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Determining Demographic Influences on Managers' Use of Accommodation or Non- accommodation in Communication With Direct Reports in Australian Workplaces

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Description

This paper outlines a project aiming to identify demographic influences that influence communication by managers with their direct reports in Australian workplaces. A study has been designed using an online survey to identify whether and in what circumstances managers, in the interests of effective communication at work, consciously alter modifiers such as words, tone and the pace of speech, to accommodate perceived demographic differences. The study will also capture whether and in what circumstances managers decide not to alter the way they communicate when demographic differences are perceived. Managers' responses rating the outcome of a critical interpersonal communication event will be measured against a range of demographic attributes – age, gender, educational background, cultural background, organisational tenure, and English language use. Variations will be analysed to determine the types of demographic factors that influence face to face communication events and perceived outcomes. In addition, the study will determine whether specific demographic factors are associated with the use of accommodative communication practices in diverse workforces.

Location

iC - SBS Teaching Facility

Determining demographic influences on managers' use of accommodation or non-accommodation in communication with direct reports in Australian workplaces

Ann Rogerson

Abstract

This paper outlines a project aiming to identify demographic influences that influence communication by managers with their direct reports in Australian workplaces. A study has been designed using an online survey to identify whether and in what circumstances managers, in the interests of effective communication at work, consciously alter modifiers such as words, tone and the pace of speech, to accommodate perceived demographic differences. The study will also capture whether and in what circumstances managers decide not to alter the way they communicate when demographic differences are perceived. Managers' responses rating the outcome of a critical interpersonal communication event will be measured against a range of demographic attributes – age, gender, educational background, cultural background, organisational tenure, and English language use. Variations will be analysed to determine the types of demographic factors that influence face to face communication events and perceived outcomes. In addition, the study will determine whether specific demographic factors are associated with the use of accommodative communication practices in diverse workforces.

Introduction

The demographic makeup of Australian workplaces is changing with a wider range of age groups represented in individual places of employment (Caldwell et al. 2009; Hewlett, Sherbin & Sumberg 2009; ABS 2009b; Murray & Syed 2005), together with an increased variety of cultural and language backgrounds (ABS 2009a). These individual attributes, such as age, language and cultural origins are described by some researchers as socio-historic factors (Giles 1980; Street & Giles 1982; Gallois & Giles 1998; Williams et al. 1997). The net result of a population with different heritages and a national population growing through immigration rather than birth rates (ABS 2009a; Betts 2010), is a diverse Australian workforce (Kramar 1998). Another factor impacting on the composition of the Australian workforce population is that employees are now encouraged to remain working beyond previous retirement ages in order to ease the burden on government financial support (ATO 2010).

A consequence of these factors is a broadening of the range of employee demographic attributes existing concurrently in Australian workplaces. This generates challenges for managers who need to effectively communicate with diverse workforces (Sadri & Tran 2002). Studies by Ayoko, Hartel and Callan (2002), McCann and Giles (2006), and Caldwell et al. (2009) are representative of research demonstrating how age and cultural differences may impact on workplace communication such as how it occurs and how it is perceived. However, previous studies are typically limited to examining individual demographic factors working in isolation or in combination. Few if any studies have tackled a range of factors which may interact in a communication event. This gap was noted by Jones et al. (2004)

as a challenge to be addressed by organisational communication researchers in the 21st century.

Understanding how individual demographic differences influence workplace communication may assist with efforts to ensure that managers' perceptions of the attributes of people who report to them do not bias or adversely impact workplace interactions. In addition, because communication has been shown to contribute to workplace productivity and engagement (Lindborg 2007; Little & Little 2006; Tasker 2004), improvements in employee engagement, productivity and support of diversity initiatives may be achieved through improved communication (Murray & Syed 2005; Hunter 2003). For Australia to maximise the potential of demographically diverse employee populations, a knowledge of how perceptions of individual characteristics impact on interpersonal workplace communication events from a message sender's perspective is required.

