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2016

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The Relationship of Trait Assertiveness and Trait Humor on Social Support Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand how argumentativeness and humor orientation can affect a communicator's perception of social support availability. Emotional support is a communicative behavior that happens on a daily basis and mediates professional, social, and romantic relationships. Seeking emotional support from others is an important aspect of social interaction and can either positively or negatively affect relationships. Adopting communibiological presumptions and a trait theory perspective on communication, this research project seeks to understand and test relationships among argumentativeness as humor orientation and the perceived social support availability. By understanding how social perceptions might interact with personal traits, researchers can better understand and predict people's actions and interpretations.

The Relationship of Trait Assertiveness and Trait Humor on Social Support Perceptions

Social Support Communication

Social support has been demonstrated to be an important factor in a variety of communication behaviors and dimensions of overall well-being (Burleson and MacGeorge, 2002; Goldsmith, 2004; Jones and Wirtz, 2006). Not only does increased social support relate to higher self-esteem but it also has been proven to be a protector against mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Sarason and Gurung, 2001). Drawing from the fields of communication and mental health, researchers have attempted to explore individual's motivations to provide, accept, and evaluate emotional support and predict outcomes for individual's social realities.

Although social support has been widely regarded as a crucial component of one's social reality, there is a gap in the literature surrounding the role of trait factors in predicting supportive communication behaviors. Social influence models—such as Thoits' (1986) model of social support as a process of social gestures—emphasize the role of social factors in support behaviors. Based on the constructivist tradition, many social support intervention models have been based on the assumption that social support is merely a reflection of social factors (Lakey and Lutz 1996), and not a reflection of internal factors such as traits or predispositions.

Trait theory

Communication researchers often look to environmental, situational, and relational attributes to predict people's actions. But trait theorists attempt to explain people's actions by looking at inherent—rather than contextual—aspects of the communicator. Trait theory can be helpful in understanding communicators as individuals with primarily inherited

characteristic and personalities. Traits are generally understood as a stable predisposition to exhibit certain behaviors (Littlejohn and Foss 2009). Trait theorists are concerned with explaining behavior through both situational factors and inherent traits (Kim). And while predispositions to various behaviors have been studied for years, no links between specific genes and personality traits have been discovered. Communication traits are predispositions or tendencies to communicate in a particular way (Levine and Kotowski). Communication researchers who study traits are less concerned with personality as an internal state, but more as a predictor of communicative behavior. From a communications standpoint, Beatty (1998) has furthered trait theory by introducing the communibiological paradigm, which focuses on the role of neurobiological systems in behavior. Differences in situation behavior—according to the communibiological paradigm—can be attributed to differences in individual brain functioning due to genetic inheritance and prenatal hormone exposure, rather than experiences (Beatty 1998).

For this study, two traits—Humor Orientation and Assertiveness—have been chosen to investigate the role between communication traits and support perceptions.

Trait Argumentativeness

Argumentativeness is a communication trait where individuals are inclined to refute ideas offered by others as well as one's predisposition to offer ideas to others (Infante, 1982). Infante and his colleagues developed a conception of argumentativeness as a personality trait that is the constructive and positive tendency to engage in conversations about controversial topics, to support your own point of view, and to refute opposing beliefs (1996). Infante and Rancer adapted Atkinson's (1957,1966) theory of achievement motivation that asserted that behavior is based on the tendency to approach reward and

avoid punishment. Both argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are under the trait

umbrella of communicative assertiveness. Argumentativeness is generally understood as

the constructive trait of assertive personalities. Argumentativeness can provide positive

social benefits such as higher perceived credibility, advocacy skills, and competent rebuttal

behaviors (Rancer). While argumentativeness is a constructive personality trait, Infante

and Wigley also discuss the shadow sides of an assertive personality—verbal

aggressiveness and hostility. Verbal aggressiveness is the personality trait that predisposes

people to attack the self-concept of others (Infante and Wigley 1986). By understanding

how argumentativeness and verbal hostility traits can characterize individual's

personalities, Infante and Rancer aim to answer question about why and how people

engage in both constructive and destructive communicative behaviors.

In order to measure argumentativeness, Infante and Rancer suggest that individuals

can be arrayed on a spectrum of high to low argumentativeness, which does not necessarily

reflect the ability to argue well or competently, but rather more of an internal tendency to

argue. In other words, argumentativeness—under Infante and Rancer—is a question of

frequency, rather than effectiveness. The scale is referred to as the ARG, or

Argumentativeness Scale. Similarly, the verbal aggression scale (VAS) measures the

predisposition to berate and insult the self-concept of other, on a spectrum of either

frequently or infrequently (Infante and Wigley 1986).

