

PATTERNS OF POWER COMMUNICATION : AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Communication in one form or other is the basis of all social interaction. This paper deals with a particular aspect of communication namely, the effect of power and authority on the communication patterns that are set up between individuals. In such situations usually a power differential exists between the individuals as in the case of an employer and an employee, and this is responsible for setting up different attitudes in the mind of the people.

The aim of the experiment described here is to study the reactions in individuals to expression of praise and hostility. The main finding is that those who are in power *e.g.* the employers are not so susceptible to praise as those who are subordinate to them. Also, a superior power person is less disturbed by hostile act of a subordinate than *vice versa*.

Introduction

Communication is a mode of social interaction. It assumes different forms according to the level and pattern of organization of the group in which it occurs. It may refer to a 'verbal, explicit and intentional transmission' or to indirect, unconscious and symbolic forms of behaviour which tend to influence relationship-organization in a group. It presupposes: (1) that the attitude, gestures, nuances, tones, and overtones, thoughts, feelings and emotions, etc., occur in a situation where persons are involved in a group; (2) that these are in some ways (specific or vague and elusive) communicable to relevant points in the group structures; (3) that the mode of communication would depend not only on the perceptiveness, linguistic or attitudinal and emotional equipment (or adjustment) of the person(s) concerned but also on the cultural and value matrix to which it is relevant; and (4) that in some measure it produces recognizable changes in the organization or character-structure of the group. These changes are often difficult to determine or measure or even to estimate with any degree of precision partly because the techniques and tools for measurement are quite imperfect today but also perhaps because of the inherent difficulties of the social situation which is in some ways analogous to the difficulties of measurement in the domain of microphysics. Nevertheless, some gross measurements may be attempted especially such as may enable a social-psychologist to indicate certain trends or tendencies and certain characteristics of the communicative process as a social reality. The communicative process may be understood as a dynamic event occurring in a field where the individual participants act and react and help build a situation which is unique in many ways. This field situation is characterized by flexibility and shift from one

main focus to another in varying forms of interpersonal roles and relationships. The process is not an atomistic interconnection between two or more sources of sensory-perceptual or cognitive-actional systems but a dynamic interplay between areas of stress and strain, between newly emerging patterns of relevant modes of behaviour on the part of individuals concerned in the communication process. Each shift in the situation of one person finds its echo in the adaptive (or unadaptive) reaction of the other. Thus, the presence of the person in authority or an evaluative judgment or even a casual remark from him about the other who is for the time being situated in a subordinate position would serve to establish a communication system of complex dimensions. Broadly speaking, these dimensions are structured according to (1) the immediate contemporary situation; (2) the status and roles assumed by persons in this situation; (3) the social and cultural factors and value systems of the persons involved; and (4) the unconscious or unverballed cues that influence reactive behaviour. Thus, hostility or praise shown by a person in power or by his subordinate would evoke different modes of responses which could perhaps be understood in terms of the factors enumerated. Both the uniformity (where it is found) and the differential character of behavioural response of individuals in the power-communication system would become meaningful when they are understood as a function of social variables.

In this sense, communication would include a much larger segment of inter-personal behaviour than has been recognised in most of current psychological treatment. In general, the latter is concerned with what might be called the formal aspects of the communicative process as distinct from the *material, integral and dynamic* aspect. The former lays exclusive emphasis on verbal, gestural and attitudinal mechanism of communication, the latter attempts at both a phenomenological description of the whole process in which persons involved play a certain role and also at understanding and explaining the dynamic properties of the total situation. Thus, in a power-communication situation one may try to understand not only how authority is exercised in terms of the role and status assumed by individuals but also how personality factors and social-cultural influences and value-systems may give a clue to differential forms of behaviour. Even where the formal status of a person remains unaltered, his reaction-patterns may be determined by differences in role, in caste or class-structure, in economic adequacy or otherwise, in sensitiveness to prestige, in emotional adjustment, etc., etc. The exercise of power, that is, its communication, would then be a function of many and complex variables. Power in this context would obviously include the capacity or potentiality to reward or to raise its expectation, or punish or suggest a threat; to elevate or derogate; to support or jeopardize one's security systems and, in general, to effect such changes as are likely to modify one's position for better or worse.

Object of Investigation

The present investigation is concerned with estimating the influence of power-variable as a determinant of social interaction. Praise and hostility have been taken as two forms of social action and attempt has been made to investigate their effects on both the agent and recipient and their responses in a power-communication situation. In the experiment the power variable

has been exemplified by envisaging a hypothetical situation in which employer-employee roles are taken by the subject. In most situations of this kind both individuals (employer and employee) have some 'power' over each other. 'Accordingly, we have defined the *power differential* of a superior and a subordinate person as the differential capacity of the two persons to reward and punish each other or to raise expectation of the reward and imply threat of punishment. Further variations in the power variables have been introduced through variation in the financial dependence of the employee on the employer. Also, attempt has been made to see if variables like caste-group, religious views, personality factors (nervousness, dominance, friendliness, etc.), parental attitudes, income or socio-economic status and the like contribute towards the differential character of the subject's behaviour in the experimental situation.

The responses of the subject have been elicited to three questions: (1) What he *would think*; (2) what he *would feel like* saying and (3) what he *would say* in a certain hypothetical situation (praise-hostility). The three-fold categorization is obviously only a methodological abstraction, not a phenomenological division. The justification for this analysis would appear to consist in providing a basis to the subject for some detailed introspective scrutiny and careful description of his own reactions. This would also, perhaps, enable us to ascertain whether, for example, the expression of greater or lesser hostility has been due to the intensity of positive feelings or to the restraints exercised by the subject or both.

