

“You Are Being Unfair”: Emotional Trigger Phrases and Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Do certain phrases elicit emotional responses when used in conflict situations? Using trigger phrases developed by Schroth, Bain-Chekal, and Caldwell (2005), 139 participants were presented two conflict scenarios, which varied in setting, type of trigger, and gender of actors, and then rated their overall perceptions of the conflict, trigger phrases, and the actors. Commanding trigger phrases, or telling someone what to do, were perceived more satisfactory and more likely to lead to a resolution of the conflict when used in business settings rather than personal settings. Negative trigger phrases, or belittling the other person, were perceived as ineffective in conflict resolution, especially within a personal setting. Male trigger users rate trigger phrases more positively and are viewed more positively when using trigger phrases than female trigger users.

INTRODUCTION

Gender adds an interesting dimension to conflict. Men and women tend to use different types of strategies during conflict or when attempting to influence others (e.g., Dolinska & Dolinski, 2006). In addition, the perception of strategies varies depending on the gender of the perceiver. Carli (1990) found that women who used the typically masculine assertive language influenced other women more than those who used typically feminine tentative language. Generally speaking, respondents are more comfortable with individuals who act in ways consistent with stereotypes of their group membership (Seta, Seta, & McElroy, 2003). Finally, Edwards and Hamilton's (2004) complex model of gender communication shows that a person's gender role (the behaviors typically associated with their sex) is more influential on communication perceptions than their actual biological sex.

Emotion, Conflict, and Gender

Conflict involves emotion; however, the type of emotion affects the resolution of conflict. Van Kleef, De Dreu, and Manstead (2004) found that an expression of anger was more likely to lead to an opponent's concession in negotiation than an expression of happiness. Friedman, Anderson, Brett, Olekalns, Groate, and Lisco (2004) found that people perceive the use of the expression of anger as negatively affecting the resolution of the conflict. However, in contrast to this general belief, their findings supported that the expression of anger does not lead to reciprocity of anger and instead facilitates resolution. Although people respond to emotional trigger phrases with anger, the use of these phrases may be essential in conflict resolution.

Emotional Triggers

In an exploration of emotion, conflict, resolution and gender, Schroth, Bain-Chekal, and Caldwell (2005) identified common phrases that trigger emotional responses in conflict. Emotional trigger phrases are words and phrases that are used in conflict to elicit specific emotions in the recipient. Schroth et al. found three categories of emotional trigger phrases: negative labeling, commanding (i.e. telling the other person what to do), and power phrases. Negative labeling involves belittling the other party, examples include such phrases as: “don't be stupid” and “it was your fault”. Examples of commanding phrases are: “I think you need to...” and “you're not looking at my position”. Power phrases are those that appeal to a higher source (or ideal), blame, or abdicate responsibility, such as: “this is how we have always done it” and “why do you always...”.

Schroth et al. (2005) also measured participants' perception of the user of the emotional trigger phrases in both personal and business conflict scenarios. Two of the three categories of emotional trigger phrases elicited emotional responses. When negative labeling was used, anger was more likely elicited than frustration. However, when told what to do, frustration was more common than anger. A response of anger was twice as likely to occur in personal conflicts as workplace conflicts. When the parties in conflict were of the same gender, emotions were more likely

triggered when commanding phrases and negative labeling were present than when in a mixed gendered dyad, which is a man and woman in conversation. Gender effected both the participant's perception of the likelihood of the resolution and the fairness of the conflict as a whole. Men were not affected by the use of emotional trigger phrases with respect to conflict resolution, whereas women viewed the use of these phrases as "optimistic" toward providing a quicker resolution to the conflict. Women were more impacted by being told what to do, especially by other women, than men. Men were more impacted by negative labels, specifically rude comments by other men, than women. With the use of emotional triggers, women perceived the user as generally fair, while men viewed them as generally unfair. Overall this study creates a pattern of results that appear to be inconsistent. Although additional research is needed, the study suggests that while perceivers may not "like" the use of emotional triggers, they may see them as useful in bringing about a quicker resolution of conflict. Additionally, the perception of emotional triggers is gender dependent.

The current study examined the effect of emotional trigger phrases as they influenced the overall perceptions of the conflict, how these varied with gender, and in different social settings. Specifically, we empirically tested the findings by Schroth et al. (2005) involving the impact of negative labeling and commanding emotional trigger phrases in same sex dyads. It was hypothesized that: (1) there would be more satisfactory ratings of the overall conflict when negative labeling was used in male dyads. (2) Women would rate the overall conflict as more satisfactory when command triggers were used with other women. (3) Women would perceive the use of emotional trigger phrases as helping to resolve the conflict, whereas men would not be view them as helpful.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred thirty-nine University of Wisconsin - La Crosse students between the ages of 18 and 27 participated in this study ($M = 19.30$, $SD = 1.35$). Seventy-three percent of the participants were women. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (95.0%), followed by Asian/Pacific (2.2%) and Hispanic (1.4%). Forty percent of participants were freshman, thirty-eight percent were sophomores, thirteen percent were juniors, and nine percent were seniors. Fifty percent of participants were science majors, twenty-six percent were liberal studies majors, and twenty-four percent were other majors or undecided majors. Participants received extra credit in a psychology course for participating.

