Argumentative and Aggressive Communication Theory, Research, and Application
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What Are Argumentative and Aggressive Communication?

To say that conflict exists everywhere would be to state the obvious. Conflict occurs between all people and in all contexts. If you were to review your interactions with people you encounter from day to day, you can probably recall numerous instances in which your communication with them was marked by disagreement. That is, you and others seem to see the world in very different ways, and the positions you hold on various issues seemed to be divergent.

For example, you may recall conversations you had with friends, such as, "What is the best comedy program on television?" "Which major in college creates the greatest chance for getting a job after graduation?" "Who makes the best pizza in the city?" "Which brand of jeans is the most attractive?" or "Which current musical performer or group is the best?" One of your authors can recall arguments he had with friends many years ago about who were the better musical groups: the Beatles or the Rolling Stones, the Temptations or the Four Tops. The excitement felt when arguments were presented on a variety of such subjects, and the feelings of satisfaction experienced when he was able to win them over to his side are still palpable decades later. Although the issues, topics, and characters have changed, these types of arguments and the positive feelings about arguing continue today.

You may even consider arguing with friends and colleagues fun or a type of recreational activity that is a satisfying alternative to watching television or

listening to the radio (Rancer, Baukus, & Infante, 1985; Rancer, Kosberg, & Baukus, 1992). In this context, arguing with someone is seen as stimulating, exciting, and exhilarating, and the outcomes produced by a good argument are deemed constructive and beneficial. These feelings of excitement, interest, and enjoyment may have led you to believe that arguing is a constructive activity and an effective and satisfying way to communicate with people.

As you review your interactions with parents, relational partners, supervisors, spouses, colleagues, children, and even strangers, another, less favorable view of arguing may also emerge. You can no doubt recall instances in which an argument was anything but fun and constructive. That is, the argument you were in might have led to feelings of anger, hurt, embarrassment, or humiliation and may have even led to damaging or the termination of the interpersonal relationship. Perhaps you can recall an example of an argument that became so destructive that it quickly turned to name calling and may have culminated with the individuals engaged in some form of physical aggression (e.g., shoving, pushing, hitting) or other forms of violence. Although hopefully less common, these situations may have led you to believe that arguing is something to be avoided at all costs, even if it means having to suppress your true feelings and yield to another person's wishes. As such, you may have come to believe that arguing is a very destructive form of communication.

Examples of destructive communication behavior during conflict are often highlighted by stories in magazines, in newspapers, on radio, and on television. Political messages often contain these destructive forms of communication. For example, columnist George Will, writing about incivility, reported that during a congressional dispute, one member of Congress who was told to "shut up" retorted by calling his colleague a "wimp" and a "fruitcake" (Will, 2003). In the 1992 presidential campaign, President George H.W. Bush verbally attacked the competence of candidates Bill Clinton and Al Gore by stating, "My dog Millie knows more about foreign policy than these two Bozos" (Keen, 1996). Morning drive radio is peppered with attacks on people's character, competence, and physical appearance. Nationally syndicated radio programs such as *The Howard Stern Show* contain numerous instances of this type of communication. The use of profanity in communication is more ubiquitous than ever. Profanity is pervasive in movies and cable television programs and was becoming more commonplace even on broadcast television programs before the recent crackdown by the Federal Communications Commission (Peterson, 2000).

Constructive communication has taken a marked downturn, even in contexts in which officials and rules are supposed to prevail. According to reports in the media, if you watch children play organized sports you are

likely to observe parents shouting at coaches, referees, and other players. Headlines such as "Father accused of biting son's coach" (2001) and "Hockey death no surprise to sports observers" (Bayles, 2000) have emerged in the past several years. This latter article describes the tragic outcome of a conflict between two parents attending their children's hockey scrimmage at an ice rink in Reading, Massachusetts, in July 2000. After exchanging hostile words over a physical altercation between their children, one of the parents became enraged and physically attacked the other and "beat him into a coma, witnesses said" (Bayles, p. 3A). The man who was attacked later died from those injuries.

Even the workplace is not immune from these forms of aggressive behavior. A new phenomenon is emerging and is being compared with road rage, the type of aggression experienced when driving: "a significant portion of the U.S. work force is suffering everything from uncomfortable and distracting incivilities to stress-induced attacks on trash cans, keyboards and even co-workers, all expressions of what one survey called 'desk rage'" (Girion, 2000, p. W1). The frequency of gossip, hostile e-mail messages, snide comments, and even physical aggression between managers and subordinates and between workplace colleagues has reportedly increased in recent years.

You may have even experienced some conflict today. Consider the following examples: As you got ready to prepare to go to class this morning, both you and your roommate may have wanted to use the bathroom at the same time. With only one bathroom in the apartment, this was impossible and an argument erupted about who should use it first. In a fit of frustration, your roommate says that it was probably a mistake for the two of you to live together and accuses you of being spoiled.

Later in the day, you call your mother and ask if you can borrow some money to repair your car. During the conversation, you and your mom get into it when she states that you lack control and spend your money recklessly. In your communication research class, the instructor hands back the results of the exam you took the other day. You receive a grade of C- and feel that you were graded unfairly. You follow the professor back to her office and argue that several of the questions were ambiguous and irrelevant to the chapters covered on the test. The professor decides not to yield to your challenge, and your grade of C- stands.

Later on, you open your cell phone bill and find roaming charges for calls that you understood to be unrestricted and part of the plan you signed up for. You call customer service and argue about exactly what is and what is not covered on your "unlimited" plan.

Looking forward to some evening relaxation, you and your significant other discuss where you will go out to eat for dinner. You want Chinese

food; your partner wants Italian. An argument erupts when your partner calls you selfish and stubborn because you do not see the merits of Italian over Chinese food. These scenarios represent a few of the situations in which conflict may have emerged in your daily life. Of course, these are but a few of the many forms of conflict communication, but the latter examples typify verbal aggressiveness.

The Genesis of the Theory of Argumentative and Aggressive Communication

In 1978, one of the authors was a doctoral student in communication studies at Kent State University. He and his professor, Dominic Infante, were interested in developing a measure of interpersonal communication competence and were discussing what constitutes a competent interpersonal communicator. After a rather exhaustive review of literature, they identified a number of factors research had indicated might be associated with interpersonal communication competence. Among those factors identified were openness and self-disclosure, listening, feedback, supportive communication, empathy, trust, and perspective-taking ability. The list, however, seemed to contain only those factors that might come into play during interpersonal communication in which agreement and interpersonal bonding was the goal. In examining this list of interpersonal communication competence behaviors, they noted the absence of behaviors that deal with communication during interpersonal conflict, communication behaviors that are considered argumentative and aggressive in nature.

Much interpersonal communication takes place when individuals disagree with each other about important relationship issues or when individuals espouse significantly different positions on issues they feel are important to the relationship. After all, almost everyone has held a position contrary to their partner on an important (and sometimes unimportant) relationship issue. As a former intercollegiate debater and debate coach, as well as a student and scholar trained in argumentation, Infante suggested that it might be profitable to explore the influence of personality when people hold different positions on controversial issues. He observed that people seem to differ in their desire and motivation to engage in argumentative behavior. Some people may be seen as incessant arguers, who enjoy engaging in an argument with others no matter who they are arguing with or what the topic of the argument is. Some of these highly argumentative types even talk back to their radio when they disagree with what is being said on one of the many national and local talk radio programs.

It is also apparent that many other individuals rarely voice their position at all on controversial issues. Such people appear to avoid arguing with others, even when they are passionate about an issue and despite the fact that it would be in their best interests to do so. For still others, the tendency to argue seems to be influenced by factors in the situation; that is, they either increase or dampen their desire to argue depending upon who they are arguing with, what they are arguing about, and the situation or context in which the argument takes place. It was clear, however, that people seem to differ in their underlying motivation to engage in argumentative communication and thus a systematic program designed to study aggressive communication started. We began by defining aggressive communication and then developed a conceptualization and measure of one form of aggressive communication, argumentativeness. In so doing, we made sure to distinguish argumentativeness from another form of aggressive communication, verbal aggressiveness. A few years later, Infante and Wigley (1986) developed a more complete conceptualization and measure of verbal aggressiveness.

Purpose of This Book

It is the purpose of this book to review the journey that has been taken toward the development of what is called *the theory of argumentative and aggressive communication.* Hopefully by the end of this journey, you will better understand the differences between constructive and destructive communication exhibited when conflict exists or when people disagree with each other. As communication scientists, we believe that the most important "way of knowing" comes about as the result of "the activities of scholars committed to a scientific approach to generating answers to questions" (Beatty, 1996, p. 37). In this book we will identify a number of questions that have been raised about communication during disagreement, and through reviewing and synthesizing this body of research, we will attempt to provide some answers to those questions.