Although Infante and his colleagues are considered the authority on assertive trait

research, there is some important criticism that deserves to be considered. Levine and

Kotowski (2010) call attention to non-evaluative nature of Infante's one-dimensional

model of argumentativeness. They describe how competency is a necessary metric for

understanding how trait behaviors function in the real world. According to Levine and Kotowski, Infante's conceptualization of argumentativeness encapsulates both competent argumentative people and also obnoxious contrarians under the same umbrella of argumentativeness. Similarly, Beatty (2012) calls into question the scale-behavior correspondence of Infante et al.'s methods by suggesting that self-reported and recalled communicative behaviors are not adequate measures of communicative behavior. Despite explicit claims that previous research has failed to incorporate a multi-dimensional conceptualization of assertive traits, both Levine and Kotowski and Beatty recognize the importance of Infante's contribution. Current research would suggest that the ARG and VAS scales are probably indicators of different constructs than actual communicative behavior (Levine and Kotowski) but this does not void the reliability of the scales as a measurement for understanding how individuals view themselves as argumentative or verbally aggressive.

Trait Humor Orientation

The communibiological paradigm also provides a conceptualization of humor as a temperamental personality trait similar to assertiveness, shyness, or neuroticism. Humor is an abstraction that can be understood in a variety of communicative ways, although most literature on humor are related only to jokes and joke telling. Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1999) provided a trait theory conceptualization of humor through the lens of humor orientation (HO), where individuals with high HO are predisposed to enact frequent attempts to communicate humor through verbal and non-verbal means. As an important contributor to humor research, Butterfield et al. provided a sociopsychological approach to understanding humor as a function of the communicator as an individual. Butterfield et al.'s

concept of HO reflect Beatty's model of communicative behavior as reflective of inherent neurobiological structures. Humor Orientation provides communication researchers the ability to study how individuals behave communicatively based on their inherent traits, rather than the previous conceptualizations of humor as a response, message, or social construction.

Wanzer (1995) drew an important connection between self-reported HO scores and the perceptions of outsiders. According to Wanzer's research, those with higher HO were perceived by others as funnier than those with low Hos. As evidenced by the controversy surrounding Infante's VA and ARG scales, drawing connections between trait and actual communicative behavior is a hugely important aspect of the communibiological paradigm.

Research surrounding humor orientations has painted a favorable picture for those with higher HO. LaBelle, Booth-Butterfield, and Weber (2013) found that higher HOs were associated with relational satisfaction, coping efficacy, and coping effectiveness. Maki, Booth-Butterfield, and McMullen (2012) investigated humor orientation influence on dyadic cohesion and satisfaction and found a positive correlation between HO and both relationship satisfaction and cohesion. Booth-Butterfield has contributed to the overall consensus that the individual trait of humor orientation can positively mediate individual's daily experiences. Additionally, outside of the individual, receiver-based research into humor orientation have suggested that managers, supervisors, and college instructors with higher perceived HO are associated with less stressful workplaces and classrooms (Rizzo, Wanzer, and Booth-Butterfield 1999) (Aylor and Oppliger 2003).

Models of Supportive Communication

Interactive coping and demonstrating emotional support are communicative behaviors that have been the focus of communication and psychology researchers alike. Emotional support is a process of attempting to help distressed people reappraise (Burleson and Goldsmith, 1998) and manage their emotions (Jones and Wirtz, 2006) to alleviate distress (Burleson and MacGeorge, 2002; Goldsmith, 2004; Jones and Wirtz, 2006). Much of the research surrounding the communicative aspects of emotional support is attributed to the work of Burleson (1985) who provided a communicator-based conceptualization of emotional support behaviors. Burleson has provided a robust body of research surrounding the mediating factors of social support among peers. Burleson and his colleagues provided a hierarchy or comforting strategies, where higher-level comforting responses are superior to lower-level comforting responses. Emotional support behaviors carry risks and rewards and existing research has demonstrated that inferior comforting strategies can harm perceptions of the comforter (Burleson and MacGeorge, 2002) and effective support can increase solidarity between seekers and providers (Dirks and Metts, 2010).