Background

Communication involves emotional, psychological, and behavioural factors, which can influence perceptions of and outcomes from the communication (Campbell, White & Johnson 2003; Gallois & Giles 1998; Madlock 2008; Mueller & Lee 2002; Shelby 1998; Pincus & Wood 2006). Hoogervorst, Flier and Koopman (2004) outline how interpersonal communication may be impacted by conscious (*intentional*) factors, for example using different words or phrases when speaking with an employee who managers perceive to be younger than themselves, or unconscious (*unintentional*) acts on the part of the manager, for example where a manager unknowingly slows his or her pace of speech when conversing with an employee they perceive to be less skilled in speaking English. As a result demographic attributes such as age, gender, education and ethnicity may impact on the communication relationship, processes, and outcomes (Ashford, Blatt & VandeWalle 2003; Canary & Spitzberg 1990; Cennamo & Gardner 2008; Duffy & Ferrier 2003). When framed within an organisational context, other factors such as workplace roles and the employment tenure of message senders and receivers, may provide an added "class of variables" (Lawrence 1997:2), which have the potential to influence the outcomes of workplace communication events.

Impact of demographic differences on communication interactions

Demography issues in organisations are receiving increasing levels of interest due to the expansion of diversity concepts beyond traditional concerns with gender and ethnicity (Goldberg, Riordan & Zhang 2008; Riordan & Wayne 2008; Tsui, Porter & Egan 2002). Lawrence (1997:5) describes individual attributes as moderators that influence individual performance. She groups them into three categories: a) immutable attributes including gender, age and ethnicity, b) those that encompass the individual's relationship with the organisation such as the position a person holds, and the length of the person's tenure with the organisation, and c) social attributes describing our positions in society such as our marital or family status.

Recognising and responding to demographic similarities and differences between managers and their direct reports can contribute to organisational success (Kramar 1998; Parker & Fischhoff 2005; Twenge & Campbell 2008). Failure to recognise and manage them can cost organisations in terms of high employee turnover, claims of stress, discrimination and harassment, and contribute to lost productivity (Ando & Kobayashi 2008; Little & Little 2006). Managers' failure to understand workplace

differences in areas such as employee age, gender, tenure and so on can result in conflict, misunderstanding and miscommunication (Westerman & Yamamura 2007; Hindi, Miller & Catt 2004; Pelled 1996). Duffy and Ferrier (2003) report that differences between supervisor and subordinate demographic factors influence supervisory behaviours. They call for further examination of factors that may moderate relationships between managers and direct reports.

Managers as communicators can highlight their similarities with the person they are communicating with to consolidate positive interactions (Adams 2005), or utilise differences for some type of situational advantage (Ando & Kobayashi 2008). An alternate approach is for the manager to accommodate the perceived differences to benefit the other party to the communication, and the organisation overall (Tsui, Porter & Egan 2002; Zhang et al. 2008). Fear of, or an inability to effectively communicate when differences exist may even lead to managers avoiding employee interactions altogether (Jackman & Strober 2003; McGuire, By & Hutchings 2007). In order to assess how managers view communications within their organisations and to identify whether some of these issues exist, some organisations are turning to communication audits, such as the one established through the International Communication Association (ICA) (Hargie & Tourish 2009).

Organisations are also required to consider the broader range of diversity issues so perceived or actual 'differences' between employees or between employees and their managers can be 'effectively' managed (Kramar 1998; Pelled 1996; Pelled, Ledford & Mohrman 1999; Cruickshank 2007). At a strategic level, the implications of managing a workforce with demographically diverse backgrounds presents challenges for managers in how interpersonal communication events should be conducted (Jones et al. 2004). This study focuses on how managers perceive and deliver interpersonal communication from the manager/message sender's viewpoint. Specifically, the project aims to answer the following research question:

Which factors influence a manager's use of accommodative or non-accommodative communication behaviours who are aiming to facilitate understanding in one to one interactions in Australian workplaces?

