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To cite this article: Laura R. Umphrey & John C. Sherblom (2018) The Constitutive Relationship of Social Communication Competence to Self-Compassion and Hope, Communication Research Reports, 35:1, 22-32, DOI: 10.1080/08824096.2017.1361395
To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2017.1361395

Published online: 21 Aug 2017.

Article views: 96

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The Constitutive Relationship of Social Communication Competence to Self-Compassion and Hope
Laura R. Umphrey & John C. Sherblom

Communication is constitutive—in theory. In research, however, communication is often treated as an outcome, influenced by personal attributes. The present research examines social communication competence as a constitutive influence predicting self-compassion and hope. Path analysis results support this hypothesis. Results show that social communication expressivity ($\beta = .14$), sensitivity ($\beta = -.32$), and control ($\beta = .20$) predict self-compassion. Social communication sensitivity ($\beta = .26$) and control ($\beta = .27$) affect hope agency, and social communication control ($\beta = .29$) predicts hope pathways thinking. These results provide evidence of the constitutive nature of communication.

Keywords: Constitutive; Hope; Self-Compassion; Social Communication Competence

Communication scholars theorize that communication is a primary explanation of, rather than secondary phenomenon to be explained by, social or personal antecedents (Cooren, 2012; Craig, 1999; Hecht, 1993; Manning, 2014). Luhmann (1992) defines the communicative, social, and psychological as systems having semipermeable membranes, allowing influences across them. A person does not communicate but participates within a communication system, engaging in patterns of communicative interaction with others, while simultaneously participating in social-cultural and personal-psychological systemic processes. A constitutive communication perspective examines the influence of these communication processes on the social interactions.
and psychological dispositions. “Communication … is the primary social process through which our meaningful common world is constructed” (Craig, 2007, p. 127).

This constitutive view of communication is an accepted tenet in organizational communication research where the debate has shifted from whether organizations are constituted by communication to which of three communicative constitution of organization (CCO) theories best describes the process (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Yet, in interpersonal communication, a constitutive perspective “awaits both affirmation and dispute” (Manning, 2014, p. 438). Little research examines the constitutive influence of interpersonal communication patterns on personal dispositions. This is particularly true for research on communication competence.

Many measures of communication competence focus on personal attributes rather than patterns of communication interaction. Wiemann, for example, indexes communication competence with prompts such as “S finds it easy to get along with others” and “S is a good listener,” which focus attention on personal attributes rather than interpersonal patterns (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994, pp. 128–129). Similarly, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, p. 153) define communication “competence as an interpersonal inference rather than a set of skills or behaviors,” focusing attention on perceptions of personal attributes. Communication competence measures of appropriateness (“some of her/his remarks were inappropriate”) and effectiveness (“I was an ineffective conversationalist”) focus attention on the speaker or treat the conversation as an object, such as in “it was a useless conversation” (Rubin et al., 1994, pp. 151–153).

Measures of social communication competence place attention on the patterns of communication interaction by taking both the communicator and generalized other into account—for example, social communication expressivity prompts for a response to “at parties I enjoy speaking to a great number of different people,” social communication sensitivity to “sometimes I think that I take things that other people say to me too personally,” and social communication control to “I can fit in with all types of people, young and old, rich and poor” (Riggio, Riggio, Salinas, & Cole, 2003).

Social Communication Competence

Social communication expressivity includes the ability to talk with others spontaneously, interact competently, initiate conversations, engage others in social interaction, be outgoing and gregarious, encode appropriate messages, and speak fluently (Riggio, 1986, 2005). Social communication sensitivity is the ability to receive and understand verbal messages, show knowledge of and concern for social communication rules, and focuses on public rather than private self-consciousness and aspects of the self that are easily observable by others, such as appearance, nonverbal cues, and social behaviors. Socially sensitive individuals are responsive to others, pay attention to social norms, and may become self-conscious, anxious, or inhibited because of a focus on publically appropriate communication. Social communication control represents the ability to manage one’s self-presentation and verbal behavior. Individuals high in social control appear sophisticated, tactful, adept, and self-confident. They
engage in discussion easily, are skilled in taking on social roles, and behave appropriately (Riggio & Canary, 2003).

In past research, communication scholars have measured the relationship of social communication competence to such personal attributes as an individual’s social skill, psychological distress, and shyness (Arroyo, Nevárez, Segrin, & Harwood, 2012; Segrin, 1994; Segrin, McNelis, & Swiatkowski, 2016). In addition, Neff (2011) recognizes the influence of communication patterns with others upon self-compassion, and Snyder (2000) describes communication as fundamental to hope agency and pathways.

