

Two studies are summarized in which respondents provided core descriptions of two key communication conditions. Communicators who are operating from the state of "defensiveness" tend to become physically tensed, discomfited, sped-up, gripped by the situation, estranged, mentally confused, and feel like striking out against the other person. "Feeling understood," on the other hand, is characterized by feeling awakened, empowered, comforted, and wanting to move toward others. When communicators feel understood, they want to reach out; when they feel defensive, they want to strike out. When they feel understood they want to do something for the other person; when they feel defensive they want to do something to the other person. These two key contrasting communication conditions have greatly different implications for message sending and receiving behaviors. The core descriptions presented have heuristic and pedagogical value.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FEELING DEFENSIVE AND FEELING UNDERSTOOD

Ronald D. Gordon

University of Hawaii—Hilo

THERE IS PERHAPS NO COMMUNICATION concept more regularly utilized in the teaching of effective human communication than that of "defensive communication." Jack Gibb's now-classic article on the subject is vitally alive in the communication literature two and a half decades after its original publication.¹ In theories of interpersonal, small group, and organizational communication the notion of defense-arousing versus defense-reductive communication styles plays a recurring central role.

In the organizational context, for example, longitudinal research within the Sears and Roebuck organization shows that the "fatal flaw" that marked those executives who failed to rise to the highest levels of management was a strong tendency to trigger defensiveness in many of the other people with whom they tried to communicate.² Most people do not welcome being thrust into a state of defensiveness. The condition is neither pleasurable nor productive. We do not tend to esteem those whom we see as consistently contributing to our defensiveness.

Conversely, there is a psychophysiological state that is seemingly at the opposite end of the continuum from defensiveness, and that is apparently quite different in its associated effects: the communication condition of "feeling understood."³ The importance of creating this communication condition for others in the organiza-

tional context is paramount. Organizational communicators who exhibit high degrees of empathic understanding promote greater job satisfaction and lower job turnover among their subordinates,⁴ and achieve greater upward mobility within the organization.⁵ Research on the importance of empathic understanding in the management of a multicultural workforce has led to empathic understanding being posited as a "universal organizational communication skill."⁶ In the educational setting it has been found in one research project that the most potent predictor of ratings of teaching effectiveness was the extent to which learners perceived themselves as being understood by those who tried to teach them.⁷ The ability to provide others with the feeling of being understood has been identified as perhaps the main ingredient of "communication competence."⁸

Organizational communicators would do well to know as much as they possibly can about the states of (a) "defensiveness," and (b) "feeling understood." Even though much research remains to be done, it seems that these two sets of experiences are close to the center of the concepts of ineffective and effective communication.

Yet what does it actually mean to feel "defensive"? Beyond saying that this state entails perceived threat and a resulting effort to defend oneself, what are the contours and textures of this psychophysiological state? What are its essential features, its constituent elements? Gibb's article does not offer a mapping of the state of defensiveness, but rather presents a list of some triggers of defensiveness, and alternative behaviors to engage in if one intends to avoid stimulating a defensive climate. Subsequent defensiveness research has also avoided a mapping of defensiveness.⁹ Yet a detailed examination of a core description of what it means to be defensive might acutely sensitize the would-be effective communicator to the dimensions of this phenomenon, and the counter-productivity of eliciting it in another communicator. Similarly, detailed familiarity with a generalized account of "feeling understood" might vividly demonstrate the appropriateness of providing other communicators with the opportunity to experience this communication condition. Toward these ends, two studies are reported here that will give the reader a clearer picture, or a more complete map, of both "defensiveness" and "feeling understood." This broadened comprehension can be of heuristic and pedagogical value. In the summaries of these two studies to follow, technical information has been kept to a minimum, since it is available elsewhere.¹⁰

A MAP OF "DEFENSIVENESS"

The basic question asked in study No. 1 was this: how will respondents describe their physical-cognitive-emotional responses to defense-arousing communication? Over 100 upper-division university students enrolled in two sections of a course in interpersonal relations and one section of a course in interviewing served as respondents. Females comprised 47 percent of the sample and males 53 percent, and the most prominent academic major was business. During the first week of classes, all respondents were read the following statement (*italics highlighting points of vocal emphasis*):

Each of us has experienced becoming *defensive* in response to something that another person has said or done. This is a normal human tendency, to become *defensive* when we are *threatened* by the words and/or nonverbal actions of another person. There are many triggers to our *defensiveness* when others communicate with us, including the following:

1. *Evaluation*, where the underlying message is "You are uninformed/stupid/foolish to say/do/think that."

