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ABSTRACT

This study (the second of a 2-part project exploring the communication patterns of the elderly) examined whether the quantity and frequency of conversational talk affected how favorably an individual was viewed as a partner for activities within a small social network of elderly black persons. Subjects, 5 black women ranging in age from 65 to 78, participated in 2 videotaped free-style discussions and completed a sociogram that was developed to depict the order of choices the 5 subjects made in choosing each other as partners for 10 social activities. Conversational patterns were examined by determining the number of times each subject talked, the amount of time spoken during the 2 conversational periods, and the sequential order of the speakers. Results showed that subjects who placed medially in terms of quantity and frequency of conversational talk were the subjects most often selected as partners for social activities in both studies. (Three tables of data are included.) (SR)

Communication Patterns of the Elderly in the Black Community

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INTRODUCTION

Health related messages include a wide range of issues when considering hardships among the elderly. The one that we have chosen to deal with may not be considered by some to be a "health-related" message because it would not, on the surface, appear to impair the health status of the elderly. This is the issue concerning communication skill, a skill inseparably related to the social well-being of all age groups, but its impact on the elderly is especially significant. We are told by health officials that older people with active friendships or interpersonal networks tend to have less need for support services even in the face of failing health (Moss, Gottesman, & Lleban, 1976).

Evidenced in the literature is the fact that self-esteem plays a major role in the social well-being of the elderly. The older person's self-concept is often seen as a determining factor regarding how the individual will communicate with others, adjust successfully, and establish satisfying interactions with peers. Persons who have positive and realistic self-images tend to be more accepted and liked (Neuhaus and Neuhaus, 1982). The pilot study which preceded this one (Jackson and Williamson-Ige, 1988, unpublished) supported this view within a small group of elderly persons.

We know that elderly people decline in terms of their physical, mental, psychological, economical, and environmental well-being. But they also decline in their linguistic capabilities. Findings from longitudinal studies of cognitive performance of normal adults indicate that there are consistent mean declines late in life - sometimes in the 60s, but most always by the late 70s (Mueller & Geoffrey, 1987). A summary of the expressive language deficits that are associated with aging include a number of observations at different levels of language analysis. With regard to word usage, notable naming deficits have been described pertaining to word retrieval, the speed of naming, word association, and increased use of vague terms. Critchley (1984) describes specific naming deficits that may underlie a number of impairments in the spontaneous oral language production of older individuals. Verbal standstill refers to the phenomenon whereby speech is arrested in midstream because of sudden failures in word retrieval, especially for proper nouns, but more often nouns than any other part of speech (p. 257). Generally, these expressive alterations, as well as those regarding deficits of language comprehension, may be related systemically to structural and physiological changes in the nervous system that accompany aging (Mueller & Geoffrey, p. 261).

Conversation, which may be regarded as informal spoken exchange of thoughts and feelings, was chosen as the medium for examining social relationships among the elderly for two reasons: First, it is a social activity that shares the characteristics of all other social activities, and therefore, has been shown to be vital to the health and well-being of the elderly (Wardhaugh, 1985); and secondly, it provides the opportunity to examine two conversational maxims which underlie the efficient use of language in conversation.

The first is the maxim of quantity, which generally indicates that with "other things being equal, give neither more or less information than, or at least give as much information as, is required" (Grice, 1981, p.184). The traits of loquaciousness and parsimony have both been attributed to the elderly, and both violate the first maxim. The second maxim relates to the clarity of utterances produced by the speaker, specifically exhorting an avoidance of obscurity and ambiguity.

It is not the intent of the present study to analyze conversational patterns to determine the structural contents of the interactants talk (e.g., rules, units, speech acts, etc.), but only to quantify conversational data to determine the amount and frequency of talk. In this pilot study, the interactants did not have a conversation that was prompted by their own motives. Rather, they were asked to

come together and discuss a topic that was chosen by the researchers, but thought to be interesting enough to generate free-style talk. The intent of the research was to gather quantifiable data regarding how much was said rather than what and how it was said.

This project is the second of two parts which explored the communication patterns of the elderly. The first study (Study I) involved nine subjects while this follow-up involves five subjects from Study I.

The purpose of this follow-up study was to question whether the quantity and frequency of conversational talk affected how favorably one was preferred as a partner for activities within a small social network of elderly black persons. An examination of these results is expected to generate information about the impact of conversational skill on the social networking, hence, the social well-being, of elderly persons.

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the methods and procedures employed in the study of the question previously advanced. Included are descriptions of the following aspects of the methodology: the subjects, independent and dependent variables, and the procedures.

Subjects. Five black female subjects, ranging in age from 65 to 78 years of age, participated in the study. The subjects were part of a community group that was involved in a lunch and social activities program on a daily basis at the Warren Senior Citizens Center in Toledo, Ohio, which is sponsored by the Area Office on Aging. With the exception of one subject who used a tripod cane to assist in walking, all subjects were ambulatory and capable of engaging in the social activitis.

