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# A Social Reasoning Mechanism Based On Dependence Networks

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**Abstract.** This paper describes the fundamental concepts of a *social reasoning mechanism*, designed to be part of an agent's internal model, in a multi-agent systems (MAS) context. It enables an agent to reason about the others using information about their goals, actions, resources and plans. Every agent stores this information in a data structure called external description. We have formally defined and implemented the concepts of *external description*, *dependence relation*, and *dependence network*. One of the main contributions of this work is that an agent can infer his dependence on others using either his own plans or those of the others. As a result, we have defined a preliminary taxonomy of *dependence situations* regarding the goal being analysed (unilateral, mutual or reciprocal) and the sets of plans used in this reasoning mechanism (mutually or locally believed). We have used this model to build a dependence network simulator, called DEPNET, which is also briefly described in this paper.

**Keywords:** multi-agent systems, cognitive modelling, communication and cooperation, integrating several AI components.

## 1 Introduction

The main goal of this work, developed in a scientific cooperation program between the LIFIA/IMAG and the IP/CNR, was to combine the complementary expertise of these groups in the multi-agent systems (MAS) domain. In particular, we have designed and implemented a computational model of the Social Power Theory [4], using the concept of dependence relation [3]. This model, as well as some of its extensions, will be used in some modules of the LIFIA's MAS platform [2] and agent models [10], mainly involving conflict management in MAS. On the other hand, we have used this model to build a dependence network simulator, called DEPNET. This simulator will enable the IP/CNR's research staff to experiment and validate some future theoretical results.

The ability of reasoning about the others is an essential issue in a so called "intelligent" agent. Moreover, if we consider a MAS as an open system [7], this feature enables an agent to adapt himself to an evolving environment, to take into account information about new members of the agency (as an example, one can think of a robot's agency, when new robots may arrive and robots may leave due to failures). Therefore,

in our point of view, an agent must have a *social reasoning mechanism* in order to react properly when faced to such situations. On the other hand, structural analysis approaches have been extensively used in the last years, specially in social and political sciences [8]. More recently, these approaches are beginning to be used in Computer Science. An interesting work, closely related to this paper, is described in [12], where a model of dependence was designed to treat business reengineering problems. The difference between this work and the one presented in this paper is that in the former some of the types of dependences introduced are closely related to the target domain, while our approach claims to be domain-independent.

In section 2, we present the concept of *external description*, a data structure where an agent stores the information he has about the others. This information may be used to infer his *dependence relations* and to construct his *dependence networks*, as it is shown in section 3. Once constructed such networks, an agent may identify which is his *dependence situation* regarding the other agents for a specific goal. A preliminary taxonomy of these dependence situations is described in detail in section 4. Section 5 briefly presents the DEPNET simulator, a software tool we have built in order to test our ideas. Finally, we present in section 6 our conclusions and further work.

## 2 External Description

As presented in [2] [10], we consider that an essential functionality an agent has to have in order to be really autonomous (in a broader sense) is a *social reasoning mechanism*. We call social any reasoning mechanism that uses *information about the others* in order to infer some conclusions. Therefore, any agent (despite the possible different internal models an agent may have) must have a data structure where this information about the others is stored. At the LIFIA/IMAG, we call such data structure an *external description* [6]. In this paper, we define it as composed of the following elements:

- *goals*: the goals an agent wants to achieve. An agent may have more than one goal, and in this point we do not make any reference if a goal is currently active or not, this discussion is out of scope of this paper;
- *actions*: the actions an agent is able to perform;
- *resources*: the resources an agent has control on;
- *plans*: the plans an agent has, using any actions and resources, in order to achieve a certain goal. These actions

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and resources do not necessarily belong to his own set of actions and resources, and therefore an agent may *depend on others* in order to carry on a certain plan.

Let us introduce a formal notation in order to describe this concept. In the rest of this paper, we will denote  $ag_i$  as a generic agent whose social reasoning mechanism we are analysing. Therefore, for an agent  $ag_i$ , his external description  $Ext_{ag_i}$  is defined as follows:

$$Ext_{ag_i} \stackrel{def}{=} \bigcup_{j=1}^n Ext_{ag_i}(ag_j)$$

where  $Ext_{ag_i}(ag_j)$  is the corresponding entry in  $ag_i$ 's external description when the information about  $ag_j$  is stored. In the previous formula, we are supposing that the agency is composed of  $n$  agents, so each agent has  $n$  entries in his external description, corresponding to each agent that belongs to the agency, including himself.

