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**An Investigation of the Relationships among Implicit Personal Theories of Communication, Social Support and Loneliness**

Autumn P. Edwards  
Lindsey M. Rose  
Chad Edwards  
Linsay M. Singer  
Western Michigan University

*Autumn Edwards (PhD, Ohio University, 2006) and Chad Edwards (PhD, University of Kansas, 2003) are assistant professors in the School of Communication at Western Michigan University. Lindsey Rose (BA, Western Michigan University, 2006) and Linsay Singer (BA, Western Michigan University, 2006) are M.A. students in the School of Communication at Western Michigan University.*

### Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to explore the relationships among individuals' implicit personally-held theories of communication (message design logics) and their levels of social well-being. Both social support and loneliness figure importantly into a person's overall social health. Survey research was employed to explore the associations among message design logic (expressive, conventional, and rhetorical), social support appraisals and loneliness. Results indicated that the expressive message design logic was associated with relatively lower appraisals of social support from friends and others and higher loneliness, whereas the rhetorical message design logic was associated with increased satisfaction with systems of social support. Implications are discussed in light of the theory of message design logic.

**Keywords:** *message design logic, loneliness, social support, personal theories of communication*

Both social support and loneliness are considered important factors in the overall social well-being of the individual. Social support has been demonstrated to be a significant factor in overall health and social functioning (Albrecht & Halsey, 1992; Hamburg & Killilea, 1979). On the other side of the human-connectedness equation is loneliness, or perceived social isolation, which has been linked to wide array of detrimental social and relational conditions (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). A potentially important determinant of individuals' levels of social support and loneliness is their implicit theories of communication. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the associations among O'Keefe's (1988) message design logic (an account of implicit personal theories of communication), social support, and loneliness.

#### Message Design Logic

O'Keefe (1988), in her account of message variation, has noted that individuals possess implicit theories of communication, or message design logics (MDLs). On the basis of social interaction, individuals progressively accumulate and integrate knowledge about what communication is and what it can be used to accomplish. The resultant working models of communication guide the process of message production and interpretation. MDLs, which arise from "differences in the very definition of communication that individuals construct and employ" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 84) describe the way thoughts, transformed as messages, relate to desired message outcomes, and to the variation in goals and goal management strategies observed in previous studies (e.g., O'Keefe and Shepherd, 1987; 1989). Thus, "the message design logic model offers a theory of communication theories, an analysis of the alternative ways in which individuals (or communities) might constitute communication processes" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 98). O'Keefe (1988) has identified three general types of MDL: expressive, conventional, and rhetorical. The three design logics, which are based on individuals' levels of cognitive complexity, are characterized by different premises about communication, which manifest in messages of varying organization, content, and effectiveness (O'Keefe, 1988).

#### *Expressive*

The expressive MDL refers to the simplest form of message production, which is predicated on the notion that "language is a medium for expressing thoughts and feelings" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 85). Because expressive communicators make no distinction between thought and expression, they tend to produce messages which "dump" their current mental states and assume that others do the same (O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987, p. 71). In this view, communication is primarily "a process in which persons express what they think or feel so others will know what they think or feel" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 84). Expressive communicators judge the success of communication by its clarity and the desirability of communication by the fullness and openness with which thoughts and feelings are disclosed. Naturally, such preferences lead to a "concern for the fidelity of messages, and anxiety about deceptive communication" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 85). When an expressive communicator must deliver a message that is potentially face-threatening, the solution is to "be tactful" (O'Keefe, 1991). Expressive messages have internal coherence that is subjective and associative. In other words, the expressive message is created by "dumping" salient mental contents, or simply expressing the thoughts one happens to have at the moment (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 85). Expressive messages frequently display features such as reactivity, affect-orientation, and pragmatically pointless, redundant, or

unedited content. In interpreting the messages of others, expressive communicators are unlikely to find anything other than literal and direct meaning (O'Keefe, 1988).

