

Claire Fitzpatrick

Professor Wells

Research Methods

10 May 2018

Let's Talk About Stress, Baby:

Examining Perception's Role in Student Stress Communication

I. Introduction

Stress is widely seen as universal throughout college students. Impending deadlines and exams, responsibilities of living on their own, and relationship pressures are all common factors which contribute to feelings of overwhelming stress and anxiety for college students. Though colleges provide coping resources like counseling, students are likely to express their concerns to those who are closest- their own peers. College living may perpetuate a specific way of coping with experiences through the way in which students interact with their peers. Communication about stress between roommates and friends is plentiful, as these are the people with whom students spend the most time. Thus, this project studies the specific motivations and linguistics within stress communication as students cope with their stressors.

Academic stress has been proven to be detrimental to students' health relating to depression, anxiety, physical illness, substance abuse, and risk of suicide (MacGeorge, E. L., Samter, W., & Gillihan, S. J., 2005). Support communication is one way to remedy this stress, as proven by previous research, which has discussed findings that support moderates the relationship between stress and health problems (MacGeorge, E. L., Samter, W., & Gillihan, S. J., 2005). Being part of a close-knit college community while living in a dorm room consisting of a small number of students allows for accessible communication at most times. Therefore, because stress within a

college setting is so common and research is accessible, I have chosen to research how this communication occurs between peers through the sort of language peers use to both express stress and relieve others' stress.

In this report I will first provide a literature review covering key issues in my field of study relating to stress communication and coping amongst students and the effects of stress communication or apprehension on anxiety and academic stress. In addition, I will describe the Human Perception/Communication Model which informs this project and its findings.

II. Literature Review

Fairly vast research has been conducted pertaining to elements of this study, such as modes of stress management, coping through social networking, and the effects of expressing thoughts and feelings of stress and anxiety. This research has provided support for the base of this study- that students under stress benefit from counseling. Previous studies have defined stress as “the body’s physiological and psychological response to a real or perceived threat or challenge” (International Communication Association, 2011, p. 1). Programmatic studies have revealed that support programs for college students under such stress have been proven to spark change in stress management behaviors and stress-related measure subscales. One such study has looked at the efficacy of a computer program designed to deliver tailored motivational feedback and tools pertaining to stress management to college students. Results indicated that the tailored and interactive aid from the *MyStudentBody—Stress* program had the most significant positive effect on students than either the control website or the group without treatment (Chiauzzi, E., Brevard, J., Thurn, C., Decembrele, S., & Lord, S., 2008). This study has suggested that some sort of support is beneficial to students under stress. Further structured studies have focused on the positive influence of emotional support through social networking sites on perceived life

stress. One study has focused on whether physical and social attraction among Facebook partners are predictive of perceived emotional support. Results indicated that homophily, or similarity, is an important perceptual factor in seeking emotional support. As Facebook is tailored toward a young student population which shares similarities in attitude, it may serve as a healthy community for college students to seek emotional support in times of stress (Wright, K. B., 2012). This research is pertinent to the present study because it exhibits the importance of studying a population which possesses similarities in attitude. For the present study, a general population consisting of college students and their peers aligns with these findings, as their attitudes toward the college experience, including stress, are similar. Additionally, they share experiences together which form these comparable attitudes. Research has also suggested that closer relations, like friends, are likely to provide support due to a greater concern for such a relation or expectations of reciprocity (Cohen, S., 1992). This also suggests that an appropriate population for our study might be college roommates who have stayed together after freshman year. Though these studies reveal the influence of seeking aid on perceived stress and contribute to the formation of this study by informing the study of a fitting population, they focus solely on the way in which online communication affects perceived stress. Thus, research has looked into the way in which in-person support can positively affect feelings of anxiety. One study has found that emotional support like attentive listening and validation of the emotional experience lead to a more effective and positive appraisal of possible stressors. According to the research, this is due to the fact that this sort of communication allows for participants to better process negative emotions. However, the study did not find any significant research on the effect of emotional support specifically on feelings of anxiety. The researchers attribute this to the limited face validity of their instruments and measurements of anxiety in the lab setting (MacGeorge, E. L.,