Several years ago, Infante and Rancer (1996) reached a number of conclusions about argumentative and aggressive communication based on the research available at that time. In this book, we will update many of those conclusions and attempt to articulate new ones as well. In summarizing that research over a decade ago, Infante and Rancer presented "the rather unequivocal conclusion that the effects of argumentativeness are constructive and those of verbal aggressiveness are destructive" (p. 345). We believe this conclusion is further strengthened by an examination of the studies reported here.

Part I will begin by defining the structure and origin of argumentative and aggressive communication. We will first present a conceptualization of argumentative and aggressive communication as they are situated within the cluster of other communication and personality traits. This section will also review the major approaches to studying argumentative and aggressive communication and present the issues related to the measurement of these predispositions. In Part II we will present a rather thorough review of how the argumentative and aggressive communication traits function in a variety of communication contexts. A plethora of research has been conducted over the past 25-plus years on the influence of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness in the relational and family context, in the organizational context, in the instructional context, in the intercultural context, in mediated contexts, and in persuasion and social influence situations. Much of that research will be discussed in this section of the book. Part III of the book will present suggestions based on this corpus of research regarding how one could modify these traits to enhance the chances of more effective and satisfying outcomes of communication encounters. This part of the book will also describe how knowledge and understanding of these traits has been, and can be, employed to try and overcome social and personal problems dealing with communication during conflict. The book will conclude with suggestions for future directions for research and theory-building efforts offered by some of the most noteworthy scholars in argumentative and aggressive communication.

The Importance of Communication Traits

If you were to search the literature in the communication discipline for the past 35 years, you would discover that communication traits and predispositions have occupied a central place. A large percentage of research and theory building activity has been directed at (a) identifying a cluster of communication traits, (b) understanding how these traits and predispositions emerge, and (c) determining how these traits influence our actual communication behavior in several communication contexts. Communication trait researchers believe that a better understanding of other people can be obtained by knowing the traits an individual possesses. By examining communication traits, scholars hope to identify ways in which individuals might be able to enjoy more favorable communicative outcomes in their lives. More specifically, these situations range from teaching argumentative skills to children and adults in an effort to de-escalate a volatile situation to helping employees interact with a difficult boss. The chapters throughout this book will highlight these and many other important communication goals.

Your exposure to traits probably goes back to your early experiences in school. You may recall that you, or someone you knew, was described as possessing a given personality trait. Shyness, friendliness, talkativeness, and assertiveness, for example, were potential traits ascribed to you or your friends by others. It is not difficult to conjure up images of individuals we know whose communication behavior is defined by those traits. One of the authors, in the second grade, was described as a troublemaker. You can probably imagine, without too much effort, the cluster of cross-situational behaviors that give the impression of a troublemaker.

The concept of a trait originated in personality theory. Psychologist Guilford (1959) defined a trait as "any distinguishable, relatively enduring way in which one individual differs from others" (p. 6). Another psychologist, Mischel (1968), suggested "a [personality] trait is a construction or abstraction to account for enduring behavioral consistencies and differences" (pp. 4–5).

Communication scholars Daly and Bippus (1998) suggest that communication and personality traits differ along several dimensions. For example, some traits are broad such as locus of control (i.e., the way in which people see their actions in relation to life's outcomes), whereas others are more narrowly focused such as communication apprehension (i.e., the fear associated with either real or anticipated communication with other people). Some traits highlight social characteristics such as shyness (i.e., the tendency to talk less than the typical person) while other traits are focused more on an individual's cognitive orientation such as dogmatism (i.e., closed-mindedness or the tendency to ignore the belief systems of other people that deviate from their own). Some traits are part of a larger conceptual framework or fit into a larger supertrait (e.g., Costa & McCrae's [1980] five factor model of personality; Eysenck & Eysenck's [1985] three dimensions of personality), whereas other traits stand alone (e.g., communicator style). Some traits are measured primarily as responses to questionnaires, whereas other traits are measured by observing a person's behavior (e.g., disclosiveness) (Daly & Bippus).

Regardless of how traits differ, the underlying assumption among communication trait theorists is that people differ from each other because of the different clusters of traits or predispositions that they possess. That is, trait theorists believe there is a great deal of variation in the way individuals interact with each other and respond to situational factors. The way a person responds, trait theorists believe, is primarily controlled by this cluster of traits. Scholars who adhere to the trait perspective of behavior suggest that individuals will most often respond to different situations with similar behavioral and interactional patterns (Nicotera, 1993, 1994; Rancer & Nicotera, in press).

That is not to say that situational influences do not have any impact on the way a person will respond communicatively in a given situation. The specific characteristics of each situation do impact somewhat the behavior of an individual. For example, consider Bob, who is absolutely terrified to speak at an interpersonal level. Let us also assume that in the past week Bob has experienced a great degree of loneliness. The loneliness (in this case a situational factor) will influence Bob's communication apprehension. Bob may want to be free from apprehension and appear interpersonally savvy. In this case, Bob's need to reduce the feelings of loneliness (a temporary state) serves to subdue his tendency for being apprehensive (an enduring trait). Some scholars believe that situational factors are more important in predicting an individual's behavior than are the cluster of traits belonging to that person. More specifically, they feel that factors in the given situation are more important than knowledge of a person's trait in predicting how people will interact and respond in that situation. Scholars who espouse this position are called *situationalists*. We will have more to say about this perspective in the next chapter. For now, we will again cite the work of Daly and Bippus (1998), who state, "Although situations clearly play a major role in affecting behavior, a situationalist perspective has not received either strong empirical or conceptual support" (p. 11). Indeed, the importance of traits has been underscored by numerous researchers (see especially Beatty, 1998; Daly & Bippus, 1998; Infante, 1987a; McCroskey, Daly, Martin, & Beatty, 1998). Perhaps most important, traits have been found to account for significant variability (i.e., the degree to which traits explain behavior and perception) in a person's actual communication and communication-based perceptions (Daly & Bippus; Rancer, 1998).

What Are Communication Traits?

Communication traits represent a subset of personality traits. More specifically, communication traits are personality-related traits that deal specifically with human symbolic behavior (i.e., communication). We can define a communication trait as "an abstraction constructed to account for enduring consistencies and differences in message-sending and message-receiving behaviors among individuals" (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 2003, p. 77). An argument for this definition can be made because studying communication traits provides us with a degree of knowledge about what to expect from a person in a given situation. It can be very helpful to us if we have some idea of what to expect when we interact with a person whom we do not know or when we hear about someone we do know when in a novel situation or new context. Knowledge of people communication traits allows us to make

relatively accurate predictions about how they will likely respond in different communication contexts (Infante et al., 2003).

Communication traits are considered part of the broader umbrella concept of personality traits, but are related more specifically to human symbolic behavior. As such, communication traits represent a subset of the larger set of personality traits. Employing an adaptation of Mischel's definition of a personality trait, a communication trait has been defined as "an abstraction constructed to account for enduring consistencies and differences in message-sending and message-receiving behaviors among individuals" (Infante et al., 2003, p. 77).

Before we present our conceptualization of aggressive communication traits, another general issue needs to be reviewed. Communication traits are considered *hypothetical constructs*. That is, they give meaning to certain communication behaviors and provide us with explanations about human communication that would not otherwise be available (Infante et al., 2003).

What is a hypothetical construct? Hypothetical constructs (such as attitudes) are invented by scholars and researchers in the social and behavioral sciences to represent something that might not be easily observed through the senses. Hypothetical constructs are invented in order that we may better or more completely explain behavior. For example, although we can measure your attitude toward an object (e.g., creamed corn), a person (e.g., Hillary Rodham Clinton), or an event (e.g., the war in Iraq), we cannot see your attitude. We can say, however, that you have a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward creamed corn. Thus, we can better explain your actual behavior regarding that object. Knowing your attitude toward creamed corn allows us to better explain and predict behaviors such as buying creamed corn at the supermarket, talking favorably about creamed corn with your friends and colleagues, asking for creamed corn at a restaurant, and the relative frequency of eating creamed corn as a side dish with dinner.