Theoretical Framework

Communications Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles 1980; Giles, Coupland & Coupland 1991; Street & Giles 1982; Gallois, Ogay & Giles 2005; Williams & Giles 1996) provides an appropriate theoretical basis to examine workplace communications interactions from a social (*or interrelationship*) perspective, specifically in an intergenerational (*age specific*) context.

The term accommodation is used to describe the extent of communication alignment to facilitate understanding between the message initiator and message receiver. A message may be altered to minimize perceived and/or real differences between the socio-historic groups of both parties (Giles 2008). In CAT this is labelled convergence, meaning that interactants make a transition to similar (converged) styles achieving a degree commonality to improve the likelihood of classifying the communication event as effective.

In contrast, in non-accommodative communication events, interactants either maintain or accentuate their perceived or real differences between socio-historic groups attributed to the message sender and message receiver (Giles et al. 2006).

That is, an individual may, consciously or unconsciously, not adjust their communication style, such as its degree of formality or other aspects of their interpersonal interaction. This is known as divergence. While maintenance strategies, where no change to communication patterns take place have a higher likelihood of a successful communication outcome due to socio-historic similarity, divergent communication practices reduce the potential of achieving an effective communication outcome (Gallois, Ogay & Giles 2005).

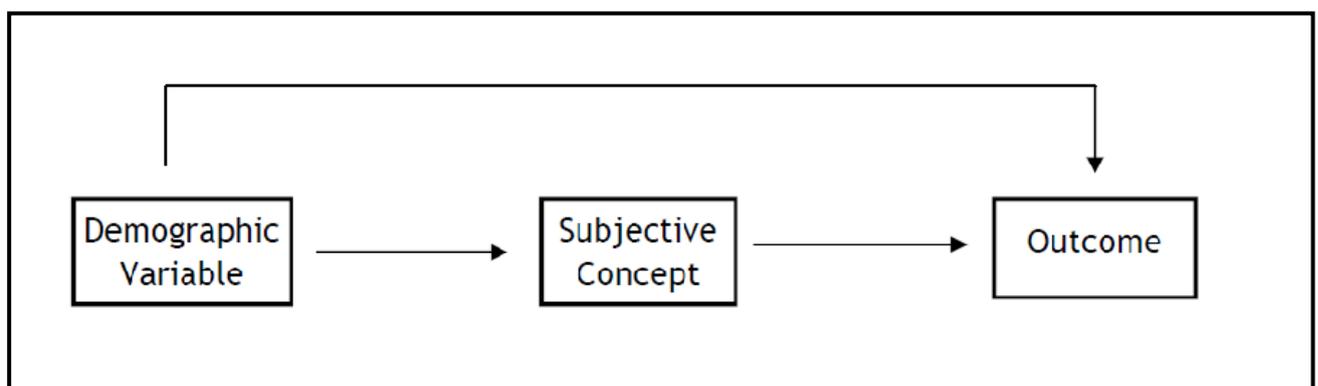
The benefit of using CAT as a theoretical principle is it provides a basis for examining message events and outcomes to determine whether people modify their communication transmissions to highlight, reduce, or reinforce the differences between themselves and a message recipient to achieve understanding during a interpersonal interaction. CAT focuses on explaining the motivation in a specific communication encounter, while assuming “the existence of intergroup and interpersonal markers” (Gallois, Ogay & Giles 2005:138). The theory of CAT does not describe how to evaluate individual or group attributes, leaving that task to other research and theory. In order to overcome this limitation in CAT, additional theories or frameworks need to be considered.

In the absence of a single theory or framework that encompasses all aspects of communication interactions it is difficult to examine and research the entire process of interpersonal organisational communication solely in light of a theory such as CAT. This constraint is noted by authors such as Markus (1994), Trevino, Webster and Stein (2000), and Jones et al. (2004), who promote the view that communications research should utilise theories that complement but do not compete against each other in order to examine the research issue.

