bined the two perspectives existed. Palmaru references Siegfried J. Schmidt’s more recent works, yet he seems to be unaware of (or silently dismisses) Schmidt’s seminal work Kognitive Autonomie und Soziale Orientierung (1994), which raises exactly this question: How do cognitive autonomy and social orientation go together? I believe much of what Schmidt had to say about this question in the 1990s is still helpful today and might be worth revisiting. Furthermore, the hiatus between macro- and micro-level perspectives and the struggle to combine the two could be described as one of the challenges for the humanities and social sciences in general. Various important theories try to solve this puzzle — think of Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens to name but a few. I find Palmaru’s vision of a ‘social constructivism’ (§2) that bridges the macro-micro divide appealing. However, there is a long tradition and a large body of work available in this context that has to be taken into account on this route and that Palmaru does not even mention.

Author’s Response: Culture Matters
Raivo Palmaru

> Upshot • I draw the attention to the fact that the communication concept of Luhmann’s social system theory and that of radical constructivism are not congruent. Also, communication and culture cannot be understood without taking into consideration that they are two sides of the same coin and that both act as reality-generating agents.

— 1 — First of all, I would like to thank both of the commentators who responded to my article. One of these, Martin Zierold, responded to my question, “How do[es] culture emerge in communication from the individual constructions of people?” with a question “How do you know it does?”. He went on to say that he does not want to debate my paper because he lacks criteria for assessing my suggestions. Zierold points out that the issues I discuss are merely “one possible way of conceptualizing culture in its relation to communication and individual constructions of people.” He adds, referring to Christoph Jacke, that “culture does not exist, but we need it.” I agree that culture is not something that can be put on a table and studied with a magnifying glass. Instead, it is the 18th camel from the Middle Eastern story that helped three mourning brothers fulfill their fathers’ last wish. So what I suggest in my article is not the truth of the last instance, but only one possible way of explaining the connection between communication and culture. There are certainly other possibilities that give a completely different view on the connection between culture and communication.

Why culture?
— 2 — Martin Zierold’s question “Under which conditions is it viable/helpful/productive to talk about ‘culture’?” is a little late, because the topic of culture already achieved a broader breakthrough in social sciences thirty-four years ago. In communication science, connecting culture and communication became as self-evident as walking on two legs after the publication of James W. Carey’s book Communication as Culture in 1989. According to Carey, communication does not mean transmitting messages in space as much as the constant construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful world. Carey even compares communication with a religious or magic ritual where a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed, which unites people and strengthens the relationship between them (Carey 2009: 15). Therefore, according to Carey, communication is primarily a process of the representation of shared beliefs and the maintenance of society over time.

— 3 — Nearly twenty years ago, Siegfried J. Schmidt developed cultural constructivism within the framework of radical constructivism (RC) in his seminal work Kognitive Autonomie und Soziale Orientierung (1994). I cannot agree with the implications Zierold draws in his §9, which leave the impression that this book is somehow at odds with Siegfried J. Schmidt’s later works. On the contrary, it introduces socio-cultural constructivism and Schmidt relies on the same logic in his later publications. Until 1994, the argumentation of RC relied mainly on the data of natural sciences, primarily biology, neurophysiology, and psychology. However, in Kognitive Autonomie und Soziale Orientierung Schmidt introduced cultural arguments. In the 2003 book, Histories and Discourses, a new manner of argumentation evolves – discursive self-grounding – which Schmidt also continued in his later works.

— 4 — However, the abovementioned does not mean that the question “Under which conditions is it viable to talk about culture?” is not legitimate or reasonable. This question may always be asked. The reasons that made me write the target article are primarily related to my empirical studies. For example, I have compared the coverage of different political figures in fifteen media outlets. The main (so far unpublished) finding was that the media evaluated the different individual and collective agents very differently, some in a very negative way and others mainly positively. However, the output of the different media sources studied was astonishingly similar. The main reason for the limited variance of the studied variables seems to be cultural – choices of journalists, the attribution of meaning, and

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the resulting evaluation of agents being based on the prevailing pattern of shared assumptions.

«5» One of my main study interests is media influence. In many cases, I have measured the strong relationship between evaluations of political parties by the media and corresponding election and poll results (Palmaru 2001, 2005). However, in some cases it appears that the media has no influence at all. Why is it so? What is the process whereby media influence is generated and how can the relationship between media coverage and people’s preferences be theoretically modelled? Traditional research into the influence of the media supposes media effects in the media users. But it often appears that there are more people affected than simply the recipients of media messages, especially at the macro level. Of course, the picture changes when we also bear in mind its indirect communication with friends, family members, acquaintances, colleagues, etc. But here we encounter another paradox. Namely, upon closer inspection, it soon appears that the direct user of media could be less affected than a person who does not use the observed media outlet, and that the same medium might have a different impact in different groups. Therefore, we can conclude that linear causation does not apply in regard to media effects. Here, we are dealing with the interaction of many individuals, and the phenomena appearing as a result are emergent properties of that interaction. However, this process has needed theoretical conceptualisation.

«6» Therefore, I find it difficult to agree with Zierold’s critique in §7, where he says: “[i]t seemed to me that Palmaru is prima facie rather essentialist in his conceptualisation of Luhmann’s social system theory and its consequences, even though it remains attentive to all three factors” (§3).

