

Is it Something I Said? An Examination of Apprehension and Adaptation Communication Traits on Field Interviewer Performance

David W. Alward, Stephen M. King

Survey Research Division, RTI International, 3040 Cornwallis Rd. Haynes 497I Research Triangle Park, NC 27709.

Abstract

This study explores whether field interviewers' adaptation and apprehension communication traits – which explain how, why, and when individuals communicate in a given situation – can predict how a field interviewer performs and analyzes how traits relate to performance on large national studies that use in-home, computer-assisted personal interviewing techniques. Additionally, we examine whether a specific trait's presence or absence can predict performance. Results show significant correlations between *cognitive flexibility*, *communication apprehension*, and *interpersonal communication competence* with *overall field interviewer performance*, and a predictive relationship between *communication apprehension* and *overall field interviewer performance*, meaning this trait can be used, in part, to predict success.

Key Words: Communication Traits, Field Interviewer Performance, Field Management, Hiring, CAPI Interviewing

1. Introduction

Field interviewers on large-scale, national studies must contact a variety of selected sample representatives each day they work. The goal of all field interviewers is to efficiently collect high-quality data from those selected sample members while following project protocol. Despite travelling great distances and working in diverse, unfamiliar locations, interviewers are expected to perform effectively no matter the working area. Frequent changes in their work environment put interviewers at a disadvantage when communicating with respondents because interviewers must accommodate their communication (i.e., adapt one's communicative behavior to portray similarity between individuals) to best fit their physical location, reduce social distance, and make presented information salient to each respondent amongst the diverse group encountered on any given day (Giles, 1973; Giles, H., & Ogay, T., 2007).

Face-to-face interactions allow interviewers to take advantage of social cues (e.g., personal space, voice tone, body language) to inform one's behaviors, but interviewers must act appropriately without delay due to the synchronous nature face-to-face communication entails (Opdenakker, R., 2006). Therefore, interviewers must be versatile, adaptive to all situations and place an emphasis on choosing the best way to respond to a message. Such successfully accommodative behaviors help bridge the gap between individuals in a communication situation (Giles, 1973). Whether or not a field interviewer can communicate appropriately in the field can be the difference between collecting high quality data and collecting zero data.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Communication Traits

How one behaves in a certain situation varies by individual. These variations can be attributed in part to the differences between individual's tendencies when sending and receiving messages (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1993). Research has shown that behaviors of this nature are constant throughout a person's life and are therefore referred to as enduring and consistent trait-level characteristics (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1993; Martin & Anderson, 1996). How a person scores on a test for these trait-level characteristics will also remain relatively stable over one's life span. To put that another way, these trait-level variances are not dependent on a person's current state of being.

Communication traits describe patterns in one's communication behavior over various circumstances (Daly & Bippus, 1998; Cranmer, G. A., & Martin, M. M., 2015), and help explain similarities and dissimilarities in how individuals disseminate and reciprocate messages. There are four groups in which communication traits fall: adaptation, aggression, apprehension, and presentation (Infante et al., 2010).

In this study, adaptation (e.g., *affective orientation, cognitive flexibility, socio-communicative style, interpersonal communication competence*) and apprehension (e.g., *communication apprehension*) communication traits are examined because we feel they represent qualities field interviewers need to be successful. That is, field interviewers need to be able to adapt their communication style to the respondent or situation and field interviewers need to be comfortable communicating. These traits and their respective scales are described in greater detail in the Methods section.

Communication traits have the potential to serve as a means for estimating expected project performance results for an individual interviewer during the recruitment process, thereby potentially predicting field interviewer performance pre-hire.

RQ: How can field interviewer adaptation and apprehension communication traits be used to predict overall performance?