Like the hypothetical construct of attitude, communication traits are also considered hypothetical constructs. That is, we do not know that a particular trait is real (Infante et al., 2003). We continue to gather data to test our assumptions about the development, manifestation, and influence of communication traits. We continue to do this until another hypothetical construct is invented that might explain a set of behaviors or perceptions more completely and accurately.

Researchers have identified numerous communication traits and predispositions. Infante et al. (2003) developed a taxonomy (a classification system) in which to place these traits. Some traits can be classified as *apprehension traits*, such as the fear of communicating with others (e.g., communication apprehension), the tendency to initiate communication with others (e.g., willingness to communicate), or the fear of receiving

information or communication from others (e.g., receiver apprehension). Some traits are classified as *presentation traits*, such as the overall impression people make when communicating (e.g., communicator style) and the amount and types of information people reveal when communicating with others (e.g., disclosiveness). Some traits are considered *adaptation traits*, such as the tendency to hold one's own opinions while respecting the opinions of others (e.g., rhetorical sensitivity), the tendency to consider the impression one makes on other people (e.g., self-monitoring), or the tendency to be fully engaged in conversations with others (e.g., interaction involvement). Finally, some traits fall under the classification schema as *aggressive traits*. It is this last class of traits that this book will focus on.

What Is Aggressive Communication?

Infante argues that while the study of aggression has a rich and productive history in psychology and other social science disciplines, the study of aggression in interpersonal communication was hampered by lack of a "comprehensive and unified conception of aggressiveness as a personality trait" (Infante, 1987a, p. 161). In an effort to provide a structure for the study of aggressive communication, Infante offered a definition of aggression in interpersonal communication:

> An interpersonal behavior may be considered aggressive if it applies force physically or symbolically in order, minimally, to dominate and perhaps damage or, maximally, to defeat and perhaps destroy the locus of attack. The locus of attack in interpersonal communication can be a person's body, material possessions, self-concept, position on topics of communication, or behavior. (Infante, 1987a, p. 158)

In an effort to better understand the definition of interpersonally aggressive behavior, we should break this definition down into its principle components. First, a distinction is made between physical and symbolic aggression. Physical aggression involves the use of the body to apply force, such as striking or hitting someone or something. Symbolic aggression involves the use of words or other nonverbal behaviors (e.g., gestures made with the face or body, tone of voice) toward someone or something. The large body of research on argumentative and aggressive communication has sought to understand more fully when, how, and why people use symbolic aggressive behavior.

Second, the definition of interpersonal aggression also suggests that physical or symbolic aggression is used to dominate and defeat something or

someone (i.e., the locus, or the place where the attack is directed). Infante suggests that in interpersonal communication, the locus of attack could be another person's body, possessions, self-concept, or positions on controversial issues. For example, let us say Aimee wants to pressure Daniel into complying with a request to lend her his car when he is reluctant to do so. Aimee might use physical aggression (e.g., grabbing or shaking) or the threat of physical aggression in order to soften Daniel up and make him comply (e.g., "Give me the keys or I'll slap you!"). Aimee might attack Daniel's self-esteem by using profanity or by calling him names. This attempt at compliance gaining uses symbolic aggressive communication in the form of profanity or ridicule. Another person might attempt to induce compliance by presenting a threat to the relationship (e.g., "If you won't let me borrow your car, our relationship is over!"). Although these forms of physical and symbolic aggression (physical attacks, threats, and verbally attacking the self-concept of another) are not advocated by this book or the communication discipline, they are nevertheless used by some individuals to secure compliance from others (see research by Anderson & Rancer, 2003, for examples of such attacks).

Reading the above examples, one might conclude that all aggressive communication behaviors are bad. However, this is not the case. Some aggressive communication behaviors are inappropriate whereas others are considered appropriate. This is especially true if the behaviors involve two types of aggressive communication, assertiveness and argumentativeness. Consider the following example: Let us say you are required to participate in a group problem-solving activity in one of your courses. The other members of your group are having difficulty offering solutions, and the ideas of people who are offering solutions seem to you to be either impractical or foolish. Knowing that the group's grade will be based on the overall quality of the solution developed, you could take two different approaches. You could verbally attack the group's solutions, calling them ridiculous and impractical. In this case, your aggressive communication might be considered a bad thing and would do little to help the group. Or you could begin to present a series of arguments in favor of the solution you advocate. The other group members, having heard no better alternatives, like what you propose, accept the arguments you present in support of your position, and endorse your solution. In this example, your aggressive communication might be considered a good thing.

This duality of aggressive communication, the notion that aggressive communication can be considered good or bad, can be explained in a model of aggressive communication offered by Infante (1987a) in his personality approach to aggression. The Infante model provides the framework for the

rest of the book and will be used as a way of classifying all forms of symbolic aggressive communication. Essentially, the model suggests that symbolic aggression can be divided into two categories, constructive and destructive. In addition, the model suggests that a cluster of four aggression-based personality traits influences and controls aggressive communication (Infante, 1987a; Rancer, 2004). Each of these traits interacts with factors in the environment to energize and produce message behavior (Infante, 1987a). Two of the traits are considered constructive, and two are destructive. According to this model, the decision to identify an act as constructive or destructive can be determined in one of the following ways: (a) when one person in a dyad feels that the act is constructive or destructive, (b) when both persons in the dyad agree on whether the act was constructive or destructive, (c) when an observer deems the act to be either constructive or destructive, and (d) whether the act is consistent with societal norms for classifying the act as constructive or destructive (Infante, 1987a, p. 163).

Constructive Aggressive Communication Traits

Assertiveness

According to the theory of aggressive communication, assertiveness and argumentativeness are considered constructive traits. Assertiveness is considered the more global of the two traits. If you possess the trait of assertiveness, you tend to be interpersonally dominant and forceful, and you use this trait to achieve personal goals while creating positive feelings in others (Infante, 1987a; Infante et al., 2003; Rancer, 2004). This conceptualization of assertiveness is derived from Costa and McCrae's (1980) trait model of personality. We will examine the relationship between Costa and McCrae's model and aggressive communication a bit later in this chapter. For now, we will just suggest that assertiveness is one of the six facets of the extraversion dimension in Costa and McCrae's model of personality.

Assertiveness is conceptualized as a constructive communication trait because it involves using verbal and nonverbal symbols to exert control, to obtain justified rewards, and to avoid violation of one's rights. Individuals who are assertive use symbols aggressively, but do so in a socially acceptable way. Assertive individuals stand up for their rights and express their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in "direct, honest, and appropriate ways which do not violate another person's rights" (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976, p. 7). Other assertive behaviors include, but are not limited to, openness, refusal of unreasonable requests, absence of interpersonal anxiety, initiation of requests, spontaneous expression of one's feelings, refusal to be intimidated, outgoingness,

willingness to take initiative, and active versus passive disagreement (Norton & Warnick, 1976, pp. 62–64).

Although assertiveness has been studied extensively in the discipline of psychology, communication researchers have not been as persistent in investigating this trait. As far back as 1985, Zakahi stated, "Very little assertiveness research has been conducted using communication variables" (p. 36). The status of assertiveness research in the communication discipline has not changed very much in the years since Zakahi's assessment. Of the few studies in the communication discipline that have investigated assertiveness, only a few have explored the trait-like aspect of assertiveness. In one such effort, Norton and Warnick (1976) examined the relationship between assertiveness and a presentation trait labeled communicator style. They identified the assertive individual as one who is predisposed to verbal behavior (as opposed to being anxious in communication situations) and as a person who tends to be precise, not easily persuadable, and contentious (i.e., overly quarrelsome). Assertive individuals are also talkative, leave an impression on others with whom they communicate, hold their own in interpersonal relationships, and are likely to be remembered by others (Norton & Warnick, p. 66).

It has been suggested that the characteristics of assertiveness could be clustered into four dimensions (Lorr & More, 1980). Directiveness involves taking charge of situations. Social assertiveness involves feeling comfortable around people and the ability to initiate conversations with a variety of people, including strangers. The defense of rights and interests involves standing up for one's rights, such as being able to confront others who are taking advantage of one. Independence involves the ability to maintain one's own personal convictions or position even when receiving pressure from others to conform (Infante et al., 2003, p. 93).

