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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal communication competence has been conceptualized as a function of impressions of competence formed in the context of a dyadic relationship, and also in terms of individual behaviors. The Measure of Relational Competence, along with individual self-reports for empathy, role taking, and self-monitoring, were administered for 36 conversations among female college students. Results indicated that, in the context of initial acquaintance between women, individual tendencies explain some stable effects in impressions of competence. Unique adjustments to the relationship seem limited to projection from one's own competence to the other and to accurate self-perception of competence in each dyad. Little relational adjustment between individuals occurs in such dyads. In this context, actors' impressions of partners' competence are predicted by the partners' individual characteristics, but also are affected by the actors' self-perceptions as adjusted to each interaction. (Tables of supporting data are appended.) (SRT)

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Interpersonal Communication Competence:  
Contributions of Individual Tendency and Relational Context

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## Interpersonal Communication Competence: Contributions of Individual Tendency and Relational Context.

Interpersonal communication competence has been conceptualized in terms of individual behaviors and as impressions formed in the context of a relationship. The Measure of Relational Competence, along with individual self-reports for empathy, role-taking and self-monitoring, was administered for thirty-six conversations among female college students. Data were analyzed by round-robin analysis of variance. Results indicated that, in the context of initial acquaintance between women, unique adjustments to the relationship are not necessarily relational, but are probably limited to projection from one's own competence to the other, and to accurate perceptions of self-competence in relation to partner's impression. Self-reported communication tendencies apparently influence impressions of competence at the individual level: empathy is negatively related to the impressions of competence one gives, role-taking is positively related to those impressions, while self-monitoring is positively related to the way one's conversational partner perceives their own competence.

# Interpersonal Communication Competence: Contributions of Individual Tendency and Relational Context

## Introduction

Educators and legislators as well as communication scholars want to know what makes a person interpersonally competent. Some would identify competencies observable in behavioral skills (Allen and Brown, 1976; Rubin, 1982); others claim that competence resides in individual cognitive capacities (Larson, Backlund, Redmond and Barbour, 1978; McCroskey, 1982). In addition to the conceptual confusion regarding the locus of communication competence in the individual, we find reminders that the individual alone cannot control the impression of competence that another attributes to the individual. More often than not, we find current discussion of interpersonal communication competence focusing on the dyadic nature of the construct; impressions of competence are said to be more a function of the relationship than of the individual.

### Competent Individual Vs. Competent Interaction

Even though we may agree that interpersonal competence is a function of the relationship, very few researchers have operationalized the construct so that they may adequately examine relational concerns. For the most part, measures of interpersonal competence have consisted of self-reports of individual tendencies or of third-party evaluations. (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1984, pp. 170-171).

An ambitious exception to the traditions of competence research is a model of relational competence developed by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984). Their review of the literature in communication competence leads them to integrate what they consider to be the necessary components of competence: motivation, knowledge and skills, with the criterial outcomes of those three acknowledged elements, as well as the oft-mentioned but rarely studied catch-all of context (Spitzberg and Cupach, p. 117). One of the critical assumptions of the model is that competence is an impression of appropriateness and effectiveness, rather than a set of behaviors. Another of their assumptions, particularly important to the research to be reported here, is that competence is a matter of degree. I have liberally interpreted this assumption to include the issue of development. I expect that impressions of competence vary according to both the subject's and evaluator's level of communication development.

Cupach and Spitzberg have developed a measure to operationalize their theoretical constructs (1981). The measure calls for interactants in a communication episode to assess their own communication as well as their partner's. Thus they obtain impressions of both individuals by both individuals in a context.

Using the Measure of Relational Competence, we can begin to explore the relative contributions of the individual and the interaction in interpersonal competence. If competence is an individual tendency, we might expect to identify behaviors that lead most social actors to develop an impression of competence. If it is to be found in a relational event, then our expectations are not as clear. Perhaps competence impressions are more likely to be made on the basis of a particular combination of behaviors in a dyad, or perhaps some contexts lend themselves more easily to favorable impressions than others. The individual, the context, and the relationship are likely to affect impressions of competence; therefore, we need a method for analyzing the variance distribution in relational data.

