sociability mainly to individual interaction, Halbwachs (1933) investigated the forms of sociability by analysing those connected to the lifestyle and mentality of the working class. Some years later, Gurvitch (1938) identified the

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