2. *Control*, where the underlying message is "I'm the one in charge here, and you're going to do things my way *or else!*"

3. *Strategy*, where the underlying message is "I'm going to maneuver you into doing exactly what I want you to do."

4. *Neutrality*, where the underlying message is "You are unimportant to me—I don't care about you."

5. *Superiority*, where the underlying message is "I'm better than you are."

6. *Certainty*, where the underlying message is "I'm right, you're wrong."

The question in the present project is this: what goes on within you when you are experiencing *defensiveness*? What goes on in your body, in your mind, in your emotions when you are reacting *defensively* to someone else?

Will you pause a minute, and recall two or three people with whom you have become *defensive*. *Visualize* yourself interacting with these people. *What happens, verbally and nonverbally, inside and outside yourself?*

Now will you read through the items in the attached booklet and mark each item in the "T" (true) column that applies to your experience when you are in a state of *defensiveness*. Only check those items that apply. Thank you very much.

Each respondent also had a duplicate copy of this statement at his or her desk to refer to while completing the 382-item checklist used in this study. Joel Davitz of Columbia University developed this checklist on the basis of open-ended data gathered from over 1200 people as to their sensations and cognitions during a wide variety of affective states.¹¹ A massive number of descriptive sentences were reduced through statistical procedures to 382 items by

Davitz, constituting a reasonably comprehensive yet manageable tool of measurement. Respondents in the present study were able to summarize their defensiveness responses in an average of forty minutes using this checklist.

In order for a given item to be included within the core description of the physiological-cognitive-emotional aspects of defensiveness, over one-third (34 percent +) of both females and males had to include that item in their checklist responses. This follows the convention set by Davitz for establishing a minimum acceptable level of item inclusion. An overview of the resulting 66 descriptors is presented in Table 1. Ellipses separate these 66 descriptors.

Table 1
A CORE DESCRIPTION OF "DEFENSIVENESS"
(N = 107 Respondents)

Tensed

My whole body is tense . . . I'm jumpy, jittery, ready to snap . . . there's tension across my back, my neck, and shoulders . . . my face and mouth are tight, tense, hard . . . I'm wound up inside . . . I'm hypersensitive . . . I have a sense of being trapped, closed-up, boxed, fenced-in, tied down, inhibited . . . There's muscular rigidity . . . I want to do something, anything, to change the situation and relieve the tension . . . my stomach shivers and trembles, I'm jumpy inside . . . my hands are moist . . . I need to take a deep breath . . . my teeth grind against each other.

Discomforted

There's a heavy feeling in my stomach . . . I feel as if I'm under a heavy burden . . . a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach . . . there's a clutching, sinking feeling in the middle of my chest . . . there's a lump in my throat . . . I have no appetite, I can't eat . . . there's a sense of loss, of deprivation.

Sped-Up

My blood pressure goes up, blood seems to rush through my body . . . my pulse and heartbeat quicken . . . my heart pounds . . . there's an excitement, a sense of being keyed-up, overstimulated, supercharged . . . my body seems to speed up . . . I feel hot and flushed . . . my reactions seem to be exaggerated . . . I can hear my heart beat . . . there are moments of tremendous strength . . . my speech becomes rapid . . . there is a heightened self-awareness . . . I feel wide awake, more alert, more alive . . . my breathing becomes faster.

Gripped by the Situation

There's a sense of being gripped by the situation . . . I seem to be caught-up and overwhelmed by the feeling . . . there's a narrowing of my senses, my attention becomes riveted on one thing . . . it's more an "inner" than an "outer" feeling, a very personal feeling . . . It all seems bottled-up inside me . . . it's a confused, mixed-up feeling, involved with other feelings . . . I want the other

Table 1, continued
 A CORE DESCRIPTION OF "DEFENSIVENESS"
 (N = 107 Respondents)

person to feel the same as I do . . . it's a very complex sort of feeling . . . the feeling is very deep inside, I seem to feel it at the pit of my being . . . I feel off balance . . . I want to fight against it, not let the feeling overcome me.