An external description entry  $Ext_{ag_i}(ag_j)$  is by its way defined as follows:

$$Ext_{ag_i}(ag_j) \stackrel{def}{=} \{G_{ag_i}(ag_j), A_{ag_i}(ag_j), R_{ag_i}(ag_j), P_{ag_i}(ag_j)\}$$

where  $G_{ag_i}(ag_j)$  is the set of goals  $g_i$ ,  $A_{ag_i}(ag_j)$  is the set of actions  $a_i$ ,  $R_{ag_i}(ag_j)$  is the set of resources  $r_i$  and  $P_{ag_i}(ag_j)$  is the set of plans  $p_i$   $ag_i$  believes  $ag_j$  has. At this point, we must clarify that we are not interested in the moment in how an agent can gather this information about the others. This may be done by explicit communication whenever an agent enters the agency (for instance, using an introduction protocol as described in [1]) or by the agent's perception mechanisms. The important point is that this information corresponds to the beliefs an agents has regarding the others, and that these beliefs may be *neither necessarily true nor complete*. Without lacking of generality, and in order to illustrate the power of the proposed framework, we will adopt the hypothesis of external description compatibility ( $Ext_{ag_i}(ag_i) = Ext_{ag_j}(ag_i) \wedge Ext_{ag_i}(ag_j) = Ext_{ag_j}(ag_j)$ ) in the rest of this paper, when analysing the social reasoning mechanism of two related agents.

Regarding the description of the plans,  $P_{ag_i}(ag_j, g_k)$  refers to the set of plans  $p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k)$   $ag_i$  believes that  $ag_j$  has in order to achieve the goal  $g_k$ . Each plan  $p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k)$  can be formally described as:

$$p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k) \stackrel{def}{=} \{g_k, R(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k)), I(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k))\}$$

where  $g_k$  is the goal to be achieved by this plan, the second term  $R(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k))$  is a (possibly empty) set of resources used in this plan and  $I(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k))$  is a (possibly empty) sequence of instantiated actions used in this plan. By its way, each instantiated action  $i_m(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k))$  is defined as follows:

$$i_m(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k)) \stackrel{def}{=} \{a_m, R_{a_m}(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k))\}$$

where  $a_m$  is an action and  $R_{a_m}(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k))$  is a (possibly empty) set of resources used in this action, with the following constraint  $R_{a_m}(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k)) \subseteq R(p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k))$ .

For simplicity of notation, in the next sections we will drop the subscript referring to the generic agent  $ag_i$  we are analysing (for instance, we will use  $G(ag_j)$  instead of  $G_{ag_i}(ag_j)$ ).

We will also use  $P_{jk}$  and  $p_{lk}$  respectively instead of  $P_{ag_i}(ag_j, g_k)$  and  $p_{ag_{i_l}}(ag_j, g_k)$ . Whenever these notation assumptions are to be dropped, this fact will be explicitly stated.

### 3 Dependence Relations and Dependence Networks

Using the definitions cited above, an agent  $ag_i$  will be **a-autonomous** for a given goal  $g_k$ , *according to a set of plans*  $P_{qk}$  if there is a plan that achieves this goal in this set and every action appearing in this plan belongs to  $A(ag_i)$ :

$$a_{aut}(ag_i, g_k, P_{qk}) \stackrel{def}{=} \exists g_k \in G(ag_i) \exists p_{lk} \in P_{qk} \forall i_m(p_{lk}) \in I(p_{lk}) a_m \in A(ag_i)$$

Analogously, an agent  $ag_i$  will be **r-autonomous** for a given goal  $g_k$ , *according to a set of plans*  $P_{qk}$  if:

$$r_{aut}(ag_i, g_k, P_{qk}) \stackrel{def}{=} \exists g_k \in G(ag_i) \exists p_{lk} \in P_{qk} \forall r_m \in R(p_{lk}) r_m \in R(ag_i)$$

Finally, an agent an agent  $ag_i$  will be **s-autonomous** for a given goal  $g_k$ , *according to a set of plans*  $P_{qk}$  if he is both a-autonomous and r-autonomous for this goal:

$$s_{aut}(ag_i, g_k, P_{qk}) \stackrel{def}{=} a_{aut}(ag_i, g_k, P_{qk}) \wedge r_{aut}(ag_i, g_k, P_{qk})$$

The major contribution of this work is the fact that this notion of autonomy is closely related to the set of plans used in the reasoning mechanism. In other words, an agent can use either *his own* set of plans (when  $q = i$  in the definitions above) or *those of the others* in order to infer his own autonomy. Doing so, an agent can **simulate the reasoning of the others**, by using *their knowledge* (in our case, their plans).