**Self-Compassion**

Self-compassion is an internal dialogue of kindness toward oneself that is associated with happiness, optimism, positive feelings, and agreeableness, rather than critical self-judgment, self-blame, unfavorable self-comparisons, and unrealistic expectations (Neff, 2011). Treating oneself with kindness rather than judgment, common humanity rather than self-deprecation, and mindfulness rather than identification are the characteristics of self-compassion (Neff, 2003). Self-kindness means accepting one’s personal inadequacies without engaging in relentless self-criticism or being overly harsh in judgments of oneself (Neff, 2011). Common humanity recognizes that people make mistakes and that our personal imperfections are part of our human condition (Neff, 2003). Mindfulness reflects on the present moment with awareness and perspective and acknowledges shortcomings rather than suppressing, obsessing, fixating, or becoming identified with them (Neff, 2011).

**Hope Agency and Pathways**

Hope is an “enduring pattern of thinking about oneself in relation to [one’s] life goals” (Snyder, 1994, p. 68). It is the “perceived capabilities to produce routes to [those] desired goals, along with the perceived motivation to use those routes” (Snyder, 2000, p. 8). Early in life, a child wishing to obtain a toy beyond reach points, cries, and communicates with an adult to achieve that goal. The adult provides a pathway to reaching the toy, and the child develops a sense of personal agency through communication with the adult (Snyder, 1994).

Hope grows in thinking about viable pathways and experiencing agency in achieving one’s personal goals (Snyder, 1994). Pathways thinking identifies the strategies needed to accomplish the goal. People having hope can generate multiple alternative pathways to achieve their goals, despite potential setbacks. They are, therefore, more likely to attain those goals, even when obstacles block one or more of the pathways. Agency thinking develops as an internal motivation, sense of self-efficacy, and stamina to pursue those multiple alternative pathways, overcome potential obstacles, and ultimately obtain the goal (Snyder, 2000). Agency represents a proactive confidence and “belief that one can begin and sustain movement along the envisioned pathways toward a given goal” (Snyder et al., 2000, p. 749).
Multiple pathways and adequate agency to sustain one’s momentum toward a goal characterize the nature of hope.

**Social Communication Competence, Self-Compassion, and Hope**

Past research indicates that the internal dialogues of self-compassion and hope are related to social communication competence. The constitutive influence of that competence upon them, however, is not well developed. Riggio et al. (2003) connect social communication expressivity and control to a personal social intelligence, and Riggio (1986) associates social communication sensitivity with a public self-consciousness and lack of self-confidence. On the other hand, self-compassionate people balance their needs with those of others and resolve interpersonal conflicts with compromise (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Hope is connected to relational listening and interpersonal closeness, indicating a relationship to social communication competence (Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1999; Umphrey & Sherblom, 2017).

In addition, self-compassion and hope are related phenomena. Self-compassion predicts reaching one’s goals through personal initiative and the motivation essential to hope agency (Neff, 2011). Hope agency, in turn, provides the internal motivating stamina to pursue alternative pathways and overcome obstacles to obtain that goal (Snyder, 2000). We predict the influence of social communication expressivity, sensitivity, and control on self-compassion, hope agency, and hope pathways; of self-compassion upon hope agency; and of hope agency upon hope pathways:

- **H1:** The social communication competence dimensions of expressivity, sensitivity, and control influence the dispositions of self-compassion, hope agency, and hope pathways thinking.
- **H2:** The internal dispositions of self-compassion, hope agency, and hope pathways are related.
- **H2a:** Self-compassion affects hope agency.
- **H2b:** Hope agency affects hope pathways.
- **H2c:** Self-compassion indirectly affects hope pathways as mediated through hope agency.

**Method**

**Participants**

We obtained 308 responses to our survey (215 females, 93 males; 209 Caucasian, 62 Hispanic, 13 African American, 8 Native American, 5 Asian, 11 other). Participant ages ranged from 19 to 61 (M = 30, SD = 10) with 33 participants (11%) younger than 21; 168 (55%) between 21 and 30; 62 (20%) between 31 and 40; 29 (9%) between 41 and 50; 15 (5%) between 51 and 60. One participant was older than 60.
Procedures

Following approval of the research procedures by the institutional review board at the first author’s university in the southwestern United States, instructors were contacted to recruit participants from their online classes. Instructors received an e-mail solicitation to provide to students that contained a link to the online survey. Response anonymity was maintained by providing survey respondents with a secret phrase to relay to their instructor for extra credit.

