Socio-Communicative Orientation, Communication Competence, and Rhetorical Sensitivity

Keith E. Dilbeck, Bangkok University and
James C. McCroskey, University of Alabama at Birmingham

Keith E. Dilbeck (M.A., 2008, Bangkok University) is an instructor at Bankok
University, Thailand, 10110 RamaIV, Prakanong, Klong Toey, BUIC (LI) Building
four Email: k_dilbeck@hotmail.com
James C. McCroskey, (D.Ed., 1966, Pennsylvania State University) is a professor
of communication studies in the University of Alabama at Birmingham HHB 333,
1530 3rd Ave South, Birmingham, AL 35294 Email: email@JamesCMcCroskey.com

Abstract

This research is an effort to more accurately determine the similarities and differences among "Rhetorical Sensitivity," "Communication Competence," and "Socio-communicative Style/Orientation." Rhetorical Sensitivity is observed as individuals balance interpersonal goals of self and other. The two orientations Noble Self and Rhetorical Reflection are predictors of Rhetorical Sensitivity. Noble self is rigid stylized communication focusing on self goals. Rhetorical Reflection is communication that supports the goals of the 'other.' Sociocommunicative Style maintains two orientations, namely Assertiveness and Responsiveness. These Socio-communicative orientations are predictive of Communication Competence, similar to orientations of Rhetorical Sensitivity. Assertiveness focuses on the self, similar to Noble Self, while Responsiveness focuses on the 'other,' similar to Rhetorical Reflection. The participants perceive few very small relationships between Socio-communicative orientations, Communication Competence, and their Rhetorical Sensitivity orientations.

The study of "Rhetorical Sensitivity," "Communication Competence," and "Communication Style" have attracted much attention from communication scholars over the past three decades. This type of study may date back farther than the Socratic form of argumentation, Plato's Dialectic, and Aristotle's Rhetoric. However, the early scholars were not in a position to accurately measure related concepts. Since the middle to late 20th century, scholars have developed more accurate concepts and measures. Such research builds an understanding of effective, flexible, and appropriate communication in interpersonal interaction. However, due to such a wide range of application over time, theoretical foundations have begun to share many conceptual similarities. Investigating the relationships current concepts share should help to clear up some of the perceived or actual conceptual overlap among researchers' theories.

Recently, two specific constructs measure the patterns of these interactive variations. Socio-communicative Style/Orientation and Rhetorical Sensitivity define concepts i almost exactly the same way. The similarities deal with interpersonal communication effectiveness. They describe individuals able to flexibly and appropriately balance needs of self and other(s) to meet the demands of situations However, only one (Socio-communicative Style/Orientation) takes has made observations of behaviors associated with Social Confirmation (Zakahi & Duran, 1985). That is, Socio-communicative Style/Orientation considers actively supporting, or not supporting the overall expression of self and/or other. Throughout the development of Rhetorical Sensitivity, the concept of Social Confirmation is noticeably absent. Testing the conceptual similarities of these two prevalent constructs, then, sets a foundation for future research to more accurately determine the usefulness of their application.

A consistent approach to these studies is the construct of Socio-communicative style/orientation. Concerning initial research with Socio-communicative style/orientation "two primary dimensions of behavior were identified: Assertiveness and Responsiveness" (Snavely, 1981, p. 132). These are simple and effective ways to alter communication behaviors of self with other(s) to increase understanding and improve communication (Snavely, 1981). Definitions of Assertiveness and Responsiveness describe individuals that consider alternative orientations other than their own. This allows for more effective interpersonal communication outcomes (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). Basically, Socio-communicative Style/Orientation is the way a person is perceived as relating to other people (Klopf, 1991). It is how an individual initiates, reacts, adapts, and ends the communication with others, through Assertiveness and Responsiveness (Teven, 2005; Paulsel, Richmond, McCroskey & Cayanas, 2005).

Assertiveness is concerned with requests, active disagreement, positive or negative expression of personal rights and feelings, initiating, maintaining, and disengaging from conversations, maintain self respect, satisfy personal needs, pursuing personal happiness, to state opinions with conviction, defending personal rights and standing up for one's self without attacking others (Klopf, 1991; McCroskey, Richmond & Stewart, 1986; Bolton, 1979). Assertiveness "is a person's general tendency to be interpersonally dominant, ascendant, and forceful (Thompson & Klopf, 1991, p. 65; Infante, 1987; Bolton, 1979). Assertive communicators are often very competitive in confirming their own overall self expression, while recognizing others'.