If an agent is not autonomous for a given goal, he will depend on others to achieve it. An agent  $ag_i$  **a-depends** on another agent  $ag_j$  for a given goal  $g_k$ , according to a set of plans  $P_{qk}$  if he has  $g_k$  in his set of goals, he is not a-autonomous for  $g_k$  and there is a plan in  $P_{qk}$  that achieves  $g_k$  and at least one action used in this plan is in  $ag_j$ 's set of actions. Formally:

$$a_{dep}(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{qk}) \stackrel{def}{=} \exists g_k \in G(ag_i) \neg a_{aut}(ag_i, g_k, P_{qk}) \wedge \exists p_{lk} \in P_{qk} \exists i_m(p_{lk}) \in I(p_{lk}) a_m \in A(ag_j)$$

In a similar way, we define that an agent  $ag_i$  **r-depends** on another agent  $ag_j$  for a given goal  $g_k$ , according to a set of plans  $P_{qk}$  if:

$$r_{dep}(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{qk}) \stackrel{def}{=} \exists g_k \in G(ag_i) \neg r_{aut}(ag_i, g_k, P_{qk}) \wedge \exists p_{lk} \in P_{qk} \exists r_m \in R(p_{lk}) r_m \in R(ag_j)$$

Finally, an agent  $ag_i$  **s-depends** on another agent  $ag_j$  for a given goal  $g_k$ , according to a set of plans  $P_{qk}$  if he either a-depends or r-depends on this latter:

$$s_{dep}(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{qk}) \stackrel{def}{=} a_{dep}(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{qk}) \vee r_{dep}(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{qk})$$

Once defined these dependence relations, an agent can construct a *dependence network* to represent in a same structure all of his action/resource dependences regarding the others. These networks can be used later in the agent's social reasoning mechanism, in particular to detect the dependence situations regarding two agents for a given goal, as described in the next section.

## 4 The Dependence Situations

Since an agent has constructed his dependence networks, he can use this information when reasoning about the others. In other words, for a given goal  $g_k$ , an agent  $ag_i$  can calculate for each other agent  $ag_j$  which is the *dependence situation* relating them for this goal. A preliminary taxonomy of dependence situations are presented in figure 1. In the rest of this section, we will analyse these situations considering only a-dependences. We will call **mutual dependence** a situa-

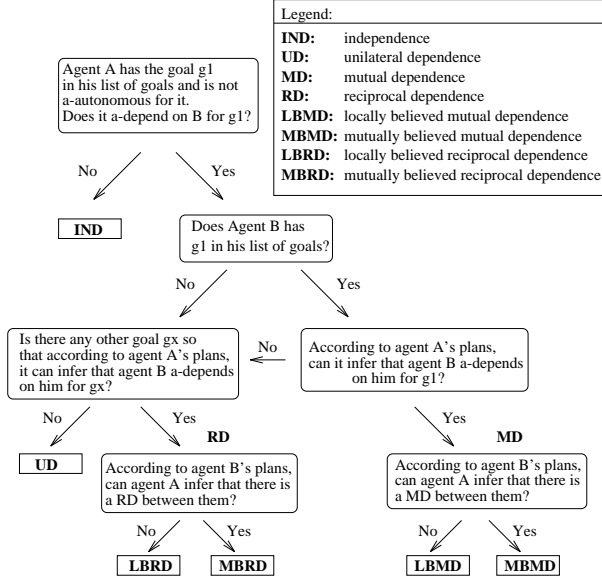


Figure 1. A Preliminary Taxonomy of Dependence Situations

tion where an agent  $ag_i$  infers that he and other agent  $ag_j$  a-depend on each other for the *same goal*  $g_k$ , according to a set of plans  $P_{qk}$ :

$$MD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{qk}) \stackrel{def}{=} a_{dep}(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{qk}) \wedge a_{dep}(ag_j, ag_i, g_k, P_{qk})$$

