Measurement of Tolerance for Disagreement

Jason J. Teven
Northwest Missouri State University

James C. McCroskey
West Virginia University

Virginia P. Richmond
West Virginia University

This paper reports the development of a measure of Tolerance for Disagreement (the TFD scale). The paper reviews the evolution of the TFD construct and previous efforts with reference to measurement. In this study, a 15-item version of a TFD instrument was found to be unidimensional, reliable, and able to demonstrate good discriminant validity. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Conflict between people is a common feature of the human condition. When people interact and form relationships, disagreements inevitably emerge. A plethora of research has been conducted on the nature of conflict (Coser, 1956; Fisher, 1970; Horney, 1937; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Mack, 1966; Watkins, 1974). However, these studies often have failed to differentiate between conflict leading to negative interpersonal outcomes and purposeful disagreement which often leads to better decisions and other positive outcomes. Although disagreement is common, its results do not have to be destructive. Disagreement can be, and frequently is, constructive (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973). Whether the results are constructive or destructive often depends on the communication skills of the individuals and the affinity between them. Better management of interpersonal disagreements can lead to stronger relationships, alternative ways of seeing difficult problems, and discovery of

Jason J. Teven (Ed. D., West Virginia University, 1998) is an Assistant Professor at Northwest Missouri State University, Marysville, MO 64468. **James C. McCroskey** (Ed. D., Pennsylvania State University, 1966) and **Virginia P. Richmond** (Ph.D., University of Nebraska, 1977) are Professors in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506-6293.

The construct of "tolerance for disagreement" has emerged from conceptualizations and research in organizational and group communication contexts. In particular, a number of writers have distinguished between "good conflict" and "bad conflict" (e.g. Burgoon, Heston, & McCroskey, 1974). After using this distinction while teaching undergraduates and participating in training programs for numerous adult (non-college) groups, McCroskey, Knutson, and Hurt (1975) challenged the usefulness of the good-conflict/bad-conflict approach. Their rationale was that the value of a theory is inversely related to the degree to which the theory employs "lay language" in ways in which lay people do not use that language. In this case, getting many undergraduates and adult non-students to accept the concept of "good conflict," they argued, was just too difficult to be worth the effort. "Conflict" is a term that many, if not most, people associate with negative affect. This led McCroskey and Wheeless (1976) to attempt to rephrase the theory in terms more understandable and acceptable to students and non-communication experts. They distinguished between "disagreement," seen as "differences of opinion on issues," and "conflict," which they saw as characterized by "competition, hostility, suspicion, distrust, and self-perpetuation." They saw the nature of the relationship between communicators as key to whether interactions which include disagreement will escalate into conflict. Employing balance theory, they argued that people who like one another will be slower to move into conflict over any given issue than people who do not have such positive affect for one another.

P. (Kearney) Knutson joined with McCroskey, T. Knutson, and Hurt (1979) to expand this conceptualization. Their view was that disagreements about substantive and procedural matters were just that, disagreements, unless personal issues became involved (called "interpersonal conflict" by some). When such a combination is present, according to these authors, this is conflict. This view, of course, is much closer to the lay view than the previous theoretical positions which had been advanced. They also recognized that not everyone would agree as to when an interaction moves from disagreement into conflict--whether they are observers or participants in the interaction. They posited the existence of an individual difference variable, which they labeled "tolerance for disagreement (TFD)," which they employed to explain why some people will perceive the presence of conflict much sooner than others will.

Expanding on a measure which Hurt, T. Knutson, and McCroskey had been working with prior to this reconceptualization, these writers advanced the first Tolerance for Disagreement measure. Since the original work on the instrument was designed to measure a different construct, Tolerance for Conflict (which was later discarded), several of the items on the instrument included the term "conflict" where under the new conceptualization the term "disagreement" would have been appropriate. While the TFD instrument was found to have high reliability (.90) and early research found it to have predictive validity (Teigen, 1977), the inappropriate presence of the term "conflict" in items on the scale presented a significant challenge to its face validity. However, subsequent research which has used this instrument has indicated this measure of the construct may be more useful than originally believed (i.e., Martin, Anderson, & Thweatt, 1997; Richmond & McCroskey, 1979; Richmond, McCroskey, & Davis, 1981). Nevertheless, a revision of the TFD instrument to

remove the face validity problems still is mandated. Consequently, let us review the construct as it is represented currently.