The Responsiveness orientation describes a person's willingness and capacity to be sensitive to the communication of others, by recognizing others' needs and desires (Thompson & Klopf, 1991). Responsiveness involves good listening skills, being other oriented, making others comfortable in speaking situations, cognizant of the needs of others, openness, and is described as empathic, friendly, helpful, sympathetic, warm and understanding (Bolton, 1979; McCroskey, Richmond & Stewart, 1986; Rocca, Toale & Martin, 1998; Klopf, 1991; Mottet & Beebe, 2006). Responsiveness allows for an information gathering process to take place for instrumental communication alternatives. Responsive communicators may urge others to disclose, as to gather information to respond to. "By allowing others to provide them with information about their affective and cognitive state, they are able to determine their next action, whatever that may be (Patterson & Beckett, 1995). However, while responsive to the rights of others, they are not so submissive as to give up their own rights and defer readily to others (Klopf, 1991; Bolton, 1979; McCroskey, Richmond & Stewart, 1986; Mottet & Beebe, 2006).

These orientations do oppose one another, but they have not been found to be bi-polar. Clear measures of Assertiveness and Responsiveness produced results that they are either slightly positively correlated, or are not correlated at all (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). The individual with "high assertiveness and low responsiveness is aggressive; the person low in assertiveness and high in responsiveness is submissive;

and the person low in assertiveness and responsiveness is noncompetent," indicating that a person high in assertiveness and high in responsiveness is communicatively competent (Martin & Anderson, 1996, p. 547; Richmond & McCroskey, 1992).

This style of measurement would be impossible when dealing with bi-polar factors. As one factor increases on a continuum, the opposing factor(s) must decrease. They cannot increase/decrease isomorphically.

This style of research shows that Assertiveness and Responsiveness are core style elements of competent communicators, and are highly predictive of Communication Competence (Mottet & Beebe, 2006; McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Competent communicators balance the Assertiveness and Responsiveness necessary for effective interpersonal communication (Hullman, 2007). Observing these orientations allows for an understanding of the knowledge and skill involved with instrumental goal seeking behaviors. The conceptual framework indicates stimulating the intended meaning within an audience (McCroskey, 2006). As predicted by Sociocommunicative Style/Orientation, competent communicators likely possess cognitive flexibility (Martin & Anderson, 1998) and consider alternative orientations (Duran & Kelly, 1985; Duran, 1992; Duran & Kelly, 1994). Competent communicators are then able to utilize contextual cues to form differentiated impressions of self and others for appropriate role-taking behaviors (Duran, & Kelly, 1985). "Competent communicators are flexible, able to adapt their communication to meet the demands of different situations" (Knutson & Posirisuk, 2006, p. 4). They are open and able to think and behave in ways that 'fit' the situation best.

The construct of Rhetorical Sensitivity and its orientations conceptually mimic Communication Competence and Socio-communicative orientations. Hart and Burks (1972) advanced the construct of Rhetorical Sensitivity. This construct depicts five basic elements of communication describing the Rhetorically Sensitive individual as: (1) tries to accept role-taking as part of the human condition, (2) attempts to avoid stylized verbal behavior, (3) is characteristically willing to undergo the strain of adaptation, (4) seeks to distinguish between all information and information acceptable for communication, and (5) tries to understand that an idea can be rendered in multi-form ways (Hart & Burks, 1972, p 1). Essentially, Rhetorical Sensitivity is Aristotle's advice regarding adapting to one's audience within the interpersonal setting. It describes how effective interpersonal communicators analyze the situation. Then, from that analysis, they select behaviors which maximize the potential for positive communication outcomes (Faulkerson, 1990). This is conceptually similar to Communication Competence.

The dimensions of Rhetorical Sensitivity were later advanced by Darnell and Brockriede (1976) by the addition of the two opposing orientations Noble Self and Rhetorical Reflection. The Noble Self represents more of an "I take care of myself first" attitude, while the Rhetorical Reflector represents "a chameleon-like person who believes that satisfying the needs of another is the best means of achieving some desired communication outcome" (Eadie & Paulson, 1984, p. 390; Darnell & Brockriede, 1976). The construct of Rhetorical Sensitivity was popular in the 1970s,

but it had no measurement. Hart, Carlson, and Eadie made things clearer in 1980 with the RHETSEN instrument intended to measure Rhetorical Sensitivity, Noble self, and Rhetorical Reflection. Nevertheless, the research reported little valid measurement. In 1984, Eadie and Paulson derived better information, but still did not produce clear results.