One instrument used to measure assertiveness is the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule, a 30-item, Likert-type scale with high reliability and validity (see especially, Beatty, Plax, & Kearney, 1984; Norton & Warnick, 1976; Rathus, 1973). Another scale used to measure assertiveness is Richmond and McCroskey's (1990) Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure. Recent research on assertiveness in the communication discipline has examined assertiveness as a facet of assertiveness and responsiveness (Anderson, Martin, Zhong, & West, 1997; Bacon & Severson, 1986; Richmond & McCroskey; Rocca, Martin, & Toale, 1998). Assertiveness is the effort of a person to influence another person's thoughts or actions, whereas responsiveness refers to the individual's ability to express feelings and emotions (Bacon & Severson, p. 53). These two dimensions of assertiveness and responsiveness are considered important dimensions of communication competence (Richmond & McCroskey). Richmond and McCroskey, in developing a scale for

the measurement of assertiveness and responsiveness, suggest that the following items tap the assertiveness dimension of personality: "defends own beliefs, independent, forceful, has strong personality, assertive, dominant, willing to take a stand, acts as a leader, and competitive" (p. 449). The other focus from the communication discipline on this trait usually explores the influence of assertiveness training (Ruben & Ruben, 1989). That is, the purpose of these efforts is to teach people low in (trait) assertiveness to communicate more assertively. For example, assertiveness training for women was particularly popular during the early days of the women's rights movement in the 1970s.

Argumentativeness

Like assertiveness, argumentativeness is also considered a constructive communication trait. Some conceptualizations or definitions of this trait place argumentativeness as a subset of assertiveness because all argument is considered assertive, but not all assertiveness involves argument (Infante, 1987a, p. 164). An example of this would be a request to a friend for help on studying for a communication theory exam. While this request is considered a compliance-gaining effort, it does not necessarily involve arguing. If your friend agrees with your initial request, "Can you help me study?" there is no need for you to say anything else. However, if you want to go to the movies and your friend wants to go swimming, you might need to present some arguments (e.g., "It is too cold to go swimming today!") to support your position. This latter example would be considered evidence of argumentative behavior.

In their conceptualization of the trait, Infante and Rancer (1982) defined argumentativeness as "a generally stable trait which predisposes the individual in communication situations to advocate positions on controversial issues, and to attack verbally the positions which other people take on these issues" (p. 72). Simply stated, a person's trait argumentativeness represents an underlying motivation to argue. Note here that the locus of the attack is on the position that the other person holds on the issue, not the person.

Here is an example of argumentativeness. Let us say that you and a friend are planning a spring break getaway vacation. You have a preference to go to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, while your friend prefers to go to South Padre Island, Texas. You are locked in a major disagreement with your friend because you want to travel together, you can only go to one location during the break, and you must make your travel plans very soon. The interaction might go something like this: You might say to your friend, "I understand that you want to go to South Padre Island, but I don't. South Padre Island may hold a great attraction for you because you've been there before, and you have some great memories of your times there. But I think it is too far to drive for only a week's vacation, and The Weather Channel reports that the weather in south Texas

is too variable and often too cold in mid-March. Since we live in a cold weather climate and have felt frozen the entire winter, we want to be able to catch some decent rays and warmth, and I think Florida is a better bet."

Notice here some elements of the argumentativeness trait. You stated some understanding of your adversary's position on the controversial issue of where to go for spring break. You did not put your friend down for holding that position on the issue; rather, you provided some arguments, indeed some rudimentary evidence, to support your position on the issue. You attacked your friend's position (going to Texas for spring break); you did not attack your friend personally. You were constructive in asserting your position. And, you did not yield to the other person's position without defending your own position while attacking the other one. What you did in this example was to engage in argumentative behavior.

Categories of Trait Argumentativeness

Individuals can be categorized into five different types regarding predispositions to be argumentative. Although Chapter 3 will discuss in greater detail how we measure the argumentativeness trait, for now let us simply state that argumentativeness is composed of two dimensions: ARGap and ARGav. ARGap stands for your motivational tendency to approach arguments, and ARGav stands for your motivational tendency to avoid arguments. Thus, any individual can be placed into one of a set of categories of argumentativeness depending on his or her approach and avoidance scores. The categories represent the following:

1. Low argumentatives: these individuals have a low motivation to approach arguments and a high motivation to avoid arguments. Low argumentatives lack motivation and desire to argue across most situations and generally do not engage in much argumentative behavior (e.g., people who dislike talking about controversial issues because it makes them uncomfortable).

2. High argumentatives: these individuals have a high motivation to approach arguments and a low motivation to avoid arguments. High argumentatives experience little anxiety associated with argumentative communication and, indeed, often see arguing as an exciting intellectual challenge (e.g., people who love to discuss controversial issues and also find it enjoyable as well as exciting).

3. Conflicted-feelings moderate argumentatives: these individuals have a high motivation to approach arguments, but also have a high motivation to avoid arguments. These conflicted-feelings moderates are highly emotional when it comes to engaging in arguing. At the same time they both feel compelled to

argue due to their level of competitiveness, yet are also highly anxious about arguing due to the possible fear of failure. We suspect that moderate argumentatives who have conflicted feelings are more sensitive to factors in the argumentative situation, especially their perceptions of the importance and success of a particular argument. We suggest that these conflicted-feelings moderates argue mainly when the probability of success is high and the importance of failure is low. This is mainly due to their wish to avoid feeling anxious about the possibility of losing an important argument (e.g., these people often find themselves in arguments in an attempt to win, but do not necessarily enjoy the experience).

4. Apathetic moderate argumentatives: these individuals have a low motivation to approach arguments and concomitantly a low motivation to avoid arguments as well. These apathetic moderates are very low in emotion when it comes to engaging in argument. They feel very little motivation to argue and experience little to no anxiety over engaging in argument. We speculate that these apathetic moderate argumentatives generally tend to engage in argumentative behavior when the incentive of success is high and argue mainly for utilitarian (practical) reasons.

5. Neutral moderate argumentatives: a fifth category of moderate argumentatives has also been suggested. That is, individuals who are moderate in motivation to approach arguments and moderate in motivation to avoid arguments have also been identified (Hamilton & Mineo, 2002). These individuals will argue only when they see some good coming out of it and that they have a good chance of winning.

Because the argumentativeness trait, like many other traits, is normally distributed in the population (especially among individuals from Western cultures), we would expect that more people would fall into the moderate categories of argumentativeness, while fewer people would be high and low in argumentativeness. This issue remains somewhat unresolved empirically. For example, Hamilton and Mineo (2002), in arguing for the unidimensionality of the Argumentativeness Scale (a topic we will cover in Chapter 3) suggest "that the number of people who are apathetic moderates or conflicted moderates in the argumentativeness typology is relatively small" (p. 306).

Destructive Aggressive Communication Traits

Hostility

There are two destructive traits in Infante's model of aggressive communication, hostility and verbal aggressiveness. First, we will describe hostility, the

more global of the two traits. Destructive symbolic aggression is classified as hostility. Hostility manifests itself in interpersonal communication when individuals use messages to express irritability, negativity, resentment, and suspicion (Buss & Durkee, 1957; Infante & Rancer, 1996). Infante et al. (2003) illuminate some of these characteristics of hostility: Irritability is exhibited by communicators who have a quick temper, show little patience, exhibit moodiness, and become exasperated when something goes wrong. Negativism is communicated by excessive pessimism about outcomes others are more favorable about, refusing to cooperate, and being antagonistic toward authority, rules, and social conventions. Resentment involves expressing jealousy and hatred and brooding about slights, either real or imagined, which causes anger to develop. Suspicion is communicated through distrust of others and by believing that others want to harm you (p. 95).

One of the leading researchers from the discipline of social psychology, Leonard Berkowitz, views hostility as "an attitude, a dislike of a particular person, object, or issue, accompanied by a desire to see this target injured or even destroyed" (Berkowitz, 1998, p. 264). This definition of aggressive and hostile behavior is consistent with the definition of verbal aggressiveness advanced by Infante (1987a).

Some individuals exhibit strong predispositions toward hostility, and as such, they are said to possess a hostile personality. Research by Zelli and Huesmann (1995) suggests that extremely hostile individuals tend to exhibit some common beliefs. For example, they see themselves as being persecuted by others (e.g., "People want to be mean to me"), see their world as a mean one (e.g., "People like doing things that bother me") and view themselves as more aggressive than others (e.g., "I'm a better fighter than most people"). In Costa and McCrae's (1980) trait model of personality, hostility is considered a facet of neuroticism. Each of these expressions of hostility is the result of the interaction between the trait dimension of hostility and factors in a given situation. That is, people who possess the hostility trait are likely to express hostility across many situations; however, certain situational factors may serve to either increase or dampen expressions of hostility. For example, a hostile person might be unlikely to exhibit this trait when communicating with superiors at work for fear of losing his or her job.

