

## **Communication skills, like plaster, are pretty stable over time**

by Jennifer Schneider

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Recently, I bumped into a couple I went to college with over 10 years ago. As with all post-college encounters, I couldn't help but compare the people in front of me to the college kids I remembered. During our entire conversation, Mary and Benjamin argued, bringing up past grievances and not listening to what the other person was saying. It was honestly uncomfortable to be around, though I was not surprised to find they were still the same as I remembered from college—they never were good at communicating, and I remember having to be a mediator in some of their fights back then. Meeting them again now, I wondered, why hadn't Mary and Benjamin's communication skills improved—why hadn't they gotten better at communicating their feelings after being together for so long?

### **Do communication skills change?**

To find out what the experts say about whether communication ability can change or not, I went to the Relationship and Communication Research Laboratory (RCRL) at Stanford University. Researchers at the RCRL are interested in the origins of communication skills. For more than 15 years, the RCRL has been following over 400 couples. The researchers have been collecting elaborate data on them, including in-depth interviews with the couples, their family members, and close friends.

In a recent article published in the *Journal of Social and Personal*

*Relationships*, Dr. Daniel Lawrence, the Director of RCRL, reported the findings of their research. Dr. Lawrence concluded that “communication skills seem to be rather fixed and to develop consistently along the same path over time. Communication skills might start as a bundle of possibilities when you are young, but in the early years, the possibilities appear to solidify into a stable skill level.” Dr. Lawrence shows

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that of the 400 couples followed over 15 years, very few people's overall communication skills changed significantly from what they were at the beginning of the study. Why? As Dr. Lawrence explains, “in most of us, by the age of twelve or so, our communication skills have set like plaster and don't really soften again. We may go through life and meet different people and have different experiences, but our communication talents are essentially unchanged by them.” He reported many large long-term studies which show that people can “mature and develop, but they do so on the foundation of enduring ability levels.”

Similar conclusions were drawn by Dr. Heather Ochoa, an eminent researcher. In her speech at the American Psychological Association's annual convention, held in San Francisco in August of 2019, Dr. Ochoa argued that “communication skill is hard like a rock that cannot be changed. Even greater effort and determination don't seem to effect changes.” She reported numerous large longitudinal studies which show that people “can mature but not change their communication abilities.” She also reported findings showing that people's communication capabilities are set early

in life and remain the same through the late seventies.

Dr. Ochoa's conclusions about communication are based on six longitudinal studies published between 2004 and 2017, including two of her own. All six studies had considerably different samples and rationales, but "were nearly unanimous in their conclusions on the rigidity of communication skills," she said.

These studies, together with many others, have made clear the fact that people's communication abilities cannot be developed or changed throughout their lives.

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### **Can external influences change communication skills?**

To better understand why communication skills do not change, I spoke to eminent psychologists and neuroscientists all across the country. Surprisingly, I found good consensus that all through one's life, regardless of one's relationship experiences, one's communication skill stays relatively constant. Either you are skilled at communicating, or you are not.

How have these fields come to such agreement about the inability of communication skills to be changed? Actually, this conclusion was reached long ago. The classic Cambridge-Somerville Young Couples Study convinced the field of psychology that communication ability does indeed stay the same over time. In 1935, Richard Clark Cabot established one of the most ambitious and exciting intervention

programs ever conceived. It was designed to serve the needs of young couples who were on the verge of breaking up, and who reported hesitancy and difficulty in talking about their negative emotions with their partner. At the start of the study, the 250 young couple participants had been in a romantic relationship for 6 months to 3 years. They continued in the program for two years.

The main research question of the intervention program was whether these couples' communication skills changed, and how. Among other things, during the program, couples attended bi-weekly psychotherapy sessions and attended individual psychotherapy sessions once a month. In short, the program was a multifaceted, long duration intervention.

Despite the huge investment of effort and money, the results were disappointing. Some change occurred but it didn't last. Compared to the young couples who were at risk of breaking up but were not in the program, those who had the intervention were equally likely to report continuing relationship dissatisfaction and to eventually break up.

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The study conducted follow-up interviews with the participants and found that the majority had positive experiences during the intervention, even though the participants did not end

up being helped by the intervention itself. Some of the participants expressed gratitude for the steady and consistent time spent with their partner across the bi-weekly couple sessions. The study quotes one participant who stated, “I think it was good to spend more time together, and work on our relationship, even though communication just isn’t for me.”

The conclusion is clear: research findings from a wide range of studies, including large-scale longitudinal studies, rigorous experiments, and intervention programs, converge to one major conclusion: *Communication ability seems to be fixed and cannot be changed.*

### **Lessons Learned**

So what about my old classmates, Mary and Benjamin? I guess it’s no surprise that their communication skills had hardly changed over time, despite all of their relationship experience during and after college.