

Couples sometimes communicate no better than strangers, study finds

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Married people may think they communicate well with their partners, but psychologists have found that they don't always convey messages to their loved ones as well as they think -- and in some cases, the spouses communicate no better than strangers.

The same communication problem also is true with close friends, a recent study has found.

“People commonly believe that they communicate better with close friends than with strangers. That closeness can lead people to overestimate how well they communicate, a phenomenon we term the ‘closeness-communication bias,’” said Boaz Keysar, a professor in psychology at the University of Chicago and a leading expert on communications.

Keysar’s colleague Kenneth Savitsky, professor of psychology at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., devised an experiment resembling a parlor game to study the issue. In it, two sets of couples sat in chairs with their backs to each other and tried to discern the meaning of each other’s ambiguous phrases. In all, 24 married couples participated.

The researchers used phrases common in everyday conversations to see if the spouses were better at understanding phrases from their partners than from people they did not know. The spouses consistently overestimated their ability to communicate, and did so more with their partners than with strangers.

“A wife who says to her husband, ‘it’s getting hot in here,’ as a hint for her husband to turn up the air conditioning a notch, may be surprised when he interprets her statement as a coy, amorous advance instead,” said Savitsky, who is lead author of the paper, “The Closeness-Communications Bias: Increased Egocentrism among Friends versus Strangers,” published in the January issue of the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#).

“Although speakers expected their spouse to understand them better than strangers, accuracy rates for spouses and strangers were statistically

identical. This result is striking because speakers were more confident that they were understood by their spouse,” Savitsky said.

“Some couples may indeed be on the same wavelength, but maybe not as much as they think. You get rushed and preoccupied, and you stop taking the perspective of the other person, precisely because the two of you are so close,” he said.

Savitsky conducted a similar experiment with 60 Williams College students. In the study, the students overestimated their effectiveness in communicating with friends, replicating the pattern found with married couples.

Closeness can create ‘illusion of insight’

Communication problems arise when a speaker assumes that a well-known acquaintance has all the information the speaker has, removing the need for a long explanation, Keysar said. When people meet a stranger, they automatically provide more information because they don’t have a “closeness bias” in that encounter. In the same way, listeners may wrongly assume that a comment or request from a close acquaintance is based on knowledge that the two have in common — a mistake the listener would not make with a stranger.

In order to test that idea, a team at Keysar’s lab set up an experiment in which two students would sit across from each other, separated by a box with square compartments that contained objects. Some of the objects were not visible to one of the students. That student, the speaker, would ask the partner to move one of the objects — but the speaker did not know that the request could be interpreted in two different ways. For example, if the speaker asked the partner to move a mouse, the partner would have two options: a computer mouse that the speaker could see, or a stuffed mouse that the speaker could not see.

The study found that when partners were asked to move an object with an ambiguous name, they would hesitate longer when the speaker was a friend. But when the speaker was a stranger, the partner would be faster to focus on the object that the speaker could see, and ignore the object that the speaker did not know about. This showed that the participants were more likely to take an egocentric position when working with a friend, neglecting to consider the possibility that the friend didn't share the same information they had.

“Our problem in communicating with friends and spouses is that we have an illusion of insight. Getting close to someone appears to create the illusion of understanding more than actual understanding,” said co-author Nicholas Epley, a professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

“The understanding, ‘What I know is different from what you know’ is essential for effective [communication](#) to occur,” Savitsky said. “It is necessary for giving directions, for teaching a class or just for having an ordinary conversation. But that insight can be elusive when the ‘you’ in question is a close friend or spouse.”

Joining the three in authoring the article were Travis Carter, a College graduate of the University of Chicago and a post-doctoral student at Chicago Booth, and Ashley Swanson, a graduate student at MIT.

Provided by University of Chicago

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