

An Exploratory Cross-cultural Analysis of Communication Apprehension Between French and American Managerial and Non-managerial Employees

Eunkyong Lee Yook

Ph.D., Associate Professor, Communication Department

George Mason University, USA

Email: eyook2@gmu.edu

Abstract

Purpose: The current exploratory study examines communication apprehension of French and American managerial and non-managerial level employees. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the similarities between communication in France and communication in the United States.

Design/methodology/approach: McCroskey's Personal Report of Communication Apprehension was used to collect information from 96 American and French workers (managerial and non-managerial). A 2x2 ANOVA was conducted to test the two hypotheses of interest in this study.

Findings: Results indicate that the non-managerial employees have higher levels of apprehension than the managerial employees, while the variable of culture is not a significant source of difference.

Originality/value: It is important for employees, employers, teachers and students to know more about communication in different cultures. It is also important for companies to be aware of differing levels of communication apprehension within their organization.

Keywords: Research paper, cross-cultural analysis, communication apprehension, superior-subordinate communication, individualism

Introduction and Review of Literature

Communication is an important aspect of superior and subordinate relations within an organization, and the culture of the interactants will color the nature of the communication. France and the United States share some cultural roots, and have valuable political and commercial ties. However, studies by anthropologists such as Hofstede (1997) and Storti (2001) have pointed out important differences between the cultures. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences between the two cultures in terms of organizational communication merits our attention.

Over the past few decades, a great amount of research has been done regarding communication apprehension (CA). The majority of this research has been based on McCroskey's view that CA is an individual's level fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1977a, 1978). The original conceptualization of CA was advanced by McCroskey in 1970, and focused CA exclusively on oral communication. Much of the research done on CA has treated this construct as trait-like, but there has also been significant research directed at situational (or state) CA. For instance, the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) developed by McCroskey (1978) measures a person's CA over four situations, public speaking, meetings, small groups,

and dyadic communication. Research has been done examining communication apprehension across different cultures, and research has been done on communication apprehension within organizations, but to our knowledge no one has attempted to compare the communication apprehension of managers and non-managers in France and the United States.

Previous studies have compared the apprehension about communication between Americans and many other cultures. For example, Watson did a study comparing American and Swedish children's apprehension about communication (1984). The results show that the Swedish children overall showed more apprehension. Zhang, Butler, and Pryor (1996) compared apprehension between Americans and Chinese. Using a translated version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, the Chinese sample, as compared to an American sample, yielded a significantly higher mean score on apprehension about communication. These findings contradicted earlier findings (Klopf & Cambra, 1980) which compared a Chinese sample to Americans elsewhere and uncovered no significant difference. The reason for the discrepancies could be explained by the fact that Klopf and Cambra did not translate the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension scale, where the latter study (Zhang, Butler, & Pryor, 1996) translated the scale into Chinese.

A comparison of apprehension about communication between Koreans and Americans (Yook & Ahn, 1999) found that tests given to Koreans in English reported a difference in responses, only when the test was translated into Korean. After the translation into Korean, the Korean sample showed significantly higher apprehension about communication than the American sample. The authors report "that a careful translation is a vital step in administering a scale to persons who speak a different language" (Yook & Ahn, 1999). Although seemingly obvious, as more studies are conducted across cultures and languages, ensuring quality translation of the items is critical to ensuring validity of the results.

As can be seen in the studies mentioned above, CA levels can differ across cultures. Culture is a factor that impacts people's orientation toward communication; communication norms are a function of culture. In other words, one's communication norms and competencies are culture-bound. When an individual is placed in contrast to other cultural groups, the differences may be salient, but when the same individual is within their culture, they may have many more group similarities than individual differences. A person who is considered "talkative" in one culture may be seen as "withdrawn" when compared to people in another culture. (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990).

Besides for cultural differences, context can set expectations for what communication orientations and skills are valued. Within professional and organization settings, apprehension about communication is an important topic. For example, a study conducted by Pitt and Ramaseshan (1990) examined the effect of apprehension about communication on the performance of salespersons. The results show that media salespersons have seemingly less apprehension than automobile salespersons. The study also suggests that lower apprehension is an indicator of better performance.

The same was found in a study looking at the effects of individuals' willingness to communicate in an organizational setting (Richmond, 1992). The relationship between CA and willingness to communicate (WTC) is direct: the more apprehensive the individual is, the less willing he or she is to communicate. Although there are positive attributes of a low WTC individual, these individuals are considered "at risk" in an organizational setting. These individuals may have the same level of ability and intellect as those who are more willing to communicate, but the lack of oral manifestation of those skills causes supervisors to perceive silent people more negatively (Richmond, 1992). It has been noted in previous research (McCroskey & Richmond, 1976) that people who are less willing to communicate are perceived as less socially attractive,

less task attractive, less competent, less sociable, less composed, less extraverted, and less desirable as a leader, than their talkative counterparts.