Recently, a new measuring instrument known as THAIRHETSEN has been reported. Stemming in part from the RHETSEN2 measure, THAIRHETSEN was modified to fit crossculturally with Thailand's cultural values (Knutson & Posirisuk, 2006). Results reported useful findings that depict observable behaviors associated with Rhetorical Sensitivity. Knutson and Posirisuk's (2006) cross-cultural findings between Thailand and the U.S. also greatly assisted with evidence of how previous research endured inconsistencies. Among other things, the orientations, Noble Self and Rhetorical Reflection were reported to change isomorphically (Knutson & Posirisuk, 2006). As mentioned above, that is impossible when factors exist on a continuum – as one factor increases, the other opposing factor(s) must decrease. Certainly there is a need to clarify exactly how these orientations relate to one another.

The research with Rhetorical Sensitivity (Noble Self/Rhetorical Reflection) and the two Socio-communicative orientations (Assertiveness/Responsiveness) are similar. They depict how individuals balance self and other(s) according to the constraints of a given social situation (Spano & Zimmermann, 1995). Both constructs seem to desrcribe the need for flexible and appropriate communication behaviors, and both deal with instrumental communication, or social influence. Where Noble Self and Rhetorical Reflection are the core elements of Rhetorical Sensitivity, Assertiveness and Responsiveness are the core elements of Communication Competence. Where a Rhetorically Sensitive person balances Noble Self and Rhetorical Reflection, a competent communicator balances Socio-communicative orientations Assertiveness and Responsiveness. The two constructs appear conceptualized in almost exactly the same way (see Faulkerson, 1990; Klopf, 1991; Spano & Zimmermann, 1995). Clearly there is conceptual overlap.

However, these constructs may not be operating exactly the same. Assertiveness and Responsiveness (and Communication Competence for that matter) are observable through Social Confirmation (Zakahi & Duran, 1985). However, these observations have yet to be related to the development of Rhetorical Sensitivity. Social Confirmation (McKinney, Kelly & Duran 1997) allows for observation of cognitive flexibility (Martin & Anderson, 1998) and an individual's consideration of alternative orientations (Duran & Kelly, 1985; Duran, 1992; Duran & Kelly, 1994). These observations can take place when an individual either supports or does not support the overall projected expression of self and the other (McKinney, Kelly & Duran 1997). Such observations have not been tested with Rhetorical Sensitivity to detect specific associated behaviors.

Some of what past research considered as similarity may have overlooked a considerable difference. For example, "the noble self is unable or unwilling to adapt to situational cues due to excessive concern for self, where the rhetorical reflector,

on the other hand, relinquishes self goals by adapting completely to situational cues and relational others" (Spano & Zimmermann, 1995, p. 20). This is seemingly parallel to Assertiveness and Responsiveness. However, what may have been overlooked is that Assertiveness (self) and Responsiveness (other) do not readily forfeit their own rights, or the rights of others. Assertive individuals defend their rights withoutimpinging on the rights of others, and Responsive individuals respond to the rights of otherswithout giving up their own rights (Klopf, 1991, p. 135; Bolton, 1979; McCroskey, Richmond &Stewart, 1986; Mottet & Beebe, 2006). These Socio-communicative Orientations, howeverminimal, account at least for the constant consideration of self and other throughout the duration of active engagement. Noble Self and Rhetorical Reflection, on the other hand may actually forfeit these rights, or are otherwise all together ignorant to either self and/or other.

It is not yet clear whether the Noble Self behaves with total disregard for the other – rendering even less cognitive flexibility and complexity than Assertiveness. Nor is it yet clear whether a Rhetorical Reflective behaves with total disregard for self – rendering less cognitive flexibility and complexity than Responsiveness. These dimensions would be opposing, and equally independent from Social Confirmation. The concern would be the initial sensitivity necessary to either support, or not support an overall expression – a necessary condition to observe Assertiveness and Responsiveness. One must first be sensitive to the goals of self and other, as to allow for behaviors of Assertiveness and Responsiveness.

The Noble Self may not be Assertive, but rather all together ignore the rights and concerns of the other, displaying behaviors with exclusive support for self expression, denying the rights of others. This would neither confirm, nor disconfirm the other, but rather maintain total disregard. The Rhetorical Reflector may not be Responsive to the other, but rather all together deny the rights and concerns for self, displaying behaviors with exclusive support for the other. This would neither confirm, nor disconfirm the self. These are the orientations of Rhetorical Sensitivity, and sensitivity indicates a measure of stimulation. Insensitive individuals may not be experiencing stimulation, behaving with total disregard for self/other. It is yet to be tested how much, or little Noble Self and Rhetorical Reflection are stimulated by the self or others. What Rhetorical Sensitivity may be dealing with, then, is the quantity of stimulation during interaction, necessary for the manifestation of Assertive and Responsive behaviors.