As with the trait of assertiveness, the hostile personality has been studied more extensively by psychologists and social psychologists than by communication scholars. In his early work, Berkowitz (1962) suggests that aggressive behavior is learned by individuals responding aggressively to aggressive cues. In particular, Berkowitz posits that frustrating and anger-inducing experiences produce hostile and aggressive behavior. Consequently, hostile behavior in response to anger-inducing stimuli is learned and can become habitual

(Infante, 1987a). Berkowitz suggests further that hostility can be influenced by the method in which an individual was punished in childhood. The influence of aggressive behavior emerges especially when attempting to influence others. If a child is subject to physical or corporal punishment (i.e., the child is hit), the child may reason that physical aggression is an effective compliance-gaining strategy. That is, the child may reason that "hitting someone must be a good method for getting your way; it sure worked on me" (Infante, 1987a, p. 179; Infante, 2005). Indeed, when compared with other students, children identified as school bullies report being hit more often by their parents and have parents who resort more often to corporal punishment as a method of solving problems with their children (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999).

The hostile personality has not received a great deal of attention from scholars in the communication discipline, but comes out of the discipline of social psychology. Indeed, most of the measures of hostility were developed by psychologists and social psychologists. For example, one of the earliest hostility measures is the Buss and Durkee (1957) Hostility Inventory. This self-report instrument consists of 75 true–false items intended to measure one's propensity to engage in hostile behavior. The 75 items cluster into seven distinct traits: assault, indirect aggression, irritability, negativism, resentment, suspicion, and verbal aggression. Another self-report hostility instrument was developed by Siegel (1986). It consists of 38 items designed to measure aspects of angry feelings such as the frequency, duration, and magnitude of anger; the types of situations that provoke anger; and the individual's general way of expressing anger (Berkowitz, 1998, p. 272).

Research indicates that the predisposition toward hostility and aggressiveness can persist over many years and the trait is quite stable (Berkowitz, 1998). If individuals are hostile in their youth, then that knowledge is a good predictor of how hostile and aggressive they will be much later on in their life (Berkowitz, 1993).

Verbal Aggressiveness

The trait of verbal aggressiveness is considered to be a subset of hostility. Like hostility, verbal aggressiveness is considered part of the neuroticism dimension of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Infante, 1987a). Argumentative behavior and verbally aggressive behavior are both considered attacking and aggressive forms of communication. However, presenting a definition of verbal aggressiveness will help you understand the difference between these two traits.

Verbal aggressiveness is defined as "the tendency to attack the self-concepts of individuals instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of

communication" (Infante, 1987a, p. 164; Infante & Wigley, 1986, p. 61). When people direct their attack on the person's self-concept, ("You are such a liar!"), they are engaging in verbal aggression. A study by Kinney (1994) suggests there are three broad domains of self-concept attack: group membership (e.g., "Your family is a bunch of psychos!"), personal failings (e.g., "And how could we forget that business you ran into the ground five years ago!"), and relational failings (e.g., "Maybe your ex-husband wasn't so weird after all.").

Argumentativeness (the constructive trait) and verbal aggressiveness (the destructive trait) can be distinguished by the locus of the attack (i.e., the place where the attack is directed). When the attack is on the other person's position, it is considered an argumentative attack. When the attack is on the other person's self-concept, it is considered a verbally aggressive attack. As we will detail later in the book, many people confuse both communication traits, while others see any attack, even if it is directed at another person's position, as verbally aggressive communication.

The trait of verbal aggressiveness is measured by the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale developed by Infante and Wigley (1986). A copy of the scale and more details on its development will be presented in Chapter 3 and in Appendix A. For now, however, we will describe a taxonomy of verbally aggressive communication and describe what we believe causes the trait to be developed in individuals.

First, let us contrast an interpersonal interaction characterized by verbal aggression with one categorized as argumentative. In order to do so, let us return to the example presented earlier in this chapter. Recall the controversy you had with your roommate over the spring break getaway vacation (you wanted to go to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, while your friend preferred to go to South Padre Island, Texas). Unlike the argumentative encounter described earlier, the verbally aggressive interaction might go something like this: You might say to your friend, "I think you are so stupid for wanting to go to South Padre Island for spring break! The weather in south Texas in mid-March sucks. And, it is so far away. I'll probably have to drive most of the way because you are such a bad driver. Even worse, I'll get stuck with paying for all the gas, tolls, and food on the trip since you are such a cheap bastard." Although this interaction may seem closer to reality than the argumentative version, it is considered verbally aggressive and thus can be considered relationally destructive.

Several different types of verbally aggressive communication have been identified and several of them are evident in the preceding example. The first type is called competence attacks. Competence attacks are verbal attacks directed at another person's ability to do something. A general example of a competence attack would be a father saying to his son, "You can't do anything

right!" or more specifically, "Give me that hammer, you can never put a nail in the wall correctly." Spouses can engage in competence attacks that instill hurt, pain, and embarrassment. One such competence attack that is exchanged in relationships marked by difficulty is "You are a lousy mother/father." In the dialogue example above, calling your friend a bad driver is an example of a competence attack. Recipients of competence attacks generally feel hurt, ashamed, and embarrassed. If the attacks persist in one area, those attacks may indeed cause a person to become less competent at the particular task and dampen that person's desire to perform that task or activity again.

Another type of verbally aggressive message is character attacks, attacks on another person's character. "You're a liar!" and "You're a cheater!" are two very typical forms of character attacks. Again, embarrassment, hurt, and psychological pain often result from character attacks. Profanity is a ubiquitous form of verbally aggressive message behavior. Some researchers define profanity in a very narrow way (e.g., "to treat [something sacred] with abuse, irreverence, or contempt" (Jay, 1992, p. 3). However, a more common interpretation suggests that profanity involves the use of obscene words, epithets, and vulgarities. Since most of us know profanity when we hear it, we will not provide a laundry list of profane or obscene words or phrases. Those wishing to review such a list can be directed to the work of Jay, whose book, *Cursing in America*, provides an extensive list of curses, profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarity, slang, epithets, and slurs. However, Jay makes it clear that anger is often expressed with profanity and taboo words and has developed a five-stage model designed to demonstrate that "taboo or obscene speech when used to express anger is coded speech" (Jay, p. 97). In the dialogue example above, calling your friend a cheap bastard would constitute a verbally aggressive attack using profanity.

Teasing and ridicule are also two forms of verbally aggressive message behavior. Although in conventional usage the terms teasing and ridicule are often used interchangeably, they are a bit different. In teasing, we make fun of, or playfully mock, another individual. The key element in teasing is the notion that it is a more playful form of verbal aggression. When we tease others and they become angry or annoyed at us, we tend to defend this verbal behavior by stating, "I was only kidding you, I was only teasing you." However, teasing can inflict psychological harm and damage on the target, thus fulfilling the objective of verbal aggression to inflict harm and pain on another. We are certain that you can recall an example of being teased sometime during your life, whether it was directed at your physical appearance (e.g., "You have a nose like a trumpet") or your level of skill at doing something (e.g., "You throw the ball like a baby"). We are also sure that, despite the number of years that may have passed, you remember the teasing episodes

and the hurt and embarrassment they evoked. Closely related to teasing is another type of verbal aggression, ridicule. Ridicule is using words or deeds to evoke condescending laughter directed at another person. Children are particularly fond of using teasing and ridicule as forms of verbal aggression.

In order to understand and study teasing, DiCioccio (2001) developed the Teasing Communication Scale, which is used to assess differences in teasing messages. DiCioccio drew from the literature on verbal aggression and the use of personal idioms (expressions) to explore how and why teasing is used. Although the theory of aggressive communication suggests that teasing is a form of verbal aggression (Infante, 1987a; Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992; Infante, Trebing, Shepard, & Seeds, 1984; Infante & Wigley, 1986), the research on personal idioms suggests that teasing is one type of personal idiom that could potentially have a beneficial dimension to interpersonal relationships (Baxter, 1992; DiCioccio).

Incorporating both theoretical frameworks, DiCioccio suggested that teasing has two dimensions, affectionate teasing and aggressive teasing. These two dimensions represent the constructive and destructive aspects of teasing. Affectionate teasing is considered a constructive form of communication and is used as a means to exhibit positive relational affect, to increase affinity between individuals, and to strengthen relationships. Affectionate teasing often acts like an inside joke between relationship partners that can bring them closer to each other. An example of affectionate teasing is when one person says to his or her partner during a trip, "Better hold onto these maps and directions because you know how good you are at finding places!" In this case, one partner is commenting on the other's geographic and directional challenges in an effort affectionately laugh at his or her shortcomings.