Social support models vary across disciplines in the ways they either emphasize social factor or traits. Lakey and Scoboria (2005) have attempted to highlight the extent to which traits and social factors interact together to influence perceived social support. Although contributing to the communibiological tradition primarily, Burleson has also suggested that social support behaviors are influenced by factors such gender (Burleson, Hanasono, Bodie, Holstom, McCullough, Rack and Rosier 2011) and cultural difference (Mortenson, Burleson, Feng, and Liu 2009). Some social support models suggest that

behaviors are also mediated by internal factors such as mental state and perceptions of support availability and accessibility such as Rossetto, Lannutti, and Smith's (2014) who suggested that self-efficacy and emotional challenges are key predictors of individual's willingness to provide emotional support.

Thoits (1985) employed a symbolic interactionism view of supportive communication as a process of social gestures and ongoing mutual orientation. Such models reflect an understanding of supportive communication that emphasizes the role of social factors in favor of trait factors. Like Thoits, most of the work in support communication reflects an emphasis on the communication context (e.g., symbolic interactionism) and social factors as grounds for predicting the mechanisms of support communication. Recent communication research on supportive communication has not yet provided a comprehensive model of social support that account for both social factors and the communibiological perspective in an integrated approach.

Perceived Support Availability

Supportive communication research suggests that different individuals will perceive the effectiveness, availability, and accessibility of social support. Perceived support availability (PSA) describes an individual's belief about the likelihood that social support is available when needed. PSA has been identified as an underlying factor in the processes and outcomes of support communication. Henderson's (1981) research into the role of perception in social relationships suggested that personality and perceptions of available social support are causally related. Individuals with higher PSA are more willing to seek out support from their social networks and studies have demonstrated that these individuals will seek and ultimately receive support more frequently than those with low PSA

(Burleson and MacGeorge, 2002). Numerous studies have proven that people who perceive their social networks as more supportive experience better mental health, including less distress, lower rates of mental disorder, and higher self-esteem (Sarason and Gurung, 2001). PSA has been widely applied to supportive communication studies and personality research and has been proven to be important protective factor against mental health problem (Brissette, Scheier, and Carver, 2002).

Apart from demonstrating the mediating role of PSA in social realities, researchers have also investigated the roles of gender and culture in PSA. Burleson and his colleagues have demonstrated and acknowledged that women typically display higher PSA as wells as individuals whose support networks have similar cultural backgrounds as the individual (2002).

Perceived Support Availability has yet to be considered in the context of a communibiological perspective, although Henderson's research into the personality aspects of support behaviors provides a good starting point. A trait theory model of PSA would help draw connections between behaviors and underlying factors, especially such much of the literature has focused on the mechanisms of social support through a symbolic interactionism or constructivist lens.

Rationale

The research described above supports the idea that trait theory has an important place in the understanding how individuals accept, perceive, and demonstrate supportive communication. The communibiological perspective deserves to be applied to a variety of phenomenon, but has often been disregarded in the study of supportive communication in favor of social factors such as gender, cultural norms, and contextual variables.

Additionally, much of the research surrounding perceived social support have come from the psychological tradition, which is less concerned with "traits," but more interested in mental health factors such as wellbeing, and stress (Kaul and Lakey 2003).

As the research has shown, an individual's perception of the available social support has important implications for how that individual navigates their life. Lower reported levels of distress, mental disorders, and depression point to the need for individuals to feel as though their social networks are a positive source of social support.

Understanding how biological predispositions towards certain personality traits interface with social support perceptions could provide valuable insight into how individuals experience supportive communication. The current literature does not consider the role of specific personality traits and their mediating roles in the process of social support perception.

Considering how a trait theory understanding of humor orientation has been successfully applied to a myriad of communicative phenomenon, HO can also be applied to supportive communication studies and provide a necessary alternative to the existing research that looks at social factors and mental health. Drawing off the previous work that highlights the role of humor in coping, it is reasonable to assume that HO also affects perceived support availability. In order to bridge the gap in the literature, it is important to investigate how traits such as humor orientation and argumentativeness interact with social support perceptions. Humor as a trait, rather than the abstraction, has successfully been associated coping and stress management skills, but not individual's perceptions of their social support networks, which has been demonstrated to be an important mediating factor in overall mental health.

H1:   Higher trait humor orientation will positively predict higher perceived social support availability.

Similar to humor, argumentativeness has been associated with a variety of communication behavior. As Rancer has demonstrated, trait argumentativeness is associated with self-advocacy skills and assertiveness. These trait-influenced factors could reasonably be associated with an individual's perception of emotional support resources available to the individual.

H2:   Higher trait argumentativeness will positively predict higher perceived social support availability.