2.2 Field Interviewer Performance

There are few studies which have examined quantifiable, objective factors relating to field interviewer performance. Rogers (1976) compared telephone and in-person interviewing strategies and how different strategies (i.e., phone versus face-to-face) relate to both the quality of responses and how field performance differs from telephone performance. Rogers found minimal difference between the quality of data collected over the phone and in-person. King and Stringer (2016) administered structured interviews to a small sample of applicants for a field interviewer position during the recruitment process, asking the exact same questions and scoring their answers. They examined how those structured interview scores related to end-of-project performance for those candidates who were hired. They found no linear relationship between structured interview scores and performance. Carley-Baxter, Baxter, Williams, & Thomas-Banks (2013) examined the relationship between training certification quiz scores and interviewer performance, finding non-significant correlations between the two.

The purpose behind the current research is to focus on field interviewer communication through an examination of adaptation and apprehension trait behavior and, specifically, how variances in scores on measures of these two trait types relates to variance in field interviewer performance.

H1: Affective orientation, cognitive flexibility, interpersonal communication competence, assertiveness, and responsiveness will be positively correlated with overall performance.

H2: Communication apprehension will be negatively correlated with overall performance.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

Participants ($N = 44$: 39 female and 5 male) were professional field interviewers recruited from 5 national field studies at a large East Coast nonprofit research institute. Each participant worked on an in-home, computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) project. Participants' mean age was 57.3 with interviewing experience ranging from 1 to 30 years.

3.2 Procedures

All measures were programmed into a single online survey using Survey Gizmo. No changes were made to original scale language, and questions were programmed in the same order as each measure was built. To recruit the interviewers, we first contacted management staff of each project to obtain approval to include their field interviewers in the study. Once approval was received, project management provided the authors with interviewer contact information. Field interviewers were sent an introductory email describing the study and asking them to volunteer to participate. Upon launching the survey, respondents were asked to provide their consent before proceeding. Interviewers received no compensation or incentive for participating. Two reminder emails were sent approximately one week and two weeks, respectively, after the initial email to all possible participants. The reminder emails were sent to all participants because the research did not associate survey participation with individual email addresses and included language thanking those who had already participated and asked for no repeat submissions.

3.3 Measures

Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield's (1990) 20-item Affective Orientation Scale ($M = 73.48$, $SD = 9.55$) was used to measure *affective orientation*. Responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). *Affective orientation* explains an individual's awareness of his or her current emotional state, the self-perceived importance level of the felt emotion(s), and how judgment and interactions are made based on the individual's current emotional disposition (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1994, p. 332).

Martin and Rubin's (1995) 12-item Cognitive Flexibility Scale ($M = 60.98$, $SD = 6.04$) was used to measure respondent *cognitive flexibility* with a 6-point Likert format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). *Cognitive flexibility* explains how aware an individual is of the options and alternatives available in any given communication situation, how he or she can adapt to the situation, and one's self-efficacy in successfully achieving a possible option or alternative. In short, this explains one's knowledge that he or she has a choice toward his or her selected behavior in an interaction (Martin & Rubin, 1995, p. 623).

The 20-item Assertiveness and Responsiveness measure (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990), consisting of both a 10-item *responsiveness* ($M = 58.75$, $SD = 6.39$) and 10-item *assertiveness* ($M = 51.52$, $SD = 6.45$) scale using a 6-point Likert format ranging from 1 (*never true*) to 7 (*always true*) was included. *Assertiveness* (i.e., standing up for one's self) and *responsiveness* (i.e., being sensitive to others) represent the two adaptation dimensions that make up the trait *socio-communicative style* (Malachowski et al., 2012), which explains an individual's motivation to communicate, and is an important piece of interpersonal communication competence (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990; Richmond & Martin, 1998, pgs. 135-136).

Interpersonal communication competence was measured using Rubin and Martin's (1994) 30-item Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale (ICCS) ($M = 115.39$, $SD = 9.57$) using a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). *Interpersonal communication competence* refers to an individual's ability to handle and manage interpersonal relationships in social situations (Rubin & Martin, 1994). To be considered competent, one must possess the ability to provide

and receive information effectively and express his or her knowledge known to the other individual in the relationship (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988).

