TO BE SMART OR TO BE SOCIAL?
THE CONTEXT-DEPENDENT
EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION
STYLES ON STATUS CONFERRAL
IN TASK GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

The verbal and nonverbal behaviors that individuals display (i.e., their communication styles) influence the status positions they attain in their task groups. Prior research has generally concluded that communication behaviors that convey agency (i.e., characteristics denoting intelligence, ambition, and dominance) are more effective for obtaining a high-status position in a task group than communication behaviors that convey communality (i.e., characteristics denoting warmth, sincerity, and agreeableness). The message from these prior studies is that it is more status enhancing to be smart than to be social. The objective of this chapter is to challenge this assertion and argue that in some task groups it may be more status enhancing to be social rather than to be smart. I suggest that the status benefits of particular communication styles depend on the characteristics of the group to which an individual belongs to. Thus, in contrast to prior research in this area, I argue for a more contextual

Status and Groups
Research on Managing Groups and Teams, Volume 7, 93–119
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ISSN: 1534-0856 doi:10.1016/S1534-0856(05)07005-2

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approach to the study of communication styles and status conferral, focusing on how structural and process differences between groups influence how the group members’ words and actions are evaluated.

For most individuals, participation in task groups is a frequent and familiar aspect of both work and non-work life. For example, in the course of a single day, an individual may meet with coworkers to discuss their responsibilities for a new marketing project, work with fellow parents to organize a school bake sale, and talk with neighbors about establishing a neighborhood watch group. In such task groups, status (i.e., the value and social worth that others ascribe to an individual; Ridgeway, 2001) is often distributed unequally among group members (Bales, 1999). Some group members may be viewed as high status: They have prestige and the respect of fellow group members, influence group decisions, and may hold formal positions. Other individuals may be seen as low status in the group: They may take direction from high-status members and exert little influence over others. This unequal distribution of status in many task groups raises an interesting question: How do groups decide which individuals should be leaders and which should be followers? In other words, how is status conferred to various members of a group?

In this chapter, I focus on one important factor that has been shown to influence the status that individuals attain in their task groups, i.e., communication style. Communication style is a term used to encompass a wide array of both vocal and verbal attributes (such as pitch, volume, and word choice), and nonverbal attributes (such as gestures and facial expressions). Communication behaviors provide an interesting domain to study status conferral because these behaviors are often quite subtle, yet they frequently exert substantial influences on individuals’ status positions. For example, an individual’s speech style (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O’Barr, 1978), emotional expressions (Tiedens, 2001), and even subtle patterns of eye contact (Rosa & Mazur, 1979), to name a few, can affect how the individual is perceived by fellow group members, and hence the individual’s status position within the group. Thus, to develop a complete understanding of how status is conferred in task groups, it is necessary to investigate how specific communication behaviors influence individuals’ status positions. For example, what are the status consequences of speaking loudly? Putting one’s feet on the desk? If one hopes to gain status in a group, should one interrupt others, or wait quietly for a turn to speak?
Providing answers to these questions is complicated, however, by the fact that task groups vary enormously along many dimensions, including their structures, the tasks they undertake, and the composition of their memberships. These group differences are likely to have implications for the types of communication behaviors that influence status conferral in different groups. However, despite this variability across different task groups, there has been, to date, little systematic study of how these contextual factors may influence the relationship between an actor’s communication style and the actor’s awarded status position in a group. Rather, prior research has often focused on categorizing communication behaviors into one of two broad classes, namely high-status behaviors (which are associated with high-status individuals and are effective for increasing an individual’s status) and low-status behaviors (which are associated with low-status individuals and are ineffective for enhancing an individual’s status position). A multitude of studies have demonstrated that individuals gain more status in task groups by displaying high-status communication behaviors, such as assertive speech or expansive body postures, than low-status communication behaviors, such as unassertive speech or constricted body postures (e.g., Erickson et al., 1978; Ridgeway, 1987). In contrast to these prior approaches, I argue for a more contextualized approach to the study of status conferral in task groups that accounts for differences in group goals, processes, and structure. I suggest that the status benefits of a high-status communication style, relative to a low-status style, may not be absolute and that, in many cases, individuals may gain more status from displaying low-status behaviors that have generally been deemed “ineffective” for enhancing one’s status position than by displaying the high-status behaviors that have traditionally been linked to status attainment. In this sense, what constitutes a high-status or low-status communication style is not static, but context dependent.

I suggest that these contextual differences in status conferral emerge because both types of communication styles can convey positive, socially desirable qualities about the individual displaying them. Behaviors characterized as high status in prior research generally convey that the actor displaying the behaviors is highly agentic (i.e., intelligent, ambitious, and dominant), whereas behaviors characterized as low status convey that the actor is very communal (i.e., affiliative, selfless, and warm; Bakan, 1966). As a result, the status enhancing benefits of these communication behaviors may depend on the extent to which the qualities of agency and communality are seen as valuable and worthy qualities in particular groups. In groups that place a high value on agency, group members are likely to award more status to those individuals who display traditional high-status behaviors (which convey high agency)
than to those who display low-status behaviors (which convey high commu-
nality). However, in groups that place a greater value on communality, the
reverse may be true and individuals may award more status to those indi-
viduals who display the behaviors that have been, to date, classified as low
status.