The survey first oriented participants to thinking about social communication competence by inquiring about the dimensions of expressivity, sensitivity, and control. Next, it queried the psychological dispositions of self-compassion, hope agency, and hope pathways. We asked participants to first respond to queries about social communication competence in general, rather than to a specific experimentally manipulated situation, to access a general perception of their social communication competence and then, with that in mind, to index the associated psychological dispositions of self-compassion, hope agency, and hope pathways.

To orient participants to thinking about hope, we first asked them to identify a specific personal goal prior to responding to the agency and pathways prompts. All survey responses were measured on 5-point Likert-type scales with choices ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Several items for each measure were reverse coded to reduce response bias.

Measures

Social communication competence

We measure social communication expressivity, social communication sensitivity, and social communication control on 5-point Likert-like scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), using Riggio’s 30-item inventory (Riggio, 1986). The measure shows good reliability in past studies, with Cronbach alphas for social communication expressivity of $\alpha = .88$, social communication sensitivity $\alpha = .84$, and social communication control $\alpha = .87$; and test-retest reliabilities of .96, .86, and .92 respectively. (Riggio, 1986; Riggio & Canary, 2003; Riggio et al., 2003). The Cronbach alphas for social communication expressivity of $\alpha = .88$, sensitivity $\alpha = .76$, and control $\alpha = .73$ in the present study show adequate reliabilities.

Self-compassion

We index self-compassion with Raes, Pommier, Neff, and Van Gucht’s (2011) 12-item measure. This measure contains prompts such as “when something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance,” measured on 5-point Likert-like scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measure has shown good reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .92$ in a past study (Neff & Beretvas, 2013) and $\alpha = .86$ across samples (Raes et al., 2011). The present Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = .75$ demonstrates adequate reliability in the present study.
Hope

We use Snyder’s (1994) measure of hope to index agency and pathways on 5-point Likert-like scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This hope measure consists of four items indexing agency, such as “even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem,” and four items indexing pathways, such as “I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.” The measure shows acceptable reliability over a wide range of samples, with Cronbach alphas for agency ranging from .70 to .84 and for pathways from .63 to .86, and test-retest reliabilities from α = .85 for a three-week follow-up to α = .82 after 10 weeks (Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand, & Feldman, 2003). A Cronbach alpha of α = .79 shows adequate reliability in the present study.

Analysis Plan

A constitutive perspective predicts that patterns of communication will influence participants’ internal dispositions. Path analysis provides a method to model these predicted relationships, providing standardized regression coefficients and a set of statistics that test the fit of the model to the data. Model fit is demonstrated through a nonsignificant χ², χ² to df ratio of less than 5, and a set of statistical indices (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). The comparative fit index (CFI) provides an incremental fit statistic that is relatively insensitive to model complexity. The CFI is normed so that values closer to 1 indicate a better fit and a CFI value greater than .95 indicates a good fit to the data (Hayes, Slater, & Snyder, 2008). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is an absolute fit measure that adjusts for sample size and model complexity. It provides an index of how well the model fits the population as well as the sample, and a RMSEA value less than .06 indicates a good fit (Hair et al., 2006). The expected cross-validation index (ECVI) offers an estimation of the fit a model would achieve in another sample (Hair et al., 2006). Smaller values represent a better fit. Hair et al. (2006) and Hayes et al. (2008) provide fuller discussions of these model fit criteria.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Participants report experiencing social communication expressivity (M = 3.53, SD = .88), social communication sensitivity (M = 3.42, SD = .74), and social communication control (M = 3.61, SD = .67). We examine the relationships of these social dimensions of communication competence to self-compassion (M = 3.14, SD = .60), hope agency (M = 4.10, SD = .58), and hope pathways thinking (M = 4.13, SD = .52) through correlation and path analysis.

Table 1 presents the correlations among social communication expressivity, sensitivity, control, self-compassion, hope agency, and hope pathways. Expressivity is correlated with control (r = .60), self-compassion (r = .25), hope agency (r = .30), and hope pathways (r = .27) but not with sensitivity (r = .03). Sensitivity is negatively correlated with control (r = -.30) and self-compassion (r = -.38) but not significantly
correlated with hope agency \((r = .05)\) or hope pathways \((r = -.01)\). Control is correlated with self-compassion \((r = .38)\), hope agency \((r = .35)\), and hope pathways \((r = .39)\). Self-compassion is correlated with hope agency \((r = .36)\) and hope pathways \((r = .22)\). Hope agency and hope pathways are correlated as well \((r = .45)\).