Communication apprehension was measured using McCroskey's (1982) PRCA-24 scale ($M = 50.95$, $SD = 13.83$). Respondents complete the 24-item measure by using a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). *Communication apprehension* describes the level of anxiety built-up in an individual prior to engaging in a communication interaction (McCroskey, 1977).

Overall performance scores ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .78$) were numeric grades assigned to each individual field interviewer by his or her respective project supervisor using a Likert-type 1-5 rating format. A rating of 5 was the highest rating, while 1 was the lowest. The measure of performance included the following 13 dimensions: productivity, response rates, quality of work, conversion skills, cost efficiency, meeting deadlines, computer skills, communication, dependability, judgment, cooperation, professionalism, and overall performance. *Overall performance* was not assigned as a mean average from the previous 12 dimensions, but as a separate measure, independent of prior responses. Supervisors who completed the performance evaluations came from multiple projects, but only evaluated field interviewers under their direct supervision. While all projects use the same performance evaluation, there is no singular, project-inclusive performance evaluation training between the projects. See **Figure 1** for all measure reliabilities.



Figure 1: Trait Measure Reliability

4. Results

The research question explores the relationships between adaptation and apprehension communication traits and overall field interviewer performance. The results of a series of Pearson correlations (see **Table 1**) found moderate positive relationships between *cognitive flexibility*, $r(42) = .32$, $p < .05$, and *interpersonal communication competence*, $r(42) = .33$, $p < .05$, with *overall performance*, partially supporting Hypothesis 1. There was a moderate negative relationship between *communication apprehension* and *overall performance*, $r(42) = -.36$, $p < .05$, fully supporting Hypothesis 2.

Table 1: Relationships between Communication Traits and Overall Performance

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Overall Performance	1						
2 Affective Orientation	0.08	1					
3 Cognitive Flexibility	*0.32	0.29	1				
4 Assertiveness	0.25	0.19	0.28	1			
5 Responsiveness	-0.02	0.14	0.22	0.01	1		
6 Communication Apprehension Interpersonal	*-0.36	-0.24	**0.72	**0.46	-0.15	1	
7 Communication Competence	*0.33	0.22	**0.62	**0.44	**0.39	**0.64	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A regression model using the traits significantly correlated with overall performance (i.e., *cognitive flexibility*, *communication apprehension*, and *interpersonal communication competence*) determined if any of these traits could significantly predict overall performance, not just represent a positive or negative relationship. *Communication apprehension* explained 13% of variance in overall performance scores, $F(1, 42) = 6.33, p < .016$. The other two traits did not explain a significant amount of variance. These data suggest that as a field interviewer scores lower on the *communication apprehension* measure the corresponding performance scores increase. Conversely, the more apprehensive an interviewer is in his or her communication, his or her performance scores decrease.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine adaptation and apprehension communication traits and evaluate whether the presence, absence, or a combination of traits are related to how field interviewers perform. The results of this study show a relationship between *cognitive flexibility*, *interpersonal communication competence*, and *communication apprehension* with *overall performance*.

Based on the outcomes of a linear regression model, only *communication apprehension* is predictive of field interviewer performance, accounting for roughly 13% of the variance. As expected, this is an inverse relationship: lower levels of *communication apprehension* predict higher *overall performance* scores. *Communication apprehension* explains fear and anxiety levels one feels about an upcoming social interaction within one of the following contexts: dyadic interaction (i.e., one-on-one), public speaking, group discussion, and meetings (Pribyl et al., 1998). Varying levels of *communication apprehension* can have behavioral implications on an individual. Internally, higher levels can increase levels of discomfort when communicating; while, externally, increased levels can cause individuals to communicate ineffectively and inappropriately (McCroskey & Beatty, 1998). High levels of *communication apprehension* have been related to loneliness (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1987).