Samter, W., & Gillihan, S. J., 2005). Research also shows that expressing thoughts and emotions through writing or talking allows a person to organize their thoughts through the construction of language. In doing so, these interactions serve as a way to think through trauma and stress, allowing for the participant to overcome these experiences systematically (Does Communication Matter?, 2011). For instance, they are able to accept experiences by documenting them in an external fashion (Lyubomirsky, S., Sousa, L., & Dickerhoof, R., 2006). The effects of internalizing stress and neglecting to communicate negative feelings have been justified as significantly negative. Research has shown that high communication apprehension, defined as the “tendency to experience anxiety when communicating or thinking about communicating with others,” (Gearhart, C. C., & Bodie, G. D., 2012, p. 28) acts as a barrier to engaging in the communication necessary to form close relationships in college (McCroskey, J. C., & Sheahan, M. E., 1978). Communication apprehension has also been examined as a common source of academic stress (Gearhart, C. C., & Bodie, G. D., 2012). As a result of this apprehension to communicate with peers, college students internalize their stress, allowing for intrusive thoughts of their stressors to accumulate. Research has shown that when intrusive thoughts are present, increased anxiety is observed (Morrison, R., & O'Connor, R. C., 2005). Thus, those who choose to internalize their stress and anxiety and who choose not to communicate these mental burdens get caught in a cycle of inducing their own anxiety. Though research has shown that people are better off communicating their anxieties, there has been very little research showing the impact of specific types of communicated support on perceived anxiety in a college setting. Research outside of a laboratory setting has also been neglected, which may have skewed results on actual communication behavior. More importantly, though, is a lack of research regarding motivation to communicate stress and the process through which someone goes when forming an expression of

their stress or a seemingly appropriate response to someone else's communication. Therefore, I have also studied the Human Perception/Communication Model, which demonstrates the process of perception as contributing to the formation of communication. The model illustrates that an infinite number of stimuli available to a person are reduced to only that which a person is able to perceive, as "no individual, no matter how smart or perceptive, can ever discover all the stimuli in an environment" (Russell, 2000, pg. 9). After initial reduction, humans "name" stimuli and continue to reduce the stimuli which have been discovered. In the "name" figure, an infinite number of stimuli becomes a "simplistic singularity," as language enters the process. We then further reduce stimuli by categorizing them in the "classify" stage, when "classified linguistic images assume the characteristics of other members of the class" (Russell, 10). Additionally, in the "classify" stage, humans allow characteristics associated with a category or class to have a "larger role in perceptions than directly observed behaviors" (Russell, 10), which will become particularly salient in discovering how gender affects stress communication patterns. Then, the model demonstrates that we make meaning from these simplified categories and language labels. Finally, through these separate stages of perception, we communicate ideas we've crafted from perceptions of external stimuli. This model is particularly important in supporting underlying motivations of communication patterns among peers. Hopefully, findings from this study on the identification of perceptual errors as contributing to communication patterns will allow for more cognizant choices in both stress expression and forming responses to others' stress communication.

III. Research Questions

This research has led to the following questions: What are the self-reported ways and motivations of communicating perceived stress levels among BC sophomores? How does someone's gender affect their patterns of stress communication?

IV. Project Design

I have studied friend communication and perceived stress throughout BC sophomores through an interpretive paradigm. An interpretive frame focuses on understanding more deeply how meaning is created, as it “draws from hermeneutics, which aims at a holistic understanding” (Tracy, 2013, pg. 42). In this case, I have attempted to more deeply understand the motivations behind communicating about stress through feelings of openness and the sort of language which is used to both communicate stress and respond to this communication. In gathering my data, I have structured my research as descriptive research. Descriptive research is characterized by understanding “*what* is happening, *how* it happens, and *what* the people involved in those happenings think about it” (Spickard, 2017, pg. 40). The research was descriptive because it relied heavily on qualitative descriptions of participants' interactions with peers. These descriptions contributed to the interpretive paradigm, as the openness of participants' ability to describe their peer interactions allowed for more detail, resulting in a more robust understanding of the topic at hand. I gathered several types of data, namely reports of acts, behavior, and events, self-identity, personal feelings, and cultural knowledge. I gathered information through interviews. In 8 interviews lasting roughly 15 minutes each, I learned about specific stressors BC sophomores tend to respond to, and heard reports of interactions with their roommates pertaining to stress and anxiety. Cultural knowledge, or “things everyone knows,” (Spickard, pg. 61). played a part in how students define their stressors, which tended to be academic stress on a college campus, as well as how they perceived societal and cultural norms as contributing to

their communication patterns. In order to gather this data, I interviewed 4 sophomore women and 4 sophomore men at Boston College who have had one year of dorm living. Narrowing this sample, I conducted a purposive study, which targeted sophomores who have chosen to stay with their freshman roommate(s).