The objective of this chapter is to explore why group differences may
affect the characteristics, i.e., agency and communality, and hence the com-
mination styles, that are most status enhancing in different groups, and to
identify the particular group characteristics that affect this relationship.
I begin by reviewing prior research on communication styles and status
attainment, and discussing the relationship between communication styles,
and perceptions of agency and communality. I then discuss different the-
oretical frameworks that make predictions about the status enhancing ben-
efits of agency relative to communality. Finally, I explore two group
characteristics, the level of interdependence in the task group and difficulty
of detecting social loafing (i.e., free-riding on the efforts of others; e.g.,
Jackson & Williams, 1985; Karau & Williams, 1993; Latane, Williams, &
Harkins, 1979), which may affect the characteristics, and thus the commu-
nication styles, that are most effective for attaining status in a task group.

COMMUNICATION STYLES

The Components of Communication Styles

An actor's communication style refers to all aspects of an actor's behavior
that he or she displays while communicating or interacting with others. An
actor's communication style includes both the messages and signals that are
deliberately conveyed by the actor (e.g., conveying to others that one is
persuasive by choosing specific language to craft a convincing argument),
and also those behaviors that the actor may display unintentionally (e.g.,
conveying to others that one is nervous by biting one's nails). Furthermore,
communication styles include both the content of an actor's message (e.g.,
nodding one's head in agreement conveys a different message than shaking
one's head in disagreement), as well as the manner in which this content is
delivered (e.g., shaking one's head slowly versus rapidly).

For the most part, prior research on communication styles and status
conferral has generally focused on the manner of message delivery, rather
than the content (for an exception see Tiedens, 2001, which investigates the
status consequences resulting from the content of emotional expressions).
Many of these studies have focused on nonverbal communication behaviors. For example, some studies have examined displays of eye contact, including both the duration of eye contact with others (Rosa & Mazur, 1979), as well as specific patterns of eye contact, such as individuals’ visual dominance ratios (defined as the ratio of making eye contact while speaking, to making eye contact while listening; Exline, Ellyson, & Long, 1975). Other research on nonverbal behavior has focused on individuals’ postures and gestures. In particular, research has demonstrated that individuals often change their level of postural expansion (i.e., the amount of physical space they consume) during their interactions with others (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). Additionally, individuals often communicate, usually unintentionally, through gestures. For example, gestures such as hand-wringing or grooming behavior (e.g., touching one’s hair or face) often convey nervousness on the part of the actor (Mazur, 1985), whereas intrusive gestures, such as pointing, convey dominance (Ridgeway, 1987). Finally, nonverbal behaviors also include vocal attributes, or voice characteristics, such as one’s speaking volume, tone of voice (e.g., a confident voice tone or an uncertain voice tone), and rate of speech (i.e., speaking fast or slow; Ridgeway, 1987).

Although they have not been as frequently studied, studies of status conferment have also examined verbal communication behaviors. In particular, these studies have generally investigated verbal markers of speech assertiveness, or the confidence and assuredness of one’s speech (e.g., Erickson et al., 1978; Carli, 1990). Unassertive speech is defined as a tentative, or uncertain, manner of speaking often characterized by the use of hesitations (e.g., “Well ...,” “Um ...”), tag questions (e.g., “Don’t you think?”), hedges (e.g., “Kinda ...,” “Sort of ...”), disclaimers (e.g., “This may be a bad idea, but ...”), and formal addresses (e.g., “Yes, Sir”), whereas assertive speech is an assured, confident manner of speaking usually marked by the absence of these characteristics (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Lakoff, 1975; Erickson et al., 1978).

The Effects of Communication Styles on Status Positions

Communication behaviors may come to influence status positions because individuals often adjust their communication styles based on the status positions they currently occupy (see Berger, Webster, Ridgeway, & Rosenholtz, 1986, for a review). For example, status positions affect patterns of eye contact such that low-status individuals have a lower visual dominance ratio (i.e., they make more frequent eye contact when listening to others.
than when speaking to others) than high-status individuals (who make more frequent eye contact while speaking than while listening; Exline et al., 1975; Ellyson, Dovidio, Corson, & Vinicur, 1980; Ridgeway, Berger, & Smith, 1985). Similarly, status positions affect vocal and verbal behaviors, with high-status individuals speaking more quickly (Ridgeway et al., 1985) and assertively (Carli, 1990) than low-status individuals. As a result of these frequently observed differences, observers may learn to associate particular communication behaviors with high-status and low-status individuals, so that, over time, these communication behaviors may become indicators of status in their own right. Individuals often make inferences about actors' likely and deserved status positions based solely on the communication behaviors that these individuals display. For example, prior research has demonstrated that actors gain more status when they speak quickly rather than slowly (Brown, Strong, & Rencher, 1973; Smith, Brown, Strong, & Rencher, 1975), use a confident voice tone as opposed to a hesitant voice tone (Ridgeway, 1987), sustain eye contact rather than break it (Washburn & Hakel, 1973; Wexley, Fugita, & Malone, 1975; Hamada & Hakel, 1977), and express anger rather than sadness (Tiedens, 2001), which are all behaviors that are displayed more frequently by high-status than low-status individuals. (see Ridgeway, 1987 for a discussion.) Thus, prior research on communication styles and status conferral has generally distinguished between a high-status communication style, which is associated with high-status individuals and results in a high level of status for an actor, and a low-status style, which is associated with low-status individuals and results in lower status for an actor.\(^1\)

