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Psych 101 – Intro & Methods

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<u>Introduction</u>

As social beings, effective communication is an integral and important facet of the human existence. Our ability to share our ideas—in spoken and written language—sets us apart from our animal counterparts and makes possible the wondrous feats of mankind. In the Information Age, communication has never been easier—friends, family, and even strangers near and far, from our present and our past, can all be reached instantaneously by text, Skype call, or tweet. But while our words may be more easily received (and our inboxes filled with hundreds of thousands of Snapchats), our minds are not always brought together. This increase in quantity does not beget an increase of quality, as while our networks are broader, our discussions more numerous, and our reach much longer, the quality of our communication is not uniformly improved. We have more meaningful conversations with our loved ones and reconnect with long-lost classmates; but we also have more empty conversations about the weather, leave meetings feeling like our boss does not quite grasp our idea for the product, and have unproductive discussions where we say much but make little ground. With communication easier than ever, how do we make our communication more effective?

Researchers have looked extensively at effective interpersonal communication. But most of the foundational work examining communication quality and effectiveness on an individual level has taken place in marriage and family counseling (looking at

communication between spouses and family members), in healthcare (studying

conversations between patients and doctors), or in sales (examining salesman-customer

relationships) (Pryor, Malshe, & Paradise, 2013; Comer & Drollinger, 1999). These

studies have found that effective communication on the interpersonal level takes many

forms but at its heart necessitates increased understanding between individuals (Comer

& Drollinger, 1999). This understanding comes from not only grasping the words of the

other party and accurately comprehending the meanings those words convey, but from

agreement on a deeper level: parties share metaperceptions, or correctly estimate what

one party thinks the other party is thinking (Allen & Thompson, 1984). This comes

about when parties practice active, empathetic listening—again, not just fostering a

superficial literal comprehension, but an empathetic appreciation of the other's

viewpoint, emotions, and thought process (Pryor et al., 2013; Comer & Drollinger,

1999). When communicating parties share this deeper, meta-understanding, they

perform more effectively; have higher feelings of trust; and perceive themselves, the

other party, and the world in a more positive light (Reinsch, Lamar, & Turner, 2006;

Shelby, 1998; Gordon, 1988).

        Notably, these studies lack in-depth analysis of communication in relationships

characterized by power: marriage and family therapy relates to and attempts to create

partnerships with no dimension of verticality between them, and the healthcare studies

do not explore the hierarchical relationship between a doctor and her patient and its

effect on their discussions. Even in the field of business, where this aspect of power is

highly salient, the vast majority of academic and consulting work in internal

communication focuses nearly exclusively on the macro scale, examining corporate

culture in regards to communication, an institutional environment's effect on company-

wide communication, and the impacts of external communication like marketing, image maintenance and customer impressions, leaving relatively little learned in comparison about communication on the interpersonal, micro level—for example, between coworkers, or between a manager and her employee. This leaves out a multitude of relationships, especially in the workplace, that are distinctly tinged by an imbalance of power that cannot be removed, ignored, or bridged: relationships including those between parents and children, bosses and employees, and team leads and reports (Reinsch, Lamar, & Turner, 2006).

The dynamic of power is especially relevant in communication not only because of its prevalence in relationships, but also because its imposition and overemphasis seems to be a common thread between the conditions that detract from effective communication. A factor analysis contrasting the affective and cognitive states between communication conditions found the poorest communication and conversation quality came when at least one party was in a "defensive" state, characterized by perceived threat, perceived emotional and physical disconnection, and physiological tension. The most prominent conditions that preempt a defensive state—feeling unimportant, uninformed, out of control, manipulated or coerced, and inferior (as noted by the researchers)—all can be introduced by one party leveraging their power or making statements to detract from the other party's status (Gordon, 1998). When power is emphasized, other party shuts down, cognitively and physiologically, and communication shuts down with them.

Does this concept laid out in lay theory from nearly 30 years ago hold true? Does power threaten communication, cohesion, and teamwork? Other much more current work would indicate it does—a recent study conducted at Haas School of Business found

that the presence of power significantly impairs group processes and poses a distinct tendency to disrupt group performances on tasks (Hildreth & Anderson, 2014). Could this disruption stem from a breakdown in communication? If an inequality in power between people does at face value decrease communication quality, how might managers or bosses combat this effect and promote effective communication between themselves and their employees?

I seek to confirm Gordon's finding and explore Hildreth's and Anderson's in a survey-based study analyzing the effects of power on communication effectivity, as measured through an adaption of Hecht's communication satisfaction inventory that examines a person's communicative relationship with another person, rather than individual conversations (Hecht, 1978). This study will further examine what behaviors may reduce or increase this communication deficit in a factor analysis of conversations reported as good and bad by subjects. My hypotheses are as follows:

H_0 (null): There exists no effect of power on communication quality. There is no statistically significant difference in general communication satisfaction between subjects and persons with power (like bosses or managers) as compared to subjects and equals (like friends or coworkers).

H_1: There exists a positive effect of power on communication quality. Communication satisfaction is significantly higher in relationships with persons of power, as compared to relationships of equals.

H_2: There exists a negative effect of power on communication quality. Communication satisfaction is significantly lower in relationships with persons of power, as compared to relationships of equals.

Methods

I have collected self-reported data from 100 participants, recruited by social media and Amazon's Mechanical Turk service. The experiment is in survey format, asked subjects to discuss their general communicative relationship with a specified individual and to identify and examine a conversation with that person—either one

characterized by the subject as a "good" conversation, or one characterized as "bad."

These two dichotomies result in a matrix of 4 conditions:

	Hierarchy	
Quality		
	Power (treatment)	Equal (control)
Good	Condition 1	Condition 2
Bad	Condition 3	Condition 4

Subjects answered open-ended questions asking them to describe their subjective impression of their relationship and the specified conversations, and recorded objective answers on Likert scales describing their perception of the specified person and that person's perceived power; the affective, behavioral, and cognitive responses during and after the specified conversations.

This method attempts to reject the null hypothesis and support either hypothesis 1 or hypothesis 2 by looking for a significant effect in the communication satisfaction inventory scores between subjects in Conditions 1 and 3 and subjects in Conditions 2 and 4. Further information regarding conversations between equals and in relationships unbalanced by power, both good and bad, provides qualitative and quantitative illustration of factors that may describe components of the effect (if there is one), and may yield insights on prescriptive measures one may take to improve communication quality in one's professional and personal relationships.

<u>Citations</u>

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