Aggressive teasing, however, is considered destructive communication and a form of verbal aggression. Hence, aggressive teasing has the goal of causing psychological pain and hurt. As a form of verbal aggression, aggressive teasing is often used as an expression of anger regarding a specific relational issue or as a way of expressing one's discontent with a partner or the relationship in general (DiCioccio, 2001). Using the above example, aggressive teasing would manifest itself when one partner says to the other, "It would be a good idea for you to finally use the map," and says it in a mocking way in which clearly the intention is to hurt by pointing out the other's shortcomings and poor sense of direction.

An 18-item Teasing Communication Scale (TCS) was developed (DiCioccio, 2001) that measures predispositions toward both affectionate and aggressive teasing. Some of the items in the scale include, "I use teasing as a way of expressing positive feelings about a relationship," "I make fun of other people when I know it will be amusing to both of us," "I purposely

tease people to embarrass them in front of others," and "I poke fun at people to intentionally hurt their feelings." Among the many findings that emerged in her study, DiCioccio discovered that both the affectionate and the aggressive dimensions of teasing were correlated positively with trait verbal aggressiveness. This finding supports the relationship between aggressive teasing and verbal aggression, while contradicting the conceptualization of affectionate teasing. As DiCioccio suggests, perhaps all teasing is seen as aggressive in nature. As mentioned earlier, most people tend to remember the psychological pain and harm of being teased, even if those messages were delivered many years earlier.

Maledictions are verbally aggressive messages in which we wish someone harm. An example of one of the most ubiquitous maledictions in our culture is, "Drop dead!" Different cultures have idiosyncratic maledictions that do not appear to translate well into other languages and cultures. A malediction used among Eastern European immigrants to New York City was a phrase loosely translated into English as "You should swell up and die!" Another malediction heard in the workplace that is particularly cruel but humorous is "May you suffer from an injury not covered by Worker's Compensation!"

Threats are another form of verbally aggressive communication. When you threaten someone, you are expressly suggesting the intention to inflict pain (physical or psychological), injury, or another type of hurt on another person. If you grew up with a sibling, the following will probably ring true for you. A little brother or sister catches you doing something you should not be doing and proceeds to taunt you with the famous expression, "I'm telling Mom and Dad on you!" At that point, given that adolescents have relatively low skill in developing arguments, you reach into your verbal aggression arsenal and reply "You tell Mom or Dad on me and I will kill you!"

Another frequent form of verbal aggression is nonverbal verbal aggression. Nonverbal verbal aggression most frequently takes the form of speech-independent gestures, also called nonverbal emblems. Emblems are nonverbal behaviors that take the place of spoken words. The most common verbally aggressive emblem in our culture (and in many cultures around the world) is flipping the bird, or displaying the middle finger in the "up yours" gesture. Other forms of nonverbal verbal aggression include gritting one's teeth in anger, crinkling the nose, sticking out the tongue, making a fist and shaking it in front of someone, and using your index finger and thumb to form the letter "L" while holding it to your forehead to signify "loser."

Infante (1995b) expanded this original taxonomy of verbal aggressive messages by adding a few, including personality attacks (e.g., an attack on another person's personality such as saying "He's a timid fool"), negative comparison (e.g., "You are not as handsome/pretty as your brother/sister"),

attacking the target's significant others (e.g., "Your children are so ugly"), blame (e.g., "You are the reason I am poor"), and disconfirmation (i.e., completely ignoring another person or making believe he or she does not exist).

Causes of Verbal Aggressiveness

Five causes have been offered to explain the development of verbal aggressiveness: psychopathology, disdain, social learning, the argumentative skill deficiency explanation (ASD), and genetics. We will describe each of them here.

Psychopathology occurs when an individual expresses previously repressed hostility. For example, some individuals may have been the victims of teasing, threats, or ridicule and they may have become deeply hurt by it. Because they may have been quite young, or lower in status and thus powerless to respond, they consequently had to hold these negative feelings inside and suppress the hostility they felt. Several years later, however, they may vent this repressed hostility by verbally attacking someone who reminds them of the individual or group who hurt them. Now, whenever they encounter an individual who reminds them of their previously held hurt, pain, and embarrassment, they employ verbal aggression as a primary message behavior. For example, suppose an individual had an unfortunate and negative encounter with a police officer early in life. A police officer may have yelled at, belittled, or physically mistreated him or her for an offense that may or may not have been committed. Years later, whenever this individual encounters a police officer, he or she is likely to use some form of verbal aggression (e.g., profanity or negative comparison) when communicating with or about the police. Treatment for this potential cause of verbal aggression goes beyond the scope of most communication specialists and a "psychopathological basis for aggression seems likely in some of the extreme cases, and its investigation is more appropriately reserved for trained psychologists" (Wigley, 1998, p. 194).

Disdain has been suggested as another potential cause of verbal aggressiveness (Infante et al., 1984). Disdain is considered severe dislike or even hatred for another person or object. Many of us might have been the victim of a verbal attack by someone who disliked us greatly. Thankfully, such experiences are infrequent for most people (except for those who work as customer service representatives!). When one expresses disdain for another person it is likely to be in the form of verbally aggressive communication. However, as Wigley (1998) suggests, disdain "helps us understand why some people are consistently verbally aggressive toward some individuals, but not toward others" (p. 194). Disdain, however, may not be a very powerful cause of verbally aggressive behavior because, for many of us, when

we disdain someone or something, we seek to avoid that person or object as much as possible, and we normally avoid interacting with people we dislike greatly. It is during those instances in which we must interact with someone we disdain that the likelihood of using verbally aggressive communication increases. In addition, the verbally aggressive personality usually does not restrict verbal aggression to a particular group of individuals, but engages in it across a wide range of potential targets. Current thinking suggests that while psychopathology and disdain are potential causes of verbal aggressiveness, the next three potential causes are more likely the main contributors to an individual becoming verbally aggressive.

The social learning explanation suggests that we learn to become verbally aggressive from those around us whom we interact with or observe on a regular basis. Social learning theory suggests that our behavior is shaped by factors in the environment. As such, those individuals we frequently come into contact with can greatly influence our communication behavior and personality. However, social learning theory argues that people will only model behaviors if they themselves are reinforced for using those behaviors. If we are reared in a home in which verbal aggression was commonplace, then the social learning explanation suggests that we will either be predisposed to it, or not, depending upon how we observed the outcomes associated with this form of communication. For example, a child might learn to become verbally aggressive from his or her highly verbally aggressive father if the child observes that the father always gets his way when he uses it. Conversely, a child might learn not to be verbally aggressive if he or she observes that the father is continually punished for engaging in this type of communication behavior (e.g., is shunned by family and friends or loses a job as a result of it). If the environment we grew up in contained a great deal of verbally (and physically) aggressive messages and behaviors, then social learning theory argues we might engage in these forms of aggression if we observe benefits from using it. For example, the use of bullying behaviors by some students has been attributed to social learning (see Bosworth et al., 1999). Earlier it was suggested that verbal aggressiveness is a subset of hostility and as such can be considered an aspect of neuroticism (Infante, 1987a; McCrae & Costa, 1987). As Wigley (1998) suggests, "Because neuroticism appears to categorize a large number of negative characteristics, verbal aggressiveness might incubate and grow with this aspect of one's personality" (p. 195).

Another potential explanation for the development of verbal aggressiveness is called the inherited trait explanation. It has been argued by several communication scholars that verbal aggressiveness develops largely due to genetics (Beatty & McCroskey, 1997; Wigley). Beatty and McCroskey, working under the communibiological paradigm, conceptualize verbal

aggressiveness as an expression of temperament. This perspective argues that people are born with a set of biologically determined temperaments that are relatively consistent throughout their lives.

Temperaments are behavioral tendencies that differentiate people. The communibiological perspective stands in direct opposition to the social-learning framework described earlier. While the social-learning framework suggests that verbal aggressiveness is a learned predisposition influenced by situational forces around us, the communibiological paradigm argues that a great deal of human behavior, and in this particular case verbal aggressiveness, is genetically determined. In other words, we inherit our verbal aggressiveness from our biological parents. Indeed, Beatty and McCroskey (1997) state, "From a communibiological perspective, situational or environmental explanations of verbal aggressiveness, or any other interpersonal process for that matter, should be proffered as a last resort, only after all neurobiological explanations have failed" (p. 450).

