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Willingness to Communicate: Differing Cultural Perspectives

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The general tendency to approach or avoid communication has been recognized as an important individual difference among people in a single culture for several decades. Recent research in Australia, Micronesia, Puerto Rico, Sweden, and the United States suggests large differences exist in such tendencies between people in different cultures as well as within a given culture. This research suggests such "individual" tendencies may be developed to very different degrees in dissimilar cultures. The view is taken that an understanding of the cultural impact on individual differences should be a vital component in the study of intercultural communication. Examples are drawn from research on general willingness to communicate, introversion, communication apprehension, and self-perceived communication competence in several countries around the world.

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Considerable uncertainty exists in the minds of strangers at the outset of interaction. Since such uncertainty ordinarily is non-reinforcing to interactants, they generally desire to reduce uncertainty. As verbal communication and nonverbal affiliative expressiveness increase, the levels of uncertainty of both interactants decrease (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). Reduced levels of uncertainty provide the foundation for higher levels of intimacy and liking. The development of strong interpersonal relationships, then, is heavily dependent on the amount of communication in which interactants are willing to engage. Hence, other things being equal, the more a person is willing to talk and to be nonverbally expressive, the more likely that person is to develop positive interpersonal relationships. While research in the American culture strongly supports this conclusion, its generalizability to other cultures is yet to be demonstrated.

Although talk probably is a vital component in interpersonal communication and the development of interpersonal relationships in all cultures, people differ dramatically from one another in the degree to which they actually do talk. Some people talk very little, they tend to speak only when spoken to—and sometimes not even then. Others tend to verbalize almost constantly. Many people talk more in some contexts than in others, and most people talk more to some receivers than they do to others. This variability in talking behavior among people is alleged to be rooted in a personality variable which we call "Willingness to Communicate" (WTC; McCroskey and Richmond, 1987). The impact of culture on this personality orientation is the focus on this paper.

Willingness to Communicate as a Personality Construct

Whether a person is willing to communicate with another person in a given interpersonal encounter certainly is affected by the situational constraints of the encounter. Nevertheless, individuals exhibit

regular willingness-to-communicate tendencies across situations. Consistent behavioral tendencies with regard to frequency and amount of talk have been noted in the research literature (Chapple & Arensberg, 1940; Goldman-Eisler, 1951; Borgatta & Bales, 1953) and have provided the bases for numerous theoretical formulations. Such regularity in communication behaviors across interpersonal communication contexts suggests the existence of the personality variable we choose to call "willingness to communicate." It is this personality orientation which explains why one person will communicate and another will not under identical or virtually identical constraints.

The present willingness to communicate (WTC) construct has evolved from the earlier work of Phillips (1965) on reticence, McCroskey (1970) on communication apprehension, Burgoon (1976) on unwillingness to communicate, Mortensen, Arntson, and Lustig (1977) on predispositions toward verbal behavior, and McCroskey and Richmond (1982) on shyness. All of these writings center on a presumed trait-like predisposition toward communication. The bulk of the conceptual work (significant exceptions being the work of Phillips and Mortensen and their colleagues) was advanced by McCroskey and students who worked with him in the 1970s (e.g., Andersen, Andersen, & Garrison, 1978; Andersen & Leibowitz, 1978; Daly & Miller, 1975; Heston & Paterline, 1974; McCroskey, Andersen, Richmond, & Wheelless, 1981).

The current conceptualization of WTC is most similar to early conceptualizations of "unwillingness to communicate" advanced by Judee (Heston) Burgoon and "shyness" advanced by McCroskey and Richmond. Each effort was unsuccessful because the measures were not isomorphic with constituent definitions of the construct. Some data collected for Burgoon's initial "Unwillingness to Communicate" Scale, for example, were jointly collected with data designed to refine measurements of the communication apprehension construct (five of the items on the UTC scale are identical to five on McCroskey's PRAC-25 scale. The UTC has two dimensions, one of which is simply a short-form of the PRCA. The other dimension does not appear to relate to anything in particular. Hence, this instrument is best interpreted as a communication apprehension scale.