#### *Conventional*

The conventional MDL is built on understanding communication as “a game to be played cooperatively, according to socially conventional rules and procedures” (O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987, p. 71). In contrast to the expressive communicator, the conventional communicator distinguishes between thought and expression, and subordinates and specifies expression to the process of achieving desired social effects. O'Keefe (1988) explains that “the propositions one expresses are specified by the social effect one wants to achieve rather than the thoughts one happens to have” (p. 86). The criterion employed for judging the success and desirability of communication is the extent that it falls within “conventionally defined means to achieve one's ends,” and, thus, involves situational appropriateness, resource control, and cooperativeness (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 87). The solution for a conventional communicator in a face-threatening situation is to “be polite” (O'Keefe, 1991). Conventional messages are designed by selection of the appropriate act to be performed given the context and are characteristically rule-following and organized to elicit a particular response (O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987).

#### *Rhetorical*

The third and most elaborate MDL is termed rhetorical and is based on a view of communication as “the creation and negotiation of social selves and situations” (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 85). Unlike their expressive and conventional counterparts, rhetorical communicators perceive selves and situations as mutable rather than fixed and recognize communication as a process of coordination. Thus, they treat meaning as “a matter of dramaturgical enactment and social negotiation” (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 87). An understanding of the ways in which symbolic behavior conveys features of identity and situation is used to enact a desired social reality in message production and to interpret incoming messages with depth. The rhetorical MDL holds communication to be successful and desirable to the extent that it is flexible and produces harmony and consensus. A rhetorical communicator challenged with a face-threatening situation typically responds by transforming their social identity to “be someone else” (O'Keefe, 1991). Rhetorical messages generally contain features such as explicit contextualizing elements and creative re-descriptions of selves and social arrangements.

O'Keefe (1988) maintains that the three MDLs form a developmental progression ordered according to functional utility. According to O'Keefe and McCornack (1987), the significance of the hierarchical structure of MDL is the ability of individuals to “focus goals and adapt language more and more finely to their service” (p. 73). One must acquire the ability to verbally express ideas (Expressive Premise) before one can subordinate expression in order to achieve desired social effects (Conventional Premise). Moreover, the ability to verbally reorder social situations (Rhetorical Premise) relies on a prior understanding of conventionalized action. “So there is a natural order to these three message design logics; the Expressive Premise is a logical prerequisite to Conventional functioning, and the Conventional Premise is a logical prerequisite to Rhetorical functioning” (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 89).

In certain complex and difficult interactional tasks (e.g., conflict management and regulatory), the expressive, conventional, and rhetorical design logics advance from least to most effective communication (O'Keefe, 1997). O'Keefe and McCornack (1987)

established relationships between MDL and perceptions of message ability to persuade, satisfy, motivate, and attend to “face wants.” In each case, the rhetorical MDL was associated with preferential outcomes (see also Lambert & Gillespie, 1994). Peterson and Albrecht (1996) demonstrated that mixed-status relationships (i.e., nurse/nurse manager) including a rhetorical partner were rated as most supportive, and that the employees of rhetorical managers had relatively lower levels of stress and burnout than those of expressive and conventional managers.

Several recent studies have examined the associations between the varying implicit theories of communication that underlie each MDL and individuals’ social and communal dispositions. Edwards and Shepherd (2004) demonstrated that rhetorical communicators had relatively more positive views of other people and of life, in general, and reported more faith in the possibility of understanding others. Expressive communicators, by contrast, were more cynical and reported more futility in trying to understand others. Most recently, Edwards and Shepherd (2007) found MDL to be associated with levels of pro-community activity. Rhetorical message producers reported relatively greater levels of past helping behavior and social capital. It is also important to consider the ways in which MDL may relate to individuals’ levels of social well-being. Included among the most significant indicators of social well-being are two variables central to the experience of human connectedness and its corresponding benefits: social support and loneliness.

