Message Characteristics Underlying Interaction in A Job-interview – A Descriptive Study

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Abstract- **Explicit language threatens autonomy. This qualitative study described information disseminated by interviewers' and interviewees' for explicitness and, techniques employed for mitigating threat to autonomy. A structured open-ended questionnaire was administered to a purposive sample. Thematic analyses and interpretation are presented.**

Keywords: **Job Interview; Explicitness; Message characteristics;**

Review of Literature

Persuasion threatens an individual's freedom of behaviour. The design of a persuasive message tends to adopt either the prescriptive i.e. suggestion or the proscriptive i.e. command approach (Miller, Massey, & Haijing , Forthcoming). The common function is to either encourage a desirable behaviour or to discourage an undesirable behaviour (Rains, 2013). Inherent to prescription/proscription of desirable/undesirable behaviours is denying freedom of behaviour i.e. the choice of what actions, emotions, and/or attitudes the recipient undertakes (Brehm, 1966).

Perception of freedoms varies with characteristics and circumstances of the individual. Two individuals may be denied the same behaviour/s, but only one of them may perceive the message as a freedom threat. A behavioural freedom may not exist at all; a freedom may not be adequately important for self; the individual may not be able and/or capable to exercise a behavioural freedom even if it exists and is important (Brehm, 1966); any of these conditions can make an individual react to the stimulus without perceiving the stimulus as a threat (Quick & Considine, 2008). Further, individuals vary in their need for autonomy and self-determination (Wicklund, 1974). Perception of freedom threats tends to be high among individuals who show a dislike for rules and regulations, high desire for autonomy, high defensiveness, and low concern for social norms (Dowd & Sanders, 1994); (Seibel & Dowd, 2001); (Quick & Stephenson, Examining the role of trait reactance and sensation seeking on perceived threat, state reactance, and reactance restoration., 2008). Individuals with these pre-dispositions are prone to experiencing freedom threats. Adolescents and young adults as against adults tend to experience greater freedom threats, perhaps because of uncertainty of where they stand and its associated insecurities (Arnett, 2019); (Hong, Giannakopoulos , Laing , & Williams , 1994).

Message characteristics influence perception of freedom threat. A recommendation that is presented either as a prescription i.e. suggestion or, a proscription i.e. command, tends to be a freedom threat (Rains, 2013). Prescription and Proscription in particular are characteristic of social-influence, and much social-influence is persuasive (Miller, Massey, & Haijing , Forthcoming). A message and/or the source of the message may have useful information for the recipient, but these tend to be resisted if characterized by prescription/proscription. This resistance is motivated particularly when an individual sees a proscription (command) to interfere with his freedom of behaviours to survive and thrive (Brehm, 1966).

Persuasive messages threaten autonomy. Persuasive messages seek either to encourage a desirable behaviour or to discourage an undesirable behaviour (Rains, 2013). Casting these messages in implicit language makes them ineffective, because indirectness can communicate multiple meanings and/or allow for multiple interpretations (Miller, Lane, Deatrick, Young, & Potts , 2007). explicit messages are clear, and direct in the meaning being conveyed, which leaves little room for interpretation on the part of recipients (Searle , 1995). But, greater the explicitness, the more it is seen to interfere with one's autonomy and consequentially resisted (Miller, "Persuasion and psychological reactance: The Effects of Explicit, High-controlling Language,", 2015) (Brehm, 1966).

Persuasion can be designed to balance explicitness and perception of threat to autonomy.

I. Choice Enhancing Language (CEL)
CEL allows for The possibility of alternative interpretations of a message, but simultaneously recommends one particular alternative (Miller, "Persuasion and psychological reactance: The Effects of Explicit, High-controlling Language,", 2015). This explicit prescription/proscription is toned-down with qualifiers like 'perhaps' and 'may be' for mitigating resistance to perceived threat to autonomy.