McCroskey and Wheeless (1976) employed the concept of "tolerance for disagreement" to help them explain the threshold individuals' have for dealing with interpersonal conflict. They maintained that "conflict and disagreement are not the same thing" (p. 247). Disagreement can be thought of as simple differences of opinion. However, disagreement does not necessarily lead to conflict. Even when people disagree quite vehemently, they can do so without entering into conflict. Rather than disagreement necessarily triggering conflict, McCroskey and Wheeless argued that what triggers people to enter into conflict is a low degree of affinity between them, in the presence of disagreement on some issue. With an increase in affinity, that trigger might not be activated.

McCroskey and Wheeless (1976) saw tolerance for disagreement as a product of the interaction between people--essentially a relational variable. Knutson, McCroskey, Knutson, and Hurt (1979) expanded the tolerance for disagreement construct to represent an individual difference orientation. They used this approach to help explain why some individuals are prone to become involved in conflict situations while others are not. They chose to define disagreement as "a disagreement of opinion on substantive or procedural matters" and conflict as "disagreement plus negative interpersonal affect" (p. 6). Besides developing a tolerance for disagreement measure in an effort to differentiate disagreement from conflict, Knutson et al. were also interested in the measure's ability to predict both negative and positive interactions between people within the interpersonal, small group, and organizational contexts.

More recent treatments of this theoretical approach are consistent with the earlier work (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996; McCroskey, Richmond, & Stewart, 1986; Richmond & McCroskey, 1992). Conflict is often characterized by "hostility, distrust, suspicion, and antagonism" (McCroskey, Richmond, & Stewart, 1986, p. 202). Often, disagreement leads to conflict, but the chances are amplified when the level of affinity between the communicators is low. According to McCroskey and Wheeless (1976),

Conflict between people can be viewed as the opposite or antithesis of affinity. In this sense, interpersonal conflict is the breaking down of attraction and the development of repulsion, the dissolution of perceived homophily (similarity) and the increased perception of incompatible, irreconcilable differences, the loss of perceptions of credibility and the development of disrespect (p. 247).

Ellis and Fisher (1975) also made a distinction between disagreement and conflict by suggesting a developmental approach to conflict. The initial phase is characterized by interpersonal conflict, followed by a second phase labeled confrontation, and culminating in yet a third phase, substantive conflict.

Individuals will differ in the extent to which they can tolerate disagreement, and thus, avoid entering into conflict. When disagreement is taken personally, conflict is created. McCroskey (1992) further explains the difference in people with both low and high tolerance for disagreement by arguing that "people with a high tolerance for disagreement are relatively conflict resistant whereas, people with a low tolerance for disagreement are highly conflict prone" (p. 172). Thus, tolerance for disagreement has been redefined as "the amount of disagreement an individual can tolerate before he or she perceives the existence of conflict in a relationship" (McCroskey, Richmond, 1992, p. 125).

Research Conducted on the Tolerance for Disagreement (TFD) Construct

Corollary research to that of Knutson et al. (1979) in the interpersonal realm was conducted within an organizational environment. Richmond and McCroskey (1979) investigated employee satisfaction (e.g., supervision, work, pay, promotions) in relation to tolerance for disagreement. Employee satisfaction was impacted more by the manager's TFD than by the employee's TFD. Employee perceptions of the immediate supervisor's TFD were related to employee satisfaction on all dimensions except promotions. However, employee satisfaction on the job was not related to that employee's TFD, except on the dimension of satisfaction related to interacting with coworkers. Although Richmond and McCroskey (1979) found significant relationships between tolerance for disagreement of superior and four of the five dimensions of satisfaction, they found only one small, but statistically significant, relationship between tolerance for disagreement and employee satisfaction, that being with satisfaction of co-workers.

In an effort to replicate and extend their research, Richmond, McCroskey, and Davis (1982) sought to link the same and other communication variables with employee satisfaction. The researchers employed four samples consisting of public school teachers in various parts of the United States. Their investigation did not observe any significant relationships between employee tolerance for disagreement and satisfaction for any of the four samples studied. While these results replicated the earlier work, the researchers cautioned that the presence of the term "conflict" in their measure presented a potential challenge to its validity.

In an effort to further establish the validity of the "cognitive flexibility" scale Martin, Anderson, and Thweatt (1997) investigated the relationships between flexibility and the communication traits of argumentativeness, verbal aggression, Machiavellianism, and tolerance for disagreement. Cognitive flexibility and communication flexibility were both found to be positively related to argumentativeness and tolerance for disagreement and negatively related to verbal aggressiveness. The flexible communicator appeared to be willing to argue and disagree with others. These individuals tend to approach arguments and do not avoid confrontations where there may be a difference of opinions. These results contribute to the argument for construct validity for both the cognitive flexibility scale, and more importantly for the current concerns, the TFD scale as well.