Design and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions and each was given two scenarios describing people engaging in different types of conflict. One scenario was a personal setting (roommates) and one scenario was a business setting (coworkers). Each of these scenarios varied in the use of emotional triggers (negative labeling, commanding, and no trigger) and gender of the two people in the scenarios was either male-male or female-female. See Figures 1, 2, and 3 for examples of a negative, commanding, and control scenario.

After reading each of the two scenarios, participants completed a questionnaire that asked about their reactions and perceptions to the conflict using a 5-point likert scale, where "1" was strongly disagree and "5" was strongly agree. Seven central dependent variables were measured: victim satisfaction, perpetrator satisfaction, typical interaction, perceived resolution, rating of trigger phrase, rating of perpetrator, and rating of victim. The independent variables were gender of participant (male and female), gender of conflict scenario dyads (male-male and female-female), and type of emotional trigger used (negative labeling, commanding phrases, and no trigger).

Bill and Steven worked at AC Delco together for three years and a year ago left the company to start their own business together. They both pay half of the rent each month for the office space they are leasing. Bill writes out a check to Steven for his half of the rent each month and Steven writes the check for the total amount to the landlord. For the past two months, Bill has been late giving his half of the rent to Steven, forcing Steven to pay the total amount himself. This has created financial strain for Steven. This month, Bill was three weeks late writing the rent check to Steven. Steven decides to confront Bill. This is the interaction that takes place:

Steven: "Hey Bill, can you tell my why you are unwilling to get your rent payment to me on time? You have been late with your half of the rent for the last two months and it would be better if you could pay on the first of the month like the rest of the world."

Bill: "Really? I didn't realize there was a problem."

Steven: "I feel like you are making me do more work because you can't get your rent in on time."

Bill: "I thought last month I had the check in on time."

Steven: "Don't be stupid! Last month it was almost two weeks late!"

Bill: "I'm sorry; I will get the check to you by the first of every month from now on."

Steven: "You can say you are going to get your rent check into me on time, but I don't think you will."

Figure 1. Male-male interaction with negative triggers in a business setting.

Amanda and Jennifer have been roommates for one year, and were good friends prior to living together for three years. For the past two weeks, Amanda has been leaving her dirty dishes in the sink and not attempting to clean them. During this time, Jennifer has simply cleaned the dishes herself without confronting Amanda about them. The longer this has gone on, the more Jennifer believes that Amanda expects her to clean up after her. After a very stressful day of classes, Jennifer returns to the apartment to a sink full of dishes and decides she just can't take it anymore, and goes to confront Amanda about it. This is the interaction that takes place:

Jennifer: "Hey Amanda, I really don't think you have been doing your share of cleaning up after yourself. I've been cleaning up after you for a long time now. You really should be picking up after yourself like the rest of the adults in the world."

Amanda: "What do you mean?"

Jennifer: "I think I should get more respect in this apartment and not have to live in a sty!"

Amanda: "I thought I cleaned my dishes today."

Jennifer: "Come on, there is a sink full of nasty, crusty dishes out there, and I know they aren't mine!"

Amanda: "Sorry, I will clean them later tonight."

Jennifer: "Please try to understand, I want to believe you are going to clean them later, but I don't think you will."

Figure 2. Female-female interaction with commanding triggers in a personal setting.

Amanda and Jennifer worked at AC Delco together for three years and a year ago left the company to start their own business together. They both pay half of the rent each month for the office space they are leasing. Amanda writes out a check to Jennifer for her half of the rent each month and Jennifer writes the check for the total amount to the landlord. For the past few months, Amanda has been late giving her half of the rent to Jennifer, forcing Jennifer to pay the total amount herself. This has created financial strain for Jennifer. This month, Amanda was three weeks late writing the rent check to Jennifer. Jennifer decides to confront Amanda. This is the interaction that takes place:

Jennifer: "Hey Amanda, you haven't been getting your rent check to me on time."

Amanda: "Really? I didn't realize there was a problem."

Jennifer: "Yeah, it's been going on a couple of months."

Amanda: "I thought last month I had the check in on time."

Jennifer: "No, it was late. You need to start getting it to me by the first of the month."

Amanda: "I'm sorry; I will get the check to you by the first of every month from now on."

Jennifer: "Are you sure you can keep that promise?"

Figure 3. Control female-female interaction with no triggers in a business setting.