**Communication Styles as Signals of Agency and Communality**

In addition to serving as signals for an actor's likely or deserved status position, communication behaviors also serve as signals for an actor's underlying abilities and traits. In particular, communication behaviors generally convey information about two types of traits, *agency* (i.e., how intelligent, ambitious, and dominant an actor is) and *communality* (i.e., how affiliative, selfless, and concerned with others an individual is; Bakan, 1966), which are considered to be the two fundamental dimensions of person perception (e.g., Asch, 1946; Bakan, 1966; Wiggins, 1979; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).\(^2\) These trait inferences develop because individuals associate different traits with different status positions. Individuals in high-status positions are assumed to be highly agentic, but not particularly communal,
whereas individuals in low-status positions are perceived to be highly communal, but not particularly agentic (Conway, Pizzamiglio, & Mount, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Fiske et al., 2002). As a result, individuals learn to associate the traits of high-status and low-status individuals with the behaviors they display. Over time, communication behaviors become signals of agency and communality in their own right, with high-status communication behaviors signaling a high degree of agency, but a lesser amount of communality, and low-status communication behaviors signaling high communality, but relatively low agency. For example, emotions associated with high-status positions, such as anger and pride (Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000; Tiedens, 2001), and high-status speech styles, such as a direct and assertive style (Erickson et al., 1978), convey the impression that an individual is highly agentic, but not particularly communal. In contrast, low-status emotions such as sadness and appreciation (Tiedens et al., 2000; Tiedens, 2001), or an unassertive speech style (Erickson et al., 1978), convey a lower level of agency, but a higher level of communality.

Thus, both high-status and low-status communication styles are each associated with one socially desirable trait (agency and communality, respectively; Glick & Fiske, 2001). The objective of this chapter is to explore the circumstances under which one of these traits, and hence communication styles, may be more status enhancing than the other. As a result, I focus on situations in which an individual is perceived, as a function of his or her communication style, to be either highly agentic or highly communal, but not both, and explore the consequences of these trait attributions for status conferral. Of course, both empirical evidence and our own everyday experiences suggest that individuals can be perceived as both agentic and communal, or neither agentic nor communal. Although this is undoubtedly true, in this chapter I focus on the relative, rather than independent, effects of these two traits. I do this for two reasons. First, the goal of this chapter is to compare two communication styles, the high-status style and the low-status style, that have been widely discussed in the status conferral literature. As discussed above, these two styles are each associated with a high rating on one of the two trait dimensions, and a lower rating on the other trait dimension. Thus, to compare the relative effectiveness of these two styles requires that one compare a situation in which an individual is perceived to have high agency (i.e., a high-status communication style) to a situation in which an individual is perceived to have high communality (i.e., a low-status communication style). Second, although there is a general consensus in the literature that agency and communality are separate dimensions of person perception, in the sense that it is possible for an individual to be rated as
either high or low on both dimensions, evidence from several perspectives suggests that it is most common for individuals to be classified as higher on one dimension than the other (e.g., Bales, 1958; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick 1999; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Fiske et al., 2002). Although this evidence is not incompatible with the notion that agency and communality are separate dimensions, it suggests that the most frequently observed person categorizations are those in which there is a negative relationship between perceived agency and communality. Thus, by focusing on situations in which one is perceived as either highly agentic or highly communal, but not both, I am examining the two person categorizations that are likely to be most frequently occurring in everyday life.

Given that both agency and communality are viewed as positive attributes, it seems likely that both agency and communality should be socially valued (i.e., high-status) qualities and that, in some cases, displays of communality may be viewed as even higher status than displays of agency. However, little is known about the circumstances, if any, in which this might be the case. Although communality has been shown to be an important predictor of status positions in social groups (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001), there has been little systematic study of if, or when, communality may positively influence individuals' status positions in task groups. In fact, to date, the benefits of displaying communality through low-status communication behaviors have been discussed only in the context of low-status group members. Research investigating the effects of the communication behaviors of both women (Kleinke & Kahn, 1980; Carli, 1990; Eagly, Makijani, & Klonsky, 1992; Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995; Rudman, 1998) and racial minorities (Katz & Cohen, 1962) has demonstrated that individuals in these demographic categories are sometimes evaluated negatively when they use a high-status communication style, since these behaviors are considered counter-stereotypical for these social groups, and therefore may be granted higher status when they display the lower-status behaviors that are considered normative for their roles. Thus, this research suggests that individuals in low-status positions may gain more status from displaying low-status, rather than high-status, communication behaviors. However, given that these studies have focused only on members of low-status demographic groups, it is not yet clear if these effects generalize to a larger population, and if they do, what structural or situational factors are necessary to produce these results.

Although there have been few empirical investigations of the status enhancing benefits of communality, several theoretical perspectives have touched upon this issue. These perspectives differ in their views about the
potential for communality to be a status enhancing trait, and the circumstances, if any, in which communality may actually be more beneficial for an individual’s status position than agency. Three theoretical frameworks, theories of group stereotyping (Fiske et al., 1999, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001), theories of emergent leadership in groups (Bales, 1950, 1970), and theories of status generalization (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Berger, Conner, & Fisek, 1974), all make somewhat different predictions about whether and when displays of communality may be beneficial for enhancing individual status in task groups. Each of these perspectives is discussed below.