More specifically, Beatty and McCroskey (2001) suggest that three neurological circuits in the brain are the biological basis for verbal aggressiveness. One of those circuits is called the behavioral activation system, one is called the behavioral inhibition system, and one is the fight–flight system. While a complete discussion of these three systems is beyond the scope of this text, the identification of these systems as a part of the regions of the brain should help us understand if and when an individual's verbal aggressiveness becomes activated. For each of these three systems, Beatty and McCroskey (2001) identify which regions of the brain are involved and describe different types of brain and neurobiological chemical activity associated with each. In essence, they have identified a neurobiology of verbal aggressiveness. We will describe in more detail the relationship between the aggressive communication traits of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness and the measurement of temperament that has been linked to neurobiological activity later in this chapter (Valencic, Beatty, Rudd, Dobos, & Heisel, 1998).

Throughout the remainder of this text, you will encounter much discussion about another potential cause of verbal aggressiveness, the argumentative skill deficiency explanation for verbal aggressiveness. This explanation suggests that individuals become verbally aggressive due to a lack of motivation and skill in arguing. Individuals who lack motivation and skill in argumentative communication become easily frustrated when they are involved in a conflict situation. In addition, individuals with lower motivation and skill in argument have a great deal of difficulty in generating arguments to use. That is, people who have low motivation to argue, or who lack the skill to generate arguments, appear to quickly run out of things to say (i.e., arguments) during conflict episodes.

You may recall examples of this from your own life. Let us describe how this might play out. Do you ever recall, as a newly licensed driver, arguing with your parents about using their car? For example, you may have asked your dad to borrow the car to go on a date. In no uncertain terms he said, "No!" Frustrated, you attempted to argue in support of the request to borrow the car, by delivering one puny and weak argument (e.g., "All of my friends get to use their parents' cars"). Consequently, this argument was unsuccessful in getting your father to yield to your request. Because you dislike arguing, and have trouble generating any additional arguments, you could not think of any other arguments to present to him. Later, on the bus to your date's house, you can suddenly come up with much better arguments that you wish you could have generated earlier (e.g., "Traveling by car is much safer than taking the bus or subway"). Such is the case with individuals who are low in motivation and unskilled in arguing. They quickly exhaust their rather meager store of arguments during an argumentative encounter.

The argumentative skill deficiency explanation has been suggested as a cause for verbal aggression because during an argument we are in an attack-and-defend mode. If we cannot attack our adversary's position on the controversial issue by inventing and delivering arguments (i.e., engage in argumentativeness), we can either avoid the situation or more often resort to attacking their self-concept instead (i.e., engage in verbal aggression). The argumentative skill deficiency explanation for the development of verbal aggressiveness presents a rationale for the development of communication-based programs designed to enhance an individual's motivation and skill in argument. Indeed, some programs have already been designed and tested (see Chapter 10). Although the efficacy of the argumentative skill deficiency explanation for verbal aggression has been questioned (Hamilton & Mineo, 2002; Roberto, 1999), additional research will need to be conducted before its utility can be dismissed or retained. In review, Table 1.1 presents a summary of the four aggressive communication predispositions.

Infante, Riddle, et al. (1992) also discovered a few additional reasons individuals reported engaging in verbally aggressive communication. These include trying to appear tough, rational discussions that degenerate into verbal aggression, and wanting to be mean to others. Finally, verbally aggressive communication may be more common when the topic of disagreement is of greater importance to the interactants and the consequences of the conflict are very meaningful to those involved. Indeed, Martin, Anderson, and Horvath (1996) found that individuals high in verbal aggressiveness often perceive that their use of verbal aggression is justified.

Table 1.1   Argumentative and Aggressive Communication Predispositions

Trait	Definition	Orientation	Scales Used to Measure Trait
Assertiveness	Predisposition to be interpersonally dominant and forceful to achieve personal goals while creating positive feelings in others	Constructive	Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (1973); Richmond & McCroskey's Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure (1990)
Argumentativeness	Predisposition to advocate positions on controversial issues and to verbally attack the positions of others	Constructive	Infante & Rancer's Argumentativeness Scale (1982); Roberto & Finucane's Adolescent ARG Scale (1977); Hinkle's ABCAS Instrument (1986)
Hostility	Predisposition to use messages to express irritability, negativity, resentment, or suspicion	Destructive	Buss & Durkee's Hostility Inventory (1957); Siegel's Multidimensional Anger Inventory (1986)
Verbal Aggressiveness	Predisposition to attack the self-concepts of individuals instead of, or in addition to, their positions on issues	Destructive	Infante & Wigley's Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (1986); Roberto & Finucane's Adolescent VA Scale (1997); Beatty, Valencic, Rudd, & Dobos's Indirect Interpersonal Aggressiveness Scale (1999)

Argumentative and Aggressive Communication Traits and Personality Theory

Throughout this chapter we have presented research that suggests the communication traits of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness (as well as

assertiveness and hostility) are part of the larger theoretical framework
of temperament and personality theory. To review, trait theorists believe
there is a great deal of variation in the way individuals interact with each
other and respond to situational factors. The way a person responds, trait
theorists believe, is primarily controlled by this cluster of traits. Scholars
who adhere to the trait perspective of behavior suggest that individuals
will most often respond to different situations with similar behavioral and
interactional patterns.

Although numerous theories and approaches to the study of temperament
and personality exist, primarily from the discipline of psychology, two domi-
nant theoretical approaches have emerged. In this section, we will briefly review
these two trait and psychobiological theories of personality and describe how
argumentative and aggressive communication traits are related to them.

Recently, communication scholars have employed trait and psychobiolog-
ical theories of personality as frameworks to help explain the development of
communication traits in general, and argumentative and verbally aggressive
communication in particular (see Beatty & McCroskey, 2001). The frame-
works developed by psychologists Eysenck and Eysenck (1985), as well as
Costa and McCrae (1980), have been extremely helpful in this endeavor.

The Dimensions of Personality

The work of Eysenck and Eysenck (1985) resulted in the three-factor model
of personality. This model argues that there are three superfactors (i.e., a
trait that many other specific traits are part of) that underlie all personality:
psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism (P-E-N). Eysenck and Eysenck's
approach also suggests that personality is developed by genetic inheritance.
Costa and McCrae (1980) extended the work of Eysenck and Eysenck
by retaining the extraversion and neuroticism dimensions of Eysenck and
adding three additional factors. Thus, they produced a five-factor model
("The Big 5") that consists of five personality traits: openness, conscien-
tiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (O-C-E-A-N). Before
discussing the relationship between these personality traits and aggressive
communication, let us define these traits. As there is considerable overlap
between Eysenck and Eysenck's and Costa and McCrae's dimensions of per-
sonality, we will combine both sets of definitions when defining them.

Neuroticism refers to the dimension that ranges from a calm and relaxed
nature to one that exhibits a great deal of nervousness. An individual's emo-
tional stability and psychological adjustment is reflected by how neurotic the

person is. Highly neurotic individuals are easily worried, are quick to anger, and have difficulty coping with stress. Individuals who score low in neuroticism are calm and relaxed and are able to cope with stress quite well. According to Costa and McCrae (1980), the neuroticism dimension has six facets: anxiety, hostility, depression, self-consciousness, vulnerability, and impulsiveness. In a study on the relationship between Eysenck and Eysenck's (1985) three dimensions of personality and verbal aggressiveness, Heisel, LaFrance, and Beatty (2003) measured neuroticism by asking individuals questions such as

> Do you ever feel "just miserable" for no reason? Do you often feel that life is very dull? Are you easily hurt when people find fault with you or your work? Would you call yourself tense, or "highly strung?" and, Are you an irritable person? (p. 8)

The extraversion dimension speaks to how social a person is, placed on a continuum from high to low extraversion. Outgoing, friendly, and gregarious individuals are typically high in extraversion. They are assertive and often emerge as leaders. Individuals who score low on extraversion tend to be shy and quiet. Low extraverts appear to others as reserved and formal, and prefer being alone. Extraversion has six facets: warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement seeking, and positive emotions. Items designed to measure this dimension of personality include

> Do you enjoy meeting new people? Do you like mixing with people? Do you often make decisions on the spur of the moment? Do you like plenty of bustle and excitement around you? and, Can you easily adapt to new and unusual situations? (Heisel et al., 2003, p. 8)

As with the other dimensions of personality, openness (to experience) is on a continuum from high to low. People high in openness place much value on emotions. They tend to be more liberal and manifest an ability to communicate credibly on many topics. Individuals scoring low in openness tend to minimize the importance of emotions. They tend to be more conservative and somewhat dogmatic in their attitudes, beliefs and values. The six facets of openness to experience are fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas, and values.