#### Social Support

A considerable body of research has linked social support to a number of desirable outcomes. Generally, the principle interest in social support has been motivated by its relationship to physical health and psychological well-being (Dean & Lin, 1977). Broadly speaking, the presence of social support is associated with healthy and stable functioning, and its absence with poor psycho-social adjustment and diminished physical, mental, and emotional health (e.g., Albrecht, Burleson, & Sarason, 1992; Albrecht & Halsey, 1992; Hamburg & Killilea, 1979; Holahan & Moos, 1981; 1982; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Furthermore, the role of social support in buffering the negative psychological and physiological responses to stress has been well documented (e.g., Albrecht, Burleson, & Goldsmith, 1994; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Vaux, 1988). Supportive interactions are associated with reduced stress, enhanced self-esteem, and provision of tangible assistance with stressful experiences (see review by Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Moreover, supportive communication is linked to improved health status and relational satisfaction (Burleson, Albrecht & Sarason, 1994).

Theoretically, there exist two major forms of social support (Helgeson, 1993). *Received support* refers to the actual social support provided to an individual facing a stressor, whereas *perceived support* refers to one’s belief that social support will be available and adequate when needed. Research has established the positive effects of *perceptions of social support* on aspects of mental, physical and relational well-being (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986; Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983; Sarason, Pierce & Sarason, 1990; House et al., 1988). The current study focuses on the perceived social support domain.

#### Social Support Appraisals

Social support appraisals are subjective assessments of social support network resources and the supportive behavior that occurs within these relationships (Vaux,

1990). Thus, social support appraisals refer to perceptual evaluations of the availability and quality of one's social support system. The notion of social support appraisals is based upon Cobb's (1976) definition of social support as "information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations" (p. 300). Perceptions of available social support have been associated with physical health (House et al., 1988), emotional well-being (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986), and relationship quality (Sarason et al., 1990). Research suggests that appraisals of support exert an especially important influence on well-being (see review by Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). Significantly, satisfaction with perceived support has shown a stronger relationship to well-being than have measures of actually received support or objective features of social support networks (e.g., Sarason et al., 1983; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Sarason, Sarason, Shearin and Pierce (1987) maintained that this effect is understandable given the presence of individual variation in both the need for affiliation and in the personal meanings attached to various relationships.

The perceived availability perspective implicitly recognizes a role for communication in the source and influence of social support (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002). Namely, communication is viewed as the vehicle through which perceptions of support availability are created. However, according to Burlison and MacGeorge (2002), communication variables are rarely included in studies of perceived support availability. MDL figures as an important communication variable to consider in accounting for individual variations in appraisals of social support. Thus we pose the following research question:

RQ1: Do individuals' social support appraisals differ as a function of their MDLs (expressive, conventional, rhetorical)?

### **Loneliness**

Loneliness is a key indicator of both personal and social well-being. It has been linked to a number of serious problems, including suicide (Van Orden, Merrill, & Joiner, 2005), depression (Alpass & Neville, 2003; Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980), and several indicators of physiological stress (Pressman et al., 2005). Furthermore, loneliness has been associated with many facets of negative affect (Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978). According to Peplau and Perlman (1982), loneliness is a state of emotional distress that arises when a person's social interactions fall below the levels of quantity and/or quality that he or she desires. Thus, loneliness refers not to the absence of social contacts, but to the way lonely persons view and experience relationships (Marangoni & Ickes, 1989; Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Pincus & Sorensen, 2001).

The link between loneliness and problems with social relationships has been well documented. Numerous studies have shown an association between loneliness and relationship dissatisfaction (e.g., Cutrona, 1982; Flora & Segrin, 2000; Russell, Cutrona, Rose, & Yurko, 1984), and negativity toward relationships (e.g., Duck, Pond, & Leatham, 1994; Jones, Freemon & Goswick, 1981; Wittenberg & Reis, 1986). In terms of social interaction, loneliness is associated with negative expectations regarding communication (e.g., Bell & Daly, 1985; Zakahi, 1986). Lonely individuals interpret others' messages more negatively and rate others' communication competence lower (Edwards, Bello, Brandau-Brown & Hollems, 2001; Yum, 2003; Zakahi, 1986). In addition, loneliness has been strongly negatively related to participants' ratings of conversation "meaningfulness" (Wheeler, Reis, & Nezelek, 1983).