A scale originally titled the "Verbal Activity Scale" was an outgrowth of an attempt to develop a measure of communication apprehension appropriate for preliterate children (McCroskey, et al., 1981). This scale was relabeled the "Shyness Scale" (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982) and advanced as a self-report behavioral index of talking behavior. Although the scale was found to be valid when used for that purpose it was later recognized that this was a construct distinct from a presumed predisposition or willingness to talk. Clearly there are three conceptually distinct concerns in this general area of scholarship: 1) fear or anxiety about communication (communication apprehension), 2) a specific behavioral pattern of an individual talking less (or more) than others (shyness), and 3) a personality-based predisposition toward the initiation of communication (willingness to communicate). While all three of these constructs are theoretically related, research to test this theory awaited the development of an appropriate WTC measure.

Measuring Willingness to Communicate

People exhibit differential behavioral tendencies to communicate more or less across communication situations. It is reasonable to presume such a personality orientation predisposes individuals to exhibit those tendencies. However, to research the relationship between the behavioral tendencies and the personality orientations requires a measure of those orientations. A recently developed self-report instrument, known as the Willingness to Communicate scale (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987), provides what appears to be a valid operationalization of the construct. It has strong content validity and there is some support for its construct and predictive validity.

Underlying the construct of willingness to communicate is the assumption that this is a personality-based, trait-like predisposition which is relatively consistent across a variety of communication contexts and types of receivers. For us to argue that the predisposition is trait-like, then, it is necessary that the level of a person's willingness to communicate in one communication context (like small group interaction) is correlated with the person's willingness in other communication contexts (such as public speaking, talking in meetings, and talking in dyads). Further, it is necessary that the level of a person's willingness to communicate with one type of receiver (like acquaintances) is correlated with the person's willingness to communicate with other types of receivers (such as friends and strangers). This is an "interactionist" perspective in that it argues the trait-like personality orientation carries across contexts, yet is directly impacted by those contexts.

This assumption does not mandate that a person be equally willing to communicate in all contexts or with all receivers, only that level of willingness in various contexts and with various receivers be correlated. If no such regularity exists when data are aggregated for a large number of people, willingness to communicate in one context will not be predictive of willingness to communicate in another context and willingness to communicate with one type of receiver will not be predictive of willingness to communicate with another type of receiver. In this event, the data would invalidate the assumption of a trait-like predisposition and necessitate that we redirect attention to predispositions that are context-based and/or receiver-based, or forego the dispositional aspect of the interactionist approach in favor of a purely situational explanation of willingness to communicate.

The WTC scale includes items related to four communication contexts—public speaking, talking in meetings, talking in small groups, and talking in dyads—and three types of receivers—strangers, acquaintances, and friends. The scale includes twelve scored items and eight filler items. In addition to an overall WTC score, presumably representing the general personality orientation of willingness to communicate, seven subscores may be generated. These represent the four types of communication contexts and three types of receivers.

Available data on the instrument are promising (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; Chan & McCroskey, 1987; Zakahi & McCroskey, 1989). Internal reliability of the total WTC score has been above .90. Internal reliabilities for the subscores for communication context have ranged from .65 to .87. Internal reliabilities for the subscores for types of receivers have ranged from .74 to .87. The mean correlation among context subscores in two studies was .58. The mean correlation among receiver-type subscores was also .58. After correction for attenuation, the mean correlation among context subscores is .88 and among receiver-type subscores it is .82. Factor analysis has indicated that all twelve scored items load most highly on the first unrotated factor, indicating the scale is unidimensional. No interpretable multidimensional structure could be obtained through forced rotations (McCroskey & Baer, 1985).

The above correlations and reliabilities suggest an individual's willingness to communicate in one context or with one receiver type is highly related to her/his willingness to communicate in other contexts and with other receiver types. This does not mean, however, that individuals are equally willing to communicate in all contexts and with all types of receivers. In fact, major mean differences were observed across samples of subjects studied on the basis of receiver type. In the McCroskey and Baer (1985) study the observed mean percentage of the time people would be willing to communicate with friends was 85.5. For acquaintances and strangers the percentages were 75.0 and 41.3, respectively. Contexts produced less dramatic differences in willingness. The percentages for the contexts were as follows: dyad, 79.5; group, 73.4; meeting, 60.0; and public, 56.1. In general, the larger the number of receivers and the more distant the relationship of the individual with the receiver(s) the less willing the individual was to communicate.

The data generated by the WTC scale suggest the validity of the construct of a general predisposition toward being willing or unwilling to communicate. The scale also appears to be valid. The items clearly represent the construct as we have outlined it and the subscore correlations suggest the instrument is measuring a broadly based predisposition rather than a series of independent predispositions.

The Role of Culture

Although many factors impact people's orientations toward communication (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987), this paper focuses on the influence of culture. We see the impact of culture appearing as either a function of divergence or dominance.