Individuals also differ in the dimension of agreeableness. Agreeable people are easier to get along with and are more trusting of others. Highly agreeable individuals tend to be somewhat humble, see others in a very positive light, and when involved in a conflict situation, often defer to others (especially those with higher status and authority). Individuals scoring low on agreeableness tend to be more aggressive and competitive, especially in

conflict situations. They find it more difficult to trust others and are often cynical and guarded. The six facets of agreeableness are trust, straight-forwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness.

Conscientiousness deals with how meticulous and persistent an individual is. Individuals scoring high in conscientiousness are organized, neat, and focused on tasks and task completion. Conversely, individuals low in conscientiousness are relatively unorganized and unprepared. They tend to procrastinate and are easily distracted. The six facets associated with conscientiousness are competence, orderliness, dutifulness/dependability, achievement orientation, self-discipline, and deliberation.

A final dimension of personality is psychoticism. While conventional usage suggests that being psychotic is when one's contact with reality is sus-pect, Eysenck and Eysenck (1985) suggested that psychoticism is better seen as emotional independence. Being high in the psychoticism dimension of per-sonality does not suggest that you are psychotic, only that you may share some of the characteristics commonly found among psychotics. Eysenck and Eysenck described this dimension of personality as lacking in feeling and empathy, being somewhat unconcerned and possibly hostile to others, having a certain degree of disregard for common social conventions, and exhibiting a degree of inappropriate emotional expression. Some of the facets of psychoticism identified by Eysenck are cold, egocentric, impersonal, unempathic, creative, tough-minded, and aggressive. In the Heisel et al. (2003) study, psychoticism was measured by items such as

> Would you take drugs which might have strange or dangerous effects? Do you prefer to go your own way rather than act by the rules? Do you think that mar-riage is old fashioned and should be done away with? Do you think that people spend too much time safeguarding their future with savings and insurance? and, Would you like people to be afraid of you? (p. 8)

Although both models of personality have been employed in communica-tion research, Beatty and McCroskey (2001) advocate the use of the Eysenck and Eysenck model. They argue for its superiority because (a) it has been in use for a longer period of time than the Costa and McCrae (1980) model, as Eysenck and Eysenck's research on dimensions of personality began in the 1950s; (b) it has a great deal of data to support it; (c) the factor structure of the model is stable and has been replicated across cultures; and (d) "the model aligns well with communication" (Beatty & McCroskey, p. 63). Beatty and McCroskey also suggest that "we believe that the fullest account of human communication will require research programs that pursue all posited models of communication" (p. 63).

The Relationship Between Temperament and Aggressive Communication Traits

Throughout this chapter we have suggested a relationship between the aggressive communication traits (i.e., assertiveness, argumentativeness, hostility, and verbal aggressiveness) and these other personality traits. As we have mentioned, assertiveness is one of the six facets of the extraversion dimension in Costa and McCrae's (1980) model, and argumentativeness has been related to the assertiveness facet of extraversion. Again, in Costa and McCrae's trait model of personality, hostility is considered a facet of neuroticism. Like hostility, verbal aggressiveness is considered part of the neuroticism dimension of personality (Costa and McCrae; Infante, 1987a).

Several studies have empirically examined the relationship between argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and the personality dimensions described above. In one of the earliest studies, Blickle (1997) correlated Costa and McCrae's (1980) five dimensions of personality with trait argumentativeness. For a sample of male college students in Germany, argumentativeness correlated significantly and positively with extraversion and openness, and significantly and negatively with neuroticism and agreeableness. In a similar study with American students, Hamilton and Mineo (2002) examined the relationship between argumentativeness and Costa and McCrae's dimensions. They discovered positive relationships between argumentativeness and extraversion, openness to new experiences, and a negative relationship between trait argumentativeness and neuroticism.

As early as 1997, Beatty and McCroskey suggested that psychoticism and verbal aggressiveness should be positively related. To examine this speculation, McCroskey, Heisel, and Richmond (2001) examined the relationship between argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and Eysenck and Eysenck's (1985) big three factors of personality. They found that argumentativeness correlated significantly and positively with extraversion and psychoticism. They also found that verbal aggressiveness was correlated significantly and positively with psychoticism. Indeed, substantial correlations between verbal aggressiveness and the psychoticism dimension of personality have been observed in other research (Beatty, Rudd et al., 1999; McCroskey et al., 2001; Valencic et al., 1998). These results suggest that "psychotics are non-responsive, and tend to report higher levels of verbal aggressiveness, argumentativeness and assertiveness" (McCroskey et al., p. 365).

In another study, Heisel et al. (2003) studied the relationship between Eysenck and Eysenck's three dimensions of personality and behavior patterns associated with verbal aggressiveness. The researchers wanted to examine

whether the relationship between Eysenck and Eysenck's dimensions of personality and verbal aggressiveness would hold when observer measures were used in the place of self-report measures. The results supported that relationship in that "psychoticism predicted verbal aggressiveness" (Heisl et al., 2003, p. 10). In addition, an indirect relationship between extraversion and verbal aggressiveness was found, which the researchers suggest was mediated by affinity-seeking competence (i.e., verbal and nonverbal behaviors we use to get people to like us). Thus, individuals who are high in psychoticism and who lack affinity-seeking competence are more likely to engage in verbally aggressive behavior (Heisel et al., p. 11).

In summary, trait argumentativeness has been significantly and positively correlated with extraversion, openness, and psychoticism. That is, the higher one is in argumentativeness, the higher one is in extraversion, openness, and psychoticism. Trait argumentativeness has also been significantly and negatively correlated with neuroticism and agreeableness. That is, the higher one is in argumentativeness, the lower one is in neuroticism and agreeableness. Trait verbal aggressiveness has also been significantly and positively correlated with psychoticism and indirectly with extraversion, or, the higher one is in verbal aggressiveness, the higher one is in psychoticism and to some extent extraversion.

Conclusion

This chapter has served as an introduction to the study of argumentative and verbally aggressive communication. The development of both the argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness constructs was derived not only from communication theory, but from psychology and social psychology as well. In this case, drawing from the literature on hostility as well as assertiveness, we are able to make a distinction between constructive or beneficial traits (i.e., assertiveness and argumentativeness) and destructive or detrimental traits (i.e., hostility and verbal aggressiveness).

As with most other communication and personality traits, the development and degree to which the traits affect behavior is constantly being debated. More specifically, we discussed the various ways in which researchers treat argumentative and verbally aggressive communication. These treatments range from the assumption that genetics and brain structure account for the vast majority of trait behavior (i.e., the communibiological perspective) to the assumption that the situation exerts a great influence on the trait (i.e., situational perspective). Between these two perspectives is the interactionist approach (Andersen, 1987), which holds that any trait is a joint function of both person (i.e., biological) and

context (i.e., situational), which when combined are believed to account for most trait behavior.

An important concept discussed in this chapter was that of a supertrait or superfactor. More specifically, two types of approaches where highlighted. These approaches included the Eysenck and Eysenck (1985) three-factor model of psychotocism, extraversion, and neuroticism and the Costa and McCrae (1980) big-five model comprised of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Regardless of which model you find more appealing, the assumption is that all personality and communication traits are subcategories of the three or big-five factor supertraits.

Now that we have introduced the concepts, discussed the different ways of conceptualizing argumentative and aggressive communication, and addressed the prevailing debate about which conceptualization is better, we turn to the measurement issues. You may recall from a past research methods class that an operational definition is the equivalent of a recipe (i.e., "argumentativeness is the tendency to . . ." and "verbal aggressiveness is the tendency to . . ."). Now, we move to the measurement phase or as we call it the operational phase. This is where we now must design ways to measure argumentative and aggressive communication based on some observable characteristics. The next chapter will address these measurement issues.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 1

1. Why do you think verbal aggression is so prevalent in today's society?

2. What does it mean when we say argumentative and aggressive communication can be good and bad? Are there situations in which verbally aggressive communication can serve a strategic purpose?

3. What is the social learning explanation for verbal aggressiveness? How does this explanation differ from the inherited trait explanation?

4. What is the argumentative skills deficiency explanation for verbal aggression? Do you think such an explanation is valid?

5. Based on the reading of the chapter, do you prefer a social learning explanation or a genetic explanation for the development of the argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness traits? Why?