

WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE: A CROSS-CULTURAL INVESTIGATION

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This study examined the means of and correlations between perceptions of willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, and communication competence of college students in the United States and Australia. Comparisons indicated a high degree of similarity in the relationships between communication orientations in the two cultures but substantial differences between the cultures in terms of mean scores on willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence. Results of the study suggest similarities between people of two different cultures on one communication orientation do not necessarily indicate similarities on other communication orientations. However, relationships between orientations may have some generalizability across cultures.

Few things are more basic to a description of the communication of an individual than the amount that person talks. Simply describing an unknown person as "quiet" or "talkative" will evoke very different images in people's minds. Research which has employed such descriptions has found dramatically different perceptions of the persons described (eg. Daly, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1976; 1977; Hayes & Metzger, 1972).

While most such research has been monocultural, the challenge of understanding communicative behaviors across culture evokes a variety of images and questions concerning individuals' predispositions towards talking and the reactions of others to the manifestations of such predispositions. Since culture shapes human communication behavior (Samovar & Porter, 1985), the amount of talking in which a person engages would be dependent, at least in part, on that person's cultural orientation. The role communication orientations such as willingness to

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communicate, communication apprehension, and communication competence play in interpersonal intercultural communication is virtually unknown.

The purpose of this cross-cultural investigation was to examine possible similarities or differences in communication orientations between people in the United States and Australia. While these two cultures are often viewed as similar, relatively little research has examined communication orientations of comparable groups in the two cultures. The orientations with which this research was concerned were communication apprehension, willingness to communicate, and communication competence.

Communication Apprehension. Communication apprehension is "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, 1984). Previous research indicates people who experience high levels of fear or anxiety regarding communication often avoid and withdraw from communication (Daly & McCroskey, 1984; Daly & Stafford, 1984). Specific cross-cultural investigations comparing communication apprehension norms have found no significant differences between the United States and Australian cultures (Hansford & Hattie, 1982; Klopff & Cambra, 1979). These findings have been interpreted as indicative of the similarity between people within these two cultures in their orientations toward communication.

Willingness to Communicate. McCroskey & Richmond (1987) advanced the construct of "willingness to communicate" to reference an individual's general personality orientation towards talking. While talking is central to interpersonal communication, people differ in the amount of talk in which they will choose to engage. Although willingness is seen as relatively constant across situations, situational variables may impact a person's willingness to communicate at a given time in a given context. Such things as how the person feels on a given day, previous communication with the other person, what that person looks like, or what might be gained or lost through communicating may have a major temporary impact on willingness.

The presumed impact of culture on willingness to communicate would be expected to operate more at a trait than a situational level. Although cultural differences might be more apparent in some contexts than in others, it would be assumed that differences in an individual's day to day communication behaviors may be accounted for more by context than by cultural variations.

Communication apprehension has been found to be significantly related to a person's willingness to communicate (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986). Thus, if the results of the research on communication apprehension in the Australian and American cultures is generalizable, we might assume people in the two cultures would also be similar in their general predisposition to be willing or unwilling to communicate. The present study sought to explore this assumption.

Communication Competence. Recent research relating to a person's willingness to communicate (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986; McCroskey & Richmond, 1985) has pointed to the importance of a person's perception of her/his communication competence. If people do not perceive themselves as competent, it is presumed they would be both more likely to be apprehensive about communicating and to be less willing to engage in communicative behavior. It is believed that a person's self-perceived communication competence, as opposed to their actual behavioral competence, will greatly effect a person's willingness to initiate and engage in communication. It is what a person thinks he/she can do not what he/she actually could do which impacts the individual's behavioral choices.

Since self-perceived communication competence has been found to be related to a people's communication apprehension and to be predictive of people's willingness to communicate in American studies, it might be assumed a similar association would obtain for Australians as well. The present study ought to determine the correctness of this assumption.

In sum, the present study sought to compare communication orientations, and relationships among such orientations, across two presumably highly similar cultures, Australian and American. It was reasoned that if a high degree of similarity was found between the

communication orientations of these two cultural groups, at least some generalization of the monocultural research conducted in the U. S. would be possible. However, if such similarity could not be found for even such similar cultures, it should be concluded the generalizability of the American research may be minimal.

METHOD

Data were collected for this study from students enrolled in classes at Warrnambool Institute of Advanced Education, Australia. A total of 195 subjects completed the instruments employed in this study. Instruments were completed anonymously and on a volunteer basis. Approximately half of the subjects were male and half female. No significant differences were found in subanalyses between males and females, therefore, gender will not be considered further in this report. The Australian data were compared to previously reported data drawn from comparable U.S. student groups (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986).