Socio-communicative Style/Orientation depends on supporting or not supporting the overall expression of self and other. There is reportedly constant simultaneous regard for the rights of self and other. Past research reports competent communicators experience high levels of isomorphic changes among these orientations. The more individuals are able to demonstrate both, the more competence is demonstrated. The operations involved with Socio-communicative Style/Orientations and Communication Competence represent simultaneous consideration of self and other. On the other hand, Rhetorical Sensitivity research has yet to clarify the isomorphic changes with its orientations. Past research indicates that the Rhetorical Sensitivity

orientations probably do not exist on a continuum, as initially claimed by Darnell and Brockriede (1976). Also, research has yet to determine these orientations as operating with total disregard for either self and/or other. This marks a potentially overlooked, and certainly untested difference between Socio-communicative Style/ Orientation, and Rhetorical Sensitivity orientations.

While these orientations (Assertiveness/Responsiveness and Noble Self/ Rhetorical Reflection) are concerned with balancing self and the other, they may not abide by the same observable behaviors. They may operate by different ranges of cognitive flexibility (Martin & Anderson, 1998). Such flexibility stems from the cognitive complexities to consider alternative orientations (Duran & Kelly, 1985; Duran, 1992; Duran & Kelly, 1994). Social Confirmation can be used to observe the cognitive flexibility to support, or not support the overall expression of the self and other (McKinney Kelly, & Duran 1997). Cognitively flexible individuals make necessary changes to achieve goals for themselves and of others without interfering with longterm relational goals (Martin & Anderson, 1998). The behaviors associated with cognitive flexibility allow for observations of effective interpersonal communication – balancing self with the other. While these are clear similarities, the differences between the two Rhetorical Sensitivity orientations and Socio-communicative orientations may be a difference of behaviors associated with Social Confirmation. It is a matter of how much, or little an individual is sensitive to, or stimulated by self and other, in order to then support or not support the overall expression of self and other.

In addition, Communication Competence has a very broad application across paradigms. Rhetorical Sensitivity is applied characteristically to the interpersonal paradigm. It may be the case, then, that Rhetorical Sensitivity is a component of Communication Competence within the interpersonal setting. This would further allow for additional observations of competence within the interpersonal paradigm. In turn, it may expand the range of observing how much or little one is stimulated by self and/or other. If Rhetorical Sensitivity is a component of Communication Competence, a statistically significant, but limited relationship should be the result.

It is first necessary to test if these constructs are excessively similar, as to provide grounds for determining whether or not there is a need to further investigate these differences. A weak statistically significant and positive relationship would indicate future research will have been justified in pursuing a better understanding of Rhetorical Sensitivity as it operates through Social Confirmation. However, a strong statistically significant positive relationship will be evidence to support reconceptualizing Rhetorical Sensitivity due to its inconsistencies. At that point, the field of communication studies will either have the same concept under different titles, or two related, but different constructs to better understand how individuals balance the interactive goals of self and others. Our questions were:

RQ1: Is there a statistically significant relationship between Communication Competence and Rhetorical Sensitivity?

RQ2: Is there a strong statistically significant relationship between Assertiveness and Noble Self?

RQ3: Is there a strong statistically significant relationship between Responsiveness and Rhetorical Reflection?

Method
Participants

There were 346 Thai college student participants. Nearly 70% of the subjects were between the ages of 15-20, and almost all of the rest (30.4%) were between the ages 21-25. The division by sex was Male = 58.7%, and Female = 42.2%. Most of the subjects (67.3%) were in their third year, and second most (23.4%) were in their first year. Qualified subjects were of Thai nationality.

Procedures

Distribution of questionnaires took place with voluntary Thai college students in Bangkok, Thailand. This research came very close to the same type of participants as recent research in Thailand (Knutson, & Posirisuk, 2006). Relationships were obtained through simple correlations to identify relationships between Socio-communicative Style/Orientations, Communication Competence, and Rhetorical Sensitivity orientations.

Instruments

Each of the questionnaires issued in Thailand were translated from English into the culture's native language, Thai, and back translated into English by qualified academicians. This procedure has been widely recognized to assist in avoidance of ethnocentric error, which assumes cultural values and interpretations of instrumental items are stable across cultures. It therefore was expected to increase validity of measurement, as to accurately test the relationships among constructs related to previous research performed in Thailand (Knutson, & Posirisuk, 2006).

