

**Special Issue: Hidden Gems in Communication Studies**

## An Interdependent Approach to Personality and Communication

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This special issue on the topic of hidden gems is a fabulous idea. My thanks to the journal and guest editors for generating the idea, making it happen, and inviting my input.

If you stopped me at a conference and asked me to name an underappreciated work that should be more widely read, I might respond with an article by my research hero Paul Meehl (e.g., Meehl, 1990). For readers who are fellow methods nerds, check his work out if you have not done so already. Meehl was absolutely brilliant and his thinking was far ahead of his time. The current replication crisis makes his work more important than ever, although I also think that validity and verisimilitude are timeless aspects of good social science.

If you wanted a recommendation for a substantive contribution by communication scholars published in a communication journal, I might jump to Berger and di Battista (2009). We all know that communication is goal directed. But what happens when people realize that their communication approach is ineffectual. Do they jump to a plan B and seek an alternative path to goal attainment? No. People just repeat themselves louder and more slowly. What a great finding! I take this as evidence that most people are not especially strategic most of the time. This insight has shaped how I understand topics like compliance-gaining and deception (cf. Levine, 2020).

Despite my great admiration for Berger and Meehl and at the risk of self-aggrandizing, I will nevertheless nominate one of my own co-authored works for consideration in the category of underappreciated communication scholarship. It is my hope that my argument for this nomination will resonate with a broader communication audience than dense papers on significance testing, philosophy of science, or measurement validation. Berger and di Battista (2009) was published in a leading journal, and it has generated more than one-hundred citations. It is a gem, but not a hidden one.

According to Google Scholar, the experiment I will be discussing

(Levine & Boster, 1996) has generated fewer than two citations per year since it was published. I think this level of citation counts as evidence that the paper has been close to invisible and has had little recognizable impact. I will argue that the lack of attention is unfortunate, and the communication scholars would benefit from awareness of the idea behind the experiment as well as the findings.

### **Interdependent Approach to Personality and Communication**

The experiment was one of my two preliminary papers I did in preparation for my PhD dissertation under the direction of Professor Franklin J. Boster. Frank suggested the idea to me after reading a paper in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Thorne, 1987), the author of which credited the idea to the earlier theorizing of Murray (1938). At the time I thought the idea had huge implications for communication. I still think this today. I regret not pursuing the idea like I did truth-bias in deception. I write this essay with the hope that readers will see the value in the idea, and that some may even pick it up and run with it. It is a good idea worth pursuing. Even if it is not extended, it is still worth knowing about and contemplating.

Even the most rudimentary understandings of human communication must recognize stable individual differences in communication styles and tendencies. Some people communicate differently than other people. Although individual differences are numerous, dimensions of personality are my current focus. A person's level of communication apprehension, social anxiety, shyness, extroversion, agreeableness, openness, assertiveness, narcissisms, etc., all impact various aspects of communication behavior in meaningful ways as documented by huge numbers of prior

studies (McCroskey & Daly, 1987).

An underappreciated limitation of studies correlating some dimension of personality with some aspect of communication is that such studies implicitly presuppose a unidirectional, unilateral model of communication. It is implicitly supposed that my personality impacts my communication independently from whom I am interacting with.

If we view communication as an interdependent activity, and if we consider that communicators might adapt to their audience or interaction partners (Miller & Steinberg, 1975), then it is insufficient to only consider the personality of one person on their communication. Instead, communication should be a joint product of the personalities of the communicators. I will call this the "Interdependent Approach to Personality and Communication."<sup>1</sup> The effects of one person's personality on their communication is moderated by the personality of their interaction partner(s).

Under Frank's guidance, I set out to test this idea using argumentativeness (Infante & Rancer, 1982) as the personality dimension of interest and the making of arguments during an interaction with a person holding different opinions as the dependent variable (Levine & Boster, 1996). Participants were pretested to ascertain their scores on argumentativeness and their opinions on several issues that were controversial at the time. Participants were paired with a dispositionally similar or dissimilar other. For example, if they scored highly on argumentativeness, they were paired either with another highly argumentative individual or they were assigned a person who scored quite low on argumentativeness. Thus, high or low argumentative communicators were matched (high-high or low-low) or mismatched (low-high, high-low) on argumentativeness with conversational partners. Regardless of the

<sup>1</sup> I originally called this transactional personality based on G. R. Miller's use of the word transactional and the ideas in *Between People*. The word interdependent captures the same idea and is more likely to be understood given current usages of the two words.

personality mix, participants were always paired with a person with whom they disagreed, and they were asked to talk about the topic of disagreement. They were not told in advance that the person disagreed, nor did they know how the other person scored on argumentativeness, or even that arguments were the focus of investigation. The interactions were videotaped and coded for the number of arguments advanced by each person.