The purpose of the present study was to develop a revised version of the tolerance for disagreement scale which overcomes the face validity problems of the original operationalization. Most importantly, this effort excluded use of the term "conflict" from all of the items on the instrument.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 210 students enrolled in introductory communication courses at a large mid-Atlantic university. Participation was voluntary. No demographic data were collected on the participants of this study although the number of females and males was approximately equal.

Participants completed a questionnaire as one way of receiving extra credit in the course in which they were enrolled. The questionnaire included a measure the participants' level of tolerance for disagreement (TFD) and a measure of touch avoidance, the Touch Apprehension Scale (TAS). This measure was included to examine the divergent validity of

Instruments

The original tolerance for disagreement scale developed by Knutson, McCroskey, Knutson, and Hurt (1979) consisted of 20 items. Respondents rated on a seven-point, Likert-type scale how each statement about communicating was true about them. The responses ranged from Strongly Agree (7) to Strongly Disagree (1). The coefficient alpha in the Knutson et al. study was .90.

This revised measure of tolerance for disagreement was very similar to the original except that all references to "conflict" in the items were changed to reference "disagreement" and a more traditional five-step, Likert-type response format was employed. The 20 items that composed the Revised Tolerance for Disagreement (RTFD) measure can be found in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
Revised Tolerance for Disagreement (TFD) Scale

Instructions: This questionnaire involves people's feelings and orientations. Hence, there are no right or wrong answers. We just want you to indicate your reaction to each item. All responses are to reflect the degree to which you believe the item applies to you. Please use the following system to indicate degree to which you agree the item describes you:

5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Undecided, 2=Disagree, 1=Strong Disagree

____ 1. It is more fun to be involved in a discussion where there is a lot of disagreement.
____ 2. I enjoy talking to people with points of view different than mine.
____ 3. I don't like to be in situations where people are in disagreement.
____ 4. I prefer being in groups where everyone's beliefs are the same as mine.
____ 5.*It doesn't take very long for me to get into disagreements with another person.
____ 6. Disagreements are generally helpful.
____ 7. I prefer to change the topic of discussion when disagreement occurs.
____ 8.*Disagreement over issues, facts, and ideas leads to high quality decisions.
____ 9. I tend to create disagreements in conversation because it serves a useful purpose.
____10. I enjoy arguing with other people about things on which we disagree.
____11. I would prefer to work independently rather than to work with other people and have disagreements.
____12. I would prefer joining a group where no disagreements occur.
____13.*I am not afraid to tell another person he/she is wrong.
____14. I don't like to disagree with other people.
____15. Given a choice, I would leave a conversation rather than continue a disagreement.
____16.*People who disagree with my point of view bother me.
____17. I avoid talking with people who I think will disagree with me.
____18. I enjoy disagreeing with others.
____19. Disagreement stimulates a conversation and causes me to communicate more.
____20.*It makes me nervous when people disagree with me.

* Items which do not add to the reliability of the TFD. It is recommended they be deleted in future research.

It would have been useful in terms of testing the concurrent validity of the RTFD measure to include in this study another instrument that was designed to tap the TFD

construct. Unfortunately, no such instrument was available. Hence, a measure of touch apprehension was employed to test the divergent validity of the RFTD. Although both of these instruments presumably tap constructs involving orientations toward communication, there was no reason to expect that tolerance for disagreement would be associated with apprehension about touch. Hence, the items on the two scales were expected to form two discrete and uncorrelated dimensions in a factor analysis if they were unidimensional and unrelated constructs, as the conceptualizations of these constructs would suggest. This instrument had been created previously for instructional purposes and had not been employed in previous research (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995). The instrument is presumed to be a measure of the individual's orientation toward touching and being touched.

RESULTS

The TAS measure yielded an alpha reliability of .90 ($M = 45.53$, $SD = 7.8$). The 14 items that compose the touch avoidance scale can be found in Figure 2. As indicated in the figure, two items were found not to contribute to the reliability of the scale. Hence, future researchers may wish to delete these items. The reliability of the 12-item scale was the same as for the 14-item scale.