Research has indicated that problems in social relationships do not exist solely in the minds of lonely persons, but can also be perceived by interaction partners (e.g., Bell, 1985; Spitzberg & Canary, 1985). Much previous research has demonstrated that loneliness is associated with low communication competence (e.g., Segrin & Flora, 2000; Spitzberg & Hurt, 1989) and a broad range of social, interpersonal, and relational inadequacies (e.g., Marangoni & Ickes, 1989; Shaver, Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Vitkus & Horowitz, 1987; Wittenberg & Ries, 1986). In terms of specific behavioral manifestations of social interaction inadequacies, lonely individuals demonstrate less “partner attention” (they reference the other person less, are more self-focused, and ask fewer questions) (Jones, Hobbs & Hockenbury, 1982) and display less talkativeness, interrupting, and recall of partner communication than do non-lonely persons (Bell, 1985; Goswick & Jones, 1981; Jones et al., 1981; Miczo, 2004). Moreover, Horowitz, French and Anderson (1982) demonstrated that lonely people generate fewer and poorer solutions for interpersonal dilemmas as compared to non-lonely people. According to Edwards et al. (2001), loneliness is associated with a general lack of adequate scripts for social interaction, leading to difficulties constructing messages appropriate for various social situations. It is possible that in addition to being related to the aforementioned indicators of communication competence, loneliness is also associated with individuals’ MDLs. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ2: Do individuals’ levels of loneliness differ as a function of their MDLs (expressive, conventional, rhetorical)?

## Method

### Participants

Upon securing institutional review board approval, participants were recruited from two large-lecture introductory communication courses at a large Midwestern university. These courses were selected because they contain students representing a variety of academic majors at various points in their college careers. Of the 124 participants, there were 95 (76.6%) females, 28 (22.6%) males, and one participant who did not indicate his/her sex. A majority (81.5%,  $n = 101$ ) identified themselves as Caucasian/White, followed by African-American/Black (8.9%,  $n = 11$ ), “other” (4.8%,  $n = 6$ ), Hispanic/Latino(a) (2.4%,  $n = 3$ ), and Asian/Pacific Islander (1.6%,  $n = 2$ ). One participant did not indicate ethnicity. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 54 years, with a mean of 20.26 ( $SD = 3.64$ ). The largest percentage of participants classified as first-year students (33.9%,  $n = 42$ ), followed by sophomores (28.2%,  $n = 35$ ), juniors (21.8%,  $n = 27$ ), seniors (12.1%,  $n = 15$ ), and those who did not indicate college classification (4.0%,  $n = 5$ ). Participants were offered extra course credit in return for taking part in the study.

### Procedures

Upon providing informed consent, participants received a survey questionnaire comprised of the following measures: 1) O’Keefe’s (1988) Ron scenario (a measure of MDL), 2) the Social Support Assessment (SS-A; Vaux et al., 1986), 3) the Social Support Questionnaire Brief (SSQ-Brief; Sarason et al., 1987), 4) the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980), and 5) a brief demographic survey used for the purpose of sample description.

### Instruments

*Message design logic.* O’Keefe’s (1988) Ron scenario was designed to assess people’s MDLs. The scenario asks participants to imagine that they are in a class in

which a group project counts heavily toward the final grade. In this scenario, one of the group members (Ron) has been causing some problems for the group. Participants were asked to respond to this hypothetical situation by writing exactly what they would say to Ron. Using procedures detailed by O'Keefe (1988), each message was classified according to the kind of MDL it embodied: expressive, conventional, or rhetorical. All messages were independently coded by the first and second authors, who initially agreed on the classification of 91% of the messages, yielding an inter-coder reliability coefficient of .85 (Cohen, 1960). Cohen's kappas by category of MDL were .85 for expressive, .81 for conventional, and .90 for rhetorical. The remaining 11 messages were reviewed, discussed, and, upon coder agreement, categorized into one of the three MDLs. The classification procedure resulted in 26 (21.0%) expressive messages, 71 (57.3%) conventional messages, and 27 (21.8%) rhetorical messages.