The path analysis model presented in Figure 1 shows the constitutive influences of social communication expressivity, sensitivity, and control on the dispositions of self-compassion, hope agency, and hope pathways. The model provides a good fit to the data, \(\chi^2(1, N = 308) = .39, p = .53, \chi^2/df\) ratio = .39, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .01, ECVI = .13. In addition to showing the correlations among social communication expressivity, sensitivity, and control, the model provides standardized regression

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<th>Expressivity</th>
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<th>Self-Compassion</th>
<th>Hope Agency</th>
<th>Hope Pathways</th>
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<td>Hope Pathways</td>
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Note. \(N = 308\), exact \(p\) values included below each correlation.
coefficients showing the influence of social communication expressivity ($\beta = .14$), sensitivity ($\beta = -.32$), and control ($\beta = .20$) in predicting self-compassion. Social communication sensitivity ($\beta = .26$) and control ($\beta = .27$) also predict hope agency. Social communication expressivity ($\beta = .05$), however, shows little influence on hope agency. Social communication control predicts hope pathways ($\beta = .29$), but expressivity ($\beta = -01$) and sensitivity ($\beta = .07$) show little effect. Self-compassion also predicts hope agency ($\beta = .34$), and hope agency predicts hope pathways ($\beta = .35$).

Together, social communication expressivity, sensitivity, and control account for 23% of the variance in self-compassion ($R^2 = .23$). Social communication expressivity, sensitivity, control, and self-compassion account for 24% of the variance in hope agency ($R^2 = .24$). Social communication expressivity, sensitivity, control, and hope agency account for 27% of the variance in hope pathways ($R^2 = .27$).

Discussion

The path analysis model provides a good fit to the data, indicating a constitutive influence of communication competence on the internal dispositions of self-compassion, hope agency, and hope pathways. The regression coefficients and variance accounted for by social communication expressivity, sensitivity, and control support a constitutive view of communication. The model shows that social communication expressivity and control predict more positive self-compassion. This suggests that a person who can learn to speak with others competently, initiate conversations, engage others in social interaction, and be more outgoing, while managing verbal behavior and social roles, may also experience greater personal self-compassion. This finding builds on Riggio’s (1986) finding that communicatively expressive individuals are more self-confident, as well as more socially sophisticated, tactful, and adept. On the other hand, the model shows that social communication sensitivity predicts less self-compassion. This finding corroborates Riggio’s (1986) evidence that communicatively sensitive people may be self-conscious, anxious, and inhibited. The model also shows that social communication sensitivity predicts hope agency and that control predicts both agency and pathways. This finding supports Snyder’s (1994) argument that hope develops through communication with others. Although the model shows little direct effect of expressivity on either hope agency or hope pathways, a mediated effect is present for agency, with expressivity predicting hope agency ($\beta = .10$) through self-compassion (Hayes, 2009). Together these findings suggest that it is not the quality of being socially gregarious but of being communicatively responsive and adaptive to others in conversation that facilitates hope. This builds on Spitzberg and Cupach’s (1984) idea that competent communicators engage in effective and appropriate interactions and indicates that socially competent communication affects dispositions of self-compassion and hope as well.
Limitations of the Study

The present results are heuristic but only tentative in nature. They demand further research, using direct experimental manipulation or longitudinal analysis before full acceptance. The model shows that the influences predicted by a constitutive communication approach can be empirically supported. It does not, however, provide a conclusive test of those influences. Because we neither experimentally manipulated nor longitudinally measured the exogenous communication variables, the present model only indicates potential paths of influence and does not offer evidence of causation. Alternative models with path coefficients showing different directions of influence are possible. Hence, the relationships and directions of influence presented in the present model should be investigated more fully in future studies. Replication of the present results using an experimental research manipulation or a longitudinal study would provide an additional opportunity to find support for the current directional influence claims. Prior to that replication the present results should be considered tentative.

Future research studies should analyze more diverse samples. The present data come from a single sample that is largely Caucasian and female in composition, raising some generalizability concerns. A comparison of these social communication competence measures to other assessments, particularly Spitzberg and Cupach’s measures of appropriateness and effectiveness, would also be useful to further contextualize these results within the communication competence literature. Measuring social communication competence in behaviors, conversational outcomes, or the perceptions of others would also help validate the current self-report assessments. The use of these other experimental methods, designs, samples, and measures are needed to refine this analysis and further our understanding of the constitutive nature of social communication competence on psychological dispositions.

Conclusion

Cooren (2012, p. 2) calls upon us “to provide a communication model of this world, one which would mark the original contribution our field has to offer … a constitutive view of communication.” The present path analysis model places the social communication competence dimensions of expressivity, sensitivity, and control as antecedent predictors of personal self-compassion, hope agency, and hope pathways. The model’s fit offers some initial support for that constitutive view.

References