V. Data Analysis

The data set consisted of 8 interviews with Boston College sophomores who spoke about stress communication experiences with their roommates. I analyzed the data nominally, as I broke the population into 2 groups- one of 4 males and one of 4 females who have stayed with their freshman roommate(s). Data was also analyzed using the Human Perception/Communication Model (Russell, 2000), which demonstrates the incomplete nature of the process of human perception and resultant selectivity in human communication.

Using in-vivo and descriptive coding strategies from the insights of Sarah Tracy, I focused on highlighting language which indicated differences and motivations between using emotional language- relating to internal reactions and feelings (i.e. “I feel”)- and situational language- which describes only the situation and reveals nothing of your emotional reaction- in expressing stress, as well as those of emotional and advisory language- relating to suggestions for the future (i.e. “you should”)- in responding to another’s stress. Additionally, I focused on how participants perceived gender norms as relevant to how people communicate their stress. Then, through further primary coding, I separated women’s responses from men’s responses in order to aid the organization of my own analysis and to further investigate how communication differs between males and females, both subconsciously and consciously when asked about perceived differences. The process of secondary pattern coding narrowed 385 total codes to 7 patterns in women’s responses, and 4 patterns in males’ responses from a total of 295 codes.

After rendering my codes as hyper-specified, I condensed the 11 codes into four patterns, all bearing an integral element of perception: 1) Relationships as a Two-Way Street/Noticing the Other (i.e. perceiving a relationship as reciprocal fosters more frequent and open communication between relationship partners and noticing behavioral patterns allows for appropriate response); 2) Comfort, Openness, Closeness, and Trust (i.e. four relationship factors which affect willingness to express your stress and ability to respond to another's communication); 3) Emotional Empathy and Listening (i.e. how you might perceive the emotional openness of your communication partner as having an effect on your expression and how this emotional availability in the relationship might affect the response you receive); and 4) Gender Differences (i.e. whether women perceive men as being available and receptive to communication and patterns in men's response behaviors).

VI. Data Interpretation

Patterns within participants' responses reveal that perceptions heavily affect students' stress communication with their peers and their responses to others' stress communication. Codes have been identified as similar across both men and women, but further interpretation has revealed differing subconscious patterns in communication between men and women. The following interpretation will explore how major themes in this research contribute to the linguistic effects of perception in stress communication between peers.

Friendship is a Two-Way Street/Noticing the Other:

Previous research has designated that those with advanced understandings of friendship define a friend to be someone "with whom one ... engages in mutual self-exploration and validation ... while retaining personal autonomy" (Burlison & Samter, 1990, pg. 167). This emphasis on mutuality highlights the importance of both members benefiting from a friendship.

This may be brought about through reciprocal communication, that which relies on a give-and-take of information and response. In stress communication, this can be seen as both parties of the relationship benefiting from freely communicating stress and receiving an appropriate or helpful response as a result. As evidenced by the research conducted in this study, students are more likely to openly communicate their stress with a friend if they perceive the relationship as reciprocal. Language like “vent ... back and forth” (Megan. Personal Interview. April 10, 2018), “don’t want to hurt each other” (Sabrina. Personal Interview. April 12, 2018) and “trust each other” (Megan. April 10, 2018) indicate patterns across the nature of friendship communication as mutuality. This mutuality also requires a consciousness of the other, or an awareness of how a friend tends to deal with his or her stress. Trends in data showed that perceiving changes in another’s behavior patterns causes a sort of confrontational communication in responding to their stress. Participants noted that this sort of communication was appropriate when their roommate was acting different than usual. As a result, this affected who initiates stress communication. Two participants in this study exhibited the importance of this awareness. “I notice... ‘oh she hasn’t been around in a while like she’s been really stressed,’” said Maxine when indicating that she initiated communication with her roommate after noticing behavioral changes in her friend (Maxine. Personal Interview. April 12, 2018). Samuel described a similar pattern in initiating stress communication with his roommate as he said, “There’s really less outright communication and more like I could notice patterns of behavior ... I would ask first what was wrong instead of you know, him coming to me” (Samuel. Personal Interview. April 23, 2018). In deriving information from their peers’ changing behavior patterns, participants perceived that they were stressed and decided to intervene by addressing their behavior and confronting them. They perceived if they needed help. Though the Human Perception/Communication Model shows us