Thinking about this in terms of the day-to-day, in-field experiences of interviewers, it makes sense that interviewers who are highly apprehensive will likely struggle in this position. Avoiding communication and the tendency to communicate ineffectively is a combination that does not promote

success as a field interviewer. Demonstrating a positive and welcoming demeanor while at a respondent's doorstep, building rapport through initial conversation, and successfully describing one's reason for contacting respondents are examples of key interviewer responsibilities individuals with high levels of apprehension would struggle with.

These findings suggest it may be possible to screen field interviewer job candidates during the recruitment process for their level of communication apprehension and then use that information during job candidate selection to avoid hiring interviewers without the requisite communication skills to become successful interacting with respondents.

Limitations

This research did face several obstacles in collecting usable data: obtaining management permission to contact field interviewers; asking field interviewers to volunteer to participate without compensation; and each participant's unique identification number, assigned at the time of hire, was needed to connect performance results with interviewers. These obstacles resulted in a response rate of 46% amongst the total interviewer pool. Only 2% of all emailed interviewers responded and refused to participate without compensation. Some participants started the survey but did not complete in full, while others fully completed the survey but either left out or made up the identification number. This dropped the fully useable completion number from 60, or 63% of potential respondents, to 44.

Additionally, the application of field interviewer performance ratings may have varied across interviewers based on their specific project assignment. Field supervisors were not trained in giving consistent performance ratings in a singular training session for all projects. Performance requirements are project-specific and there were no behaviorally-anchored ratings assigned to performance levels across multiple projects. Therefore, what one field supervisor considered "level 5 performance" could be considered by a different field supervisor as "level 3 performance" and vice versa.

In future research adaptations, a larger sample size will allow for a more robust assessment of these findings. Future research should also use additional trait measures to explore for more predictive variance and gather communication trait data from new field interviewers before the individuals begin interviewing, rather than gathering data from experienced field interviewers as done in this study. Finally, future studies should attempt to identify the characteristics of field interviewers who are less likely to attrit, not just the characteristics of those who will be good performers.

As for how this research can improve surveys: if a trait or combination of traits can explain a large amount of variance in performance (i.e., predict performance), projects could use a structured measure to quantitatively anchor the interview process and predict performance based on scientifically-significant results prior to hiring a candidate. So, during the recruitment process, supervisors could look for these innate communication characteristics amongst candidates, which have been shown to not change over time, to identify individuals who could be expected to perform well as field interviewers.

References

- Beatty, M. J. & McCroskey, J. C. (1998). Interpersonal communication as temperamental expression: A communibiological paradigm. In McCroskey, J. C., Beatty, M. J., Daly, J. A., & Martin, M. M. (Eds.), *Communication and personality: Trait perspectives* (pp. 41-67). New York, NY: Hampton Press.
- Booth-Butterfield, M., & Booth-Butterfield, S. (1990). Conceptualizing affect as information in communication production. *Human Communication Research*, *16*, 451-476. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1990.tb00219.x.
- Booth-Butterfield, M., & Booth-Butterfield, S. (1994). The affective orientation to communication: Conceptual and empirical distinctions. *Communication Quarterly*, *42*(4), 331-344. doi:10.1080/01463379409369941.
- Carley-Baxter, L., Baxter, R., Williams, J., & Thomas-Banks, D. (2013, May). *Interviewer Certification Scores & Performance*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of International Field Directors & Technologies Conference, Providence, RI.
- Cranmer, G. A., & Martin, M. M. (2015). An examination of aggression and adaptation traits with moral foundation. *Communication Research Reports*, *32*, 360-366. doi:10.1080/08824096.2015.1089848.
- Daly, J. A., & Bippus, A.M. (1998). Personality and interpersonal communication: Issues and directions. In J.C. McCroskey, J.A. Daly, M. M. Martin, & M. J. Betty (Eds.), *Personality and interpersonal communication* (pp. 1-40). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Downs, V. C., Javidi, M., & Nussbaum, J. F. (1987). Communication apprehension and loneliness in older adults: An empirical test of socio-environmental theory. *Communication Research Reports*, *4*(2), 73-80.
- Giles, H. (1973). Accent mobility: A model and some data. *Anthropological Linguistics*, *15*, 87-109. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029508>.
- Giles, H., & Ogay, T. (2007). Communication accommodation theory. In B.B. Whaley & W. Samter (Eds.), *Explaining communication: Contemporary theories and exemplars* (pp. 293-310). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Infante, T. A., Rancer, A. S., & Avtgis, T. A. (2010). *Contemporary communication theory*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.
- Infante, T. A., Rancer, A. S., & Womack, D. F. (1993). *Building communication theory (2nd ed.)*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.
- King, S. M., & Stringer, M. C. (2016, May). *Gut check: Getting from intuition to prediction in field interviewer hiring*. Presented at the annual meeting of International Field Directors & Technologies Conference, Austin, TX.
- Malachowski, C. C., Martin, M. M., & Vallade, J. I. (2012). An examination of students' adaptation, aggression, and apprehension traits with their instructional feedback orientations. *Communication Education*, 1-21. doi:10.1080/03634523.2012.748208.
- Martin, M. M., & Anderson, C. M. (1996). Communication traits: A cross-generalization investigation. *Communication Research Reports*, *13*, 58-67. doi:10.1080/08824099609362071.