II. Restoration Postscript (RP)
RP is a brief statement at the end of a message (Miller, Lane, Deatrick, Young, & Potts , 2007)that softens resistance to the explicit message by creating the illusion of autonomy. After a message has sought to persuade the recipient into a desirable behaviour, RP tells the recipient that he is free to decide either way after considering the argument/s presented. RP is found to be effective in high risk persuasion scenarios (Bessarabova , Miller, & Russell, 2017). Medium of communication e.g. text Vs. radio

and length of text e.g. 10 words Vs. 50 words can influence effectiveness of RP (Quick, Kam, Morgan , Montero Liberona , & Smith, 2015).

III. Provision of Choice Alternatives (PCA)

PCA uses voluntarism for neutralizing threat to choice, and consequent reactance (Shen, 2015). Here the source offers 2 alternatives for the recipient to choose between, both of which realize the same behaviour change. One alternative is the direct explicit communication for effecting the desired behaviour change, and the other alternative is a modified version of the desired behaviour change but which may be more cumbersome for the receiver to adopt. An example of modified choice alternative is (Reynolds-Tylus, 2019)study, where subjects could choose between a set of pre-decided actions, and a set of actions to choose from on the basis of their compatibility with one's own lifestyle.

IV. Narrative Message Style (NMS)

As against the non-narrative message that presents "propositions in the form of reasons and evidence supporting a claim", a narrative message is "a representation of connected events and characters that has an identifiable structure, is bounded in space and time, and contains implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed" (Kreuter, et al., 2007). NM is particularly effective in written educational materials (Gardner & Leshner, 2016), because narratives "obfuscate persuasive intent" (Slater & Rouner, 2002); (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004); (Moyer-Guse, 2008). Measures of effectiveness of NM include positive attitudes towards the message and advocated behaviour, lower freedom threat, fewer counterarguments, and lower state anger than experienced when exposed to non-narrative style (Gardner & Leshner, 2016).

V. Empathy

Empathy is "sharing the subjective experience of another person" (Campbell & Babrow , 2004). Empathy is a psychological state, and not a message feature. But, incorporating Empathy into construction of a message based on a particular strategy can mitigate anger and counter-argument (Shen, Mitigating Psychological Reactance: The Role of Message-induced Empathy in Persuasion., 2010; Shen, The Effectiveness of Empathy-versus Fear-arousing Antismoking PSAs., 2011).

V-a. Affective Empathy

Affective empathy reduces Anger. Here, the message makes the recipient 'experience others' emotional experiences—including understanding and sharing others' feelings' (Lazarus, 1991); (Preston & De Waal, 2002); (Decety & Jackson, 2004).

V-b. Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive Empathy reduces Counter-argument. Here, the message makes the recipient take perspective (i.e., placing oneself psychologically in another person's circumstances), thus allowing for comprehension and understanding of another's point of view' (Lazarus, 1991) (Preston & De Waal, 2002); (Decety & Jackson, 2004).

VI. Loss-frame

Messages that highlight what the individual stands to lose if he does/not behave in a certain manner tend to be persuasive (O'keefe, 2012), because individuals instinctively seek to avert loss in all its forms (Shen & Dillard, The Influence of Behavioral Inhibition/Approach Systems and Message Framing on the Processing of Persuasive Health Messages., 2007). Loss-frame is particularly effective in case of economic behaviour (Levin, Schneider , & Gaeth , 1998). But for arousing fear, a loss-framed message needs to use more and/or highly controlling language which threatens freedom (Cho & Sands, 2011). This threat makes the individual prioritize resisting the threat over mitigating fear of loss (Shen, Antecedents to psychological reactance: the impact of threat, message frame, and choice., 2015). This explains why loss-framed messages produce unfavourable persuasive outcomes (Cho & Sands, 2011) (Shen, Antecedents to psychological reactance: the impact of threat, message frame, and choice., 2015).

VII. Message Sensation Value (MSV)

Message sensation value is "the degree to which formal and content audio-visual features of a message elicit sensory, affective, and arousal responses" (Palmgreen, et al., 1991). Value (dramatic impact), emotional arousal, and novelty (uniqueness) are the 3 dimensions of MSV (Morgan, Palmgreen, Stephenson, Lorch, & Hoyle, 2003). Novelty i.e. unique content generates fewer counter-arguments which is a measure of reactance (Quick, Perceived Message Sensation Value and Psychological Reactance: A Test of the Dominant Thought Disruption Hypothesis., 2013), because novelty distracts and dulls the perception of freedom threat (Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976). High novelty of content combined with low controlling language least triggers anger (emotional arousal) (Xu, 2015), but high novelty combined with high controlling language triggers anger (emotional arousal) the most (Xu, 2015).