AGENCY AND COMMUNALITY AS BASES OF SOCIAL STATUS

Group Stereotypes

Research on stereotype content has generally focused on the status positions of groups within society (Fiske et al., 1999, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001). However, this perspective is useful for thinking about status attainment at the individual level, since group membership (e.g., one’s gender or racial group) is often an important determinant of an individual’s status position (Webster & Driskell, 1978). This research has demonstrated that a social group’s status in society is commensurate with their perceived level of agency: High-status groups (e.g., business professionals, wealthy people) are perceived as highly agentic (e.g., intelligent, ambitious, dominant, confident), whereas low-status groups (e.g., housewives, elderly people) are perceived as less agentic. Furthermore, low-status groups are generally viewed as more communal (i.e., likeable, agreeable, sincere, tolerant) than high-status groups, but these researchers argue that these attributions of communality are essentially a consolation prize for those individuals deemed unworthy of high status. Attributing characteristics of communality to individuals or groups is characterized as “throwing the bone ... to subordinates” (Glick & Fiske, 2001, p. 287), aimed at both “stifling resentment” among low-status group members (because they can feel good about the positive traits attributed to them) and “promoting deference” to the high-status group members (because the stereotype provides a prescription that low-status individuals ought to behave in a communal and friendly way). Thus, research on stereotype content conceptualizes communality as a “socially desirable, though, subordinating” trait (Fiske et al., 2002) that serves
only to pacify low-status individuals. This suggests, consistent with the research on minority groups and communication styles (Katz & Cohen, 1962; Kleinke & Kahn, 1980; Carli, 1990; Carli et al., 1995), that communality only has the potential to be status enhancing in groups that are viewed as low status in society. Since displays of communality are normative for these groups (i.e., part of the group stereotype), individuals who conform to behavioral expectations may be valued more (i.e., seen as higher status) than those who violate such norms by displaying counter-stereotypical high agency behaviors.

**Emergent Leadership**

Research on small group interaction and emergent leadership provides a somewhat more optimistic view about the status enhancing benefits of communality, arguing that perceptions of communality are associated with certain types of leadership (i.e., high-status roles), but that communality is still viewed as a lower-status trait than agency. Much of the research in this area stems from Bales's (1950) distinction between task and social leaders in groups. According to this perspective, group members that are perceived as communal are more likely to be viewed as social leaders (i.e., those who manage the socio-emotional problems arising between group members) by the group, whereas those members perceived as agentic are more likely to emerge as task leaders (i.e., those who help the group complete the task at hand; Bales & Slater, 1955; Slater, 1955; Bales, 1958; Eagly & Karau, 1991). Although both types of leaders are seen as necessary for group functioning, and both are generally considered to be high-status group members, task leaders (who display agency) are ultimately rated as higher status than social leaders (who display communality; Bales & Slater, 1955; Slater, 1955; Bales, 1958). In further support of this assertion, related research has demonstrated that, when choosing only one overall leader, group members are more likely to nominate a leader that displays characteristics of agency than a leader that displays characteristics of communality (Moss & Kent, 1996). These researchers argue that this occurs because one's status position is a function of one's task contribution, and thus task leaders, who directly enhance the group's performance, contribute more to the task than social leaders, who enhance task performance only indirectly, by fostering harmonious interpersonal relations (Bales, 1950, 1999). As a result, although little explicit discussion is devoted to this topic in the theory, these researchers suggest that communality should be valued more than agency only
in situations where the socio-emotional problems of the groups are more urgent and important than the task problems (i.e., in "dysfunctional" groups; Bales, 1950; Slater, 1955).

**Status Generalization**

The effects of agency and communality on status conferral are also discussed by expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1972, 1974), a prominent sociological theory developed to explain the creation and maintenance of status differences in task groups. This theory suggests that status is conferred to an actor based on others' assessments of the actor's expected performance in the group. Thus, similar to Bales's research on group interaction (1950, 1970), this perspective asserts that the traits and behaviors that result in the highest status for an individual within a group will be those that are perceived to be the most valuable for helping the group complete the task at hand (Berger et al., 1972; Webster & Driskell, 1978). However, unlike the group interaction perspective, expectation states theory does not make an explicit distinction between task and social behaviors, or limit the role of communality to facilitating harmonious interpersonal relations. According to this theory, *any* characteristic that is associated with a high level of expected performance in a group should result in increased status for those individuals possessing that characteristic. In both discussions of the theory (e.g., Ridgeway et al., 1985) and in empirical tests of the theory (e.g., Ridgeway, 1987), these researchers often claim that agency should be the biggest predictor of an individual's performance, and hence status, in a task group. Those individuals who are intelligent and ambitious should be able to perform better on most tasks than those that are not. Thus, similar to both research on group stereotyping and research on emergent leadership, expectation states theory has generally been used, to date, to argue that agency should be, and is, a bigger predictor of one's status position than any other quality (including communality). However, by defining status in terms of expected performance, the theoretical framework is broader than the way it is often discussed, and does allow for the possibility that traits other than agency (i.e., communality) may be status enhancing in circumstances where these characteristics are seen as important for facilitating task performance. Thus, according to this perspective, displays of communality should be more status enhancing for an individual than displays of agency in any situation where group members perceive communality to be more relevant for high task performance than agency.
In sum, these three theoretical frameworks make different predictions about if, or when, communality may be an important predictor of one’s status position, and whether communality may ever be a more status enhancing trait than agency. Both research on stereotype content and research on emergent leadership contend that although displays of communality are functional for the group, they are not necessarily functional for the individual. Although these two literatures focus on different sources of individuals’ status positions—status arising from one’s group membership versus status arising from one’s task roles—they both share the notion that communality is generally viewed as a lower-status trait than agency. The group stereotype perspective suggests that communality should never be a status enhancing trait, except, perhaps, in groups that are generally devalued in society (i.e., low-status groups), since displays of communality are stereotypical and normative in such groups (Fiske et al., 2002). Taking a slightly different approach, the emergent leadership perspective maintains that communality is an important characteristic for social leaders, who are generally seen as high-status group members, but not quite so high status as the high agency task leaders, except in situations where the group’s interpersonal relations are so dysfunctional as to impede effective task performance (Bales, 1950; Slater, 1955). However, expectation states theory stands somewhat in contrast to these two perspectives, allowing for the possibility that communality may be status enhancing, and even more status enhancing than agency, in situations where communality is important for facilitating task performance. Thus, of all the perspectives, expectation states theory is the most open to the possibility that attributions of communality may improve an individual’s status position, and is also the most specific about the circumstances under which this might be the case.