Concerning Zierold’s comment, that in “some passages of his article, Palmaru seems to advocate a rather essentialist perspective on culture” (§6), similar comments were also made to Ernst von Glasersfeld himself who responded in the following way:

“[t]his position is problematic, mainly because he equalised the communication concept of Luhmann’s social system theory and that of radical constructivism and took Luhmann’s position in defining communication, which does not coincide with the RC position. The difference is that Luhmann takes the position that it is not the individual but only communication that communicates, and not people but communications produce other communications (see Luhmann 2008: 261f.).

Luhmann defines communication as a combination of three components: information, utterance and understanding, each of which he conceptualised as selection. Information is a selection from a repertoire of possibilities. With utterance, Luhmann refers to the form of and reason for a communication, and understanding is conceptualised as the distinction between information and utterance. In Luhmann’s concept, the third element – understanding – plays a central role: a communication is ultimately determined through the understanding (see Luhmann 1995a: 143). According to Luhmann, a communication as unity of the three selections cannot be attributed to any one individual (psychic system) and the meaning of the communication is neither contained in the mind of the sender nor of the receiver (ibid: 139–140, 143–144).

In radical constructivist understanding, communication takes place as a reflexive social process of sign use that serves the verbal organisation of interactions or common activities. However, as we know, the signs consist of two components – the signifier and the signified, the first of them being the form that the sign takes; and the second being the concept, idea or thought it represents. The latter is naturally created in the mind of an individual. Here, the communication theories of RC and Luhmann differ significant-

http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/journal/8/1/063.palmaru
ly. I do not deny that communications are produced by social systems recursively and self-referentially. However, communication cannot take place without the receiver understanding the utterance in the same way as the sender. It is necessary that both must have the same understanding of meaning of the utterance. According to Luhmann, the meaning of the communication is not contained in the mind of either the receiver or the sender. According to his theory, communication is irreducibly social and on that level meanings exist outside individual minds (cf. §§ 8–22 in my article). My proposal to distinguish between personal sense structures and socio-cultural meanings derives from the desire to broaden Luhmann’s conception somewhat.

13 In §4, Meitz falls short of taking into consideration the existence of socio-cultural constructivism and the principle change in the argumentation strategy of constructivism, which was created by Schmidt’s book Histories and Discourses. Meitz writes that the author of the target article establishes “a range of conceptual antonyms opposing communication, and his starting point is the juxtaposition of communication and culture” (§4). Furthermore, he thinks that, “culture appears as an auxiliary construction to surmount the implications of Luhmann’s work.”

14 Meitz’s subsequent text is suitable for illustrating to what extent the process of generating information in the course of perceiving a message depends on the assumptions of the receiver. For example, he writes that “At no point is a functional assignment for culture given” (§4). However, this has been done in the target article (§§40–43 and 52). In his §7, Meitz writes that

15 I have to insist that this is in contradiction to what I wrote in §§28 and 29, where I explicitly said that communication acts to surmount and correct the autopoietic closeness of consciousness and described communication in a constructivist manner. In comparison with Luhmann, the only vital difference is that I do not stop with the assertion that the social domain consists of communications, but I also explain how communications come about.

16 Meitz’s passage “author’s attempt to redefine sharing as a form of socially binding participation” (§5) is misleading without additional explanation because it fails to refer with sufficient clarity to the fact that knowledge is not passively received, nor can it be transmitted either; it is actively built up by the cognising subject.

17 Meitz also attempts to address a problem that I discuss in my article – How do a shared knowledge and culture emerge in communication from the individual constructions of people? – through the point of view of identity (§§8, 9, 14). Principally, it can be done through the theorem of double contingency, meaning, identity or some other way. However, because the question also lies in the fact that in Luhmann’s work the elements of social system – communications – create meanings independent of the consciousness of individuals, it is reasonable to focus on meaning and not identity or double contingency when searching for a solution. This is further supported by the fact that the two latter ways also lead to meaning.

18 So Meitz’s promise at the beginning of the remarks to call my terminology into question seems to have been unfulfilled because he (a) without realising it, placed the communication concepts of constructivism and Luhmann into the one pot and (b) rejected socio-cultural constructivism, which focuses on communication, media, and culture as the reality-generating agents. Therefore, the points of departure of the target article and Meitz’s comment appear to be too incompatible to spark a fruitful discussion.

Conclusion

19 I realise that my adaptability discussion (§§60ff) by default presumes a dualistic epistemological position and the considerable role of reality – the hidden reality always limits what is possible. I presumed that this is exactly where the critique of the commentators could have been directed. However, because there was no such criticism, I would not want to refrain from saying that most probably the problem of dualism is understood in a simplified manner. For some time, RC has developed towards non-dualism and with it attempts have been made to take the question of reality out of the theoretical domain in the contexts of our lifeworld. But this has never been achieved. Dualism cannot be avoided by replacing von Glasersfeld’s viability with the social acceptance of knowledge or inner coherence of common knowledge. In my opinion, the 20th century history of Europe confirms it more than convincingly. We have to surrender the traditional dualistic view that explicitly or implicitly presumes we have access to an experience-indepen
dent reality and that is expressed in such dichotomies as “subject/object” or “experience/reality.” This traditional approach does not sufficiently consider a simple fact that living beings are anything but passive. They do not respond blindly to the outer world, but are in a complicated interaction with their environment and gradually derive experiences – both knowledge and schemes of reaction that they create themselves. In this process, the question does not lie in the fact of whether the perceived objects “in here” correspond to the objects “out there.” For what counts is survival, coping in one’s environment.

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**Palmaru’s division of meaning into a human domain, which is defined as personal sense structures, and social-cultural meanings, defining a social domain that itself is not identical with communication, caters for a phenomenological substitute by implication.**

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