VIII. Other Referencing Message (ORM)

As against self-referencing message (SRM) that focuses on consequences of one's actions for self, ORM foregrounds the influence of one's actions on others -- friends / family (Gardner & Leshner, 2016). ORM generates less anger and fewer counter-arguments, as compared to SRM.

IX. Inoculation Messages (IM)

(McGuire, 1961) theorizes that sensitizing individuals with weak versions of persuasion (like injecting weak version of virus through vaccine) should prepare (i.e. develop antibodies) individuals for protection against stronger persuasive attempts in future. An individual primed with IM may be expected to more often resist with counter-argument (Cognition), than otherwise (Banas & Rains, 2010).. But IM must use low controlling language because preparing the recipient for dealing with persuasive message tends to generate fear, and can lead to perception of freedom threat and subsequent reactance (Richards, Banas, & Magid, 2017).

Explicit language must be addressed to mitigate the Boomerang effect. A boomerang effect is a direct and/or indirect behaviour of resistance to persuasive i.e. encouraging/discouraging messages (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Explicit recommendations that seek to encourage particular behaviours meet with direct resistance. Undertaking the very action that is denied is an instance of direct boomerang effect. But direct resistance may not be feasible for an individual to undertake or, circumstances may make the

direct resistance behaviour unsuitable. This makes the individual resort to indirect behaviours of resistance (Wicklund, 1974). Some of these indirect behaviours include increasing one's liking of the threatened choice, vicariously performing the threatened behavior by observing others acting in a freedom restoring manner, derogating the source of the freedom threat, denying the existence of the threat, or by exercising a related freedom to regain feelings of control and choice. Indirect behaviours are the default expression of resistance to recommendations that discourage particular behaviours. Refusing to act as prescribed/proscribed is an instance of indirect boomerang effect.

A large body of extant literature has focused investigation on characteristics of pre-meditated messages that tend to be one-way communications and/or are consumed and responded-to in asynchronous environments. The current study investigates characteristics of messages exchanged by both parties involved and, in synchronous environments. A job interview is an interaction between a job candidate and a prospective job giver i.e. employer. Both entities in this interaction create, consume, and respond-to messages   in   synchronous   environment.

Research Question: What are the characteristics of messages exchanged between interviewer-interviewee?

Research Design
Research   **Method**
This study uses the purposive sampling technique for gathering qualitative data i.e. reflective narratives of experiences in a job interview. The sample is drawn from a niche population of students and qualified Chartered Accountants in India. After preliminary interaction, a structured open-ended questionnaire seeking reflective narratives of job interview experience was sent-out by E-mail to individuals -- who had been actors in a job interview as either candidate or interviewer/employer. A total of 14 valid responses including 08 candidates and 06 employers from different cities/towns in India are included in the analysis for this study. All respondents (candidates [C#] and employers [E#]) are assigned a unique alpha-numeric code for preserving confidentiality. Written reflections are subject to thematic analysis for tagging segments with particular message characteristic/s identified from extant literature.

Research   **Question**
Effectiveness requires persuasive messages to use explicit language. But, explicit language tends to threaten freedom of autonomy. This threat can be mitigated by combining explicit language with specific message characteristics including alternative/s (Shen, Antecedents to psychological reactance: the impact of threat, message frame, and choice., 2015), qualifiers (Miller, "Persuasion and psychological reactance: The Effects of Explicit, High-controlling Language,", 2015), low controlling explicit language (Richards, Banas, & Magid, 2017), inefficiency of choice (Shen, Antecedents to psychological reactance: the impact of threat, message frame, and choice., 2015), explaining circumstances (Kreuter, et al., 2007), and a focus away from loss (Petty, Wells, & Brock,   1976).
RQ-1.   What   are   the   characteristics   of   messages   exchanged   between   interviewer-interviewee?
RQ-1A. To what extent is explicit language invested with threat mitigating characteristic/s?