The Measure of Relational Competence (MORC) has been used to gather impressions of recalled conversations between friends and the results have been analyzed by traditional social science methods such as multiple regression analysis (for example, Spitzberg and Cupach, 1981; Cupach and Spitzberg, 1983). With the use of controlled interaction data and a method capable of distinguishing individual differences from relationship influence we can begin to sort out the critical factors leading to impressions of competence. A round robin analysis of variance for interaction data allows the researcher to test the significance of individual differences as well as interaction effects (Warner, Kenny and Stoto, 1979).

#### The Relational Model and the Social Relations Model: The Theory-Method Fit

The relational model of competence developed by Spitzberg and Cupach finds a sympathetic methodological partner in the Social Relations Model developed by Kenny and Lavoie (1983). The round robin analysis of variance was developed to fill a need in the social sciences for a statistical model that provides information about the interactive aspects of social behavior, such as reciprocity (Warner, Kenny & Stoto, 1979). Kenny and Lavoie describe the Social Relations Model as a descriptive model of social behavior for the round robin design. The dyadic variables observed are described by the variance partitioned in three components: actor, partner, and relationship effects. The actor effect refers to the average level of A's behavior in the presence of a variety of other partners, in this case, the average competence score given by A to others (OR) and to self (SR) over many conversations. The partner effect reflects the behavior that person A consistently elicits from others; that is, the average competence score that A receives from partners (OR) and the partners' self-ratings from conversations with A (SR).

The Social Relations Model begins to examine the interaction effect; the sum of person A and person B may be not simply A+B but a unique adjustment between A and B to each other. The relationship effect represents the extent to which A's behavior toward B cannot be explained by A's actor effect or by B's partner effect; the actor and partner effects are controlled and the remaining variance is accounted for by the relationship (pp. 3-4 check new pub.).

The model accounts for interdependence between social behaviors by examining correlations among the elements of the two equations representing the dyad. They are actor-partner correlation, relationship correlation and occasion correlation. The actor-partner correlation measures association between individual effects, so it does not refer to the relationship but simply the extent to which persons who rate others highly competent tend to elicit high ratings. The relationship correlation is computed with the actor-partner correlation partialled out, so the coordination of both persons' relationship effects can be examined. For instance, if A rates B more competent than A rates others and more competent than others usually rate B, does B respond in kind? The occasion correlation measures the instability in the relationship across several observations of the relationship.

The Model of Relational Competence consists of theoretical assumptions that may be tested by the design and analysis explained by the Social Relations Model. If we assume that the measure of relational competence reflects the components of knowledge, skill and motivation by assessing impressions of criterion outcomes, then we have an

operationalization of relational competence but yet lack information about what the scores mean or what accounts for those scores. One assumption of the relational competence model is that competence is an interdependent process; that "self and other ratings interact to affect conversational outcomes." (Spitzberg & Cupach, p. 115) We can now pinpoint the nature of this interaction; it may be a simple actor-partner effect (individual level) or a relationship effect that suggests projection or truly reciprocal adjustments.

The other assumptions of the Model of Relational Competence to be examined in this study are the issues of context and degree. Context may influence the nature of the interdependent process. We may expect to find different sources of variance in competence ratings among newly acquainted partners than we might among friends (Spitzberg and Recht, 1984). For purposes of this study, context will be controlled within the parameters of new acquaintances in a laboratory setting.

Competence is a matter of degree according to the relational model; so partners may have different expectations for different types of people and situations. Age, for example, may affect our impressions of others and the underlying resources we use in perceiving them. Again, the Social Relations Model for analysis of data can identify the amount of variance due to individual level or relationship level effects. If the individual level variance is considerable, then characteristics of each partner may predict the variance.

The Social Relations Model for describing interaction data can provide a more informative analysis of relational competence than has been available heretofore. The resulting data can test some of the assumptions of the theoretical Model of Relational Competence.

#### Individual Characteristics: Age, Empathy, Perspective-Taking and Self-Monitoring

The literature regarding interpersonal communication competence suggests that an individual must display a variety of human communication skills to be considered competent. Those skills identified as important range from interpersonal warmth to interaction management. Two often mentioned skills or traits are empathy and role-taking. Considerable conceptual confusion has emerged about these terms (Burleson and Bingham, 1983); a simple distinction will be made for purposes of this study. Empathy will be defined as an affective response in kind to another's feeling, while role-taking will be defined as a cognitive process by which one attempts to infer others' perspectives.