On the other hand, we will call **reciprocal dependence** a situation where an agent  $ag_i$  infers that he and other agent  $ag_j$  a-depend on each other, but for *different goals*  $g_k$  and  $g_l$ , according to the sets of plans  $P_{qk}$  and  $P_{ql}$  (both sets belonging to the same external description entry):

$$RD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, g_l, P_{qk}, P_{ql}) \stackrel{def}{=} a_{dep}(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{qk}) \wedge a_{dep}(ag_j, ag_i, g_l, P_{ql}) \wedge g_l \neq g_k$$

In the case of mutual dependence, a possible *cooperation* regarding this goal can happen. On the other hand, in the case of reciprocal dependence, one of them will have to adopt the other's goal first in order to achieve his own one in the future. This mechanism is called *social exchange*. These concepts are better explained in [3] [4].

An agent **locally believes** a given dependence (either mutual or reciprocal) if he uses exclusively his *own plans* when reasoning about the others. If he uses both *his own plans* and *those of the others* to reach such a conclusion, it will be said that there is a **mutual believed dependence** between them.

The difference between the locally and the mutually believed situations (either in mutual or reciprocal dependence) is very subtle: in the first case, one of the agents may not be aware of this dependence (for instance, when one of them has a different set of plans to achieve the considered goal and in neither of these plans he a-depend on the other). In this case, a plan negotiation will have to be made in order to achieve the desired goal.

Let us consider two agents  $ag_i$  and  $ag_j$ . If  $g_k \in G(ag_i)$  and  $\neg a_{aut}(ag_i, g_k, P_{ik})$ , there are six different dependence situations which may occur, considering  $ag_i$ 's reasoning mechanism. These situations are described next, and we will use as an example to illustrate them the external description presented in table 1, corresponding to an agency composed of 7 agents (*jaime, rosaria, cristiano, vittorio, maria, amedeo* and *paola*):

Table 1. Example of an external description

$ag_j$	$G(ag_j)$	$A(ag_j)$	$R(ag_j)$	$P(ag_j)$
jaime	g1 g2 g3 g4	a1	r1	g1:=a3(r1). g2:=a6(r1),a7(r2). g3:=a1(r1),a2(r3). g4:=a1(r1),a4(r5), a5(r4).
rosaria	g1	a2	r2	g1:=a2(r2).
cristiano	g5	a3	r3	g5:=a3(r3).
vittorio	g4	a4	r4	g4:=a4(r5),a5(r4).
maria	g4	a5	r5	g4:=a1(r1),a5(r7).
amedeo	g3	a6	r6	g3:=a6(r6).
paola	g2 g3	a7	r7	g2:=a5(r1),a7(r2). g3:=a1(r2),a6(r3).

- 1 **Independence:** using his own plans,  $ag_i$  infers that he does not a-depend on  $ag_j$  for  $g_k$ :

$$IND(ag_i, ag_j, g_k) \stackrel{def}{=} \neg a_{dep}(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{ik})$$

In our example, agent *jaime* is independent on agent *rosaria* regarding  $g_1$ :

Regarding agent:(rosaria)

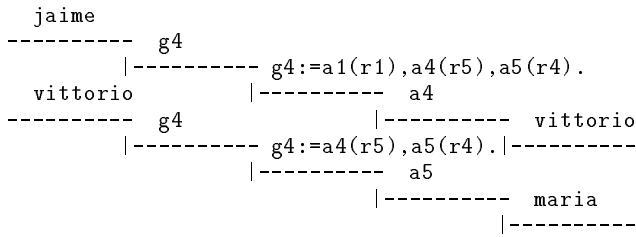
Agents (jaime) and (rosaria) are independent regarding goal g1  
 Agent (rosaria) is s-autonomous for goal g1

- 2 **Locally Believed Mutual Dependence:** using his own plans,  $ag_i$  infers that there is a mutual dependence between himself and  $ag_j$  for  $g_k$ , but he can not infer the same using  $ag_j$ 's plans:

$$LBMD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k) \stackrel{def}{=} MD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{ik}) \wedge \neg MD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{jk})$$