Within an organization, a hierarchical relationship necessarily exists between managers and employees. Those in positions of higher power in an organization will have achieved that status based on their ability to get work done and lead other towards the organization's goal, which is predicated on effective communication, among other things. Having a shy temperament does not, therefore, fit a managerial leadership role in an organization. Indeed, Bakar, Dilbek, and McCroskey (2010) studied the effect of communication on LMX (Leader-Member Exchange) and found that high quality supervisor communication engenders group commitment by subordinates, among other findings. Hierarchical position within an organization, whether one is in a managerial position or not, as well as culture is posited to have an effect on levels of communication apprehension.

Cultural Differences Between the United States and France

Collectivistic cultures value harmony and group goals, whereas an individualist culture values independence and individual goals (Gass & Seiter, 1999). The Individualism index developed by Hofstede (1997) ranks countries on a continuum of individualistic cultures to collective cultures. The United States was number one on the Individualism index. Other countries rating high on Individualism on the index were countries in Western Europe, including France, as well as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. On the opposite side of the continuum, those countries rated as more collectivist come predominantly from Asia and South and Central America.

Even though the United States and France are two different cultures, they share some similarities. In particular, the United States and France share similarities in that they both have European mentalities, relative to the way of thinking of Asian or Hispanic cultures, for example. As stated above, both the United States and France are considered individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 1997). When juxtaposed against each other, cultures considered to be more individualistic may be closer in communication styles among themselves rather than when compared with collectivist cultures. Therefore, they are expected to both value speaking up, and expected be relatively similar in their communication apprehension levels as a cultural group altogether. Therefore, given their similarities, the United States and France are expected to show no difference in CA levels across cultures.

However, there *are* other ways in which the cultures of the United States and France differ that can affect their communication apprehension levels. The United States is different from France in that France is considered a relatively high Power Distance culture, whereas the United States low on the low end of the Power Distance scale (Hofstede, 1997). According to Storti (2001), the French have a strong feudal tradition, which makes it hold a high regard for privilege. As the definition of Power Distance is that those in positions of lesser power in a society accept the power differential, it is understandable why France would rank highly on the Power Distance index. Therefore, the influence of U.S. and French cultural variations on professional and organizational communication is an interesting focus of study because while the two cultures both rank highly on the Individualism index, they are different in their Power Distance levels.

Given the interesting mix of France's culture reflecting high Power Distance ranking on the one hand, and high Individualism ranking on the other (Hofstede, 1997), the question is how these dimensions affect communication between managers and employees in the French workplace. According to Storti (2001), employees in France tend to feel that they have a right to express their views to their managers, although they do respect managers' rights to have the final say by virtue of the vested authority of their positions. In short, French employees, while respecting their managers, will not be shy about expressing their views. Therefore, we expect that

employees' communication apprehension levels will be similar to those of the United States, despite some differences in cultural dimensions. It is also reasonable to expect that managers will have lower levels of communication apprehension across both American and French cultures due to the need for managers to exert their leadership in organizational settings.

Hypotheses

This study will extend previous research by examining differences and similarities in communication apprehension levels between managerial and non-managerial employees in both the United States and France. McCroskey's Personal Report of Communication Apprehension was administered in the United States, then translated and back-translated into French, and administered in France.

The first hypothesis expects to find higher communication apprehension from non-managerial and less apprehension from the managerial levels, across the cultures, especially due to expectations for leadership and expressiveness for those in managerial positions. In an organizational setting, importance is placed on communication skills, and additionally, the macro cultures of both France and the U.S. value individualism and expressiveness, potentially leading to the valuing and promotion of those who are not shy. In the organizational setting, being shy or reticent has been devalued, on the other hand. Therefore, managers are expected to have lower communication apprehension.

As explained earlier, even though the United States and France are two different cultures, they do share some similarities. The similarities are even more pronounced when viewed relative to other cultures in a global perspective. Common values of individualism, despite some differences in power distance due to differences in cultural history, render them to be similar, relatively speaking. Because these similarities seem to outweigh the differences, it is expected that the U.S. and France will not differ greatly in overall levels of communication apprehension across cultures, regardless of hierarchical position within an organization. Therefore, the second hypothesis states that there will not be a significant difference found between the French and American counterparts.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study are 73 (46 male and 27 female) American employees, and 23 (12 male and 10 female) French employees. Of the American participants 39 are in managerial positions and 34 are in non-managerial positions. The mean age of the American sample is 32.2. The French sample consists of 14 managerial and 9 non-managerial positions. The mean age of the French sample is 32.0. The American participants were all collected from one business. French participants were found at several different locations. In both cases, participation was voluntary.

Materials

The most recent version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension of 24 items (PRCA-24) relating to four different communication situations was administered to both the French and American employees. The four different communication situations the PRCA measures are group discussion, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking. The reliability and validity of the scales have been reported in previous research in which translated versions were tested in China, Sweden, Micronesia, Puerto Rico, Australia, and Korea (Klopf, 1984, McCroskey, 1977, McCroskey & Richmond, 1990, Zhang, Butler, & Pryor, 1996, Yook & Ahn, 1999).