For the purpose of this study the Intervening Process Explanation (IPE) outlined by Lawrence (1997) has been selected as a framework for the research project as it provides the opportunity to consider the influence of demographic factors on outcomes and presents no theoretical conflict with CAT. IPE links a demographic variable to an outcome, through an influencing concept. For example, comparing an employees’ length of tenure to their intent to stay can be linked through a concept such as the perceived level of conflict in the workplace (Lawrence 1997:4).

The IPE framework is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Intervening Process Explanation (after Lawrence, 1997:3)



Explaining Demographic Variables: Relational Demography within Groups

In this research project the demographic and independent variables are age, gender, tenure, nationality, perceived expertise with English language use, and education level. The manager completing the survey will be asked to provide data for these attributes in terms of themselves, in addition to these factors for their direct report as perceived by the manager in relation to themselves. The demographic factors will be measured using the perceived similarity approach outlined by Riordan and Wayne (2008). Perceived similarity measures ask respondents to indicate how similar their personal demographic factors are to the attributes of another individual, allowing for the comparison of actual versus perceived demographic characteristics, and to determine if different individual factors achieve alternate outcomes.

The use of a range of demographic variables supports Tsui et al.'s call for researchers to measure multiple attributes as opposed to single attributes "unless there are strong theoretical and empirical justifications for not doing so" (2002:922).

The Subjective Concept – Critical Incident Technique

To establish a subjective concept to be used as a reference point for information gathering, an approach designed around the principles of Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique (CIT) will be utilised. Managers will be asked to recall a face to face interaction with a direct report. This allows the manager to "determine which incidents are the most relevant to them for the phenomena being investigated" (Gremler 2004 :66).

The CIT approach is recommended and relevant and appropriate for many disciplines (Gremler 2004) and forms part of the ICA Organisational Audit Survey (Hargie & Tourish 2009), where it is labelled as a 'communication experience' rather than a 'critical incident' to avoid the confusion that can be associated with the word critical.

Outcome:

The dependent variable is the extent to which the manager perceives the communication outcome to be effective or ineffective. This is consistent with the approach in the ICA audit, and will enable an examination of the data against CAT to determine the impact of demographic factors against perceptions of communication outcomes.

The Research Design

In order to answer the research question, three hypotheses will be explored. These are

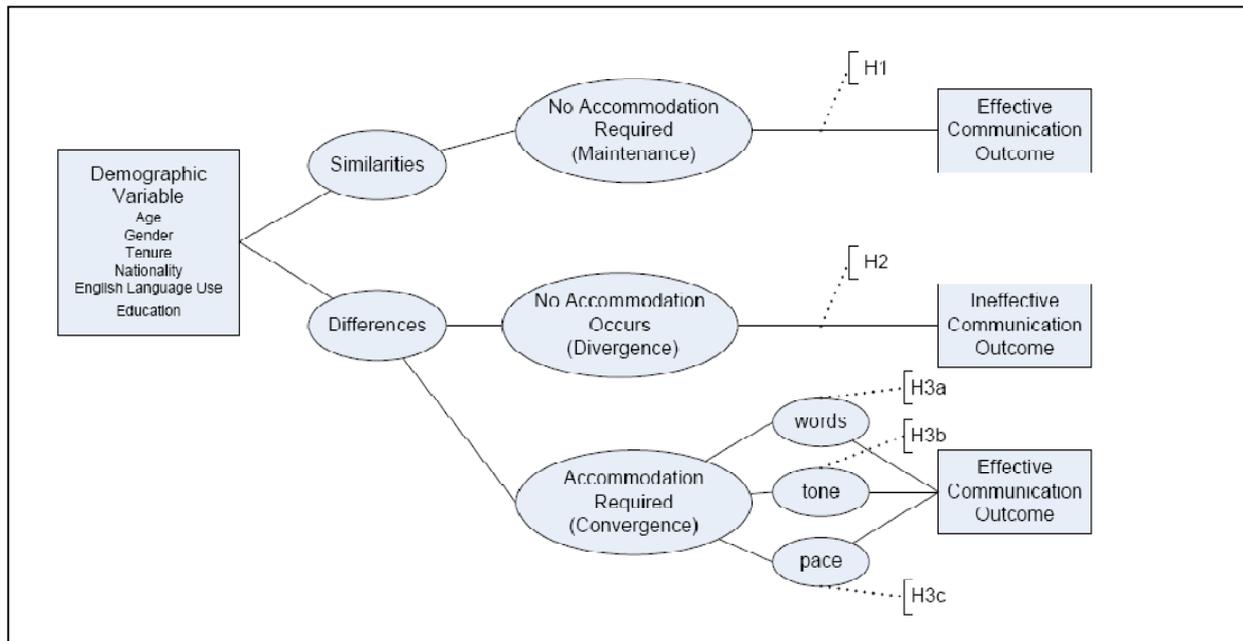
Hypothesis 1: When managers perceive high demographic similarity between themselves and their direct report, they will be more likely to report that the communication event was effective.