Data Analysis, Findings, and Interpretation

Explicit language is a characteristic of 12 out of the 20 segments. Candidates [7] as against employers [5] use explicit language.

1. Circumstances (NMS): Candidates effectively combine explicitness with narrative element/s for mitigating threat to autonomy. Candidates more frequently [6] than employers [4] incorporate narrative element/s in their messages. Explicit language occurs in combination with Circumstances (NMS) in 6 instances. Candidates [4] more often employ NMS to soften explicitness of their messages to employers, than do employers [2] for candidates. Exposure to this combination mitigates threat of autonomy for 3 out of the 4 employers. all the 3 instances where the combination does not lead to threat to autonomy are instances of candidates softening explicitness with circumstances.
2. Alternatives: Incorporating alternatives is both an under-utilized and an ineffectively utilized technique in message construction. Instead of making outcome the approach for defining alternatives, respondents seem to take the outcome as a foregone and so define alternatives narrowly as multiple close-ended options. Respondents rarely present alternatives (3) to recipient of communication. Only 1 respondent (employer) incorporates the combination of explicitness and alternatives for recipient to choose from. The other 2 instances where alternative is incorporated is where the source (candidate) combines it with implicit language. The source is the same in both these instances, which is to say that a total of 2 out of 14 respondents (candidates [8] and employers [6]) incorporate alternatives in messages. Alternatives is fundamental to the techniques of CEL, RA, and PCA. CEL tones-down explicit persuasion in favour of a particular alternative by using qualifiers. Qualifiers can facilitate escape or excuse for avoiding unpleasantness in interaction. But none of the 12 instances of use of explicit language incorporate qualifiers, neither does any of the 3 instances where alternatives is built into the message. PCA creates the illusion of autonomy by presenting the recipient with an alternative that is too cumbersome to execute, and thus makes him opt-for the desired alternative. None of the respondents, who do incorporate alternatives, do build-in inefficiency.
3. Loss: Candidates [5] as against employers [1] are exposed to messages that highlight loss following from undertaking/not a particular behaviour. Only 1 respondent (employer) casts loss in implicit language. But none of the respondents take focus of message   away   from   potential   loss   for   their   recipient.
Explicit language that seeks to convey what the recipient stands to lose by acting/not in a particular manner does well to tone-down

threat by not adding high-control to explicit statement of loss. Employers [4] more often communicate potential loss in explicit language, than do candidates [1]. high-controlling explicit language in a loss-focused message is counter-productive, which employers [3] more often than candidates [1] do. In only 1 instance out of the 5 and in only 1 instance out of the 4 from employers is there an attempt at softening loss by using low-controlling explicit language.

This initial study described text of interaction between job interviewer and interviewee. The small sample size of the current study does not warrant deep discussion and conclusions based on findings. Limitations of the study and scope for future research are detailed.

	Candidates	Employers
Explicitness	7	5
Circumstances	4	2
Alternatives	0	1
Low-controlling language	0	1
Loss-focus	1	4
Focus away from loss	0	0
Qualifiers	0	0
Inefficiency	0	0

Limitations

To make Narratives elicit rich data, it needed to be combined with the unstructured interview technique. The study sought to compensate for the niche and small sample size with diversity. Each respondent represented a different combination of role (employer / interviewee) and place (town / city). This meant that data had to be gathered, remotely. Respondents for this study shared their narratives through an electronically disseminated structured open-ended questionnaire. A consequence of the study design was that the participants and the researcher could not build rapport, which can influence the nature and extent of richness of data. Ethics required the researcher to respect respondents' decision against follow-up interaction.

Future Research

Contrary to a large body of extant literature that has worked with pre-meditated message design in/and asynchronous environments, the current study worked with real-time message design in synchronous environment. Here, each actor in the interaction must deal with threats emanating from information stimuli that can interfere with messages he intends to communicate and/or the manner in which he intends to communicate them. Future research must investigate the nature and extent of the relation of synchronous Vs. asynchronous environment and message design.
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