If individual level processes account for a good deal of the variance in competence ratings given and received by newly acquainted partners, then we would want to identify whether those processes were affective, cognitive or a combination of the two. Then we could identify the type of communication process, claimed by the individual, that predicts who will impress others as competent. The Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE) developed by Mehrabian has been used by many researchers in a manner consistent with the above definition. The EM scale developed by Hogan (1969), although labeled an empathy scale, purports to describe "the capacity to adopt a broad moral perspective. Hogan defines empathy as "the intellectual or imaginative apprehension of another's condition or state of mind" (Hogan, p. 307)--or what we have distinguished as the capacity to infer another's perspective rather than to feel-in with another. A recent

review of empathy measures reports that the QMEE and EM scales have been the most used measures and are the best supported in terms of validity and reliability (Chlopan, McCain, Carbonell and Hagen, 1984). However, they apparently measure two different things; QMEE measures emotional arousal and EM measures role-taking ability (p. 650).

Spitzberg and Cupach found no significant relationship between competence ratings and self-monitoring scores (1981); however, the relationship may not be straightforward yet functional in interaction. Self-monitoring refers to that capacity to use the expressive cues of others in social situations as guidelines for regulating individual behavior (Snyder, 1979). Because high self-monitors have well-developed impression management skills (Snyder, 1979a), we might expect them to cope effectively in many social situations and thus to give the impression of competence (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1981). The self-monitoring scale developed by Snyder was found to have three conceptual factors when analyzed in three separate studies (Briggs, et.al., 1980; Gabrenya & Arkin, 1980; Tobey & Tunnell, 1981), the agreement of loaded items is only 60%; therefore interpreting subscale scores is risky. The sum scale score will be used as it has been in the majority of published self-monitoring research and in the study by Spitzberg and Cupach.

#### Relational Impression: Other-Rating and Self-Rating

The Measure of Relational Competence is relatively new, but both the self-ratings and other-ratings have demonstrated high reliability (.94 and .96 respectively) and construct validity by factor analysis with the communication satisfaction inventory (Cupach and Spitzberg, 1981).

This research addresses two general questions:

1. To what extent do dyadic impressions of competence reflect individual tendencies and/or unique relational adjustments?
2. To what extent are dyadic impressions of competence related to individual characteristics (age, empathy, role-taking, self-monitoring)?

### Method

#### Subjects

The sample was selected from volunteers (198) recruited from a basic communication course at a large midwestern university during the spring semester of 1985 (enrollment=464). All volunteers completed self-report measures for empathy, perspective-taking and self-monitoring, and received course credit. Subjects received additional credit for their participation in the videotaped portions of the data collection. Twenty-four subjects were selected for their age group (traditional and nontraditional students). Perhaps because of the characteristics of the population in general, more nontraditional volunteers were female; therefore, our sample for this study is entirely female so as to avoid confounding effects of gender.

#### Procedures

Data were collected within a two week period in the spring of 1985. The first portion of the session involved the completion of self-report measures in a large, comfortable room on campus. When the selected subjects had finished their pencil-and-paper measures, they were

escorted to research laboratories in the same building. Each group (six) of four women entered one of two rooms on either side of a video control room. They were introduced and briefed about the session. Whomever happened to take the chairs set up for taping in that room remained for the first conversation. The other two women moved to the room opposite the control booth. Each dyad was to begin their conversation by exploring the differences of opinion found by comparing responses to an attitude questionnaire. They were instructed to feel free to leave the prescribed topics and most of them did so; the goal was specified as "finding out more about the other person." Each conversation lasted at least ten minutes, then the researcher entered the room and asked one subject to move to the other room until all parties had conversed with each other. The order of changing partners was prescribed for all groups following the first random selection of seats. Upon completion of videotaped conversations, all subjects were brought back to one room and asked to complete a permission form for using the tapes and the measures of relational competence for the three conversations they had just had. Finally, the researcher debriefed participants, thanked them for their time and invited further inquiries.

The dependent dyadic variables were both other-ratings (OR) and self-ratings (SR) from the measure of relational competence. Independent variables were relationship level and individual level variance. Adjunct to the individual level of the design were age, empathy, role-taking and self-monitoring.