that we make conscious decisions in perceptions which allow us to communicate in times such as these, it highlights an important factor of the incompleteness and inaccuracy of our perception process. The model illustrates, “no individual, no matter how smart or perceptive, can discover all the stimuli in an environment” (Russell, pg. 9). Our human process allows for us to make various shortcuts in the stimuli we choose to perceive in many stages of the process. Therefore, we choose to perceive only those which are relevant to us. We then start to categorize the information we’ve chosen in the “naming” stage which creates a “simple singularity” from which we derive our communication to others. (Russell, 10). The data found in this study supports that we have the ability to make errors in perceiving others due to the limited number of stimuli we are able to perceive, and can never be sure whether our perceptions are closer or further to reality. This can be particularly dangerous in comparing ourselves to others. The data shows that students are inclined to perceive others as more competent than they are across various categories, including career aspirations and how they handle stress. Both Sabrina and Samuel discussed a feeling of inferiority in relation to their peers during career-related conversations. Sabrina voiced that her roommate knows more about what she wants to do with her life (Sabrina. Personal Interview. April 12, 2018), while Samuel said, “I feel like a lot of people are ... on top of it but then ... I don’t know what I want to do yet” (Samuel. April 23, 2018). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the “average number of years that wage and salary workers had been with their current employer was 4.2 years in January 2016, down from 4.6 years in January 2014” (United States Department of Labor, 2016). The Bureau also reported that “individuals born in the latter years of the baby boom held an average of 11.9 jobs from age 18 to 50.” (United States Department of Labor, 2017). The frequency and volume of change in jobs might indicate a level of job dissatisfaction, possibly characterized by task dissatisfaction

(Robbins & Judge, 2017, pg. 250). Although their peers may present themselves as confident about their career and choices, the likelihood that they are either masking uncertainty or that they won't end up sticking to these career decisions is very high, as evidenced by decreasing job retention rates. In this way, students' perceptions of others' career knowledge are likely wrong, therefore causing these students to feel inferior in error. In perceiving how others handle their own stress, the data indicates that students who have a tendency to turn inward, as a way of keeping the burden of their own stress off others' shoulders or pretending that they do not feel any stress at all, are perceived as handling stress better. Samuel said that "Some people ... in college don't consider certain things to be like worthy of communicating to their roommates so they don't communicate it ... they won't communicate it because ... they feel like everyone else is dealing totally fine" (Samuel. April 23, 2018). However, research has shown that refusing to address your stressors through communication can lead to worsened health effects, or that "avoidance is believed to suppress one's feelings and further contribute to distress, anxiety, and ruminative thoughts" (Afifi et al., 2017, pg. 77). In this way, there is a stigma around stress, that those who are quiet about what they are feeling are actually handling stress better. As a result, students commonly don't communicate their stress, as a way of pretending that everything is okay. However, it is shown that communicating your stress is a better outlet. In this way, the perception that these people are handling their stress better is likely wrong and flimsy ground for others to compare themselves and feel inferior. In conjunction with insights from the Human Perception/Communication Model and further research, the data collected in this study supports the findings that students rely on perception in order to make decisions about whether they communicate about stress and how they respond to others' stress communication.

Comfort, Openness, Closeness, and Trust:

Data from this study has highlighted the different implications of having a relationship based on factors like comfort, openness, closeness, and trust. Students indicated that a relationship characterized by these factors serves as incentive to communicate their stress. Research has described relational closeness as “the core conceptualization of successful ... friend relationships in most relational research.” (National Communication Association, 2008, pg. 5). Past research has shown that there is a connection between closeness and being comfortable in talking to a friend. It states that people have defined a friend as someone who people can talk to, and that friendship “[consists] of three interrelated characteristics: voluntariness, intimacy, and fragility.” (McBride & Bergen, 2008, pg. 51). Specifically, research defines close relationships as being “quite intimate” (McBride & Bergen, pg. 51). This recognizes an important tie between closeness and being able and willing to talk. These definitions exemplify how people take information and stimuli from their relationships with their peers and categorize them as being “close.” Participants’ language has indicated that being “close” to a relationship partner is related to being comfortable and talking. There were significant ties between the language used in describing a close relationship and being comfortable discussing a variety of topics. As Emma described, “me and my direct are very very close like she’s my best friend ... I always feel very comfortable talking to her about pretty much literally anything” (Emma. Personal Interview. April 9, 2018). Megan indicated, “we’re such close friends ... it just makes everything so much more comfortable” (Megan. April 10, 2018). The subconscious use of less explicit language in participants’ responses also indicated closeness. Maxine described her communication with her roommate using language like “we.” “We just have a pretty good system of checking in on each other and making sure we’re not completely overwhelmed,” she said (Maxine. April 12, 2018). Research has shown this sort of language as an indication of closeness, as it has defined the word