FIGURE 2
Touch Avoidance Scale

Instructions: This questionnaire involves people's feelings and orientations. Hence, there are no right or wrong answers. We just want you to indicate your reaction to each item. All responses are to reflect the degree to which you believe the item applies to you. Please use the following system to indicate degree to which you agree the item describes you:

5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Undecided, 2=Disagree, 1=Strong Disagree

____ 1. I don't mind if I am hugged as a sign of friendship.
____ 2. I enjoy touching others.
____ 3. I seldom put my arms around others.
____ 4. When I see people hugging, it bothers me.
____ 5. People shouldn't be uncomfortable about being touched.
____ 6. I really like being touched by others.
____ 7.*I wish I were free to show my emotions by touching others.
____ 8. I do not like touching other people.
____ 9. I do not like being touched by others.
____ 10. I find it enjoyable to be touched by others.
____ 11. I dislike having to hug others.
____ 12. *Hugging and touching should be outlawed.
____ 13. Touching others is a very important part of my personality.
____ 14. Being touched by others makes me uncomfortable.

* Items which do not add to the reliability of the TAS. It is recommended they be deleted in future research.

The RTFD measure yielded an alpha reliability of .86 ($M = 52.11$, $SD = 9.2$). Five of the items, as indicated in Figure 1, were found not to contribute to the reliability of the scale.

Hence, use of the 15 remaining items is recommended for future research. The reliability of the 15-item measure was also .86.

RTFD was found not to be significantly correlated with TAS ($r = .10$, $p > .10$). There was no difference in obtained correlations employing the full instruments or the shortened forms. This result is consistent with divergent validity. The two instruments were not expected to be correlated, and they were not.

The 34-items of both scales also were subjected to a principal components factor analysis. The principal axis method was used to extract the components, and this was followed by a varimax (orthogonal) rotation as well as a promax (oblique) rotation. Both analyses indicated clearly separate dimensions for the two measures. Every item on the RTFD scale had its highest loading on one factor and trivial loadings on the other factor. The TAS items followed the reverse pattern. The oblique analysis provided two dimensions with an intercorrelation of only .08. Hence, these results were completely consistent with the results of the simple correlations between the summed scores on the instruments.

The item-total correlations were obtained for the RTFD scale items. Table 1 reports the obtained correlations reported by Knutson, et al. (1979) for the original instrument as well as those obtained in the current study. A comparison of these results indicate that three of the five items found not to contribute to scale reliability in the present study were the same items that had the lowest correlation with the total score on the original scale. Two of these included the term "conflict" in the original scale.

TABLE 1
Item-Total Correlations for TFD and RTFD Scales*

Item Number	TFD	RTFD
1	.48	.51
2	.55	.51
3	.66	.58
4	.51	.46
5	.37	.29
6	.52	.47
7	.57	.48
8	.39	.30
9	.51	.32
10	.64	.53
11	.61	.39
12	.67	.58
13	.35	.21
14	.62	.56
15	.70	.56
16	.53	.32
17	.52	.39
18	.63	.54
19	.64	.62
20	.63	.35

* Items reflecting intolerance reversed so that high scores equal higher tolerance.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research suggest that the Revised Tolerance for Disagreement scale has acceptable reliability, good face validity, and good divergent validity. It would also appear that our previous concern with the face validity of the instrument was less than fully justified. Two of the items which directly referenced conflict in the original instrument were among the weakest items in that instrument, and their revised versions were equally weak in the present study. Three other items which directly referenced conflict in the original instrument had high correlations with the total scores of the instrument. Their revised versions fared equally well in the revised version.

The research which has used the original version of the TFD scale should be expected to be fully replicable employing the revised measure. Clearly, both instruments are tapping into an individual difference orientation related to communication. Now that the perceived potential problem with the original TFD scale has been cleared up, and we can have confidence that we can accurately measure this construct, researchers can have confidence that the instrument can be employed to test the theories relating to disagreement, conflict, and affect which spawned the original measure.

Foremost among the areas which this instrument can be used to probe are the associations between TFD and seemingly related constructs which have been advanced subsequent to the original conceptualization in this area. Prominent among these are the constructs of "argumentativeness" and "verbal aggressiveness." It would be reasonable to hypothesize that people with a high level of TFD might be much more willing to engage in argument than those who are low in TFD. Similarly, we might expect people with low TFD would be more likely than those with high TFD to resort to verbal aggression when someone challenges their views. The mechanism for avoiding conflict, from the TFD perspective, may be the avoidance of argument with low-tolerant individuals until a stronger, more positive affective relationship can be created. In the absence of such a relationship, even minor disagreement might be expected to result in strongly verbally aggressive responses. Highly argumentative individuals, therefore, may be unwittingly triggering extremely negative responses from low TFD individuals which the highly argumentative people cannot understand since they are also people with high TFD. All of these speculations need to be investigated, and now that the instrument for doing so is available, they can be.

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