Consistent with expectation states theory, I argue that the relative importance of agency versus communality depends on the perceived importance of these two characteristics for facilitating task performance. Furthermore, I suggest that certain group features alter the extent to which one of these characteristics is perceived to be more important for task performance than the other. In particular, I focus on two group characteristics, the level of interdependence in the task group and the difficulty of detecting social loafing (i.e., shirking one’s share of the workload), that may influence the extent to which group members perceive agency and communality as important for task performance, and hence affect the communication styles that are most effective for status conferral.

It is important to note that in addition to elucidating the criteria for status conferral in different situations, identifying the factors that moderate the
relationship between communication styles and status conferral should also help to determine which of the three theoretical frameworks discussed above most adequately captures what the status is and why it is awarded to others. All three frameworks make similar predictions about the role of agency in the status conferral process, but make different predictions about the role of communality. Thus, exploring situations in which communality may be important for status advancement should help to differentiate these perspectives and provide a more thorough understanding of the process of status conferral in task groups.

**TASK INTERDEPENDENCE**

The level of *task interdependence* in a group is the extent to which group members collaborate, coordinate, or simply interact with others to complete their work (Thompson, 1967; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Wageman, 1995). Although all task groups, by definition, necessitate some degree of interdependence among members (Bales, 1950), there is substantial variation among groups in level of interdependence required for task completion; in some groups, group members work relatively independently and rarely interact with others, whereas in other groups, group members interact and work with others on a constant basis (Wageman, 1995). The level of task interdependence influences the amount of interaction, collaboration, and cooperation that occurs within a group (Thomas, 1957; Thompson, 1967; Spilerman, 1971; Crawford & Haaland, 1972; Johnson, 1973; Susman, 1976; Galbraith, 1977; Slocum & Sims, 1980). In general, the higher the level of interdependence in a group, the greater the need for, and expectation of, collective effort and coordination among group members (March & Simon, 1958; Thompson, 1967; Perrow, 1970; Galbraith, 1977).

I argue that the level of task interdependence in a group affects the importance of agency and communality for facilitating group performance, and hence the weights that groups place on these two characteristics when making status conferral decisions. Collaboration and interaction among group members should be more efficient and productive when the group members working together are friendly, nurturing, and concerned with others (i.e., when they have high communality) than when they are not. Thus, in highly interdependent groups, where collaboration and collective effort is necessary for task completion, displays of communality should be more important for task performance than in less interdependent groups, which do not require as much interpersonal interaction. At the same time, the
agency of individual group members may be relatively less important in highly interdependent groups because the collaborative nature of these groups implies that members can pool their collective talents and rely more on the abilities of the group as a whole rather than on the efforts of any one member. However, an individual’s agency may be more critical for performance in groups with a low level of task interdependence, where individuals will need to rely primarily on their own capabilities to complete tasks. Individuals that are highly agentic are, by definition, very ambitious, confident, and independent, which are all qualities that should facilitate successful performance when one is working alone. Thus, the relative importance of agency versus communality for task performance in a given group is likely to depend on the amount of interdependence in the group. In highly interdependent groups, task performance may be based more on communality, which facilitates collaboration and interaction, than on agency, which fosters independent work. However, in groups with low interdependence, we should see the pattern that has been demonstrated in prior research: Performance assessments may be based more on agency than on communality. This suggests the following hypotheses:

**Proposition 1A.** In groups with a low level of interdependence, individuals will view agency as more important for task performance than communality.

**Proposition 1B.** In groups with a high level of interdependence, individuals will view communality as more important for task performance than agency.

**Proposition 2A.** In groups with a low level of interdependence, an individual’s status position should be based primarily on assessments of the individual’s agency.

**Proposition 2B.** In groups with a high level of interdependence, an individual’s status position should be based primarily on assessments of the individual’s communality.

If the relative importance of agency and communality for task performance is affected by the level of interdependence in a group, this implies that the communication behaviors that are most effective for status conferral should also depend on the level of interdependence in the group in question. In groups with a low level of interdependence, we should see the familiar pattern that has been demonstrated in prior research: Individuals should gain more status when displaying traditional high-status communication
behaviors that convey high agency than when displaying the low-status communication behaviors that convey high communality. However, in highly interdependent groups, the opposite pattern may emerge and individuals may attain more status from displaying the communality-indicating behaviors that have previously been associated with low-status individuals.

**Proposition 3A.** In groups with a low level of interdependence, individuals should gain more status from displaying high-status communication behaviors (which convey agency) than from low-status communication behaviors (which convey communality).

**Proposition 3B.** In groups with a high level of interdependence, individuals should gain more status from displaying low-status communication behaviors (which convey communality) than from high-status communication behaviors (which convey agency).

The level of task interdependence in a group can be affected by many factors, such as norms or rules about the process that group members should use to complete the task, the type of task in question, and the degree to which information and resources necessary to complete the task are distributed among group members (Wageman, 1995, 1999). Below I discuss and provide empirical examples of two sources of interdependence, group culture and task type, that affect the traits, and hence the communication styles, that are most effective for enhancing an individual's status position within a group.