“we” as being used to indicate that “I do not stand alone” (Íñigo-Mora, 2004, pg. 34). As friendship is characterized by a lack of “standing alone” through ideas of mutuality, it can be assumed that the use of “we” is an indication of a close friendship. In tying this language to the comfort of being able to talk about anything, Maxine said, “my roommate’s definitely someone that I would go to talk to about anything that’s stressing me out.” She also said, “just because we’re pretty close ... We’re ... pretty good about talking about anything that’s bothering us” (Maxine. April 12, 2018). This supports the idea that people who perceive closeness with a relationship partner see more reason to communicate their stress. These perceptions of closeness also affect what sort of language is used in expressing stress. Data has found that patterns in expression behaviors and language can become cyclical. Emma describes that though she is very close with her direct roommate and feels comfortable talking about anything with her, she feels that “if I was talking to somebody I wasn’t as close to, I’d definitely be more situational” (Emma. April 9, 2018). This supports theories about being comfortable through closeness, and expands insights from the Human Perception/Communication Model. The model illustrates that “an individual’s communication can become another person’s environment with stimuli available for discovery and interpretation” (Russell, 14). If a person, such as Emma, perceives a relationship as distant or less close than she’s comfortable with, and frequently uses situational language in expressing her stresses as a result, she is perpetuating the impersonal nature of the relationship. According to the model, her impersonal language will affect how her relationship partner perceives the relationship as distant, and will also likely engage in solely situational language. This is supported by the idea that friendship is characterized by the ability to “[share] intimate thoughts and feelings” (Burlison & Samter, pg. 3). As situational language does not give insight into how a person is internally reacting or feeling about the situation, it is

appropriate to use in a distant relationship. Since friendship is defined by encouraging this sort of self-disclosure, the use of situational language perpetuates a cycle of impersonality and a lack of relationship development. It can be hypothesized, then, that emotional language is used when relationships are defined as “close,” which brings us to the next point of analysis.

Emotional Empathy and Listening:

As evidenced in the findings relating to closeness, emotional language is important in close relationships. Particularly, as defined by research on communication skills in friends, a friend is someone “with whom one shares intimate thoughts and feelings” (Burleson & Samter, pg. 3). These “feelings” can be described as emotions, thus supporting that emotional language is important to well-developed friendships. More specifically is the notion of empathy, which is a factor of response which caters to emotion. Past research defines empathy as “the tendency to vicariously feel, imagine, and value other’s feelings and perspectives,” and supports the general importance of emotional language within close friendship communication as it distinguishes that “empathic competencies are important building blocks of deep and lasting social connections” (Konrath et al., 2014, pg. 130). However, the data found in this study has revealed a pattern in the frequency of emotional responses in specific situations. Many participants indicated the circumstantial nature and appropriateness of emotional responses. It has been revealed that among relatable situations, like common hobbies or relationship stress, participants frequently see empathetic emotional responses, like “I understand what you’re going through,” or “I’m sorry that you’re going through this.” These are also described through experiences of validating their feelings. Matthew discussed the benefits of a sympathetic response from his roommate who is experiencing a similar academic struggle (Matthew. Personal Interview. April 25, 2018), while Samuel discussed that he tends to look for emotional empathy regarding topics like romantic

relationships- especially because he has seen his roommate go through something similar (Samuel. April 23, 2018). The trends among these two participants bring up an important question about the circumstantiality of a response which appeals to emotion through empathy. Participants noted that as effective as emotional responses can be when in reference to something common or relatable, they can be perceived as insensitive or off-putting in a particularly emotional situation or one about which the receptor lacks experience. In describing his roommate's stress about political corruption in his home country, Andrew voiced that an emotional response would be inappropriate because he could not empathize with his roommate's struggles (Andrew. Personal Interview. April 24, 2018). Megan also voiced a similar sentiment in describing her roommate's stress relating to a topic which Megan knows very little about, as she says "I can't help her with anything actually" (Megan. April 10, 2018). The commonality between these two responses lies within the apprehension to both advise and empathize as a result of a lack of situational understanding. Previous research has also indicated a relationship between emotion and advice by "[suggesting] that advice givers would be most effective if they also aim to improve a distressed person's emotional state" (Feng, 2009, pg. 117). As this research has indicated the importance of emotional elements in an advice-giving response, data found in this study that a lack of vicarious understanding can deter the use of emotional and advisory language is supported. This brings us to another important trend throughout the data-listening. Participants widely hold the belief that listening can be more effective than any speech in certain circumstances. Many voiced sentiments about the importance of being an "outlet," as described by Megan (April 10, 2018). Especially if the content of their friend's stress is unrelatable, participants discussed the value of letting their peer voice all of their frustrations and stress as a way of "getting it all out." Participants used words like "vent" or "dish everything"

