

## **Communication Accommodation Theory**

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### **Communication Accommodation Theory**

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), was created by Howard Giles in 1971, a professor at the University of California. Communication Accommodation Theory describes the idea that we change or “accommodate” our communication styles and mannerisms to fit the situation. Our communication styles and mannerisms adjust to the person or people in which we are communicating with. Depending on the opposing person's style of communication, we alter ours to go along. By doing this, we are “minimizing the social differences between others” (Cultural Communication, 2014). The textbook defines the communication accommodation theory as “changing communication behavior in a way that reduces social distance” (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2019). As humans, we can change our ways of interacting and communicating with others for many different reasons and situations.

There are two ways of communicating, verbal and nonverbal. We change our communication styles verbally but also nonverbally, through our gestures to narrow that social distance between groups. Gestures include hand movements while speaking, eye contact, or body language. We tend to thrive off of other people’s energy, therefore, if someone isn’t showing a lot of enthusiasm or excitement through tone or body language while communicating with you, you are less likely to show excitement while communicating also. Meeting someone’s communication style brings a more comfortable, positive environment by making both sides feel relatable to another. The environment or space in which you’re communicating can greatly affect both sides’ communicating styles and gestures. If you’re in a more open, quiet, not crowded area,

you're more likely to speak in a softer tone or have a more intimate, closer communicating experience.

Accommodating the way you communicate can look different for everyone. However, there are two accommodating processes, convergence and divergence. Convergence is the idea of accommodating to shrink the social distance between people communicating and become more similar. An example of convergence could be when you're speaking to an elderly, you might speak a little louder and clearer or lean in when speaking or being spoken to. Divergence is the complete opposite, it is expressing those social differences and paying close attention to them yet applying them harder. An example of divergence when communicating would be when speaking with someone of another culture or ethnicity, you could speak in a different language that they are not comfortable with, expanding the social distance. Divergence often comes across as aggressive and most people find it uncomfortable to be put in situations like it. According to the textbook, divergence and examples of it are referred to as "counter accommodation" (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2019). Research from the textbook and CAT researchers have shown that divergence is more common while convergence is an exception. CAT theorists assume that the reason for communicating in a convergent way is to appear more appealing to the other by acting similar and having common interests.

There are two other concepts that have a similar effect as divergence. The first one, maintenance, is a term similar to divergence, it means continuing the communication patterns and differences between the two styles and letting those differences collide. Maintenance doesn't give the communicators an option to think differently or give opportunity to connect. The second term is overaccommodation, meaning when one communicator is excessively concerned with the

others speaking or tone, like the way an elder would communicate tenderly and quietly and the other is excessively aiding that, almost dehumanizing the elder.

### **CAT Approach for Women's Research**

Women have certain ways of communicating to get different points or emotions across. Women show these in many ways like changing the pitch of their voice, facial expressions, speed and tone, etc. Normally, for women to be heard or respected, we must raise our tones and speak more sternly. Studies show that women will more commonly converge in the conversation to narrow the social distance than men, it could be related to personal pride and the fact that men don't want to compromise (Mulac, Studley, Wiemann, and Bradac 1987). Reasons for accommodating or not accommodating one's style of communication could arise from previous relations with the other that affect conversation, the actual context of the interaction, etc.

Researchers steer away from the "one size fits all" approach (MacIntyre, 2019) when it comes to communicating with the opposite gender. In simpler terms, data has proven not all women communicate the same and not all men communicate the same, despite many similarities and recurring patterns that were also recorded. Researchers are studying the different reasons for accommodating or counter accommodating depending on contexts and how the conversation plays out.

### **Social Context in Healthcare Providers: What can we learn from CAT?**

Working in healthcare, you are in charge of people of all ages. Each age communicates differently and has styles of communication that work best for their age and gender. CAT has taught and is presently helping healthcare workers to better aid elders and communicate to their emotions and needs. Healthcare professionals typically spend lengthy periods of time with patients or clients and through that time some develop connections and relationships while others

don't. Building a relationship, gaining that person's trust, and bonding all depend on ways you communicate with one another. Accommodating the way they care for their patients yet also maintaining the job they are there and required to perform must be learned and practiced through years of experience. Communication is not taught and then executed, it is a trial and error process, especially when learning how to communicate with people far outside of your age group.

Miscommunication can lead to many problems in the healthcare field, researchers found that miscommunication was the leading cause of documentation errors in a healthcare facility. It was recorded that 25% of healthcare professionals within that facility blamed it on the communication practices. Data shows that in order to properly care for elders, it takes the knowledge and understanding of their feelings and mental state to adequately aid them. Healthcare workers now take a "simulation" approach to teaching and practicing CAT (Momand & Dubrowski, 2020). Simulation is the idea of taking real life experiences and exchanging them for guided ones. Communication accommodation theory suggests healthcare workers practice nonverbal communication more often with elders as they see it as empathetic and they feel more understood or heard in their time.

### **Effectively Communicating with Patients during Medication Counseling using CAT**

"Poor communication exchanges with patients have been associated with lower patient satisfaction, treatment non-adherence and negative clinical outcomes" (Chevalier, Watson, Barras, & Cottrell 2017). Knowing how to communicate with patients will then give workers the opportunity to actually get to know the patient and be able to better assist them based on how they communicated information, questions, or concerns. Patients are more likely to open up and even accommodate their communication styles back when caregivers show empathy and

accommodate their styles to suit the patients needs first. Caregivers can better perform their job and make better educated decisions based on information received from their patients. “Effective communication between pharmacists and patients may lead to improved clinical outcomes as described in the physician-patient communication literature” (Chevalier, Watson, Barras, & Cottrell 2017).

### **Communication Adaptation in Challenging Simulations for Student Nurse**

#### **Midwives**

Similar to the article summary above, nurses and midwives must have effective communication with their patients in order to perform their job well and have successful outcomes. According to Giles and Williams (1992), the way a person adjusts their flow of communication and language mannerisms to accommodate a conversation is called “Attunement”. Each person clearly has a different “attunement” or way of going about accommodation to suit the other individual or group. Attunement reflects how well a person can adapt to their communication style accommodating others. Attunement also shows how quickly that person accommodates to change in styles.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we unconsciously use Communication Accommodation Theory in our everyday lives. Whether we are going for a convergence, divergence, or maintenance approach, we must accommodate our styles for certain situations, groups, or individuals to effectively gather information. Throughout the study of this theory, CAT can be studied and used in research for just about any group or circumstance because effective communication is important and helps us perform better whether it be in the workplace or for me personally, a school environment.

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