There are several dimensions of social support that should be identified as separate from one another. Although availability of social support is strongly related to relational depth (Pierce, Sarason, and Sarason, 1991), social support should be understood as available from significant others, friends, and family. Delineating between these sources of available social support could help provide a more complex understanding of how traits interact with social support perceptions.

H3:   Higher trait humor orientation will positively predict perceived social support availability from friends.

H4:   Higher trait argumentativeness will positively predict perceived social support availability from friends.

These hypothesis are aimed at identifying which mechanisms of social support can be traced to trait factors, rather than social factors.

Method

Participants

Participants were 76 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a mid-sized northwestern university. Ages ranged from 18 to 36 years. Sample was 57.3% male (N=43) and 42.7% female (N=32).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through social media and email. Participants were provided with an online questionnaire and requested to complete the measures which asked participants about their humor orientation, argumentativeness, and their perceptions of available social support from their friends, significant others, and families.

Measures

Humor Orientation Scale. Humor Orientation was measured with Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield's (1991) Humor Orientation Scale. This scale consisted of 17 items that assessed the participant's predisposition to use humor across a variety of social interactions. Rather than measuring the success of the humorous communication, the HOS measures the regularity of individual's humorous communication (e.g., "People often ask me to tell jokes and stories"). Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In this study, high internal reliability was obtained. The Cronbach's Alpha was .93 (N of items=17).

Verbal Argumentativeness Scale. Argumentativeness was measured through Infante and Rancer's (1982) Verbal Argumentativeness Scale. The measure consisted of 20 items that assessed the participants tendency to either avoid or engage in arguments (e.g., "I get an unpleasant feeling when I realize I am about to get into an argument.) Responses

were collected on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "almost never true" to "almost always true." Argumentativeness is measured on a scale of low to moderate to high argumentativeness scores. In this study, high internal reliability was obtained. The Cronbach's Alpha was .91 (N of items=20).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. Perceived social support was measured though the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Ziment, and Farley, 1988). The scale consisted of 11 items that assess the amount to which individuals understand social support to be available to them. The three dimensions addressed were (1) special persons (e.g., "There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings"), (2) friends (e.g., "I can count on my friends when things go wrong"), and (3) family (e.g., "I can talk about my problems with my family"). Responses were collected on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "very strongly disagree." In this study each dimension obtained high internal reliability. Cronbach's alpha scores were as follows: PSA-Significant Others = .93 (N of items=4), PSA-Friends = .93 (N of items=3), PSA-Family = .85 (N of items 4).

Results

Attempting to draw connections between trait humor, argumentativeness and PSA did not prove any statistically significant results. A series of Pearson Correlations were conducted to identify a linear relationship between both HO and Argumentativeness and the 3 dimensions of PSA. These analyses proved to be inconclusive and no relationship was identified. None of the hypotheses were supported (see Appendices 1 & 2)

Discussion

Although this particular study failed to yield a correlation between the selected traits and perceived support availability, the impetus of the question is still a valuable one: what role, if any, do internal trait factors play in people's social realities? Perhaps the failure of this study was that the question was less interested in the levels at which traits interact with support communication and more interested in the specific traits as they function as mediating factors in a general sense. The process of creating this study has led to the acknowledgement that traits and social factors interact in a complex manner that cannot simply be separated out into two categories of independent variables. An integrated approach to understanding their interactions would open up new realms of research. As the literature reviewed above has described, social support models need to draw a connection between the internal and external forces that mediate supportive communication. This notion has been echoed in the work of Lakey and Scoboria (2005) who point out that competing social support models are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can offer different explanations at different levels of analysis. Bringing together the symbolic interactionism approach with a communibiological understanding could synthesize these competing models and provide a new site of inquiry—which is—the question of where and when do traits either help or hinder individuals get the support they need. At what point is someone too verbally aggressive that they alienate themselves from any possible support networks? How much can people change their predispositions?

In order to create a more comprehensive model of support communication, more attention should be paid to the role of personality and the mental health understanding of traits. If perceived social support is less of a dependent variable—as this study assumed—and more of a personality mechanism as understood by clinical psychologists, than perhaps researchers would

be able to conceive of a model of social support where personality mechanisms are the key mediating factors in social support behaviors, rather than external social influences.

The above trait theory approach to the topic of perceived support availability has proven inconclusive, but does not diminish the necessary role of trait theory in further research on how individuals experience their social realities. Rancer's (2008) study of K-12 teachers suggested that trait aggressiveness in instructors was significantly related to teacher burnout, mental health concept that is defined as the feeling of being overwhelmed, cynical, and emotionally exhausted. This type of research helps draw connections between emotional well-being and internal traits, rather than external forces (e.g., their salaries, the types of classroom, etc.). Understanding how predispositions affect overall well-being is a key component of the work of Rancer and his colleagues, but more attention needs to be paid to the overlap between social influences and trait influences.