(Megan. April 10, 2018), or get “everything out there” (Maxine. April 12, 2018). These findings are supported by research that “when a speaker perceives that a listener is paying attention, speakers tend to feel more supported ... speakers also perceive attentive listeners as being more communicatively competent” (Fedesco, 2015, pg. 104). The question becomes, then, of how to distinguish a situation as needing an emotional response as opposed to just listening to the other person express their stress. The answer to this question can be found by dissecting tendencies of what is described by the Human Perception/Communication Model as a “healthy” individual. The model illustrates that a healthy individual is able to categorize and focus on many different balanced stimuli. This idea relates to ideas of cognitive complexity. An individual who is highly cognitively complex “might more likely attend to greater numbers of stimuli and make more sophisticated discriminations between and among them” (Russell, pg. 21). In this way, someone who is cognitively complex ought to be able to distinguish, given the verbal and nonverbal stimuli presented to them by their communication partner, what sort of response would be most appropriate, if any. Findings in this study connected this idea of cognitive complexity to appropriate responses through perception, as evidenced by the language used in responses to interview questions regarding how they respond to their roommates’ stress. For instance, Emma said, “if it’s something serious ... I don’t want to [use advisory language] because that’s not what would help them” (Emma. April 9, 2018). Emma is able to attend to multiple stimuli like her roommate’s tone of voice in describing the situation, as well as the content of the message itself, and through the process of perception, she can identify an appropriate response.

Gender Norms:

The Human Perception/Communication Model identifies a key element of perception as classification. As described by the model, “The single image in the *Classify* figure emerges from

a linguistic singularity rather than from discovered stimuli. Classified linguistic images assume the characteristics of other members of the class” (Russell, pg. 10). This concept supports the conception of gender norms. The data collected in this study highlighted a series of expected communication behaviors among men and women. A pattern among women described apprehension to communicate their stress with the opposite gender. Participants voiced “I’m a lot more likely to go to my girl friends than my guy friends” (Megan. April 10, 2018). In her preferences to communicate stress with other women, Megan also voiced elements of discomfort in discussing the prospect of “venting” to her guy friends. This is likely a result of how Megan perceives men’s receptivity of stress communication- a simplistic perception crafted by a classified linguistic image of men being less receptive than women. As norms are defined by “situationally based standards for behavior that prescribe certain actions” (Berkos et al., 2001, pg. 291), and classified by the group in which the person is perceived to belong, the classification stage of perception is integral to forming and cohering to norms. This idea of expectations is also exemplified by Maxine, who says that “in general, women are definitely a lot more willing and open to talking about their problems with their friends” (Maxine. April 12, 2018). When classifying someone as a woman based off of physical stimuli like appearance, Maxine expects her to enact certain communication behaviors like openness. In describing her guy friends’ stress communication behaviors, Maxine said, “they know everything about each other, it’s so weird ... it’s just so silly and not what you would expect” (Maxine. April 12, 2018). These friends violate the expectations and norms she believes for men, and it is important to note that her language in describing these violations indicates the extent to which these norms are widely-held. By using words like, “weird,” “silly,” “not what you’d expect,” she indicates that others hold these norms and perceptions of men’s communication to be true, as well. Trends in

the data illustrated that these norms cause women to feel more comfortable communicating their stress to other women, as they perceive women to be more receptive to communication. In describing their own responses to other women, women exhibited these behaviors to hold a kernel of truth, as they frequented emotional language and empathy, as well as advice stemming from their own personal experience. Men described norms of their own gender in a very different way. Men tended to create extreme norms for themselves. Half of the male participants of the study described men as frequenting harsh advisory language, like “be the man,” “take action,” or “move on” (Samuel. April 23, 2018). The other half, however, said that men frequent subtle humor and slight verbal jabs to lighten the situation at hand. Andrew described that a subtle jab relieves stress and gets a laugh out (Andrew. April 24, 2018). However, three of the four male participants described their own response patterns as being much more mild than either of these extremes. For example, Samuel and Pedro described their own response patterns as giving subtle advice by giving others the option to take this advice or leave it. Samuel describes his communication by saying, “In my personal experience this is what has helped me ... you can do this if you want” (Samuel. April 23, 2018). Pedro describes similar sentiments in saying that he gives his own subtle advice based on his experience (Pedro. Personal Interview. April 25, 2018). Andrew exhibits similar patterns, as he explains “suggestions” to the other (Andrew. April 24, 2018), which indicates much more subtle language than “take action,” and “be the man.” This evidence supports an interesting hypothesis. As they didn’t put into action their own advice, it can be hypothesized that because our perceptions are so subjective and relate to a limited number of stimuli, there is no way to assure that norms conclusively attribute to the ways in which we communicate our stress. While people may attribute their expression and response patterns to their gender, as there is a clear mismatch between male norms and male behavior and because

