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Psych 101 – Intro & Methods

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Introduction

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?

This study seeks 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 further examines effects of authority, positivity of the relationship, cognitive similarity, and perceived equality on communication satisfaction.

My hypotheses are as follows:

**H0** (null): There exists no effect of any of the specified variables on communication quality. There is no statistically significant difference in general communication satisfaction between subjects.

**H1**: There exists an effect of power on communication quality. Communication satisfaction is significantly higher or lower in relationships with persons of power, as compared to relationships of low power.

**H1.1**: There exists an effect of authority on communication quality. Communication satisfaction is significantly higher or lower in relationships with persons of authority, as compared to relationships with friends.

**H2**: There exists an effect of positivity of the relationship in question on communication quality. Communication satisfaction is significantly higher or lower in relationships reported as more positive, as compared to relationships reported as more negative.

**H3:** There exists an effect of cognitive similarity on communication quality. Communication satisfaction is significantly higher or lower in relationships between persons who share views, as compared to relationships between persons who do not.

**H4**: There exists an effect of equality on communication quality. Communication satisfaction is significantly higher lower in relationships with persons who the subject perceives as equal to them, as compared to relationships with persons who are not perceived as equal.

Methods

The data used in this study is self-reported data from 68 participants, recruited by social media and Amazon’s Mechanical Turk service. Participants who took the survey through Mechanical Turk were paid $0.85 for taking a 5 minute survey, a rate of $10.20 an hour. In survey format, subjects were asked 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 |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Boss, Authority | | Friend, Equal | |  |
| 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 any of the alternative hypotheses 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.

Citations

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