The round robin design calls for every subject to serve as both actor and partner for every other subject. The design was replicated six times with four subjects in each group. The SOREMO computer program, developed by Kenny (1984) for the treatment of round-robin data designs, was used to analyze the data. The statistical methods are described elsewhere (Warner, Kenny & Stoto, 1979; Kenny & Lavoie, 1983) and briefly explained by Montgomery in the context of communication research (1984).

## Results

The results of analysis are divided into three sections: individual level variance, relationship level variance and individual characteristics in actor/partner effects. The overall results of variance partitioning are reported in Table A. Although the relationship level appears to account for most of the variance, these figures may be deceptive. When replications are not available for particular dyads, as they were not in this study, relationship variance cannot be separated from error. Tables B and C break down individual and relationship effects further.

### Individual Level Variance

The only significant individual level effects in Table B were for actor and partner. As we might expect, self-ratings were fairly stable within the actor across conversations. Partner's self-ratings were negatively correlated, suggesting that actors were paired with a range of partners who perceived themselves quite differently, or that one actor does not elicit stable self-impressions in partners.

## Relationship Level Covariance

Intrapersonal correlations reflect the actor's effects as both actor and partner. The robust correlations reported in Table C are usually interpreted in terms of mutuality. The score A gives to B (OR) is highly correlated with the score B gives to A, and the score A gives to self (SR) is correlated with the score B gives to self, for that conversation. What may in fact be happening is that A rates others similarly to the way A thinks of his or her own traits--or uses projection to evaluate others. If B then rates A as A appears, A must be an accurate self-perceiver to project those traits accurately. This is particularly plausible in the context of nonfamiliarity of partners. A's score for B, however, also correlated with B's score of B. Impressions of competence apparently are related to the evaluated individual's self-perception; that is, the way I view myself affects the way you view me.

Interpersonal correlations reflect the relationship between A's unique adjustment to B and B's unique adjustment to A; or reciprocity. The only correlation, which is not robust for this study, is in the correlations between A's adjustment of A's self-rating and B's adjustment of B's self-rating for their conversation. In light of the stability we expect for self-ratings, however, any adjustments made to the dyad on this measure are interesting. Perhaps in newly acquainted dyads, the first adjustment to be made is in the way each individual perceives himself or herself in relation to the other.

## Individual Characteristics in Actor/Partner Effects

Age apparently had minimal influence on ratings, however the effects may be useful in building developmental theory, and cannot be dismissed as easily as low relationship level effects because individual effects are not confounded by the error term. There may be reason to believe that the older the actor (or nontraditional female student), the lower she is likely to rate herself and her conversational partner; or the younger the actor, the higher she is likely to rate herself and her partner. The older student is expected to operate at a different level of competence and may, if using projection to rate others, use the same standards for others as for self.

Empathy apparently is not the boon to competence we have believed it to be. Those actors who considered themselves highly empathic did not impress their partners as competent and vice versa. The negative correlation between empathy and other-rated competence may be explained by the vast difference between affective empathy and cognitive role-taking. Although the two concepts are often used coterminously, the first may have little to do with symbolic communication processes and the second has everything to do with them. Although affective empathy is the highest form of animal communication, human communication functions to link people symbolically. Emotional responses can interfere with appropriate symbolic responses; any good friend, parent or social worker will testify that too much empathy can prevent productive communication. Highly empathic individuals may rely so heavily on affective responses that they fail to develop competent communication skills.

Role-taking however is apparently quite important to the impression of competence, at least in newly acquainted dyads. Those actors who

considered themselves capable of taking others' perspectives received high competence scores from their partners. In newly acquainted partners, the cognitive ability to take the role of the other was more impressive than affective feeling-in-with the other.

Self-monitoring ability influenced the partner to a higher self-rating for competence. Those who saw themselves as good adaptors and impression managers were not necessarily rated as highly competent by others but managed to bolster their partners' self-perceptions.

#### Conclusion

In contrast to the majority of studies concerning interpersonal competence, this one examines dyadic impressions of competence based on observed interactions in a controlled setting. Round-robin analysis of variance allowed appropriate treatment of interaction data, partitioning the results into individual and relationship effects.