Independent variable. A free-style discussion was used to provide the data for determining conversational quantity and frequency of talk among the interactants. The topic of the discussions were a decision made jointly between the researchers and the Social Activities Director at the Center. Two discussion periods were held. The first discussion topic was "Young People Are Respectful Toward Their Elders;" and the second was "I Should Help My Children Raise Their Children."

Dependent variable. A sociogram was constructed by the researchers as the instrument used to depict the order of choices the five subjects made in choosing each other as partners for ten social activities. The sociogram included two dimensions: a list of the first names of the subjects and ten social activities. For purposes of anonymity in this paper, the names of the subjects are replaced with A, B, C, D, and E. In a column below and to the left on the

sociogram, ten activities were selected for inclusion, based on suggestions from the Social Activities Director and input from the subjects themselves. The activities included: 1. Eating meals; 2. Taking walks; 3. Watching t.v.; 4. Playing cards; 5. Talking seriously; 6. Playing bingo; 7. Talking casually; 8. Shopping; 9. Sharing a room; and, 10. Taking a trip. To the right of each activity were four lines on which the subjects were directed to select their preferred partners for the social activities in descending order of preference (see Table 1).

Procedure. The researchers met with the Social Activities Director at the Warren Senior Citizens Center about one week prior to the first meeting to be held with the subjects. During that time, it was decided where and when the ensuing meetings would take place, as well as the possibility of videotaping the sessions. It was agreed that the subjects would determine whether or not they felt any objections to being videotaped. It was decided to hold the meetings in the lounge area of the church in which the Center is located. During the next week, the Director made follow-up calls to the subjects, reminding them of the time to be at the Center.

The purpose of the first meeting with the subjects was to secure their permission and willingness to participate, and to determine which of the eight in attendance from Study I would be available to act as subjects in the second study

(Study II). Five of the subjects were available and willing to participate. The subjects were told that the researchers would be acting as facilitators during conversational periods with them, but would not be directly involved. The subjects were anxious to know what they were supposed to talk about, but they agreed to wait until the appointed time to be told in order to enable remarks to be spontaneous rather than thought out. They also agreed to be videotaped.

During this initial meeting, the researchers also reviewed the process the subjects followed in responding to the sociogram. While the subjects were reminded of the procedures used in Study I, no details of the results of that study were offered. None of the subjects requested additional information, but seemed enthusiastic about getting involved in the follow-up study. During this discussion, the subjects offered some minor suggestions for changes on the sociogram, which were graciously accepted. The time for the first conversational period was set and the meeting was over in about thirty minutes.

One week later, the subjects arrived at the Center. The researchers provided coffee and doughnuts and attempted to create a relaxed environment. The subjects got comfortable and did not seem at all nervous about anything, including the video camera. When everyone was seated with doughnuts and coffee, one researcher opened the discussion by stating: "Young people are respectful toward their

elders." The subjects were then asked to respond to each other and not to the camera or the researchers. The ensuing conversation between the subjects was lively and continued for about twenty minutes.

One week later, the subjects again arrived at a predetermined time. Arrangements were made to begin a half-hour earlier than the previous session in order to have sufficient time to complete the sociogram at the conclusion of this second conversational period. The same procedure was followed. The topic for discussion was: "I should help my children raise their children." Again, the videotaped session was lively and lasted about twenty minutes. Following the discussion, the subjects were asked to respond to the sociogram.

Treatment of the data. An examination of the conversational patterns of the five subjects was performed to determine the following: 1. The number of times each subject talked; 2. The amount of time spoken during the two conversational periods; and, 3. The sequential order of the speakers. The sociogram was analyzed to determine the number of times each subject was selected as the first, second, third, and fourth choice.

RESULTS

Conversational Patterns. Recorded speaking time for both conversational periods totalled 19 minutes, 48 seconds. The number of times spoken and the amount of speaking times in ascending order was as follows: Subject B spoke three times for a total of 34 seconds; Subject A spoke twenty-three times for 3 minutes, 15 seconds; Subject C spoke twenty-four times for 3 minutes, 54 seconds; Subject E spoke sixteen times for 5 minutes, 2 seconds; and Subject D spoke fifteen times for 7 minutes, 3 seconds. Table 2 indicates the length and number of talking times for each subject during the two conversational periods.

The percent of total time, in ascending order, that each subject talked during both conversational periods was as follows: Subject B, 3%; Subject A, 16%; Subject C, 20%; Subject E, 25%; and Subject D, 36%.