*Social support appraisals.* Two measures were utilized to assess social support appraisals. The Social Support Appraisal (SS-A) scale is a 23-item instrument designed to assess the extent to which an individual believes he or she is loved by, esteemed by, and engaged with family, friends, and other people (Vaux et al., 1986). Respondents were asked to rate each statement using four-point Likert-type scales ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4). The SS-A utilizes a combination of 18 positively worded items (e.g., My friends respect me) and five negatively worded items (e.g., I can't rely on my family for support). Four scores were computed: SS-A total (sum of all 23 items), SS-A family (sum of 8 "family" items), SS-A friends (sum of 7 "friend" items), and SS-A others (sum of 8 items referring to "people" or "others" in a general way). Previous studies demonstrate that the SS-A is a valid measure of appraisals of social support (O'Reilly, 1995; Vaux et al., 1986). Past research has also demonstrated the SS-A to be reliable. O'Reilly (1995), for instance, reported internal consistency coefficients ranging from .81 (SS-A family) to .89 (SS-A total). In the current study, the following internal consistency coefficients were obtained: SS-A total = .89 ( $M = 81.15$ ,  $SD = 8.69$ ), SS-A family = .82 ( $M = 28.58$ ,  $SD = 3.99$ ), SS-A friends = .78 ( $M = 24.81$ ,  $SD = 3.21$ ), and SS-A others = .84 ( $M = 27.75$ ,  $SD = 3.66$ ).

The Social Support Questionnaire-Brief (SSQ-Brief; Sarason et al., 1987) is a shortened version of Sarason et al.'s (1983) Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ). Although the original SSQ consisted of 27 items, the SSQ-Brief consists of only six. For each item, participants were asked to complete two tasks. The first was to list the people who they could turn to and on whom they could rely in the given set of circumstances (e.g., Whom can you really count on to distract you from your worries when you feel under stress?). The second task was to indicate their level of satisfaction with the social supports they listed (Sarason et al., 1983). Responses were elicited on Likert-style scales ranging from strongly dissatisfied (1) to strongly satisfied (6). The measure yielded two scores for each participant: number of available supports (N) and satisfaction (S). The N score for the SSQ-Brief was computed by summing the number of support persons listed and dividing by the total number of items (6). The S score was calculated by summing responses to the satisfaction items and dividing by the total number of items (6). Previous research has demonstrated both the original 27-item SSQ (Sarason et al., 1983) and the SSQ-Brief (Sarason et al., 1987) to be valid and reliable measures of social support network quality.<sup>2</sup> Sarason et al. (1987) reported internal consistency coefficients of .90 and .93 for the N and S scores. In the current study, the following internal consistency

coefficients were obtained: SSQ-Brief N = .91 ( $M = 35.99, SD = 13.02$ ), SSQ-Brief S = .90 ( $M = 31.27, SD = 5.34$ ).

*Loneliness.* The revised UCLA loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1980) is a unidimensional self-report measure focusing on the quality of a respondent’s relationship with others. Loneliness is conceptualized as an emotional response to a discrepancy between desired and achieved levels of social contact (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Items do not include the term “lonely” or “loneliness.” Each of the 20 items is accompanied by a four-point frequency scale: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, and 4 = often. There are 10 positively worded items (e.g., I lack companionship) and 10 negatively worded items (e.g., There are people I can talk to). Negatively worded items indicate non-loneliness and thus were reverse scored. The resultant scores on all 20 items were summed to produce a total loneliness score ranging from 20 (lowest loneliness) to 80 (highest loneliness). Previous research has determined the UCLA loneliness scale to be valid and reliable (see, e.g., Russell et al., 1980). Russell et al. (1980) reported an internal consistency coefficient of .94. Test-retest reliability over a 7-month period in a longitudinal study of college freshman was reported as .62 (Cutrona, 1982). In the present study, an internal consistency coefficient of .88 ( $M = 35.37, SD = 8.82$ ) was obtained.

