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## Interpretation and Production of Interpersonal Behavior

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# Interpretation and Production of Interpersonal Behavior



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## ABSTRACT

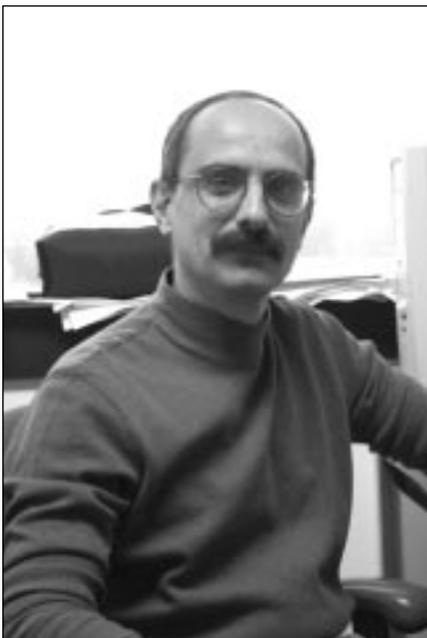
*The question of how people interpret (decode) and construct (encode) the meaning of social behavior is central to the understanding of social interaction. Early research has suggested that there may be differences in the level of difficulty involved in the processes of encoding and decoding social behavior. These differences are surprising, given that people engage in both processes constantly in everyday life. This research is an initial exploration of this problem. Groups of research participants were asked to either construct social behaviors or to interpret social behaviors. It was hypothesized that the encoding of interpersonal behavior would be more difficult than the decoding of behavior. The results of this study confirmed the hypothesis.*

## Introduction

In order to understand social interaction we must look at the ways in which social behavior is perceived. Uncovering the process that underlies how people interpret and express common social behaviors is an important part of our understanding the variety in social interaction. There has been little research on the problem of how a person understands the meaning of behavior performed by another (decoding), and how a person generates action in order to communicate a particular idea to another (encoding).

To gain a better understanding of these processes of social interaction, one must first explore the different kinds of meanings that are communicated through interpersonal behavior. Research on the semantic structure of interpersonal behavior has found at least three major dimensions on which social behavior varies; association-dissociation, superordination-subordination, and intimacy-formality (Triandis, 1977, 1994; Adamopoulos, 1984, 1988). These three dimensions appear to remain stable across individuals and cultures. Adamopoulos (1991) developed a model of the emergence of these dimensions of interpersonal behavior that is based upon resource exchange. He assumes that the emphasis in interaction is on the meaning that an action communicates rather than the action itself.

A basic question underlying much of this work concerns the process through which semantic structures lead to the production of interpersonal behavior, and the construal of the meaning of specific behaviors. Osgood (1970) attempted to assign semantic features to interpersonal verbs (decoding) and derive interpersonal verbs from a randomly selected set of semantic features (encoding). He observed that the process of decoding meaning from interpersonal verbs appeared to be less



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difficult than encoding meaning into interpersonal verbs.

In a study by Boyatzis and Satyaprasad (1994) this difference in difficulty in the encoding and decoding processes was identified during an examination of children's ability to encode and decode nonverbal behavior. They found that children were better at decoding than at encoding facial emotions and gestures. They attributed the differences to developmental processes in which the comprehension of action preceded its production.

Seburn (1997) conducted a study in which she looked at the process by which social behaviors are encoded and the process by which meaning is derived from a social behavior. Her conclusions were that social behaviors that involved dominance and affiliation were better understood and behaviors that were submissive and dissociative were hardest to produce and understand. There clearly is some difference in these two processes, though her results were not conclusive.

Differences in the processes of encoding and decoding are surprising given that people engage in both processes constantly in their everyday lives. This study is a replication and extension of Seburn's study with new and more carefully selected stimuli. Surveys were used to obtain information from two groups of participants. One group of participants was asked to construct (encode) behaviors and a second group was asked to interpret (decode) these behaviors. Each participant was also asked to rate how difficult each task was on a 7-point scale. In addition, this study focused on a hypothesis not tested in previous investigations. Specifically, it was predicted that the encoding or construction of interpersonal behavior will be more difficult than the decoding or interpretation of interpersonal behavior.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants consisted of Grand Valley State University students enrolled in introductory psychology classes. The encoding process data were collected from two groups of participants; one group of 193 and a second group of 241 participants. Data for the decoding process were collected from a group of 72 participants.

### **Procedure**

*Encoding.* Each participant in this phase of the study was asked to construct a social behavior that expresses the meaning of two semantic features from the three psychological dimensions of affiliation, dominance, and intimacy. For example, for the association/superordination combination, participants were asked to construct three behaviors that conveyed friendliness toward and control over, another person at the same time.

The behaviors generated from the encoding task were given to a second group of participants, who judged the relevance of all the behaviors on five 7-point scales representing the dimension of dominance (e.g., strong-weak, powerful-powerless), five scales representing affiliation (e.g., friendly-unfriendly, warm-cold), and five filler scales. Scale values (averaged across raters) for each of the two dimensions were appropriately transformed so that the same semantic features were scored similarly. The values were then summed and assigned to the behaviors generated by the first group of participants.

*Decoding.* A third group of participants was given a set of 12 social behaviors representing the four feature-set combination (e.g., advise, protect, and teach represented superordination/association), and were asked to rate them on the same set of scales described earlier. Data were treated in the same manner as described above.

*Difficulty scales.* Participants were asked to rate the difficulty of each task on a 7-point scale (easy-hard). These ratings constituted the main dependent variable. Since this study tested the difficulty hypothesis only, the focus of the investigation is the difficulty judgments.

### **Results**

The mean scale values for the difficulty of task were analyzed in a 2 (task: encoding/decoding) X 2 (affiliation: association/dissociation) X 2 (domination: superordination/subordination) between subjects design. The 2 X 2 X 2 ANOVA yielded a significant main effect for task,  $F(1,257) = 50.65, p < .000$ . This indicates, as predicted, that encoding ( $M = 4.606$ ) was considered more difficult than decoding ( $M = 3.23$ ). The results showed no other significant effects.

### **Discussion**

The results show that the encoding or construction of interpersonal behavior is perceived to be more difficult than the decoding or interpretation of interpersonal behavior. This is what we expected to find based upon the finding of previous studies. This study confirms empirically Osgood's (1970) speculation that it is more difficult to produce a behavior in order to communicate an idea than it is to understand an idea conveyed by a particular social action. While this study concludes that there are differences in these processes, it does not explain why these differences may occur.

Further analyses of collected data from this study, relying on the dependent variable of accuracy, may give a better understanding of some of the underlying processes of understanding and producing interpersonal behavior. Future analyses will explore differences in the accuracy of the encoding and decoding processes, and will attempt to identify specific semantic features that may moderate encoding and decoding process.

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