RESULTS

The gender of the actor, gender of the participant, setting of the conflict, and type of trigger were assessed using a 2 x 2 x 2 x 3 ANOVA. Analysis focused on seven central dependent variables: victim satisfaction, perpetrator satisfaction, typical interaction, perceived resolution, rating of trigger phrase, rating of perpetrator, and rating of victim. There were no significant main effects with regard to gender of actor found. Although no significant differences in satisfaction ratings were found between triggers, participants rated negative triggers as less positive than commanding triggers and the control with no triggers. Both negative and commanding were viewed as less positive than no triggers, but negative triggers were viewed less positively than commanding $F(2, 277) = 27.99, p = .00$. Negative triggers lead to a less successful resolution of the conflict than commanding and control $F(2, 277) = 9.01, p = .00$. The interaction was seen as less typical with negative triggers than commanding and control $F(2, 277) = 11.14, p = .00$. Victims were perceived as less satisfied receiving negative triggers than commanding $F(2, 277) = 7.56, p = .00$. Perpetrators were perceived positively when using no trigger or a commanding trigger than if using negative triggers $F(2, 277) = 6.16, p = .00$. Male participants perceived the triggers more positively $F(1, 277) = 8.11, p = .01$ and rated the actor using a trigger more positively $F(1, 277) = 8.14, p = .01$. Triggers used in a business setting are more likely to lead to a successful resolution than triggers used in a personal setting $F(1, 277) = 43.79, p = .00$. Perceived satisfaction of both the victim $F(1, 277) = 24.67, p = .00$ and perpetrator $F(1, 277) = 9.94, p = .00$ in a business setting were viewed more positively than in a personal setting. Ratings of the victim in a business setting were viewed as more positive than a personal setting $F(1, 277) = 5.97, p = .02$.

Many significant interactions were also found. Commanding triggers were seen as more satisfactory in business settings than personal $F(2, 277) = 8.62, p = .00$. Triggers used in a business setting were more likely to lead to a perceived resolution than a personal setting, especially when commanding triggers were used $F(2, 277) = 3.47, p = .03$. Male perpetrators were perceived to be more satisfied with commanding trigger use than female perpetrators $F(2, 277) = 3.50, p = .03$. Participants viewed male actors using trigger phrases more positively in a business setting than a personal setting $F(2, 277) = 6.06, p = .02$. Male participants had more positive perceptions of the triggers than females yet both genders rated the control with no triggers equally $F(2, 277) = 3.34, p = .04$. Male perpetrators were rated more positively in a business setting than in a personal setting, whereas there were no differences in female perpetrator ratings $F(2, 277) = 7.51, p = .01$. Victim satisfaction was perceived highest in a business setting

where males used negative trigger phrases and lowest in personal settings with male negative trigger use and female no trigger use $F(2, 227) = 5.84, p = .01$. Male perpetrators in a business setting were rated highest when using commanding triggers or no triggers at all $F(2, 277) = 4.20, p = .02$.

DISCUSSION

Although the data did not fully support our hypotheses, several main effects were found. There was a main effect found between triggers and perceived victim satisfaction, where negative triggers were viewed to be the least satisfying to the victim and commanding the most satisfying to the victim. There were no significant findings between victim and perpetrator satisfaction and the gender of the actor in the scenarios. Male actors in a business setting using commanding triggers lead to the greatest satisfaction. Male actors using negative triggers and female actors using no triggers were perceived as less satisfying to the victim.

With respect to previous research conducted by Schroth, Bain-chekal, and Caldwell (2005), our results both expanded on and failed to support their findings. They found that successful conflict resolution was affected by the presence of emotional trigger words. Our research supported the overall findings but also found specific differences. The use of commanding triggers in a business setting were seen as leading to more successful resolution whereas commanding triggers used in personal setting were seen as less likely to lead to successful conflict resolution. Schroth et. al also showed perceptions of perpetrators using trigger words were seen more negatively than those using no triggers. Our research supported this finding, but also found that with respect to the type of trigger used, negative triggers were seen as least positive and the control as most positive. With respect to the Schroth et. al finding that women would view trigger use as more negative than men, we found women perceived both the perpetrator and the trigger more negatively than men.

There are a few limitations that may have affected our overall results. Since our sample sizes included 202 women and 76 men, we may not have been able to accurately study gender differences with regards to trigger phrases because of the differences in gender ratios. Because of the small male population on campus and to ensure equal numbers of participants across conditions, conditions were matched to participants in a non-random manner. The second limitation was an inability to conduct random sampling due to the method of obtaining participants. Since participants were motivated by extra credit in other psychology classes, our sample is not a true indication of the university's population. Participants may have been influenced by the severity of the phraseology in the conflict scenarios which lead to skewed ratings of the trigger phrases.

Many practical applications can be drawn from our results. Regardless of setting, it is better to not use trigger phrases in conflict situations. However the use of commanding trigger phrases in business settings seems to be more effective than negative or no triggers at all. Whereas commanding trigger phrases can be very useful in the corporate environment for resolving conflict where a hierarchy exists, the use of emotional trigger phrases in personal conflict situations is ill-advised. With regard to the trigger phrases alone, negative triggers were viewed as least typical in conflict interactions. Negative triggers were not perceived to be effective in conflict resolution. Gender differences were important to note in regards to the perceptions of individuals using triggers and perceptions of triggers themselves. Men had a more positive view of trigger phrases and were rated more positively when using them than women were, suggesting that men view emotional trigger phrases as effective and essential tools in communication. Women's response to trigger phrases may reflect sex-role socialization where women tend to communicate in a less direct manner than men (Tannen, 1990).

Future research may be useful in examining further gender differences with a larger and more diverse male sample size. Although no significant results were found regarding participant conflict histories, more extensive research regarding past experiences may enhance understandings of responses to conflict.

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