**Results**

Because there were substantially more female than male participants, initial analyses were conducted to determine whether there were gender-linked effects in the data. A series of 2 X 3 ANOVAs revealed no significant sex by MDL interaction effect for any dependant variable. A one-way K-group multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the effects of the three MDLs of expressive, conventional, and rhetorical on the six dependent variables of social support appraisals (family, friends, and others), social support network (number and satisfactoriness), and loneliness was employed because the dependent variables were related (Table 1).

**Table 1 - Correlations among the Dependent Variables**

	SS-A Friends	SS-A Others	SSQ Availability	SSQ Satisfaction	Loneliness
SS-A Family	.26**	.49**	.28**	.13	-.22*
SS-A Friends	--	.64**	.44**	.55**	-.62**
SS-A Others	--	--	.36**	.44**	-.57**
SSQ Availability	--	--	--	.38**	-.37**
SSQ Satisfaction	--	--	--	--	-.50**

\*  $p < .05$   
 \*\*  $p < .001$

Significant differences were found among the three MDLs on the dependent measures, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .800$ ,  $F(12, 232) = 2.281$ ,  $p < .01$ . The multivariate  $\eta^2$  based on Wilks's lambda was moderate, .11. Table 2 contains the means and standard deviations on the dependent variables for the expressive, conventional, and rhetorical message producers.

**Table 2 - Means and Standard Deviations on the Dependent Variables for the Three Message Design Logic Groups**

	Expressive		Conventional		Rhetorical	
	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )
SS-A Family	28.19 <sub>a</sub>	(4.61)	28.87 <sub>a</sub>	(3.89)	28.19 <sub>a</sub>	(3.66)
SS-A Friends	23.31 <sub>a</sub>	(3.74)	25.01 <sub>b</sub>	(3.20)	25.74 <sub>b</sub>	(2.10)
SS-A Others	25.35 <sub>a</sub>	(4.97)	28.44 <sub>b</sub>	(2.93)	28.26 <sub>b</sub>	(3.00)
SSQ Availability	5.51 <sub>a</sub>	(2.14)	5.91 <sub>a</sub>	(2.18)	6.70 <sub>a</sub>	(2.10)
SSQ Satisfaction	4.96 <sub>a</sub>	(.96)	5.17 <sub>a</sub>	(.95)	5.57 <sub>b</sub>	(.48)
Loneliness	40.19 <sub>a</sub>	(9.96)	34.32 <sub>b</sub>	(8.61)	33.48 <sub>b</sub>	(6.55)

Means in a row with differing subscripts differ significantly at  $p < .05$ .

As a follow-up to the MANOVA, a series of univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed. The ANOVAs were significant for SS-A Friends [ $F(2, 121) = 4.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ ], SS-A Others [ $F(2, 121) = 7.944$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ ], SSQ Satisfaction [ $F(2, 121) = 3.41$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ], and loneliness [ $F(2, 121) = 5.364$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ ]. However, the ANOVAs revealed no significant differences among MDLs in terms of SS-A Family [ $F(2, 121) = .444$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ ] or SSQ Availability [ $F(2, 121) = 2.18$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ ].

Post hoc analyses to the univariate ANOVAs consisted of pairwise comparisons using Fisher's Least Significant Differences (LSD). Results from these analyses demonstrated that expressive message producers gave significantly lower appraisals of their social support from friends and from others in a general sense than did conventional and rhetorical message producers (see Table 2). Furthermore, both expressive and conventional message producers reported significantly less satisfaction with their social support networks than did rhetorical message producers. Finally, expressive message producers reported significantly greater loneliness than did conventional and rhetorical message producers.