Sociogram. The five subjects indicated their first through fourth choice of partners for ten social activities on the sociogram. The highest number of points a subject could receive was 40 (4 other choices of partners x 10 activities). Subject A received the highest number of first choice selections, twenty (50.0%), as the person most preferred to have as a partner in the ten activities, while receiving the third lowest number of last choice selections, two (5.0%). Subject B received the lowest number of first

choice selections, three (7.5%), while receiving the highest number of last choice selections, twenty-six (65.0%). Subject C ranked second as a first choice selection, with fifteen (37.5%), and last as a fourth choice, with one (2.50%). Subject E had seven (17.5%) first choice selections and three (7.5%) last choice; Subject D had five (12.5%) first choice and twenty (50.0%) last choice selections. Table 3 indicates the number of times each subject was selected as a first, second, third, and fourth choice partner for the ten social activities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This section discusses the results of the study, draws some conclusions from the findings, cites the relationships between this study and Study I, and recognizes possible limitations of the study.

The subjects appeared to be enthusiastic and interested in the two topics used for the conversations even though they were not of the subjects' choosing. There were no noticeable silent periods when subjects were at a loss for something to say. On the contrary, they were animated, with the conversations flowing evenly throughout. The subjects were extremely polite to each other, consistently giving way to one another rather than interrupting.

Two subjects were at extremes in terms of how much they talked. Subject B talked for a total of 34 seconds (3

times) during both of the conversational periods, while Subject D talked for 7 minutes, 3 seconds (15 times). Both of these subjects were the least preferred partners for the ten social activities. Wardhaugh (1985) states that cutting talk short may be a clear indication of failure or disagreement (p.49), while monopolizing a conversation is demonstrating a lack of cooperative, sharing behavior; the conversant must offer others the opportunity to speak even though they may decline to do so (p.50). The Social Activities Director indicated that Subject B, the youngest in the group at age 65 years, typically demonstrates conversational failure because she appears to have an extremely low self-esteem. According to Wardhaugh (1985), talk is usually a social activity and therefore a public activity, perhaps lending credence to presumed reasons for Subject B's conversational brevity. As previously stated, she was the least preferred, or fourth choice partner, receiving 26 selections (65.0%).

Subject D (age 78), on the other hand, has consistently monopolized most conversations, according to the Social Activities Director. Referring again to Wardhaugh (1985), he states that comments made during conversation must be relevant to the topic under discussion and appear to be adequate to the occasion: obscurities and ambiguities should be avoided and what you say should be brief and orderly (p.53). Since no attempt was made to evaluate the quality of

the talk, only the quantity, the researchers cannot interpret the impression Subject D made on her listeners. She talked 36% of the recorded conversational time and was selected as first choice five times (12.5%) while being last choice twenty times (50.0%).

Four of the five subjects, B, C, D, and E, all talked more during the first conversation than the second, while Subject A talked twice as much the second time as the first (65 and 130 seconds). During the first conversational period, Subject A talked only 44 more seconds than the least preferred Subject B, but was first in being the most preferred person and second in being the second most preferred. She was selected as the least preferred partner twice.

Subject B was the only subject who received all four choices on an activity. She was selected as last choice by the four other subjects in Talking seriously and Playing bingo. She was also given three selections as last choice in two other activities, Shopping and Sharing a room. Only one other subject received more than two selections for a social activity. Subject A was a first selection four times for Taking walks, Shopping, Sharing a room, and Taking a trip. All other selections totalled zero, one, or two.

In examining the conversational sessions, the approximate length of the first was 11 minutes, 3 seconds, with 24 exchanges taking place between the five conversants.

Subject D had only three responses during the session, but they consumed more than twice the amount of total recorded speaking time (291 seconds out of 663 seconds total recorded speaking time). Subjects A, C, and E were fairly equal in terms of the number of times they spoke - 6, 7, and 7 times, respectively. Subject B spoke only once. The mean length of response time was 27.6 seconds.

During the second session, the recorded speaking time was 8 minutes, 45 seconds, with 57 exchanges, more than twice as many as the first session. With the exception of Subject B, the amount of spoken turns was fairly evenly distributed. Subjects C and A spoke 17 and 16 times, respectively; Subjects D and E spoke 12 and 9 times, respectively, while Subject B spoke twice. The mean length of response time was obviously considerably shorter, 9.21 seconds.

According to a study by Baker (1988), total participation in small group discussions is affected by age, first-minute participation, sex, and size. Subject D, the most conversant in this conversational group, was not only the largest of the five women, but also the only one who used a tripod cane to assist in walking, thus presenting higher visibility. Baker states that the visability factor was a predictive influence in determining who spoke first. However, in this group, Subject B who talked least, was also a large woman, about the same size as Subject D, and neither

subjects talked during the first minute. Subjects A, C, and E were all smaller and similar in weight and height in comparison to Subjects B and D, and did most of the initial talking.