In a few countries, like Japan, a single culture is almost universally dominant. In other countries, like the United States, there is a majority culture and many subcultures. These subcultures exist both as a function of geographic region and ethnicity. The communication norms of Texans and New Yorkers, for example, differ. So too do Mexican Americans, Black Americans, Japanese Americans, Native Americans, and so forth. Whenever a person finds her/himself in an environment in which her/his own subculture is in a minority position compared to other people with whom he/she must communicate, that person may be described as "culturally divergent." It is incumbent on the individual to adapt to the larger group's communication norms to be effective in communication in that environment.

Culturally divergent individuals are very similar to people who have deficient communication skills. They do not know how to communicate effectively so they tend to be much less willing to communicate. The difference between the culturally divergent and the skill deficient is that the culturally divergent individual may have excellent communication skills for one culture but not for another. Cultural divergence, then, is seen as being highly related to willingness to communicate if a person regularly resides in a culture different from her/his own. On the other hand, if the person communicates primarily in her/his own culture and only occasionally must do so in other culture, the impact would only be transitory and situational.

Communication norms are highly variable as a function of culture. Thus, one's communication norms and competencies are culture-bound. Although we commonly think of a person's personality as being composed of "individual differences" between that person and others around them, people in a given culture may well have more group similarities than individual differences, and only when placed in contrast to other cultural groups are the group characteristics brought into sharp contrast. Hence, a person seen as "very talkative" when compared to other people in the same culture may be seen as "somewhat withdrawn" when compared to people in other culture. Being seen as "high" or "low" in willingness to communicate, then, may be as much a function of the culture in which one lives as it is a personality orientation which differentiates that individual from others.

Effects of Willingness to Communicate

Research relating to the impact of willingness to communicate has been conducted under a variety

of constructs—communication apprehension, shyness, unwillingness to communicate, predisposition toward verbal behavior, talkativeness, reticence, quietness, and social anxiety. Three basic research models have been employed: 1) direct observation of amount of communication with assessment of outcomes, 2) measurement of a predisposition (such as CA) which is presumed to be related to willingness to communicate, allowing communication to occur, and assessing outcomes, and 3) simulation of talkativeness variation with assessment of outcomes. One must read these literatures very carefully to sort out those results which relate to WTC rather than to communication apprehension. Many studies are mislabeled as dealing with apprehension, reticence, or social anxiety (including some authored or coauthored by the present writers) when, in fact, a general predisposition toward talking was studied.

Although some of this research has been conducted in other countries (mostly Australia and England), the vast majority has been done in the U.S. Regardless of the research model employed, the results have been remarkably consistent. The general conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that reduced willingness to communicate results in an individual being less effective in communication and generating negative perceptions of one's self in the minds of others involved in the communication.

Generalizing this conclusion beyond North America must be done with caution. At a minimum, replication of the U.S. research should be undertaken within a given culture before generalizing to that culture. The present analysis of data generated in several studies conducted in varying cultural environments was undertaken to illustrate the magnitude of the impact which culture may have on individual differences related to communication and the interrelationships among those differences.

Description of Available Data

The data described here were collected as parts of other research projects. Each project involved college student subjects. The instruments were presented to the subjects in their native language by their regular classroom instructor. Where translations were necessary, the researchers employed the back-translation method to assure comparability of items in the instruments.

The data to be examined here are drawn from studies conducted in Australia (Barraclough, Christophel, & McCroskey, 1988), Micronesia (Burroughs & Marie, 1990), Puerto Rico (McCroskey, Fayer, & Richmond, 1985), Sweden (McCroskey, Burroughs, Daun, & Richmond, 1990), and the United States (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). The instruments employed in one or more studies included the Willingness To Communicate scale (WTC; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987), the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24; McCroskey, 1982), the Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale (SPCC; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988), and a measure of introversion based on the work of Eysenck (1970, 1971).

Data from the WTC scale were available for all cultural groups except Puerto Rico. This scale generates one overall score and seven subscores, four based on differing contexts and three on different types of receivers. Data from the SPCC scale also were available for all of the groups except Puerto Rico. This scale generates an overall score and seven subscores parallel to those of the WTC. Data from the introversion scale were available for the U.S., Sweden, and Micronesia samples. This scale generates a single score. Finally, the PRCA-24 data were available for all of the groups. This scale generates an overall score and four subscores based on differing contexts. Data sets presented here were not collected in a single effort; rather they represent unrelated sets of data. Hence, formal statistical tests between the sets would be of dubious validity. As more data sets become available (many such studies currently are underway), meta-analyses need to be conducted to draw more formal conclusions. The data presented here, then, should be considered illustrative of our concerns but not conclusive.