As a multivariate follow-up to the MANOVA, a discriminant analysis was conducted to determine whether participants' scores on the six variables—appraisals of social support (family, friends, and others), social support availability, satisfactoriness,

and loneliness—could predict their MDLs. Wilks’s lambda was significant,  $\Lambda = .80$ ,  $\chi^2(12, N = 124) = 26.43$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicating that overall, the predictors differentiated among the three MDLs. Seventeen percent of the variability of scores for the first discriminant function was accounted for by differences between the three MDLs. The residual Wilks’s lambda was not significant,  $\Lambda = .94$ ,  $\chi^2(5, N = 124) = 7.76$ ,  $p = .170$ . Because the predictors did not differentiate significantly between the three MDLs after partialling out the effects of the first discriminant function, only the first discriminant function was interpreted.

Table 3 displays the within-group correlations between the predictors and the discriminant function, as well as the standardized weights. With the exception of loneliness, all of the variables inversely related to the function. Based on these coefficients, appraisal of social support from others in general demonstrated the strongest relationship with the discriminant function, followed by loneliness, appraisal of social support from friends, social support satisfaction, social support availability, and appraisal of social support from family. On the basis of these results, the discriminant function was labeled “perceived social isolation.”

**Table 3 - Standardized Coefficients and Correlations of Predictor Variables with the Perceived Social Isolation Discriminant Function**

Predictors	Correlation coefficients with discriminant function	Standardized coefficients with discriminant function
SS-A Family	-.13	.41
SS-A Friends	-.60	.24
SS-A Others	-.88	-.97
SSQ Availability	-.27	.01
SSQ Satisfaction	-.34	.20
Loneliness	.71	.40

Expressive message producers ( $M = .80$ ) had the highest mean on perceived social isolation, whereas conventional ( $M = -.22$ ) and rhetorical message producers ( $M = -.18$ ) had much lower means. When we tried to predict MDL, we were able to classify correctly 67% of the individuals in this sample. To take into account chance agreement, a kappa coefficient, which may range from -1 to +1, was computed. The obtained value of .32 represents a moderate value.

Discussion

Taken as a whole, the results point to a disadvantage for the expressive communicator on the key indicators of social well-being chosen for this study, as demonstrated in their significantly higher mean on the social isolation discriminant function. The first research question investigated the relationship between individuals’ MDLs and their appraisals of social support. The results demonstrated that expressive communicators appraised their social support from friends and from general others significantly lower than did conventional and rhetorical communicators. However, appraisals of social support from family did not differ significantly as a function of MDL. Because the sample was comprised of university students, perceived social support from

friends and general others may be particularly important for their present social well-being (e.g., Shaver et al., 1985). Consider as evidence that the magnitude of the correlation between loneliness and social support from friends (-.67) was significantly greater than that between loneliness and social support from family (-.22), [ $t(121) = 4.025, p < .005$ ] (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

The finding that expressive communicators produced more negative appraisals of social support from friends and others is consonant with previous research demonstrating their more negative appraisals of humans, in general (i.e., their higher levels of cynicism and greater sense of futility in understanding others; Edwards & Shepherd, 2004) and their relatively low levels of trust (Edwards & Shepherd, 2007). It is also possible that expressive communicators' low appraisals of social support relate to its "objectively" lower quality owing to others' negative reactions to their message behavior (cf., O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987; Peterson & Albrecht, 1996).

