

1. TITLE: Communications Media and Dyadic Conflict

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8. ABSTRACT: Although *media properties* and *conflict* have been explored in both naturalistic and experimental settings, the psycholinguistic processes and social effects of communication via different media under conditions of high-stakes conflict have not. Couples come into the lab to argue about a topic important to them in one of three conditions: face-to-face, telephone or Instant Messaging. Initial analysis shows surprising results including many fewer words in the phone and Instant Messaging conditions than in the face-to-face.

## 9. SUMMARY:

Although *media properties* and *conflict* have been explored in both naturalistic and experimental settings, the detailed psycholinguistic processes and social/personal effects of communication via different media under conditions of high-stakes conflict have not. Three major schools of thought characterize the global properties of media. The cues-filtered-out school argues that the lack of immediacy, synchronization, video and audio communication channels render interaction in email and Instant Messaging (IM) more limited than in face-to-face (f2f) interaction [6]. In contrast, the Social Information Processing school emphasizes the ways in which people give new meaning to those qualities that are present in mediated interaction, much the way a blind person is thought to make more and better use of sound than a sighted person [7]. The third school, SIDE (Social Identity/ Deindividuation model) emphasizes the ways in which media increase or decrease reliance on general categories such as social identity compared to particulars about the individual, presumably due to the absence or presence of cues [4]. More specifically, Clark and Brennan classify particular systems by characterizing media properties without predicting particular inevitable outcomes [2].

Our work asks what happens on those rare but important occasions when the communication is important to the participants. Our initial investigation is of interpersonal conflict. Previous work studying conflict and technology has either involved conflict so mild as to barely deserve the name [3] or the setting has been retrospective [5].

The current study starts from the idea that people's need for interpersonal reassurance under conditions of conflict will be greater than their need for similar reassurance when no conflict obtains. Therefore, media will affect both the course and outcome of conflict. We hypothesize that people will feel less connection to one another during and after arguing while utilizing a less rich medium, such as IM, than via a richer medium. They will attain less resolution.

We are in the process of conducting an initial study in which couples come into the lab to argue about a topic important to them in one of three conditions: f2f, phone, or IM.

### Method

**Participants:** A call for participation was posted on a large university campus and circulated via listservs. Participants were required to be eligible for university health service counseling and to be a partner in a self-defined male/female couple. All participants received \$20 compensation. Mean participant age was 22.4 years with a standard deviation of 4.7. 21 of the participants were African-American, 13 white, 5 Asian and 1 Hispanic. 12 participants categorized their relationship as "dating," 11 as

“committed”, 4 as “engaged”, 7 as “living together,” 2 as “married” and 4 as “married with children.”

## Procedure

Couples were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: face-to-face (f2f), telephone, or instant messaging (IM), resulting in eight (8), seven (7) and five (5) couples in the respective conditions so far.

Participants were first informed of their rights and asked to sign the informed consent letter. They were also told that university counseling was available to them and given contact information for support. Each person separately completed application and background/demographics/relationship forms, a number of personality inventories, and a mood scale (the PANAS, or “positive-affect/negative-affect scale”) and a feeling of closeness scale. Couples were then brought together in a room, where, together with the researcher, they selected a topic of habitual disagreement. They also selected a “happy reminiscence” topic. Partners in the IM and phone conditions were separated. Couples were asked to discuss the topic. All arguments were videotaped.

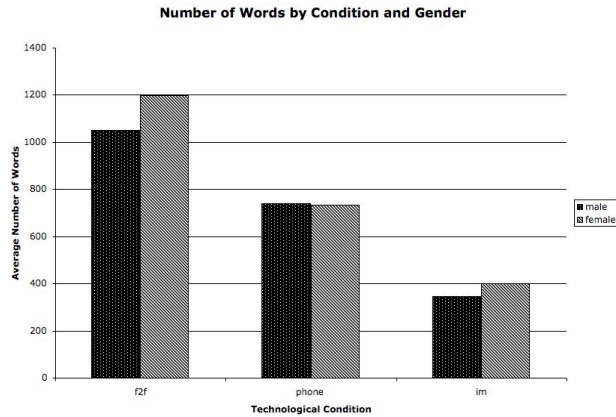
After twenty minutes, the couples were interrupted and were then asked to write down their feelings about the argument. Then they completed PANAS and closeness scales.

After completing the surveys, couples engaged in “happy reminiscences” followed by the PANAS and closeness scales. We called subsequently to see how they were feeling.

## Results and Discussion

Running of participants and analysis is on-going. However, we find considerable evidence that argumentation can be brought to the laboratory using this means. The mean drop in reported positive mood from before to after the argument was 8.6 for the men and 10.4 for the women. Behavioral evidence of argumentation includes one notable occasion on which a participant hung up the phone commenting “*if that’s true then we have nothing more to say to each other.*” The partner called back.

We also find significant effects of technological condition on the number of words for both male and female speakers (See Figure). It is no surprise that fewer words are used in the IM condition. Indeed the literature currently advocates experiments that give different amounts of time to people in f2f and IM conditions [cf.3]. However, women use a mean of 1199 vs. 734 words in the f2f as compared to the *phone* condition ( $F(1,7)=8.66, p < .02$ ).



As experimentation and analysis proceeds, we will examine gesture, facial expressions, and the reactivity that one partner shows to the other. For example, is “bald contradiction” [1] such as:

she: *Our common criminals are kept in prisons, fed, bathed, and kept well.*

he: *It doesn't matter.*

she: *It does matter!*

the same in f2f as over the phone?

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