the incomplete nature of our perceptions contributes to the conception of norms, there is support for the idea that gender contributes to our communication patterns less than circumstance.

VII. Conclusion

As discussed in the introduction and supported by findings in other literature, stress is especially pervasive throughout college students. It is important that students find healthy ways to communicate their stressors to others, as withholding information and sentiments pertaining to stress can have severe physical and psychological health consequences. This study has gone further in researching motivations behind peer stress communication and the linguistic and nonverbal expressions formed as seemingly appropriate responses to these communications. The data has found an important underlying theme of perception to be especially pertinent to the decision to communicate and formation of expressions. It has been found that humans perceive stimuli within relationships as indications of whether their partner would be receptive and open to their communication. Additionally, perceptions of the language or nonverbal stimuli in others' stress communication elicits a certain response, which can span from emotional language to advisory language. Findings have also found perception to be especially salient in the differences between men's stress communication and women's stress communication. As perception is incomplete and therefore inaccurate, data supports that gender norms are likely untrue and a construct of society. In this way, it is inconclusive that gender affects patterns of stress communication more directly than circumstance.

If I were to conduct this study again in the future, I would be cognizant of a few things. First, I found myself neglecting to voice record half of the interviews I conducted, and found my notes for each interview to be just barely sufficient. As I conducted 8 interviews, it was hard to try to remember exactly what participants said in their responses, and I did not feel comfortable

relying solely on my memory of the interactions I had with participants. Therefore, I would look to conduct the interviews with more procedural consistency in order to obtain results that are as thorough and specific as possible. Given more time, I would also want to conduct more interviews for a more thorough study with a greater volume of consistent patterns. Further researchers might also be interested to examine how stress expression and response patterns between peers differ between freshman year and senior year, as stressors change and grow in magnitude.

References

- Afifi, T. D., Shahnazi, A. F., Coveleski, S., Davis, S., Merrill, A. (2017). Testing the Ideology of Openness: The Comparative Effects of Talking, Writing, and Avoiding a Stressor on Rumination and Health. *Human Communication Research*, 43, 76-101.
- Andrew. (2018, April 24). Personal interview.
- Berkos, K. M., Allen, T. H., Kearney, P., Plax, T. G. (2001). When Norms are Violated: Imagined Interactions as Processing and Coping Mechanisms. *Communication Monographs*, 68(3), 289-300.
- Burleson, B. R., & Samter, W. (1990). Effects of Cognitive Complexity on the Perceived Importance of Communication Skills in Friends. *Communication Research*, 17(2), 165-182.
- Chiauszi, E., Brevard, J., Thurn, C., Decembrele, S., & Lord, S. (2008). MyStudentBody--Stress: An Online Stress Management Intervention for College Students. *Journal of Health Communication*, 13, 555-572. doi:10.1080/10810730802281668
- Cohen, S. (1992). Stress, Social Support, and Disorder. *Hemisphere Press*.
- Colleges Grapple with Mental Health Problems. (2002). Retrieved from <http://icof.infobaselearning.com.proxy.bc.edu/support-materials/learn-more-about/c/cu/colleges-grapple-with-mental-health-problems.aspx?sr=1&ID=8420&tab=1>
- Emma. (2018, April 9). Personal interview.
- Fedesco, H. N. (2015). The Impact of (In)effective Listening on Interpersonal Interactions. *The International Journal of Listening*, 29, 103-106.
- Feng, B. (2009). Testing an Integrated Model of Advice Giving in Supportive Interactions. *Human Communication Research*, 35, 115-129.