In our example, agent *jaime* locally believes that there is a mutual dependence between himself and agent *vittorio* for  $g_4$  (because of  $a_1$  and  $a_4$ ):

Regarding agent:(vittorio)



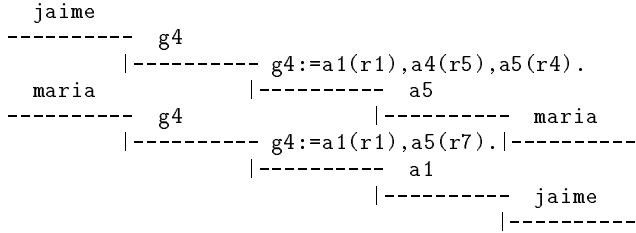
3 **Mutually Believed Mutual Dependence:** using his own plans,  $ag_i$  infers that there is a mutual dependence between himself and  $ag_j$  for  $g_k$ . Moreover, using  $ag_j$ 's plans, he infers the same mutual dependence:

$$MBMD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k) \stackrel{def}{=} MD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{ik}) \wedge MD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{jk})$$

If we adopt the hypothesis of external description compatibility described in section 2, the two agents  $ag_i$  and  $ag_j$  will infer the same result, since it is quite easy to prove the following identity:  $MBMD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k) \iff MBMD(ag_j, ag_i, g_k)$ .

In our example, there is a mutually believed mutual dependence between agents *jaime* and *maria* for  $g_4$  (because of  $a_1$  and  $a_5$ ):

Regarding agent:(maria)



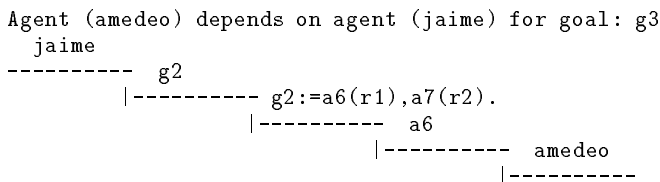
One must note that despite this mutually believed dependence, we are not supposing that *the plans involved must be the same*, as in this example. An agent may start, for instance, an interaction protocol in order to persuade the other to adopt his own plan. This feature has the advantage of not restricting unnecessarily the proposed framework.

4 **Locally Believed Reciprocal Dependence:** using his own plans,  $ag_i$  infers that there is a reciprocal dependence between himself and  $ag_j$  for  $g_k$  and  $g_l$ , but he can not infer the same using  $ag_j$ 's plans:

$$LBRD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, g_l) \stackrel{def}{=} RD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, g_l, P_{ik}, P_{il}) \wedge \neg RD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, g_l, P_{jk}, P_{jl})$$

In our example, agent *jaime* locally believes that there is a reciprocal dependence between himself and agent *amedeo* regarding  $g_2$  (because of  $a_6$ ) and  $g_3$  (because of  $a_1$ ):

Regarding agent:(amedeo)



Agent (amedeo) is s-autonomous for goal  $g_3$

5 **Mutually Believed Reciprocal Dependence:** using his own plans,  $ag_i$  infers that there is a reciprocal dependence between himself and  $ag_j$  for  $g_k$  and  $g_l$ . Moreover, using  $ag_j$ 's plans, he infers the same reciprocal dependence:

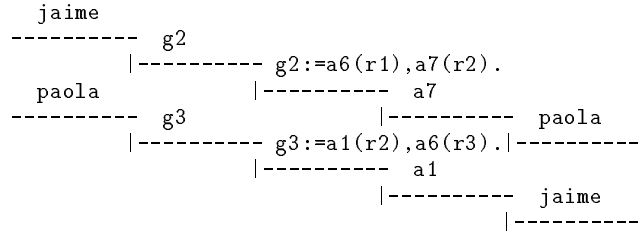
$$MBRD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, g_l) \stackrel{def}{=} RD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, g_l, P_{ik}, P_{il}) \wedge RD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, g_l, P_{jk}, P_{jl})$$

Once more, the two agents  $ag_i$  and  $ag_j$  will infer the same result if we adopt the hypothesis of external description compatibility, since it is also quite easy to prove the following identity:  $MBRD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, g_l) \iff MBRD(ag_j, ag_i, g_l, g_k)$ .