If the unidirectional, partner-is-irrelevant model of communication is sufficient, we would expect that people scoring higher on argumentativeness would make more arguments than people who scored low on argumentativeness. That is not what happened. The results showed that highly argumentative people argued more when paired with a low argumentative partner. When a high argumentative was mismatched, they dominated. Few arguments were observed in the other three dispositional combinations. The findings were clearly consistent with the idea that the effects of a person's personality on their communication was moderated by their interaction partner's personality.

I think I know why the idea did not catch on. The study was logistically difficult. From the communication-is-unidirectional-and-partner-is-irrelevant perspective, we can just survey people. Data collection is a snap if one can afford an online panel or if one has access to a departmental subject pool to sample college students. Frank and my method required pretesting, running participants two at a time in an interaction lab, and coding video recorded communication behaviors. Statistically, dealing with non-independent data is more challenging than individual-level data. These difficulties recognized; I believe it was worth the effort.

## Implications

The first implication to highlight is simply that communication research underappreciates the ubiquity of individual differences. Many social

scientists including many communication scholars compare group means with *t*-tests or *F*-tests, check the corresponding *p*-values against the conventional  $p < .05$ , and stop with a claim of a statistically significant difference or no difference. More sophisticated researchers do power analyses first to determine their sample size and examine effect sizes with confidence intervals to inform their interpretation of the results. Either way, within-cell variance is just error and not even an afterthought. This is too bad because individual differences are relegated to error terms and thereby effectively disappeared.

My former professor John E. Hunter argued that in practice, most experiments comparing group means have a fatal flaw. Group means, he argued with indisputable mathematical proofs, are only informative to the extent that the effects of the independent variable(s) are uniform across subjects. Meaningful tests of mean differences require an absence of what he and Frank Boster called treatment-by-subject interactions. For example, Asch (1956) found that some people are more susceptible to normative appeals than others. When there are individual differences in treatment effects, means and mean differences become misleading. In Asch's data, the mean finding of conformity on one-third of the critical trials compared to virtually no errors in the control group obscures the findings that the modal response was to not conforming on even a single trial. There were also some participants conformed on every trial. Most participants acted very differently from the average of the participants. I believe that the unrecognized implicit assumption of homogeneity of effects within condition is routinely violated in communication research.

Frank Boster always insisted that distributions be examined beyond just means and standard deviations. Integrating the lessons from Hunter and Boster, my scholarship has benefited greatly from an awareness of individual differences and their implications. Sensitivity to individual differences is displayed in my Truth-Default

Theory (Levine, 2020). The distribution of lie prevalence is highly skewed with a few prolific liars. Senders vary more than receivers in lie detection tasks. It was my observation of sender matching and mismatched in veracity and demeanor that led Malcom Gladwell to my work. I am hard pressed to name another communication theory that makes predictions about how important variables are distributed.

The interdependent approach to personality and communication, however, takes attention to individual differences to a whole different level. Let us consider, for example, communication competence. Surely, we can all agree that some people are better communicators than others or at least that some people are better at some aspects of communication than others.

In my understanding of the literature addressing what counts as competent communication, there are at least two broad approaches. The first presumes that situations vary, but within situations, some messages or more competent than others. Person-centered approaches to comforting are an example (High & Dillard, 2012). Messages are coded for person-centeredness with the same coding across participants.

The alternative is a view I associate with Miller and Steinberg (1975) that we might call the message tailoring approach. The message tailoring approach involves adapting to your interaction partner. Imagine an experiment where participants interact with several different friends. We could look at how much their communication varies from friend to friend. Then, we could ask each of the friends to rate the focal participant on communication competence and for their communication satisfaction with the focal participant. We could test if variability in how the focal participant communicates with different friends predicts ratings on communication competence and satisfaction. If an experiment like this exists, I do not know of it. Such a study follows naturally from the idea of extending the idea of individual differences beyond the individual.

## Conclusion

Communication can be but is often not a unilateral and unidirectional activity. Communication research needs to better reflect the idea that communication is an interdependent activity. One way interdependence is manifested is when the impact of a communicator's personality on their message behavior is moderated by the personality of their interaction partner. Levine and Boster (1996) provide a research example of this approach with trait argumentativeness. Communication scholars are encouraged to extend this approach to other traits and individual differences.

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