The Thai self perceived communication competence (THAISPCC) measure was derived from McCroskey and McCroskey (1988). THAISPCC is a 12 item, 0-100 point measure ranging from absolutely non-competent (0) to absolutely competent (100). The overall alpha reliability of the instrument was .88. The Thai Socio-communicative orientation (THAISCO) measure was derived from Richmond and McCroskey (1990). THAISCO is a 20 item, 5 step, Likert-type format measure ranging from 5) strongly agree to 1) strongly disagree. Cronbach's alpha reliability for Assertiveness was .76, and Responsiveness was .80. The Rhetorical Sensitivity measure used THAIRHETSEN (Knutson, & Posirisuk, 2006). The instrument was adjusted to include a Thai/non-Thai nationality demographic item for participant qualification purposes. A small number of non-Thai students were dropped from the data analyses. THAIRHETSEN is a 30 item, 7 step, Likert-type format measure ranging from A) strongly disagree to G) strongly agree. The alpha reliability for Rhetorical Sensitivity was .68, Noble Self was .79, and Rhetorical Reflection = .69.

Results

The participants perceived a modest positive relationship between their Noble Self and Assertiveness orientations but no relationships among their other orientations. There was modest variance accounted for between self-reports of Noble Self and Assertiveness.

Table 1
Correlations between Rhetorical Reflection/Noble Self and
Assertiveness/Responsiveness

Rhetorical Reflector	Noble Self	
Assertive	-.01	.34*
Responsive	.06	.04

$*p < .01$, R square $= .12$

Participants perceived a statistically significant, but small, relationship between their Self Perceived Communication Competence and Rhetorical Sensitivity. The relationship between Self Perceived Communication Competence and Rhetorical Sensitivity accounted for very little of the variance.

Table 2
Correlations between Communication Competence and Rhetorical Sensitivity

	Rhetorical Sensitivity
Communication Competence	.20*

$*p < .01$, R squared $= .04$

Participants perceived small relationships between the Noble Self/Rhetorical Reflection orientations as they relate to the overall Rhetorical Sensitivity construct. There was little variance accounted for by the two orientations of Rhetorical Sensitivity.

Table 3
Correlations between Rhetorical Sensitivity and Rhetorical Reflection/Noble self

	Rhetorical Sensitivity
Noble self	-.12**
Rhetorical reflection	.06

$*p < .01$, $**p < .05$, R squared $= .02$

Participants perceived statistically significant, but small, relationships between Communication Competence and their Socio-communicative Orientations. The relationships accounted for very little of the variance.

Table 4
Correlations between Communication Competence and
Socio-communicative Orientations

Communication Competence
Assertive   .21*
Responsive   .16*
*$p < .01$, R squared = .07

The participants perceive statistically significant but very small relationships between both their Rhetorical Sensitivity orientations and their Socio-communicative orientations. The relationship between Rhetorical Sensitivity orientations and the relationship between Sociocommunicative orientations accounted for very little shared variance.

Table 5
Correlations between Rhetorical Sensitivity Components and between
Socio-communicative Orientations
Rhetorical Sensitivity Orientations: $r = .24$, $p < .01$, R square = .06
Socio-communicative Orientations: $r = .25$, $p < .01$, R square = .06

Discussion

Participants perceived a modest positive relationship between their Noble Self and Assertiveness orientations, but no relationships among their other orientations. This indicates that excessive conceptual overlap is not occurring. Subjects perceive a difference between their Rhetorical Sensitivity and Socio-communicative orientations. Furthermore, participants did not perceive a strong relationship between their Self Perceived Communication Competence and the overall construct of Rhetorical Sensitivity. This further indicates subjects perceive a difference with the constructs predicted by the Assertiveness/ Responsiveness and Noble Self/Rhetorical Reflection. Participants are reporting a perceived difference in the operations of these communication constructs.

Past research may have overlooked differences in the quantity of stimulation individuals experience of self and other(s) during active engagement. From these results, the foundation for future research to consider Rhetorical Sensitivity observations with Social Confirmation is established. Such research would likely benefit from first clarifying the orientations of Rhetorical Sensitivity as opposing, but not bi-polar. A second benefit would be testing the Rhetorical Sensitivity orientations as operating with total disregard for self and/or other(s). If this operational difference between Socio-communicative Orientations, Communication Competence, and Rhetorical Sensitivity is evidenced, the field of communication should then have access to two different applications to observe interpersonal communication effectiveness. One (Rhetorical Sensitivity) would have to do with the quantity of

stimulation, while the other (Socio-communicative Style/Orientation, Communication Competence) would have to do with what happens when stimulation is present. Future research is necessary to support these claims.

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