Moving Against

I want to strike out, explode, but I hold back, control myself . . . I want to say something nasty, something that will hurt someone . . . there's an impulse to strike out, to do something that will hurt . . . I keep thinking of getting even, of revenge . . . my fists are clenched.

Estranged

I want to talk to someone about my feelings . . . I want to talk to someone . . . I want to be with friends . . . there's a sense of aloneness, being cut-off, completely by myself, everyone seems far away, out of contact . . . the world seems no good, hostile, unfair.

Mentally Confused

I keep thinking about what happened over and over again . . . I begin to think about what I can do to change the situation . . . I keep wondering if I'm doing the "right" thing . . . there's an intense concern for what will happen next . . . thoughts race through my head without control, never getting anywhere, thinking the same thoughts over and over again . . . I keep searching for an explanation, for some understanding—I keep thinking "why?" . . . I have many different thoughts going through my head . . . there's a sense of disbelief—I can't believe that what is happening is true . . . there's a sense of anticipation, waiting for something else to happen . . . my thinking is rapid . . . everything seems out of proportion . . . I keep asking myself a thousand questions.

"Defensiveness" can be described as a physiological-cognitive-emotional event aroused by perceived or anticipated threat, in which the defensive communicator tends to become tensed, discomforted, sped-up, gripped by the situation, estranged, mentally confused, and feels like moving against the other.¹² It is obvious from the core description of Table 1 that any communicator behaving from such a negative state of body, mind, and emotions is likely to be dysfunctional both as a source and receiver of communication. This person is likely to be uptight, somewhat physically sick, hyper, stuck, cut-off from friends and the world, mentally mixed-up, and wanting to strike out. This is not an optimum communication state. The undesirability of triggering this state in another communicator becomes increasingly clear the more that one rereads Table 1.

There were thirty-eight significant item differences between the defensiveness reports of females and males (most $p < .01$, two-tailed tests of the differences between proportions). These occurred not so much within the core description of Table 1, but between those items that members of one sex would include in such a description (34 percent +) that members of the other sex would not (<34 percent). It might be cautiously suggested that females, first, seem more likely to report an awareness of inadequacy-related thoughts and feelings during a state of defense-arousal than males (e.g., "I feel vulnerable and totally helpless," 39 percent female "yes" vs. 18 percent male, $p < .001$). Secondly, females appeared to report greater proportions of *flight-type* cognitions than males (e.g., "I have a sense of running endlessly, not knowing where to turn next, getting nowhere," 46 percent female "yes" vs. 28 percent male, $p < .01$), while males appeared to report more *fight-type* sensations and cognitions (e.g., "My muscle tone is suddenly enhanced," 40 percent male "yes" vs. 18 percent female, $p < .001$). The interpretation offered here is tentative, and worthy of further inquiry.¹³

Next, let us consider the other end of the continuum from "defensiveness," and examine what it means to feel deeply "understood."

A MAP OF "FEELING UNDERSTOOD"

Nearly 100 university students enrolled in four sections of a course in principles of speech communication participated in study No. 2. Females comprise 58 percent of this sample and males 42 percent, and business was the most frequent major. During the first week of classes, the following statement was read aloud to these respondents:

Communication is not always easy. For many of us, it sometimes seems that it's just not going our way when it comes to communicating with another person. At times, no matter how hard we seem to try, we *don't get through* to a particular person, and they *don't get through* to us. When this happens, we might chalk it up as one of those days, or one of those relationships, or one of those things, or whatever. But all we know for sure is that *communication didn't seem to happen*, at least not past a *certain point*. We ran into some kind of a *barrier*. We walk away feeling *frustrated* that our communication *just didn't go right*.

We also find ourselves in other communication experiences where everyone *sort of* seems to get through to one another, where there seems to be an *average* level of understanding, with things going along about *normally*.