*Interdependence Arising from Group Culture*

One reason that groups may vary in their level of interdependence is because they differ in the processes used to accomplish their tasks. These procedural differences can stem from the culture of an organization, which establishes norms about how work should be accomplished. One cultural distinction that was originally made at the national level, and then extended to the organizational level, is the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Earley, 1993; Chatman & Barsade, 1995; Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998). Individualistic cultures emphasize individual effort and achievement, whereas collectivistic cultures focus on collective goals and collaborative action (Chatman & Barsade, 1995). Evidence suggests that these cultural distinctions influence the level of interdependence in an organization, with members of collectivistic cultures interacting and
collaborating more frequently than members of individualistic cultures (Chatman et al., 1998). Based on the predictions above, this suggests that in collectivistic cultures individuals should perceive displays of communality as more important for task performance than displays of agency, and thus award more status to an individual who conveys communality through their communication behaviors than an individual who conveys agency through their behaviors. Conversely, in individualistic cultures, the reverse should be true: An individual should gain more status from displaying agency-indicating communication behaviors than communality-indicating communication behaviors.

Recently, I conducted a study that found support for these predictions (Fragale, 2003). In this study, participants read a description of an organization described as either collectivistic or individualistic (adapted from Chatman & Barsade, 1995). In the collectivistic condition, the organization (named Alliance Partners) was described as valuing cooperation and team effort, whereas the individualistic organization (named Solo Ventures) was described as valuing independent work and individual effort. After reading these descriptions, participants read a transcript of a phone conversation allegedly made by a male employee (Robert) of the organization. Participants read either an assertive (high-status) or unassertive (low-status) version of this transcript (adapted from Holtgraves, Srull, & Socal, 1989). Although, the content of Robert’s speech was identical in both the versions of the transcript, the versions differed in the style in which the content was delivered. In the unassertive version, Robert used hedges (e.g., “Kinda ...”, “Sort of ...”), hesitations (e.g., “Well ...”, “Um ...”), disclaimers (e.g., “This may be a bad idea, but ...”), formal addresses (e.g., “Yes, Sir ...”), and tag questions (e.g., “Don’t you think?”), whereas the assertive version of the interview did not contain these tentative speech patterns.

The main question of interest in this study was the amount of status that participants would award to Robert based on his speech style and the culture of the organization. After reading the transcript, participants completed a questionnaire in which they answered several questions. Participants were informed that Robert, who had just completed the training phase of his employment, was interested in a permanent position in the company, and their responsibility was to make decisions about his future status in the company. Participants rated how likely they would be to offer Robert a permanent position in the organization, how much social status he should have if he were to have a permanent position in the organization, and the extent to which they thought Robert would be a success in the organization. These questions were averaged to create a composite measure of status
conferral. Participants also indicated their impressions of Robert’s dispo-
sition, by rating him on several traits relating to the dimensions of agency
and communality. Finally, to rule out the possibility that any differences in
the patterns of status conferral across the two cultures were due to perceived
status differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, partic-
ipsants indicated the extent to which they thought the organization in ques-
tion was a high-status or low-status organization within its industry.

The results of this study supported my predictions: Robert was perceived
as more agentic when displaying a traditionally high-status behavior, as-
sertive speech, than when displaying a lower-status behavior, unassertive
speech. Conversely, Robert was perceived as more communal when using an
unassertive speech style than when using an assertive speech style. These
perceived trait differences affected the amount of status that was awarded to
Robert in the two organizational cultures. In the individualistic culture, the
traditional relationship between communication style and status conferral
emerged: Participants awarded more status to Robert when he displayed a
high-status communication behavior, assertive speech, than when he dis-
played a low-status behavior, unassertive speech. However, this pattern re-
versed in the collectivistic culture: Robert was awarded more status when
speaking in an unassertive manner, a style traditionally viewed as relatively
ineffective for enhancing an individual’s status position, than when speaking
in an assertive manner. Furthermore, mediation analyses revealed that these
results emerged because individuals valued agency and communality differ-
ently in the two cultures. In the individualistic culture, participants used
assessments of the actor’s agency, but not his communality, as the basis for
status conferral judgments. However, in the collectivistic culture, partici-
pants did the opposite: Only perceptions of the actor’s communality, and
not perceptions of his agency, affected the amount of status that was
awarded to the actor. Finally, this study revealed no status differences be-
tween the two cultures, ruling out the alternative that communality is only a
status enhancing characteristic in low-status groups where displays of com-
munality may be considered expected and normative (Fiske et al., 2002).

Interdependence Arising from Task Type

In addition to process differences, differences in the level of interdependence
among groups can also arise from the types of tasks that groups are trying
to accomplish (Thompson, 1967). As Wageman (1999) discusses, some
tasks, such as dancing the tango, require interdependence by definition
(since one cannot complete the dance without the cooperation of a partner), whereas other tasks, such as writing a computer program, limit interdependence (since only one person can work on a computer at a time). Various researchers have attempted to classify the myriad of tasks that groups undertake according to defining features (e.g., Hackman, 1968; Steiner, 1972; Laughlin, 1980; Shaw, 1981), and the level of interdependence necessitated by the task is often a feature that is discussed in these typologies. McGrath (1984) developed a task typology that synthesized the task distinctions proposed by these earlier researchers, and organized tasks according to two "fundamental" dimensions, a cognitive–behavioral dimension and a cooperative–conflictual dimension. This latter dimension has been discussed in terms of interdependence (e.g., Strauss, 1999), with the cooperative end of the dimension corresponding to relatively low interdependence tasks and the conflictual end of the dimension corresponding to relatively high interdependence tasks. At the low interdependence (i.e., cooperative) end of the spectrum are what McGrath (1984) refers to as "generate" tasks, or tasks, such as creativity and brainstorming tasks, that require idea generation. As each member can independently contribute ideas to the task, and as the group is not required to decide on a single best idea or decision in these tasks, generate tasks are considered to be low interdependence tasks; little coordination or consensus is required for generate tasks to be completed (Strauss, 1999). Compared to generate tasks, "choose" and "execute" tasks, which are located near the midpoint of McGrath's (1984) cooperative–conflictual dimension, require a higher level of coordination among group members. Choose tasks are intellective or judgment tasks that require group members to reach a decision or a consensus on a problem or issue. Execute tasks are those that require physical movement or coordination, such as athletic competitions. As group members are working toward a group decision or outcome, choose and execute tasks require more collaboration and interaction among members (i.e., higher interdependence) than generate tasks. Finally, at the conflictual end of the spectrum are "negotiate" tasks, which are tasks that require members to resolve conflicting viewpoints and arrive at a joint decision. Negotiate tasks, because they inherently involve conflicting interests, require a high level of coordination and interaction if a consensus or resolution is to be reached. Thus, of all the task types discussed in McGrath's (1984) task circumplex, negotiate tasks require the highest level of interdependence among group members.