Methods of Investigation

The present investigation employs the *hypothetical situation method*. The subjects are asked to assume a role in a certain employer-employee situation in praise or hostility relationship. Then they are asked to report how they would respond under the described conditions. Systematic variations in the situations described to different groups of subjects makes possible the retention of one of the crucial characteristics of the laboratory method. Like the laboratory method, it controls to a higher degree the nature of the power relationship and eliminates the problem of past experience with the other person as well as the problem of averaging or summarizing responses to many people at another level. Furthermore, it is possible with this method to collect introspective data concerning autistic communications, feelings and attitudes that are not actually communicated to the other person. It is also particularly suitable for cross-cultural research where complicated methods for "realistically" inducing power in a laboratory manner are difficult. The method is economical, for large groups of subjects may be employed quickly and efficiently.

Experimental Design and Procedure

The test was given to 222 undergraduate and graduate students of Lucknow University. All subjects were arbitrarily assigned first to one of two possible power positions—superior or subordinate. Half of the subordinates were asked to assume that they really needed their job as subordinates while the other half were asked to assume that they were not as dependent on the particular job. Similarly, half of the superiors were asked to assume that their subordinates were really dependent on their jobs and the other half that

their subordinates were not as dependent on the job. Thus, There were four experimental groups :

- (1) High Power Superiors
- (2) Low Power Superiors
- (3) Dependent Subordinates
- (4) Independent Subordinates

The social situation of *hostility* was presented as follows : "At this particular time Mr. _____ has just said some very nasty things to you. He stated that you are both stupid and childish. He, furthermore, questioned both your character and moral strength".

- (1) What would you *think*?
- (2) What would you *feel like* saying to him?
- (3) What *would* you say to him?

The *praise* action was described as follows :

"On one occasion Mr. _____ has had the opportunity to observe you carrying out a particular task. As you finish the work, he praises you saying that you have considerable skill, and he admires your ability and temperament"

- (1) What would you *think*?
- (2) What would you *feel like* saying to him?
- (3) What *would* you say to him?

Hypotheses

Some of the hypotheses which we have tried to test in this experiment are:

1. The Superior-power person is less likely to be pleased as a result of being praised than the Subordinate.
2. The Superior-power person is less likely to be disturbed by a hostile act than the subordinate.
3. The Superiors give (a) less positive "Valence of person" responses to the praise act and (b) less negative responses to the hostile act than the Subordinates.
4. The Superiors would tend more (a) to question the sincerity of the praise act and are suspicious about it, and (b) seek for psychological explanations of the hostile act than the subordinates.
5. If the Superiors are less trusting and less pleased with the praise and less disturbed by the hostile act (*i.e.*, if assumptions Nos. 2 and 4 are correct), we might expect (a) less hostility to be expressed by the Superiors in response to the hostile act and (b) more hostility to be expressed by the Superiors in response to the praise act.
6. (a) Lesser amount of friendliness (tolerance) would be shown by the Superiors to the praise act and (b) more friendliness (tolerance) would tend to be shown by the superiors to the hostile act.

7. The Superiors would be (a) more dominant in their approach and (b) less restrained in the style of their communication.
8. The Superiors will order change and ask for explanations more often than the Subordinates.

It has been also possible to compare our results with U.S.A. and Canadian data obtained on the same experiment conducted under similar conditions. The U.S.A. and Canadian data are found in Appendices A and B at the end.

In the Indian sample of 222 undergraduates and graduates of Lucknow University, the following variables are significant.

1. Valence of Event.
2. Valence of Person.
3. Perceived Intention.
4. Hostility.
5. Friendliness.
6. Dominance—Submissiveness.

Some of the Results

Hypothesis I : Under praise the superior-power person will be less pleased than the subordinate.

Hypothesis I is confirmed as it was in the U.S.A. and Canadian data.

Hypothesis II : Under a hostile act a superior power person will be less disturbed than a subordinate.

(1) This hypothesis is not significantly supported though in feelings asserted there is a tendency in the expected direction. Both superiors and subordinates are disturbed by a hostile act. The subordinates, however, do not express as much hostility as they think and feel.

(2) High-power superiors tend to express more hostility in their behaviour while low power superiors feel more disturbed than they express. On the whole, low power superiors feel more disturbed than the high-power superiors, though they do not think they would express more disturbance.

Hypothesis III (B) : Valence of Person

(1) Superiors gave less negative valence responses than the subordinates.

(2) Superiors tend to be more disturbed in their thought processes but show very little antagonism to the other person in their overt behaviour.

(3) The subordinates are disturbed in their thought and behaviour, though they are less negative to the other in their behaviour than in their thoughts.

Hypothesis No IV (A & B) :

The superiors in the Indian case give more positive explanation of the hostile act than do the subordinates.

From the protocol it appears that blame for the hostile act is not placed as much on the individuals as on the situation and socio-economic conditions. This is expressed in the common phrase 'man is the creature of circumstance'.

In the Indian data subordinates give more negative psychological explanation.

Hypothesis VI (A): Friendliness

In all the three samples we find that lesser amount of friendliness was shown by the superior than by the subordinates to the praise act. This is also true for all three questions with no difference between thought and action in this case.

Hypothesis VII: Dominance-Submissiveness Approach

From the analysis it appeared that superiors would tend to approach both the praise and hostile acts with greater dominance and less submissiveness than the subordinates. But the fact remains that the low power groups tend to be slightly less submissive in the praise act and that high superiors are more dominant than the lower ones. In the hostile act the independent subordinates approach more dominantly than the dependent subordinates.