These are most likely our everyday, run-of-the-mill communication encounters.

Then there are yet other communication experiences most all of us have now and again where things go incredibly well—we have the clear feeling that we are truly and sincerely *listening to the other* person or persons and they to us. At such times there seems to be a lot of *understanding* going on, a two-way sense of “Yes, I know *exactly* what you *mean!*” We are getting through to one another. There is a *mutual grasping of feelings, of thoughts, of experiences, of points of view*. We walk away from such an interaction sensing that we have really communicated with the other person, that we are really *communicating*. It is this latter experience that we’re going to focus on here.

The present question is this: exactly what *feelings and sensations* within you are triggered by this experience of really *communicating* with another person?

Each respondent also had a copy of this statement to refer to while completing the Davitz 382-item checklist. As in the core description of “defensiveness,” over one-third of both the females and males had to use an item before it would be included in the core description of “feeling understood” (and understanding the other) presented in Table 2. Sixty-three items were included there, separated by ellipses.

Table 2
A CORE DESCRIPTION OF “FEELING UNDERSTOOD”
(N = 86 Respondents)

Awakened

All my senses seem completely open—I seem to sense everything immediately, completely, fully, with no separation between me and the outside world . . . I feel excited in a calm way, a warm excitement . . . there’s a sense of vitality, an extra spurt of energy or drive, a special lift in everything I do and say, I feel bouncy, springy . . . I feel wide awake, more alert, more alive . . . there’s an intense awareness of everything—I seem to experience things with greater clarity, colors seem brighter, sound clearer, movements more vivid . . . a sense that I’m experiencing everything fully, completely, thoroughly—that I’m feeling all the way . . . a strong sense of interest and involvement in things around me . . . there’s an excitement, a sense of being keyed up, overstimulated, supercharged . . . my pulse and heartbeat quicken . . . my blood pressure goes up, blood seems to rush through my body . . . my body seems to speed up.

Empowered

There is a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment . . . I’m really functioning as a unit . . . a sense of being important and worthwhile . . . I feel strong inside . . . taller, stronger, bigger . . . a sense of being exceptionally strong or energetic . . . I seem to be functioning intellectually at a higher level—able to

Table 2, continued
 A CORE DESCRIPTION OF "FEELING UNDERSTOOD"
 (N = 86 Respondents)

think clearly, understand everything . . . I have a sense of sureness that I can do anything, that no obstacle is too great for me . . . there are moments of tremendous strength.

Comforted

I'm optimistic and cheerful, the work seems basically good and beautiful, men are essentially kind—life is worth living, the future seems bright . . . I feel I can really be myself . . . a sense of well-being . . . I feel safe and secure . . . there is an inner warm glow, a radiant sensation, a feeling of warmth all over . . . I am free of conflict, in harmony and at ease with myself, my mind and body seem totally unified . . . I feel like smiling . . . there's a renewed appreciation of life . . . a sense of "rightness" with myself and the world, everything is going right for me, nothing can go wrong . . . there is a general release, a lessening of tension, I'm loose and relaxed . . . I'm peaceful, tranquil, in tune with the world . . . a sense of harmony and peace within . . . nothing is a burden, problems fade away and I'm free from worry . . . there is a heightened self-awareness . . . I'm more aware of what's going on inside of me . . . it's simple, pure feeling . . . there is something complete within me . . . it's more an "inner" than an "outer" feeling, a very pleasant feeling . . . I seem to nurture the feeling within myself, I want the feeling to continue, to keep going . . . the feeling fills me completely . . . I have a sense of being free, uninhibited, open, no longer blocked—I feel uninhibited and spontaneous, anything goes . . . I keep thinking how lucky I am . . . I keep thinking about what happened over and over again . . . there is a sense of nostalgia as old memories crop up and I think of the past . . . I want to give thanks to God.