McCroskey's Personal Report of Communication Apprehension was translated into French for the French participants. First the survey was translated into French, and then another individual completed a back translation into English. Both of these individuals who completed the translation were bilingual.

Results

Tests of Hypotheses

A 2x2 ANOVA was conducted to test the two hypotheses of interest in this study. The first hypothesis, that there will be higher communication apprehension from non-managerial and less apprehension from the managerial levels regardless of the culture, was supported ($F[1, 96] = 10.01, p < .00, MSE = 2.65$). The mean level of apprehension for non-managerial employees is 66.2 and the mean for managerial employees is 55.3. The level of apprehension is higher for non-managerial employees than for managerial employees.

The second hypothesis, that there will not be a significant difference found between the French and American counterparts, was also supported ($F[1, 96] = 2.93, p < .09, MSE = 2.75$). The variable of culture was not found to be significant.

Discussion and Conclusion

Results showed that there were no significant differences between American and French managerial level employees. Culture was not a significant factor in determining levels of communication apprehension, while employee level (managerial or non-managerial) *was* a significant factor in determining communication apprehension. The samples of non-managerial status were found to have a higher level of communication apprehension than did those of managerial status.

One possibility for finding more apprehension among non-managerial employees may be that those who have less apprehension are better communicators. Companies may be more willing to hire better communicators for the managerial positions, therefore placing those less competent communicators in the non-managerial positions. Another possibility is the amount opportunity employees have for communication. Employees at the managerial level communicate to more people, including communication to those in the non-managerial level. The more the opportunities an employee has to communicate the more this may decrease his or her apprehension level. It may also be true that those who aspire to be in managerial positions assess their CA levels and investigate methods of CA reduction, as suggested by Dwyer (2012) and other communication scholars. The finding of differences in CA levels between managerial and non-managerial employees in both French and U.S. cultures is an important finding, and one that merits further attention in future studies.

As hypothesized, cultural differences between American and French counterparts did not play a significant role. A possible reason for this could lie in the cultures that were studied. Previous research showing significant differences found in communication apprehension studied various other countries. Americans have been compared to Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Australians, Swedish, and others (Yook, 1999, Zhang, Butler, & Pryor, 1996, Klopff, 1979, Watson, 1984). This is the first time Americans have been compared to French.

Korean, Chinese and Japanese cultures are different from American culture in that they are considered more collectivist cultures. The United States and France are both considered individualist cultures, which may account for the result of no difference in communication apprehension. Individualist cultures value independence and the goals of the individual over the goals of a collective (Gass & Seiter, 1999). Whereas collectivist cultures, such as China, tend to value harmony, concern for others and the goals of the group over the goals of the individual (Gass & Seiter, 1999). In collectivist cultures, those who speak out to groups or lead

group discussions are looked upon as trying to make themselves stand out in a culture that values group harmony. This may explain why those from collectivist cultures have higher apprehension to communicate, they may be afraid of being shunned by their people. This may account for the differences of apprehension communication found between individualist versus collective cultures. It can further explain why we do not see any significant differences of communication apprehension between the United States and France, which are both classified as individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 1997).

A study of cross-cultural differences in levels of communication apprehension focused on Swedish children aged 5-11 (Watson, 1984). This study suggests that children may have higher levels of apprehension about communication, and then as they get older, grow to be more confident about communicating. Some people recognize they have apprehension when they are adults and choose to take classes to help alleviate the apprehension. The study comparing Australian students to American students found they have a similar level of apprehension (Klopf, 1979). Australia is number two on the Individualism Index (Hofstede, 1997). This similarity of France to the United States on the individualism scale may be one reason for the closeness of communication apprehension levels between the two cultures that was found in the current study.

This study is the first to compare communication apprehension between the French and Americans. Even with a small sample size of French employees, the results were significant. Future studies should follow up on this small-scale study by using a larger sample of French employees.

Another weakness of this study was that the American sample was collected from one business, rather than several. This may not be representative of all managerial and non-managerial employees in the United States. Using samples from a few different organizations will most likely influence the results and increase the external validity of the findings. Follow-up studies should be conducted because it is important for companies to have an awareness of differing levels of communication apprehension within their organization, and how it affects actual and perceptions of leadership by managerial level staff.

The present exploratory study hopefully shed some light on and will motivate interest in the similarities between communication in France and communication in the United States. Although this study used back-translation to translate the PRCA-24, a full study with larger sample size will shed further light on managerial level and subordinate level employee communication style differences. The current study had a relatively small sample and was limited in its ability to collect samples from a variety of sources because of limited resources for the current exploratory study. Additionally, a full study with a larger sample size can investigate the cross-cultural differences between the communication apprehension of managers in France as compared to managers in the United States in the four sub-divisions of communication apprehension (interpersonal, public speaking, group, meeting contexts) of the PRCA-24. The same can be done for employees in the two cultures. Although overall differences between the two individualistic cultures were not found, it is possible that sub-dimensions show scalar differences between cultures. It is important for employees, employers, teachers, and students to know more about communication differences in an era of globalization.

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