- Martin, M. M., & Ruben, R. B. (1995). A new measure of cognitive flexibility. *Psychological Reports*, 76, 623-626. doi:10.2466/pr0.1995.76.2.623.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1977). Oral communication apprehension: A summary of recent theory and research. *Human communication research*, 4(1), 78-96. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1977.tb00599.x.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1982). *An introduction to rhetorical communication* (4th Ed). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Beatty, M. J. (1998). Communication apprehension. In McCroskey, J. C., Beatty, M. J., Daly, J. A., & Martin, M. M. (Eds.), *Communication and personality: Trait perspectives* (pp. 215-231). New York, NY: Hampton Press.
- McCroskey, J. C. & McCroskey, L. L. (1988) Self-report as an approach to measuring communication competence. *Communication Research Reports*, 5(2), 108-113, doi:10.1080/08824098809359810.
- Opendakker, Raymond (2006, August). Advantages and disadvantages of four interview techniques in qualitative research. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(4), Art. 11, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0604118>.
- Pribyl, C. B., Keaten, J. A., Sakamoto, M. S., & Koshikawa, F. (1998). Assessing the cross-cultural content validity of the personal report of communication apprehension scale (PRCA-24). *Japanese Psychological Research*, 40 (1), 47-53. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5884.00074.
- Richmond, V. B., & Martin, M. M. (1998). Sociocommunicative style and sociocommunicative orientation. In McCroskey, J. C., Beatty, M. J., Daly, J. A., & Martin, M. M. (Eds.), *Communication and personality: Trait perspectives* (pp. 133-148). New York, NY: Hampton Press.
- Richmond, V. P., & McCroskey, J. C. (1990). Reliability and separation of factors on the assertiveness-responsiveness measure. *Psychological Reports*, 67(2), 449-450. doi:10.2466/pr0.1990.67.2.449.
- Rogers, T. F. (1976). Interviews by telephone and in person: Quality of responses and field performance. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 40 (1), 51-65. doi:10.1086/268267.
- Rubin, R. B., & Martin, M. M. (1994). Development of a measure of interpersonal communication competence. *Communication Research Reports*, 11(1), 33-44. doi:10.1080/08824099409359938.
- Weaver, J. B., III (1998). Personality and self-perceptions about communication. In McCroskey, J. C., Beatty, M. J., Daly, J. A., & Martin, M. M. (Eds.), *Communication and personality: Trait perspectives* (pp. 95-117). New York, NY: Hampton Press.