Moving Toward

A sense of confidence in being with another person . . . a sense of trust and appreciation of another person . . . I want to make others happy . . . there's a sense of being wanted, needed . . . a sense of empathic harmony with another person—a total concentration on another person, a complete understanding, a communion, a unity, a closeness . . . there's a desire to give of myself to another person . . . I want to be tender and gentle . . . I want others (or the other person) to feel the same as I do . . . I feel more tolerant, accepting, understanding of others . . . I feel outgoing, I want to reach out to everyone I meet . . . I want to be with friends . . . a sense of belonging with others . . . a sense of belonging with another person, a belonging from which other people are excluded . . . I want to touch, hold, be close physically to the other person . . . I want to feel with the other person, experience with the other person with every sense, to be psychologically in touch . . . I want to help, protect, please, do something for the other person . . . I want to communicate freely, share my thoughts and feelings with everyone around.

It is apparent that feeling that one has been understood, and that one has understood the other, is an impactful, positive, valued ex-

perience. In this communication condition people tend to feel awakened, empowered, comforted, and like moving *toward* others. Or, using different words, when people are understood they tend to feel alive, strong, good, and close. Or, using yet other terms, we can say that there is a heightening of sensory awareness, self-concept, well-being, and interpersonal solidarity. The exact headings chosen for the four groupings of Table 2 are less important than the general content to which they refer. It is obvious that a communicator behaving from the physical, mental, and emotional set portrayed there is considerably more likely to be effective as both a message source and receiver than is a defensive communicator.

There are half as many (nineteen) significant item differences between the sexes as in study No. 1, with females more likely than males to report being emotionally affected by feeling understood (e.g., "there's a renewed appreciation of life," 66 percent female "yes" vs. 39 percent male, $p < .05$, or "I feel like smiling," 74 percent female "yes" vs. 50 percent male, $p < .05$). Since most such items were used by fewer than 34 percent of the males, they are not included within the core description of Table 2.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The communicator who perceives that he or she has been deeply understood by another communicator is launched into an entirely different psychological and physiological space than the communicator who perceives threat of attack.

As one repeatedly reads the two contrasting core descriptions juxtaposed in this paper, various symbolic images emerge. One of the composite visual images that comes to this writer is that extreme defensiveness entails an implosion, a turning-in upon the self, a contraction of one's psychological and physical self, with the possibility of ultimate outward explosion. The person gripped by defensiveness is locked onto a fast track to nowhere. There is an acceleration of bodily and mental processes, yet there is simultaneous immobilization; an irresistible force and an immovable object. The organism is at cross-purposes with itself, the system is split. In actual *physical* defense against *physical* attack, there is release of the organism's energies, channeled through concerted counter-attack; when feeling defensive in a viscerally noncombative socially structured public communication context, however, the courses of appropriate action are less clear. The defensive person tends to step

on the accelerator and the brake at the same time. If and when the brake is released, damaging collision is most probable.

The experience of feeling understood and understanding the other, on the other hand, is quite different from this. There is a felt-enlargement of the self, an expansion into one's strength, one's sensibilities, one's subtleties. This expansion of the self strives to overflow out into the world. People who experience understanding feel better about themselves in that instant, better about the other communicator, better about humankind. Feeling understood generalizes itself beyond the specific interaction—this is one of its most interesting facets. The checklist item which the largest proportion of both females and males (76 percent/75 percent) used to describe the state of feeling significantly understood was this: "I'm optimistic and cheerful, the world seems basically good and beautiful, men are essentially kind—life is worth living, the future seems bright." There is a sense of having been lifted to the mountaintop when we feel deeply understood, while defensiveness is more akin to believing we are being pushed off a cliff. Both states generalize themselves, make themselves large. In defensiveness not only do I wish to defend against the individual attacker, but in addition "the world seems no good, hostile, unfair." Traveling by ripple effect, the consequences of both of these states are wide-ranging. Defense-arousal would seem to be a serious disruptive noise-source in human communication systems, with potential disintegrative effects on communication accuracy, human relations, and system maintenance and development. When people feel defensive, they want to *strike out*; when they feel understood, they want to *reach out*. When people feel defensive, they want to do something *to* the other person; when they feel understood, they want to do something *for* the other person, and for people in general.

To learn to foster perceptions and feelings of understanding a greater percentage of the time is not only of extreme practical use in promoting communication satisfaction and communication productivity, but it may also be of ethical necessity. As one communication ethicist has viewed it, "Morally right speech is that which opens up channels for mind to reach mind, and heart to reach heart."¹⁵

The core descriptions of the two key states discussed here might be of use in explaining, predicting, and influencing related human communication behavior.