In our example, there is a mutually believed reciprocal dependence between agents *jaime* and *paola* regarding  $g_2$  (because of  $a_7$ ) and  $g_3$  (because of  $a_1$ ):

Regarding agent:(paola)

Agent (paola) depends on agent (jaime) for goal:  $g_3$



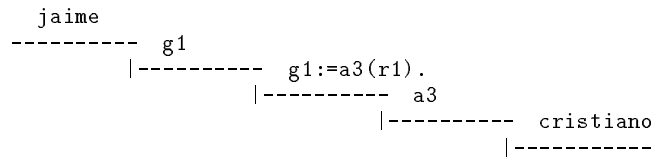
Once again, as in the MBMD situation, we are not supposing that *the plans involved must be the same*, as in the proposed example.

6 **Unilateral Dependence:** using his own plans,  $ag_i$  infers that he a-depends on  $ag_j$  for  $g_k$ , but this latter does not a-depend on him for any of his goals:

$$UD(ag_i, ag_j, g_k) \stackrel{def}{=} a_{dep}(ag_i, ag_j, g_k, P_{ik}) \wedge \neg \exists g_l \in G(ag_j) a_{dep}(ag_j, ag_i, g_l, P_{il})$$

In our example, agent *jaime* is unilaterally dependent on agent *cristiano* regarding  $g_1$  (because of  $a_3$ ):

Regarding agent:(cristiano)



Agent (cristiano) have not goal  $g_1$  in his current list of goals

## 5 The DEPNET Simulator

We have implemented a simulator, called DEPNET, which calculates both the dependence relations and situations between agents, and constructs the dependence networks of a given agent. According to the hypothesis of external description compatibility presented in section 2, there is only one external description which is shared by all agents. This simulator is composed of the following facilities:

- *agent edition module*: the user can dynamically create new agents and edit their goals, actions, resources, and plans, or modify the entry of an existing agent in the external description;
- *dependence network constructor*: this module constructs the various dependence networks of a given agent, either related to a specific goal or to all of his goals. It can construct both the a-dependence and the r-dependence networks for both cases;
- *dependence situation constructor*: this module calculates the dependence situations regarding a given agent and one of his goals. The user must specify the type of dependence situation he is interested in analysing.

The DEPNET simulator runs in UNIX workstations, and it was developed using the C++ programming language. The total number of lines of code is approximately 5800.

## 6 Conclusions and Further Work

In this paper, we have stressed the importance of a **social reasoning mechanism** in an agent's internal model, considering a MAS context. This feature is essential if an agent has to adapt himself to an evolving environment, to take into account information about new members of the agency, in an open system context [7].

The most obvious consequence of using such a mechanism is *decreasing the overall agency communication flow*. Even if every agent sends a broadcasting message to introduce himself, this is done only once, when he enters the agency. Since the others can take into account this information, there is no more need to send a broadcasting message every time an agent needs a given action or resource, as in [11], as he can know a priori the agents he should address.

On the other hand, the proposed framework allows an agent who wants to achieve a given goal to reason about the others in *two* different levels: *whom do I depend on* (in this case he may use only the dependence relations) and *who depends on me* (in this case he can use the dependence situations). Depending on the nature of the agents, these both levels may be used or not. Normally, the second level is hardly used in a benevolent world, where every agent wants to cooperate with the others. On the other hand, self-interested agents that want to achieve their own goals could benefit from the dependence situations in order to get their needed actions/resources more quickly, as described in [9]. Anyway, just the fact of using the first level has already a great impact in reducing the overall agency communication flow.

We intend to improve the *DEPNET simulator* (graphical interfaces, log files for storing sessions, unification mechanism for the plans) and extend the *dependence situations* (taking into account r-dependences as well). The computational models will be *integrated in LIFIA's MAS platform and agent models* (in particular by implementing both an introduction protocol [1] and an internal model of agent that uses the dependence networks in his social reasoning mechanism) and the DEPNET simulator will be used in more sophisticated *micro-social simulations* (to validate some theoretical results, specially concerning three or more party dependences [5]). Finally, we want to propose a model for the *quantification of dependence* (using goals' importance, number of actions and resources involved in a plan and so on). The main idea is

to use this quantification to guide a decision mechanism in solving conflicts.

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