This study and the one preceding it looked at communication patterns of the elderly. The first study, "The relationship between communication competence and peer selection in an elderly black population," (Jackson and Williamson-Ige, 1988), attempted to determine whether the basis for selecting certain individuals within a small social network is related to the importance those individuals ascribed to specific functional communication skills. The Functional Communication Skills Questionnaire (FCSQ), (Payne-Johnson, 1986), was used to determine the subjects' perceptions of the importance they attached to certain communication skills. The subjects were then asked to respond to a sociogram and select, in descending order, their first through fifth choices of partners for ten social activities. Statistically, the FCSQ was not a reliable predictor of how choices were made on the sociogram. The second study used the same sociogram for the dependent variable, but used two conversational periods instead of the FCSQ. The first study involved nine subjects, while the second involved five of the nine who participated in Study I. The results of Study I showed that two subjects, A and C, scored themselves perfectly on all 26 items of the

FCSQ, meaning that they perceived all of the activities on that questionnaire, both receptive and expressive, to be equally very important to them. The receptive skills included items relating to reading, understanding, and writing; expressive items related to telling, asking, talking, and naming. These two subjects, A and C, were the first and second choices, respectively, on the sociogram in Study II, being the most preferred partners for the ten social activities. Subject A was the first choice on the sociogram and Subject C was the fifth choice selection out of nine subjects in Study I. Subject B, least preferred on the sociogram in Study II ranked in the bottom third in Study I. Subjects E and D ranked third and sixth (of nine), respectively, in Study I and third and fourth (of five), respectively, in the present study.

The subjects had consistent behaviors within the two studies. Subjects A and C were preferred selections on the sociograms in both studies, as well as rating themselves perfectly on the FCSQ. They were also fairly equal in terms of the amount and number of times they talked during the conversational periods. Subject B was consistently rated as the least likely person to be chosen for the social activities, while Subject D was chosen 6th (of nine) in the first study and 4th (of five) in the second. Subject E ranked third in first choice selections in both studies.

The fact that the conversational sessions were "staged" rather than spontaneous may be a limitation of the study. The researchers, with suggestions from the Director of Social Activities, chose topics that appeared to have the interest of the participants; nevertheless, interaction may have flowed differently had the subjects been "caught" conversing. A type-token ratio, representing the number of different words in relation to the total number of words per utterance, would have added an additional quantitative as well as qualitative dimension to the study.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to question whether the quantity and frequency of conversational talk affected how favorably one was preferred as a partner for activities within a small social network of elderly black persons. Both studies showed a tendency toward consistency in the subjects' social behavior.

The results of Study I showed that those subjects who indicated functional communication skills as being very important to them may have exuded more positive self-esteem, thus enhancing the possibility of being a preferred partner for social activities. The results of Study II showed that the subjects who placed medially in terms of quantity and frequency of conversational talk were the subjects most often selected as partners for the social activities in both

studies. The subject who showed the most consistent behavior was one of the least preferred socially in both studies. She scored herself low on the FCSQ, was reported to have low self-esteem, and contributed the least conversationally during discussions. The subject reported to be the most loquacious speaker was the other subject least preferred as a social partner in Study II; however, she ranked third in Study I as a preferred partner.

Critchley (1984) has pointed out that the elderly have been accused of being both parsimonious and loquacious in their conversational habits. Clearly, from this small sample, the subjects exhibiting these patterns were the subjects least often chosen as partners for activities involving conversational interaction.

Table 1

SOCIOGRAM

INSTRUCTIONS

First read the list of given names, then read the list of activities. After reading both of these, read the list of activities again and then for each activity, indicate the choice of persons (according to the letter beside their names), in order of preference, with whom you would like to do each of the activities.

SUBJECTS

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

Activities	(1st)	(2nd)	(3rd)	(4th)
1. Eating meals				
2. Taking walks				
3 Watching T.V.				
4. Playing cards				
5. Talking seriously				
6. Playing bingo				
7. Talking casually				
8. Shopping				
9. Sharing a room				
10. Taking a trip				

Table 2

Length and Number of Talking Times for Subjects during Conversational Periods

	Length of Speaking Time in Seconds		Number of Speaking Times	
	Conversation		Conversation	
Subjects	One	Two	One	Two
A	65	130	6	17
B	21	13	1	2
C	134	100	7	17
D	291	132	3	12
E	152	150	7	9
Totals	663	525	24	57

Table 3

Subject Rankings and Number of Choices

Rank	Subjects and Number of Choices for Each Subject				
1st Choice Number	A 20	C 15	E 7	D 5	B 3
2nd Choice Number	C 20	A 15	E 9	D 4	B 2
3rd Choice Number	E 23	D 11	B 9	C 4	A 3
4th Choice Number	B 26	D 20	A 2	E 1	C 1

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