Table 1 reports the mean scores on each measure by country. Also reported is the potential range of scores on each measure. Table 2 reports the available intercorrelations among the total scores on the measures.

Discussion

An examination of the data reported in Table 1 indicates large differences in mean scores among the countries studied. With regard to the WTC scores, the USA subjects reported the highest willingness while the Micronesians reported the lowest. For most of the countries, public speaking drew the least willingness while talking in a dyad drew the most. In contrast, however, the Micronesians reported their lowest willingness for talking in a meeting and their highest for talking in a small group. All countries reported a generally low willingness to talk to strangers but a contrastingly high willingness to talk to friends.

The Swedes report the highest overall communication competence and the Micronesians the least. Micronesians, who generally live in smaller communities where it is likely that most people know one another report strikingly lower competence for talking with strangers. Swedes also report the highest introversion scores, while the Americans report the lowest. Micronesians report the highest communication apprehension and Puerto Ricans the lowest. Subjects from every country report on average that public speaking causes them the most apprehension, and all except the Micronesians (who have less problems with small groups) find talking in dyads the least threatening.

TABLE 1 Mean Scores by Country

Measure	Range	USA	Sweden	Australia	Micronesia	Puerto Rico
WTC	0-100	63.1	58.1	56.6	47.3	—
Public	0-100	52.2	53.3	46.0	47.0	—
Meeting	0-100	59.3	52.2	53.1	37.4	—
Group	0-100	68.1	63.3	63.3	55.2	—
Dyad	0-100	72.9	63.3	63.8	49.6	—
Stranger	0-100	35.6	37.4	38.8	22.9	—
Acquaintance	0-100	69.9	62.8	61.0	44.4	—
Friend	0-100	83.9	73.8	75.9	74.5	—
SPCC	0-100	73.7	79.0	67.3	49.0	—
Public	0-100	68.8	70.4	60.7	35.8	—
Meeting	0-100	68.8	70.4	61.9	39.4	—
Group	0-100	76.1	83.0	71.3	53.8	—
Dyad	0-100	81.1	91.8	75.4	57.3	—
Stranger	0-100	55.5	66.9	52.1	25.4	—
Acquaintance	0-100	77.4	82.0	68.2	43.7	—
Friend	0-100	88.2	87.8	81.7	77.8	—
Introversion	12-36	19.0	24.5	—	21.8	—
PRCA-24	24-120	65.6	63.4	66.9	76.6	59.9
Public	6-30	19.9	19.5	19.7	21.7	16.6
Meeting	6-30	16.3	15.8	17.2	18.9	16.4
Group	6-30	15.3	15.0	15.5	17.3	13.3
Dyad	6-30	14.1	13.0	14.4	18.8	13.5

TABLE 2 Correlations Among Measures By Country

Measures	U.S.A.	Sweden	Australia	Micronesia
WTC/PRCA	-.52	-.44	-.49	-.52
WTC/SPCC	.59	.44	.57	.80
WTC/Introversion	-.29	-.43	—	-.40
PRCA/SPCC	-.63	-.52	-.64	-.49
PRCA/Introversion	.33	.40	—	.37
SPCC/Introversion	-.37	-.26	—	.36

The correlations reported in Table 2 show even more striking evidence of differences among the cultures, although most of the relationships are quite comparable. The difference in the correlations between WTC and SPCC for Sweden ($r = .44$) and Micronesia ($r = .80$) is particularly large. These two measures share 19 percent of their variance in the Swedish data but over three times as much (64 percent) for the Micronesian data. Clearly, any generalization concerning the association of self-perceived competence with willingness to communicate must be qualified with reference to culture.

Based on the results of this inquiry, it is clear that substantial differences in communication orientation exist among the countries of the world. In addition, and possibly even more important, the relationships among these orientations also differ. Generating pancultural theoretical propositions at this time appears unwarranted. There is a major need to generate data from additional cultural groups in order to widen our base for comparisons. Only then may we begin to see groupings of countries which appear to share communication orientations and develop theoretical explanations for these different groupings. When (if) that is accomplished, we may be in a much better position to make recommendations for improving interaction between cultures with different, as well as similar, communication orientations.

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