If, as I have argued, the relative importance of agency and communality for task performance is affected by the level of interdependence in the group in question, this suggests that, in addition to differences in group culture,
differences in the type of tasks that groups are trying to accomplish should also affect the traits and communication styles that are most beneficial for status conferral. In groups with low interdependence tasks, such as “generate” tasks in McGrath’s (1984) circumplex, communication styles that convey agency should be more effective for enhancing an individual’s status than communication styles that convey communality. However, as the level of interdependence necessitated by the group task increases (e.g., to “choose” and “execute”, and then to “negotiate” tasks), the communication styles associated with status advancement may change, with communality-indicating communication behaviors resulting in more status than agency-indicating communication behaviors in highly interdependent tasks.

The effects of task type on group status conferral processes were examined in another study by Fragale (2003). In this study, participants evaluated an actor in terms of his deserved status in two organizational departments, finance and human resources, which differed in the level of interdependence necessitated by the departmental task. Tasks of a finance department are generally intellective or judgment tasks (tasks in the “choose” quadrant of McGrath’s (1984) circumflex), which require a lower level of interdependence than the tasks of a human resources department, which are often judgment or negotiation tasks (tasks in the “choose” or “negotiate” quadrants of the circumplex). A pretest revealed that participants did perceive the tasks of human resources departments to be inherently more interdependent than the tasks of finance departments. Thus, finance and human resources were chosen as two organizational departments that differed in their level of task interdependence.

As in the study described above, participants first read a transcript of a conversation between an actor and a target, two employees of a large international company, in which the actor used either an assertive or unassertive speech style. Subsequently, for each of the two departments, finance and human resources, participants rated how successful the actor would be in that department, and how much status he should have if he did work in that department (combined to create a composite measure of status conferral). The results indicated that the status consequences of the low-status unassertive speech style, relative to the high-status assertive style, depended on the organizational department in question. In the finance department, which was rated as having low interdependence, the actor was predicted to be more successful and deserving of more status when he used a high-status assertive speech style than when he used the low-status unassertive speech style. However, in the human resources department, which was rated as a high interdependence department, the actor was seen as more successful and
deserving of higher status when he used the low-status communication style than when he used the high-status communication style. Furthermore, mediation analyses revealed that participants used different criteria in the two organizational departments to make status conferral decisions. In the finance department, participants based their status conferral decisions primarily on their perceptions of the actor’s agency, whereas in the human resources department, participants based their status conferral decisions on their perceptions of the actor’s communality. Thus, this study demonstrated that the benefit of a high-status, relative to low-status, communication style was moderated by the group’s overall task.

THE DIFFICULTY OF DETECTING SOCIAL LOAFING

In addition to facilitating interdependent work, perceptions of an individual’s communality may also be important for determining the individual’s expected task contribution because communality may serve as a signal of the individual’s likely level of commitment to act in the best interests of the group. Recall that the expectation states model (Berger et al., 1972, 1974) predicts that the greatest status in a group will be awarded to those who are expected to contribute the most to the fulfillment of the group’s objectives. However, performance expectations are likely to be affected not only by how able one is to contribute, but also by how likely one is to use their abilities for the benefit of the group. Regardless of an individual’s level of ability, the individual will not contribute much to the group task unless he or she is willing to put forth the effort to apply those abilities to the task. As discussed above, communality is a construct capturing an individual’s affiliation with and concern for others. Prior research has demonstrated individuals who care about the other members of their group (i.e., have high communality) are more likely to act in the best interests of the group and often exert more effort on group tasks than those individuals that do not (Karau & Williams, 1993). Thus, individuals who display characteristics of communality may be perceived as more likely to contribute to the task at hand, since displays of communality signal that these individuals care about the other group members and will therefore work hard to contribute to the collective goal.

Relying on perceptions of a group member’s communality as a cue for the group member’s likelihood of performance should be highly probable in situations in which it is difficult to tell who is contributing to the task and who is not. One concern in task groups is that individuals will engage in social loafing, or the tendency to expend less effort when working as part of
a group than when working alone (e.g., Latane et al., 1979; Jackson & Williams, 1985; Karau & Williams, 1993). Social loafing is a particularly distressing problem for task groups because it reduces the group’s ability to complete the task at hand efficiently. If individual group members do not put forth their share of the effort, and instead rely on other group members to carry the load, the main advantage of the task group, the ability to pool individual resources, is greatly diminished (Latane et al., 1979). As a result, task groups have an incentive to know which individuals are shirking their share of the workload and which are pulling their weight. However, it is often difficult to determine which group members are engaging in social loafing and which are not, because the exact situations in which individuals are most prone to shirk their share of the work are exactly those situations in which it is difficult to detect (Karau & Williams, 1993). Thus, in situations in which social loafing is difficult to determine objectively, group members may need to look for other signals to determine which individuals are most likely to contribute to the group, and hence should be awarded high status. In such situations, group members may use perceptions of an individual’s communality as a cue that the individual will put forth a high level of task performance, even when it is possible to avoid doing so. Individuals who display a high level of communality should be perceived as having higher task performance (due to their lower tendency to engage in social loafing and hence their increased likelihood of contributing to the group), and therefore awarded higher status, than individuals who do not display such communality. Furthermore, in such groups, displays of agency may be relatively less important for assessing an individual’s expected performance. Even in situations where agency is a signal of an individual’s ability to perform well on the task (e.g., in low task interdependence groups), this ability will not translate into a high level of task performance if the individual does not use these abilities to contribute to the group (i.e., if he or she engages in social loafing). However, in groups where social loafing is easy to determine objectively (and therefore less likely to occur), group members will not need to look for other signals to make inferences about task performance, and therefore are unlikely to award more status to those individuals who display a high level of communality.