Hypothesis 2: When managers perceive low demographic similarity between themselves and their direct report, they will be more likely to report that the communication event was not effective.

Hypothesis 3: When managers perceive low demographic similarity between themselves and their direct report, and they report that the communication event was effective, the manager will also report that some aspect of their communication was altered.

The design is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Research Design



The collection of core demographic data from the respondents, together with the perceived demographic variables from the message recipient will firstly be evaluated for similarities and differences against the communication outcome. Where convergence is reported the use influence of words, tone and pace of speech to achieve the effective communication outcome will be determined.

Method

For the purposes of this research project – the message initiator will be a manager and the message recipient – an employee reporting directly to the manager.

Participants

The sample will be drawn from a commercial research panel, sourcing managers who have operated in a supervisory capacity for at least 12 months, and have had a face to face communication experience with a direct report during the previous 6 months. A balance between male and female respondents will be by including participants from the following age groups.

20 years old and under	21 to 30 years old	31 to 40 years old	41 to 50 years old	Over 50 years old
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Data Collection

An online questionnaire will be distributed through a commercial panel service provider using an active panel approach outlined by Callegaro and DiSogra (2008). This provides an expedient way to collect data, and ensures that the required number of responses from each respondent group is collected. In addition, as Rhodes, Bowie and Hergenrather (2003:69) report, web based surveys are an appropriate way to collect behavioural data about topics that may be difficult to discuss in face to face interviews and as a result may reduce bias. The depersonalised data will be delivered in a file format ready for upload into SPSS.

Data Analysis

For the quantitative data, a series of chi-square tests will need to be performed. The full series of statistical tests to be performed are currently under discussion with the University of Wollongong statistical consulting service.

The survey will include the open ended CIT question where the manager indicates whether he or she believes the outcome of the communication was effective or ineffective. The responses to this open ended question will be content analysed using either Leximancer and nVivo to determine whether any of the themes identified link to the demographic data.

The use of ICA survey elements such as the descriptive communication event provides the, some results will be able to be compared with to other ICA survey results. In addition, the age categorisations will also allow for assessment against other CAT based surveys such as the survey of Older Workers over 50 years of age (McCann & Giles 2006) where data can be separated out, or grouped together.

Benefits of the research

The research seeks to demonstrate which factors do influence non-accommodative communication events. By establishing knowledge of the demographic factors that typically lead to (unconscious) divergence, awareness training can be designed, tested and implemented. As a further contribution, the knowledge gained through this study could be related to both undergraduate and postgraduate students to assist with their transition into Australian workplaces, addressing an issue identified by authors such as Crosling and Ward (2002) and Jones et al.(2004).

No individual research project is likely to explain in empirical terms all the complexity of workplace communication interactions. At most, researchers can infer likely influences. However, through the investigation of the influence of demographic or other attributes in a workplace communication context, this project will contribute to greater awareness of the factors that influence the effectiveness and consequences of interpersonal workplace communication.

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