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The Effect of Testing Environment on Participant Perceptions of Communication Quality in Coordination with Relationship Satisfaction in Non-Violent Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have found that communication quality is a major indicator of how satisfied partners are in a romantic relationship. This study centered on that aspect but added a facet in that it tested individuals' perceptions of communication and satisfaction within their relationships in separate environments in order to test the theory that certain environments may alter our moods, attitudes, and ways of thinking. This may be relevant where it is conceivably possible for individuals to help their partners feel more loved and cared for merely by choosing the proper environment to approach certain sensitive subjects within their relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Between one half and two thirds of marriages end in divorce (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). This high percentage of divorce gives rise to the question of "Why are such statistics so high?" In order to answer this question, we must adhere to long standing practices of research so that we may discover the keys to this type of behavior and the feelings that lead to them. Our contemporaries have provided many studies that have been performed to answer this question, and through these studies, one major issue that has come to the forefront of research is communication quality. Another aspect of this topic that has been studied is how certain environments may alter our feelings and/or perceptions. However, we have yet to find any study that tested both communication quality and

environment to determine if these aspects may have a cross effect in determining relationship satisfaction.

Researchers have found communication quality to be a major factor in how satisfied a person seems to be with their partner within a romantic relationship. Litzinger and Gordon (2005) more pointedly stated that effective communication has surfaced as a central component to marital satisfaction. Without communication lines open, there seems to be a gap between partners that affects the relationship in a negative way. There is no recompense for working out differences or maintaining positive relational qualities and the participants of these relationships eventually drift apart. “Researchers have suggested that unhappy couples appear to suffer from a skills deficit that inhibits their ability to communicate effectively, and this deficit significantly contributes to marital dissatisfaction” (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005, p. 410). Litzinger and Gordon (2005) also pointed out that couples that lack the necessary to communicate successfully tend to avoid conflict situations or to become defensive, either of these behaviors tend to predict later marital or relationship dissolution. Sanford (2006) stated that observing how couples communicate in conflicts will enable researchers to predict relationship outcomes such as relationship satisfaction, divorce, domestic violence, and physical health. In light of the aforementioned studies, we can clearly see why there must be an emphasis on good communication quality within relationships in order for partners to remain together in a healthy relationship and for the total well-being of those involved. Simmons, Gordon, and Chambless (2005) emphasized that how people verbally communicate clearly reflects the quality and nature of their relationship. Taking this into consideration, they studied pronouns in marital interaction and found that couples that use pronouns such as “we” and “us” tend to be more content and happy with their partners than those who use “I,” “me,” or “you.” These words once considered to be “junk words” show a profound impact on how we view our partners, and are becoming more a topic of study than they formerly were. Researchers have used these types of words to study not only the closeness of partners within a relationship, but also the quality of communication that therein exists. Meitzner and Lin (2005) observed that communication skills are strong indicators of a satisfying relationship.

The previous studies are all important in that they define objectives that researchers may use to study relationships and the communication that takes place between partners. Hence, the number of unhappy relationships and marriages may be minimized, thus minimizing problems such as divorce and other physical and mental symptoms that arise from the breakdown of relational couplings.

In order to proceed in this undertaking, we must define several terms. We will start with the various aspects of a non-violent relationship. According to Eckstien and Grassa (2005) a non-violent relationship is one in which the partners acknowledge that they are different but equal. “This means that you treat each other with the understanding that your partner’s emotional well-being...physical well-being...psychological well-being...intellectual well-being, and expression is different than yours and is as important as your own.” (Eckstien & Grassa, 2005, p. 206). Next, note that communication quality and communication quantity are not the same thing. According to Emmers-Sommer (2004) good communication quality refers to focused, uninterrupted communication with one’s partner. It does not necessarily imply that this communication lasts over long periods of time; however, this may be a factor in relationship satisfaction as well.