NOTES

¹ Gibb, Jack R. (1961). Defensive communication. *Journal of Communication*, 2, 141-148. A review of *Social Sciences Citation Index* shows that Gibb's 1961 article has also been cited in two dozen journals outside of the communication discipline, including journals from such fields as public administration, rehabilitation counseling, small group behavior, marriage counseling, conflict resolution, hospital management, library studies, personnel guidance, education, general psychology, business, and gerontology. A bookshelf survey indicates that defensive communication is treated as a topic in approximately 75 percent of introductory communication textbooks.

² Horn, Jack C. (1986). Executive action. *Psychology Today*, 20, 14.

³ Rogers, Carl R. (1980). *A way of being* (especially chapter seven). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. For comment on needed research direction in this topic area, see Ronald D. Gordon (1985). Empathy: State of the art and science. *Journal of Communication Studies*, 4, 16-21.

⁴ Snavely, William B. & McNeill, John (1985, May). *A path analytic study of the impact of organizational and interpersonal stressors on job tension, satisfaction, and turnover propensity*. Paper presented at the convention of the International Communication Association, Honolulu, HI.

⁵ Sypher, Beverly D. & Zorn, Theodore S. (1985, May). *Communication related abilities and upward mobility: A longitudinal investigation*. Paper presented at the convention of the International Communication Association, Honolulu, HI.

⁶ Stull, James B. & Baird, John W. (1985, May). *Acceptance, openness and empathy as universal organizational communication skills: A quasi-experimental field study*. Paper presented at the convention of the International Communication Association, Honolulu, HI.

⁷ Cahn, Dudley D. (1984). Teacher-student relationships: Perceived understanding. *Communication Research Reports*, 1, 65-67.

⁸ Wiemann, John & Backlund, Phillip M. (1980). Current theory and research in communication competence. *Review of Educational Research*, 50, 185-199; or more recently, Mark V. Redmond (1985). The relationship between perceived communication competence and perceived empathy. *Communication Monographs*, 52, 377-382.

⁹ Eadie, William F. (1982). Defensive communication revisited: A critical examination of Gibb's theory. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 47, 163-177; Virginia G. Waln (1982). Interpersonal conflict interaction: An examination of verbal defense of self. *Central States Speech Journal*, 33, 557-566; William H. Baker (1980). Defensiveness in communication: Its causes, effects, and cures. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 17, No. 2, 33-43; Jean M. Civickly; Wayne R. Pace; & R. M. Krause (1977). Interviewer and client behaviors in supportive and defensive interviews. In Brent D. Ruben (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook I*. New Brunswick, CT: Transaction Books; Rebecca J. Cline & Bonnie D. Johnson (1976). The verbal stare: Focus on attention in conversation. *Communication Monographs*, 43, 1-10; Ellis R. Hays (1970). Ego-threatening classroom communication: A factor analysis of student perceptions. *Speech Teacher*, 19 43-48.

¹⁰ Gordon, Ronald D. (1983). *Physiological-cognitive-emotional responses to defense-arousing communication: Overview and sex differences*. ERIC Research

Document 249 558. Also see "Really communicating": *The explication of an expression*. ERIC Research Document 221 891.

¹¹ Davitz, Joel R. (1969). *The language of emotion* (especially chapter two). New York, NY: Academic Press.

¹² The first four categories in Table 1 are based upon statistical clusters derived by Davitz, while the latter three categories consist of this writer's grouping of twenty-eight "miscellaneous" Davitz items (see Gordon, 1983a). These data are not intended as claims about the statistical structure of "defensiveness," but rather to provide information in a somewhat organized fashion on the general content of this domain. This comment also applies to the organization of data in Table 2.

¹³ See Gordon, *Physiological-cognitive-emotional responses . . .* for these sex difference data.

¹⁴ See Gordon, "Really communicating" . . . for these sex difference data.

¹⁵ Nilsen, Thomas R. (1974). *Ethics of speech communication*. New York, NY: Bobbs Merrill.