Although most of the variance appeared to be accounted for by relationship effects, those effects cannot be distinguished from error effects in this design, because multiple interactions for each dyad across time were unavailable. In light of the low correlations for interpersonal relationship effects and robust correlations for intrapersonal relationship effects, individuals may be making adjustments in their own behavior that are unique to the interaction; that is, my impressions of you and of me in this situation are related to your impressions of me--we can be accurate in our impressions. But we probably are not making adjustments in the same way; that is, the unique adjustment I make to you is not related to the unique adjustment you make to me--our impressions are not reciprocal. Such an explanation appears sensible in the interaction of nonfamiliar partners, but more solid support for this interpretation depends upon the use of the repeated dyad design.

Based on intrapersonal correlations, we have good reason to believe that individuals project their own tendencies to the interaction partner when that partner is a new acquaintance. Social actors apparently are accurate in their impressions; individuals perceive their own competence as others do.

A stable percent of the variance was accounted for by actor effects at the individual level where we find many of the significant and interpretable effects in this study. Although there is little consistency among raters of partners' competence, some individual characteristics claimed by actors elicit particular impressions of competence. Individual level effects are apparently important in interaction among newly acquainted women. Most significant of these are the negative influence of empathy and the positive influence of role-taking on individual's received competence ratings. High self-monitors elicit high self-ratings in their partners; that is, individuals who look to others for social cues and respond to those cues, make their partners feel more competent.

Older (or more experienced) social actors tend to rate partners lower in competence than younger actors do, and influence their partners to a lower self-rating as well. These findings, of borderline statistical significance, should be checked with a block round-robin design separating out age effect.

Overall, results suggest that, in the context of an initial acquaintance between women, individual tendencies of social actors explain some stable effects in their impressions of competence, and unique adjustments to the relationship are limited to projection from one's own competence to another and to accurate self-perception of

competence in each dyad.

Little relational adjustment between individuals occurs in such dyads. In this context, actors' impressions of partners' competence are predicted by the partners' individual characteristics, but also are affected by the actors' self-perceptions as adjusted to each interaction.

Backlund (1983) suggests that in order to describe communication competence, we must examine a range of communication situations, look to people in those situations for judgements, gather a large number of impressions as to who performs appropriately and effectively in those situations, then examine the specific communication skills of those who fall at either end of the range of impressions. With that body of data, we can begin to pinpoint the skills and combinations of characteristics that account for the most variance in judgements. Descriptions across a variety of contexts are needed to support a relational model and to specify its attributes. I suggest that we collect observable interaction data with dyads that cut across levels of relational intimacy, and analyze that data by a method that lends itself to social interaction

I have described, in one context across three interactional 'situations' per individual, the relationships among their impressions of participants' competence and their reported communication skills or tendencies. Although the results are limited in scope, the descriptions are true to a relational perspective of competence accounting for individual differences and interaction effects.

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Table A

## Relative Variance Partitioning

Dyadic Variable	Actor	Partner	Relationship	Group
	OR	.200	.069	.593
SR	.372	.000	.415	.213

Table B

## Individual Level Effects

Dyadic Variable	Actor		Partner				One-Way Interaction Effect					
	OR		SR		OR		SR		OR		SR	
	r	t	r	t	r	t	r	t	r	t	r	t
OR	1.0	1.2	.5	1.1	1.0	.4	.0	-.8	-.6	-.6	.0	-.8
SR	.5	1.1	1.0	1.8*	.0	-.8	.0	-1.5*	1.11	-.15	.0	-1.0

\*  $p = .10$

Table C  
Relationship Level Effects  
Intrapersonal Correlations

	OR		SR	
	r	t	r	t
OR	1.0	3.7**	.6	2.7*
SR	.6	2.7*	1.0	3.8**

Interpersonal Correlations

	OR		SR	
	r	t	r	t
OR	.4	1.3	.4	1.5
SR	.4	1.5	.6	2.0*

\*p=.05  
\*\*p=.01

Table D

Effect of Age on Individual Level Variance

	Actor		Partner	
	r	t	r	t
OR	-.5	-1.5	-.2	-.1
SR	-.6	-.2	-1.5	.0

Table E

Effects of Actor's Tencencies on Individual Level Variance

	Actor				Partner			
	OR		SR		OR		SR	
	r	t	r	t	r	t	r	t
Empathy	.3	.7	.2	.6	-1.4	-3.6***	.0	-1.1
Role-Taking	.2	.7	.3	.9	.9	2.1**	.0	.5
Self-Moniter	.3	.8	.4	1.4*	.7	1.5	.0	1.9**

\*p=.10

\*\*p=.05

\*\*\*p=.005