Rhetorical communicators reported significantly greater satisfaction with their support systems than did expressive and conventional communicators. However, results revealed no significant differences among MDLs in perceived number of available social supports. The finding that, despite the comparable levels of perceived number of available supports, rhetorical communicators were more satisfied than others may be explained, in part, by their relatively more positive philosophies of human nature and greater faith in the potential of understanding others (Edwards & Shepherd, 2004). Additionally, the rhetorical communicator's ability to construct satisfying support relations may owe to their greater levels of community-oriented behavior (i.e., their tendency toward increased helping behavior and social capital; Edwards & Shepherd, 2007). It is also important to consider a more direct association between the definition of communication upon which rhetorical communicators operate and their increased satisfaction with networks of social support. The rhetorical figuration of communication as a process of constructing and negotiating social selves and situations may directly facilitate a more enriching experience of connectedness among support system members when compared to the conventional conception of communication as a cooperative game or the expressive conception of communication as a vehicle for the transference of mental property.

The second research question investigated the relationship between MDL and loneliness. Results demonstrated that expressive communicators were lonelier than their conventional and rhetorical peers. First, it is plausible that the higher loneliness of expressive communicators is partially explainable by others' reactions to expressive message behavior (which often resembles a "dump" of current thoughts and feelings with little regard for the consequences of such a message on the interactional partner or on the attainment of social goals). Thus, it is possible that expressive communicators experience greater loneliness because, minimally, their socio-communicative behavior is poorly received and maximally, there are subsequent decreased opportunities for the development of fulfilling interpersonal ties.

Second, the expressive definition of communication as a vehicle for the transmission of information may contribute to a heightened sense of the isolation of the individual (cf., Shepherd, 2006). The expressive communicator locates meaning within the individual person, which renders fully understanding another difficult and the experience of loneliness more probable. The conventional understanding of

communication as participation in a larger social game (which situates meaning in context) and the rhetorical understanding of communication as constitutive of social identities and realities (which situates meaning between interlocutors) likely afford a deeper sense of social inclusion, interdependency, and connectedness. Finally, the link between the expressive MDL and loneliness provides additional evidence of the association between loneliness and communicational inadequacies. Especially relevant is Edwards et al.'s (2001) assertion that loneliness is related to a lack of adequate scripts for social interaction. The fact that lonelier participants were those that tended to produce expressive messages in response to the Ron-test may be taken to demonstrate a lack of appropriate scripts for dealing with complicated regulatory interactions.

There are several limitations of the current study. The first concerns the nature of the sample as comprised of undergraduate students who were chiefly Caucasian and between the ages of 18 and 23 years old. Although the undergraduate student population is one for whom the variables of social support and loneliness hold import and is, therefore, deserving of selection for scholarly attention, caution must be exercised in attempts to generalize the associations here reported to populations with differing compositions. A second limitation is that the current investigation cannot directly test the proposed explanations for the associations between MDL and social support appraisals.

Future research should examine the causal mechanisms existing between an individual's personally-held implicit definition of communication (MDL) and perceived levels of social support and loneliness by focusing on the communication of social support. At least two broad potential causal pathways could be addressed. The first assumes that the actual support behavior to which individuals with varying MDLs are exposed does not differ, but is *perceived* as differentially available and satisfactory because of perceptual variations associated with MDL. This model could be tested experimentally by exposing expressive, conventional, and rhetorical message producers to a standardized message and assessing their perceptions of its supportiveness. An alternative model might suggest that differences in message *behavior* account for the observed effect of MDL on social support and loneliness. In other words, the three MDLs may be linked to skill/functional variation in eliciting support and building and maintaining supportive relationships. This is a plausible account, as effective strategies for seeking support require complex and sophisticated behavioral structures suited to the management of multiple objectives (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002). Such research would prove useful in further grounding explanations of social support in general theories of message production and reception (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002).

In conclusion, the current study provides evidence of the relative disadvantage of the expressive MDL for individuals' social well-being. Those who operated on the definition of communication as a medium for expressing thoughts and feelings felt less supported and lonelier: two related experiences linked with a plethora of adverse outcomes ranging from compromised physical health to relationship problems. The findings further demonstrate that implicit personal theories of communication are relevant not only in their association with more and less effective message behavior, but for individuals' overall quality of social experience.

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