Measures. The measures employed in this study were self-report scales. The measures are discussed below.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC). The WTC scale (McCroskey & Richmond, 1985; 1987) was administered to measure students' willingness to communicate related to four communication contexts (dyads, small groups, large meetings, and public speaking) and three types of receivers (strangers, acquaintances, and friends). This 20-item instrument consists of 12 items composing the measure and 8 filler items (see McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986, for items and scoring). Previous internal (alpha) reliability estimates have been reported (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986) at .95 and .91 respectively. Reliabilities for the communication context subscores have ranged from .60 to .76. Reliabilities for the subscores for types of receivers both have ranged from .74 to .82. In the present study, the WTC scale reliability for Australian students was .91.

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA). The PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1982) was used to measure perceived communication apprehension level (see McCroskey, 1982, for items and scoring). Previous internal reliability estimates for this instrument consistently have been above .90. The obtained reliability estimate for Australian subjects was .94.

Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC). The SPCC scale measures the subjects' perceptions of their own communication competence (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986). This instrument consists of 12 items that reflect the previously mentioned four communication contexts and three types of receivers (see McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986, for scoring and procedures). Previous estimates of internal (alpha) reliability for the total score have been between .91 and .95. Subscores reliability estimates have ranged from .44 to .72 for communication context and from .78 to .87 for types of receivers. The obtained reliability estimate for the Australian subjects was .96.

Data Analyses. Pearson correlations were computed between the total scores for all measures (WTC, PRCA, and SPCC). Means of all variables were also computed. Differences between means and correlations generated from the Australian and U.S. data were tested for significance with appropriate z- and t-tests. The criterion level for significance was set at $\alpha = .05$.

RESULTS

The correlations among the scores on variables for the Australian sample were very similar to those obtained for the American sample. The correlations between the PRCA and WTC scores were, respectively, -.49 and -.52. Those for the PRCA and SPCC, .64 and .63, and those for the WTC and SPCC, .57 and .59. None of the differences between the samples were significant ($z < 1$).

Table 1 reports the means and t-test results for each score for the measures taken in the two cultures. As noted in that table, virtually all of the means for the Australian data were significantly lower than those for the Americans. The exceptions were the scores on the PRCA and those for the Stranger subscores on both the WTC and SPCC measures. Scores on these three measures did not differ significantly.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Mean Comparisons for
Subscores and Total Scores on Measures**

Measures	(U.S.) (Mean)	(U.S.) (S.D.)	(Aust.) (Mean)	(Aust.) (S.D.)	(U.S. X - Aust X)	(t)
WTC	63.1a	14.9	56.6	17.3	6.5	4.40*
Public	52.2	20.4	46.0	25.8	6.2	2.88*
Meeting	59.3	18.6	53.1	21.8	6.2	3.34*
Group	68.1	16.4	63.3	18.7	4.8	3.51*
Dyad	72.9	15.8	63.8	18.5	9.1	5.78*
Stranger	35.6	21.3	38.8	22.9	-3.2	1.60
Acquaintance	69.9	18.5	61.0	20.9	8.9	4.95*
Friend	83.9	14.0	75.9	16.3	8.0	5.75*
PRCA	65.6b	15.3	66.9	14.9	-1.3	.96
SPCC	73.7c	13.8	67.3	16.8	6.4	4.09*
Public	68.8	17.8	60.7	20.9	8.1	4.10*
Meeting	68.8	17.1	61.9	21.3	6.9	3.71*
Group	76.1	14.6	71.3	17.1	4.8	3.04*
Dyad	81.1	12.4	75.4	15.8	5.7	6.22*
Stranger	55.5	23.6	52.1	22.1	3.4	1.51
Acquaintance	77.4	15.3	68.2	19.3	9.2	5.32*
Friend	88.2	11.3	81.7	16.0	6.5	5.55*

* $p < .05$.

** Converted to 0-100 scale.

a) $n = 344$

b) normative U.S. data (McCroskey, Fayer, & Richmond, 1985)

c) $n = 216$

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation present a mixed picture with regard to the generalizability to other cultures of the research on these communication orientations conducted in the United States. On one hand, major differences were found in mean scores for self-perceived competence and willingness to communicate between Australian and American college students. These results clearly indicate norms on these measures generated in the U.S. cannot be applied elsewhere without specific cultural adaptation.

On the other hand, the fact the absence of difference between average communication apprehension scores between these two cultures observed previously was replicated here, when taken in the context of the correlational results, gives a different picture. The relationships among the apprehension, competence, and willingness measures previously observed in the U.S. were closely replicated in this Australian data, even though mean scores on competence and willingness were much lower for the Australians. In both samples, greater willingness to communicate was associated with lower apprehension and higher self-perceived competence. These results may be taken to indicate the associations among these variables observed in the U.S. are not unique to the American culture. Exactly how far the results can be generalized, of course, cannot be determined from this limited investigation. Similar studies in cultures differing from the U.S. in a variety of ways will be needed to provide a data base to provide the appropriate limits of generalizability.

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