**Proposition 4.** The greater the difficulty of detecting social loafing in a task group, the more the groups will weigh perceptions of an individual’s communality (relative to perceptions of the individual’s agency) in determining the individual’s expected performance, and hence status, in a task group.
This suggests that low-status communication behaviors, which convey a higher level of communality than high-status communication behaviors, should be more status enhancing as the difficulty of detecting social loafing in a group increases.

**Proposition 5.** The greater the difficulty of detecting social loafing in a task group, the more the low-status communication behaviors will be effective for increasing an individual’s status position in a group.

There are many group characteristics that may affect the ease or difficulty of detecting social loafing in a task group. The amount of input redundancy in group members’ contributions may influence members’ abilities to disentangle individual contributions (Karau & Williams, 1993). For example, in a group brainstorming session, each group member may be responsible for generating ideas for a unique product (low redundancy), or all group members may collectively suggest ideas for all of the products (high redundancy). In general, the more redundancy between group members’ contributions, the more difficult it may be to disentangle individual inputs. Another reason that groups may not be able to assess individual contributions is because no contributions have yet been made. In a group that is newly formed, it may be beneficial to determine who is likely to contribute the most to the group before assigning particular group members to tasks. Communality may be an important signal of likely future contributions when no prior evidence of contributions is available. This suggests that the importance of communality for assessing expected performance may be sensitive to the group’s life cycle stage. Communality may be a bigger predictor of status conferral in more nascent groups, and less of a predictor in older, more established groups that can rely on past performance to assess an individual’s group commitment. One direction for future research is to examine how these and other factors that affect the ease of identifying social loafing influence the relative importance of communality versus agency in the status conferral process.

**CONCLUSION**

The objective of this chapter is to propose the idea that being perceived as agentic may not always be the most status enhancing perception in task groups. Prior research has often tried to classify particular communication styles as either effective or ineffective for gaining status in task groups: High-status communication behaviors that convey high agency increase one’s status, whereas low-status communication behaviors that convey high
communication do not. In contrast to this prior research, I have argued for a more contextual approach to understanding how communication styles influence status conferral in task groups. The results of the preliminary evidence presented in this chapter demonstrate that the effects of individuals' words and actions on their status positions are unlikely to be absolute, but rather dependent on the specific situation. Thus, both high-status and low-status communication behaviors have the potential to positively influence an individual’s status, depending on the particular characteristics of the group in question.

I have argued that two factors, the level of interdependence in a group and the difficulty of detecting social loafing in the group, may influence the relative effectiveness of particular communication behaviors for status conferral. Although preliminary evidence supports the notion that these group characteristics influence the traits, and hence the communication styles that are the most important for status conferral in different groups, a great deal of future research is necessary to determine the extent to which these results are robust and to identify other group characteristics, beyond the ones discussed in this chapter, that may affect the particular qualities that individuals value in high-status group members. Thus, rather than providing answers, this chapter aims to raise new questions about how individuals' words and actions influence their status positions, with the hopes of directing future research toward developing a more complex understanding of how individuals' behaviors influence their status attainment in task groups.

NOTES

1. High status and low status communication styles, are equivalent to the high task and low task communication styles, respectively, that have been discussed in status conferral literature (e.g., see Berger et al., 1986; Ridgeway, 1987). For the purposes of the current discussion, however, I use the labels of high status and low status to designate these two styles. I do so because I feel that the high task and low task labels for these dimensions are somewhat misleading in that they suggest that one set of behaviors is more beneficial for task performance than the other, which I later argue is not necessarily the case.

2. Although specific theories differ in the names for these dimensions and the exact traits that comprise each dimension, there is a general consensus across perspectives that traits can be organized into two dimensions: One that captures traits associated with ambition, materialism, and intelligence and the other that captures traits associated with one’s affiliation and concern for others. For example, Asch's (1946) early work on impression formation demonstrated that individuals evaluate an actor based on assessments of both the actor’s intelligence and the actor’s warmth.
Subsequently, interpersonal circumplex theories (Leary, 1957; Carson, 1969; Wiggins, 1979, 1982; Kiesler, 1983) have organized interpersonal traits along a control dimension (anchored by dominant/submissive) and an affiliation dimension (anchored by warm/cold). Similarly, a distinction has been made between agentic traits (those associated with self-assertion and mastery of one’s environment) and communal traits (those associated with selflessness and nurturance; Bakan, 1966). Most recently, research on group stereotyping has demonstrated that individuals evaluate out-groups along the dimensions of competence and warmth (Fiske et al., 1999, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001). For the purposes of the current discussion, I will adopt Bakan’s (1966) nomenclature and refer to these two dimensions as agency and communality.

3. Ibid. note 2.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Alex Abell, Adam Galinsky, Margaret Neale, Melissa Thomas-Hunt, and Gwen Wittenbaum for their helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this chapter.

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