- Gearhart, C. C., & Bodie, G. D. (2012). Sensory-Processing Sensitivity and Communication Apprehension: Dual Influences on Self-Reported Stress in a College Student Sample. *Communication Reports*, 25(1), 27-39. doi:10.1080/08934215.2012.672216
- Íñigo-Mora, I. (2004). On the use of the personal pronoun *we* in communities. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 3(1), 27-52.
- International Communication Association. (2011). Does Communication Matter? *Conference Papers*, 1-43.
- Konrath, S., Corneille, O., Bushman, B. J., Luminet, O. (2014). The Relationship Between Narcissistic Exploitativeness, Dispositional Empathy, and Emotion Recognition Abilities. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 38, 129-143.
- Lyubomirsky, S., Sousa, L., & Dickerhoof, R. (2006). The Costs and Benefits of Writing, Talking, and Thinking About Life's Triumphs and Defeats. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(4), 692-708. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.90.4.692
- MacGeorge, E. L., Samter, W., & Gillihan, S. J. (2005). Academic Stress, Supportive Communication, and Health. *Communication Education*, 54(4), 365-372.
doi:10.1080/03634520500442236
- Matthew. (2018, April 25). Personal interview.
- Maxine. (2018, April 12). Personal interview.
- McBride, M. C., & Bergen, K. M. (2008). Communication Research: Becoming a Reluctant Confidant: Communication Privacy Management in Close Friendships. *Texas Speech Communication Journal*, 33(1), 50-61.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Sheahan, M. E. (1978). Communication Apprehension, Social Preference,

and Social Behavior in a College Environment. *Communication Quarterly*, 26(2), 41-45.

Retrieved from <https://web-b-ebSCOhost-com.proxy.bc.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=9&sid=cb70af07-6061-4897-aa35-ed1ee12a8528%40sessionmgr120&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=18586629&db=ufh>.

Megan. (2018, April 10). Personal interview.

Morrison, R., & O'Connor, R. C. (2005). Predicting Psychological Distress in College Students: The Role of Rumination and Stress. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(4), 447-460.
doi:10.1002/jclp.20021

National Communication Association. (2008). Defining Closeness in Long-Distance and Geographically Close Friendships. *Conference Papers*.

Pedro. (2018, April 25). Personal interview.

Robbins, S. P., & Judge, T.A. (2017). *Organizational Behavior*. 17th edition.
Boston: Pearson

Russell, C. G. (2000). Culture, Language, and Behavior: Perception. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*. 4-27.

Sabrina. (2018, April 12). Personal interview.

Samuel. (2018, April 23). Personal interview.

Spickard, J.V. (2017). *Research basis: Design to analysis in 6 steps*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative Research Methods*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

United States Department of Labor. (2016). Employee Tenure Summary. *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Retrieved: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm>

United States Department of Labor. (2017). Number of Jobs Held, Labor Market Activity, and Earnings Growth Among the Youngest Baby Boomers: Results from a Longitudinal Survey Summary. *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Retrieved:

<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm>

Wright, K. B. (2012). Emotional Support and Perceived Stress Among College Students using Facebook.com: An Exploration of the Relationship Between Source Perceptions and Emotional Support. *Communication Research Reports*, 29(3), 175-184.

doi:10.1080/08824096.2012.695957

Appendix

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where are you and your roommate(s) from?
2. Where did you guys live last year? How about this year?
3. How many people did you live with last year? Do you still live with all of them? Or just a few?
4. Which sort of topics do you tend to stress over or feel the most anxiety about? This can be family issues, academics, career-related stress, etc. If you feel comfortable, feel free to provide an example of a specific stressor.
5. How comfortable and open do you feel about communicating these stresses with your roommate(s)?
6. Think of a time when you were noticeably stressed or anxious and decided to communicate this with your roommate(s). Describe the stressor as generally or specifically as you are comfortable with, and describe the interaction between you and your roommate(s).
7. What sort of language did you find yourself using in describing the situation to your roommate(s)? For example, did you find yourself using emotional language to describe how you reacted to the stressor (“I feel...”), or did you find yourself using situational language that did not reveal much about how you felt (“Today, _____ happened. It was lame”)? If you can, try to think of a specific example of the language you used.
8. Think about a time when your roommate was noticeably stressed and communicated this to you. How did you respond?
9. What sort of language did you use in forming a seemingly appropriate response to your roommate’s communication? For example, did you respond using emotional language (“I feel for you,” “I’m sorry that you’re going through this”), or advisory language (“Maybe you should?”)? Try to think of a specific example of this language, if possible.
10. After discussing these specific instances of stress communication, would you say that communication between you and your roommate(s) is open when it comes to stress communication? Why or why not?
11. How does your gender affect how you communicate your stress and anxiety? What norms come to mind? Please describe any specific examples you can think of.

12. Is there anything else relating to stress and anxiety communication that you would like to add?
13. Thank you so much, I appreciate you taking the time!!