Future research should test how traits interact with social influences. For example, it is reasonable to suggest that those with higher humor orientations are predisposed to have a wider and shallower social support network and those with lower HO might reflect a smaller, more intimate social network. This hypothesis could also reasonably be applied to other traits such as introversion and extroversion. In the case of humor orientation, a qualitative approach could help identify themes about how individuals are able to use their sense of humor to connect themselves to support resources.

From an intervention standpoint, mental health professionals could benefit from this type of understanding, especially if specific traits were identified as hurdles to gaining emotional support. Clients who exhibit certain traits could be more effectively coached to understand their predispositions and work to mitigate the negative effects of those specific traits. For example, if

a mental health counselor used the communibiological framework laid out in Rancer's teacher burnout study, counselors could attribute failures in the classroom to trait predispositions, rather than external factors. Conceivably, without this trait lens, teachers could spend a lot of time and energy altering the social influences of their classroom, rather than address this verbal aggressiveness trait that predicts high levels of burnout.

Conversely, if social influencers were identified as separate from trait influence in an integrated manner, counselors could coach clients into an understanding of how social factors such as classroom size, gender, and culture interact with predispositions such as verbal aggressiveness, extroversion, etc. Having a language for trait and social factors as separate, but intertwined influences could be helpful for counselors who are struggling to pinpoint which factors are contributing to client's social realities.

Although the primary purpose of this study was to extrapolate the mediating power of specific traits, the study also has implication for the way researchers approach the topic of personality. Personality psychology could be a common ground for which mental health professionals and communication scholars synthesize their separate disciplines. Both levels of analyses (trait and social) deserved to be integrated and studied in light of each other.

Finally, further research should be concerned with how trait measures reflect actual communicative behaviors. As mentioned in the literature review, there may be more effective ways to measure predispositions than has been identified by Booth-Butterfield and Infante and Rancer. Perhaps this where communication scholars should rely more heavily on the psychological tradition, specifically the work Henderson and the growing body of research surrounding personality psychology.

One of the main limitations of this study was the misguided assumption that trait humor and trait argumentativeness can or should be separated from social influencers. While measures of inherent traits were internally reliable, the lack of significant correlation to PSA demonstrates a failure in the design of the study to isolate the actual factors of trait factor predictions. In light of the misguided approach to understanding the interaction of trait influences and social factors, the study points to a need for an integrated approach that considers the symbolic interactionism of social support as well as the important social influencers. Another limitation was the reliance on exclusively quantitative measures, which failed to illustrate the complex interplay between variables.

In conclusion, this project has illustrated a gap and failure of current support communication research, but also provides some recommendations for further study and futures models of social support that includes a trait theory perspective on social factors that influence support perceptions.

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Appendix 1

Table 1 – Humor Orientation and PSA - Significant Others

Correlations

		PSASO	HO
PSASO	Pearson Correlation	1	.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.946
	N	75	74
HO	Pearson Correlation	.008	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.946	
	N	74	75

Table 1.1 – Humor Orientation and PSA – Friends

Correlations

		HO	PSAFR
HO	Pearson Correlation	1	-.086
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.465
	N	75	74
PSAFR	Pearson Correlation	-.086	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.465	
	N	74	75

Table 1.2 – Humor Orientation and PSA – Family

Correlations

		HO	PSAFA
HO	Pearson Correlation	1	-.029
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.807
	N	75	74
PSAFA	Pearson Correlation	-.029	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.807	
	N	74	75

Appendix 2

Table 2 Argumentativeness and PSA – Significant Other

Correlations

		Argumentativeness	PSASO
Argumentativeness	Pearson Correlation	1	.098
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.405
	N	75	74
PSASO	Pearson Correlation	.098	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.405	
	N	74	75

Table 2.1 Argumentativeness and PSA – Friends

Correlations

		Argumentativeness	PSAFR
Argumentativeness	Pearson Correlation	1	-.017
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.884
	N	75	74
PSAFR	Pearson Correlation	-.017	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.884	
	N	74	75

Table 2.2 Argumentativeness and PSA – Family

Correlations

		Argumentativeness	PSAFA
Argumentativeness	Pearson Correlation	1	-.055
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.641
	N	75	74
PSAFA	Pearson Correlation	-.055	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.641	
	N	74	75