In conjunction with testing communication quality and relationship satisfaction, I will include experimenting with the environment in which the tests are administered. Bushnell (1978) tested certain environments for reducing test anxiety and improving academic performance. In his study, he concluded that there are important differential effects on high and low anxious students (Bushnell, 1978). In my study, I am going to test different environmental situations that may have an affect on how a person perceives communication quality and partner satisfaction.

There were certain hypotheses tested during this study that included:

- H1: There will be a positive relationship between good communication quality and positive relationship satisfaction.
- H2: There will be a positive relationship between testing environment and participant's perception of communication quality and relationship satisfaction.

METHOD

Participants

I recruited participants for two testing sessions by requesting volunteers from the Psychology subject pool, with approximately 10 participants per session, by posting a sign-up list in the hall by the Psychology Office door in Farrar Hall and by placing a request in each psychology instructor's mail box in the psychology office for them to announce that there was a sign-up list (in the hall) at any point deemed appropriate by the instructor during their classes, if that professor wished to comply.

Design

The design of my study was mixed, experimental/non-experimental. It was a between-groups design, using two groups. Demographical variables consisted of: age, gender, collegiate classification status, and marital status. The experimental variable was the room structure in which participants are to be tested. (Two rooms were utilized; one, a structured classroom setting; the other, a less structured office/boardroom setting.) Response variables consisted of the Primary Communication Inventory and the Non-Violent Communication Questionnaire.

Instruments

We used one (revised) nationally published test and one unpublished test that both met APA standards, including the Primary Communication Inventory (see Appendix A) and the Non-Violent Relationship Questionnaire (Eckstien & Grassa, 2005) (see Appendix B). We administered a Personal Profile Questionnaire (self generated) which requested age, gender, collegiate classification status, and marital status (Single, Dating one partner, Dating multiple partners, Married, Separated, Divorced, or Widowed) The Personal Profile Questionnaire also included a four digit individual test code so that if participants wished to view their individual scores, they could use this code to do so. (See Appendix C).

Procedure

The administration of this project was as follows: Participants signed up for one of two separate sessions conducted in one environmental setting each. I assigned group one to be tested in a structured classroom setting; I assigned group two to be tested in a relaxed

office/boardroom type setting. For both groups, I welcomed and seated all participants, had all participants fill out the required Participant Consent Form, provided a brief verbal overview of the study, reminded all participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and I administered the selected tests. I then advised the participants that if they wanted to see their individual scores they needed to get and keep the four digit individual test number from the header of their Personal Profile Questionnaire. I then debriefed the participants by giving them a complete overview of the study, and reminded them that they had the option to see the overall results of the study after the scores had been tabulated. I advised the participants that they had this option with or without their individual test number. I then conducted an assessment, collected the tests, and dismissed the participants. The total administration time for this project, per session, was approximately one half hour.

RESULTS

The results of this study are as follows: The t -test for the overall communication failed to show a difference, $t(46.47) = .472, p = .639$. The t -test for the overall perception of relationship satisfaction failed to show a difference, $t(56) = .009, p = .993$.

The Pearson r correlation values between communication and total reality scores for relationship satisfaction were significant at the level of $p < .001, r(57) = .747$. Communication and total perception scores for relationship satisfaction were significant at the level of $p < .001, r(57) = .454$. Partner communication and total perception scores for relationship satisfaction were significant at the level of $p = .009, r(57) = .340$. Personal communication and total perception scores for relationship satisfaction were significant at the level of $p < .001, r(57) = .460$.

DISCUSSION

Judging by the results of this study, we do not believe that the manipulation that we attempted to use was strong enough to make a statistically significant difference. We still believe that environments may have an influence on our perceptions of reality and therefore encourage further and deeper study in this realm of relationships. However, we believe it is very interesting to see how strong an influence our personal, partner, and total communication scores have on how well we perceive our relationships to be. If you will notice, our personal communication abilities have a greater effect than our partner's communication abilities on how satisfied we perceive ourselves to be within our relationships. This is noteworthy because it may be a field in which could be expanded on, to research why these communication differences have any bearing upon our relationships.

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