

Lab Report

The Social Relations lab at Columbia University investigates issues related to social and personality psychology. Led by Professor Geraldine Downey, the lab includes a variety of studies related to social issues, particularly, to social rejection. It also includes the work and collaboration from other faculty members of the psychology department at Columbia University as well by work done by Ph.D. candidates. I particularly worked with a member of the lab—Lauren Aguilar. Lauren is a Ph.D. student who has extensively collaborated in Professor Downey’s work and who also investigates speech accommodation and speech convergence in the human communications lab at Columbia University. The work she has been doing is closely related to Professor Downey’s area of investigation as it pertains the acceptance one looks from the other person during communication and social interaction. The human communications lab—where I worked—is located in the psychology department at Columbia University.

Many undergraduate and graduate students work at the human communications lab. Some of them are visiting research assistants who come from overseas; and some others come from other universities from New York and other states as well. Participants in the study were mostly Columbia students yet also from Barnard college—the undergraduate school in Columbia; sometimes, staff from Columbia and university students from other institutions came as participants. The age range was between 20 and 32 years old. Since this is a speech perception study, only English-native speakers are allowed to participate.

My starting schedule was as follows: M, T, W, and Th from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm and F from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm. Completing 20 hours a week. I started on June 4th until

July 09th 2010 totaling 105 hours. Though according to my schedule, my final date should be July 12th, I would like to continue until the end of the summer.

My duties as a research assistant are mainly divided into three categories: running experiments, data entry, and office assistant. I also completed an online training for doing research with Human Subjects at www.citiprogram.org as well as reading some information from the IRB at Columbia University prior to starting my duties at the lab.

The major thing as a preparation to working in this lab was the training to run the experiment. A research assistant trained us (all new RAs) on this. The experiment involves four major sections: a Pre task, a Map task, a Post task, and a survey. The experiment is run with two participants who work together during the map task only. Since the goal of the experiment is to investigate whether participants mimic the speech of the other person, their voices are recorded. Once I welcome participants, I must inform them of their rights as participants and have them read and sign the consent form. I explain to them that they are being asked for their permission to record their voice while they work with another participant; I inform them that those recordings will not be marked with any identifying information and they will be kept confidential. Once participants agree to participate, I provide them with the instructions for the first Pre task that consists on reading out loud the name of certain islands. Then they have to provide instructions on how to reach to a certain point using a map I provided at the beginning of the task. The important issue to consider when running the experiment is the time. We must be able to handle the time and have both participants work at the same time. If one arrives early, then we should make sure the other participant is on its way, otherwise we would have to cancel the experiment. We must also give each participant equal amount of

time to read instructions and complete the tasks. I must also prepare the equipment necessary, create the folder where recording files will be saved on the computer, and save files with correct names with the following information: pair number (i.e., Pair83), id number (i.e., Lid78 for left id) and condition (Th for threat and N Th for no threat). The map task is the major component of the experiment. In this section, participants negotiate land parcels according to their needs. Prior to this, participants are given a package with the rules of the negotiation; they are told that they represent a corporation and that their job is to trade land parcels based on the needs of their specific corporation. It is on this section where conditions are applied. Some participants are told that there are gender differences when it comes to negotiations (threat condition) and some other participants are told that there are not gender differences during negotiations (no threat condition). Part of my duty during the entire experiment is to monitor that participants are speaking clearly so that their voices can be picked up by the microphones and therefore their data be stored. Each participant performs the Pre task at the same time at different rooms. Once they are done, I give them the instructions for the map task. Then, I move one participant where the other is so that they can work on the same room during the map task. In this part, as well as throughout the experiment, participants can't see each other. While the map task, participants are positioned face to face with a blanket in the middle so that they can only hear each other. Once they are done with the map task, I take the participant back to the other room and then both of them, now at different rooms, perform the Post task that is similar to the Pre task. Once the Post task is finished, I help them remove the microphone and proceed to give them the surveys. Once the experiment is finished, I debrief participants and explain to them the purpose of the study. I also tell

them that some participants are told that there are gender differences when it comes to negotiation but that this is not a true statement, in real life, both male and female perform equally well in negotiations. The reason why we tell participants this is to help us begin to understand how people perform under these stereotypes and how much they affect their performances. The Pre and Post task usually take between 10 and 15 minutes, the Map should take between 45 minutes and 1 hour, and the survey between 20 and 25 minutes; considering the maximum times for each of the tasks plus preparations, the entire experiment is designed to last around 2 hours. Participants are paid \$20.

When pairs are not scheduled for the experiment, I do data entry that consists on transcribing conversations and timestamping. Transcriptions are done in MS Word files and contain participants' interaction during the negotiations on the map task. There are specific rules to properly transcribed participants' speech when they talk at the same time, or when they whisper, when they laugh. An example of a short interaction looks like this:

- R: right (whisper) {yeah}
- L: um [1'00] what else are you interested
- R: um I'm really interested yeah the mountainous regions I think as well and also the quarry regions

We also keep track of the time throughout the interaction by marking each minute in brackets. Another activity in data entry is timestamping. This is done in MS Excel files and consists on stamping the time (in minutes and seconds) when participants name each of the names of the islands (i.e., milk island, telescope island, wishing well island) as well

as the names of land parcels (i.e., picket fence, babbons, dead tree). Mimicry is based on the intonation and pronunciation of these names and it is measured by analyzing the Pre against the Post task. Both transcriptions and timestamping are part of the data analysis at the end of the experiment and determine whether there is a tendency to mimic the speech of the other participant.

Some other duties include flyering around campus, set up equipment (microphones, files, burning CDs), as well as keeping track of money available to pay participants after each experiment. There are two main software programs that are used for transcriptions: Sound Studio and Praat. I also have to make sure there are enough copies of materials to distribute to participants, test microphones to make sure they work fine, as well as archiving participants' information and materials.

During the summer time, many RAs come to the lab to have some research experience. I got to know other members very well. Some are graduate students and some are undergraduate just like me. Their expertise varies a lot yet they have all worked at different labs so we all have basic knowledge. There is particularly one RA I work very closely with for he and I are in charged of running the experiment while others are in charge of data entry only. He comes from Boston and we both have made a good team. Because of our varied background, I have learned a lot about other psychology programs at other schools, as well as possible graduate schools where I could apply once I finish my undergraduate studies. All this knowledge I have gained is thanks to the good relationship we all maintain.

In general, this experience has increased my knowledge in doing research with human subjects. Before, I worked as a research assistant to Dr. Joanne Pierre-Louis, a

faculty member at LaGuardia Community College – CUNY. Since the summer of 2008, we collected data for a number research studies she was conducting at LaGuardia and at other schools with the support of her colleagues. The main study I was involved in with Dr. Pierre-Louis was studying the effectiveness of two theories: multiculturalism and colorblindness. We performed a social survey method and have collected data from students enrolled at LaGuardia Community College. My duties in that research included conducting the research with students. I went to classes and explained to students the general purposes of the study. After that, I provided students with the consent form and explain the general guidelines on it. Finally, I gave out the surveys and debriefed students at the end of the session by conducting a small group discussion to answer general questions about the two theories inducted in the study. This new experience at Columbia University has showed a different perspective of doing research because I handled different things. I had to work with students closely.

This experience as a research assistant has showed me the real work I would be doing once I become a psychologist. When I took my first class in psychology, I thought doing research was not so complicated, however, as I immersed myself into this experience, I realized we must take care of any detail so that the study is not biased and that way be able to contribute to the scientific community with our study.

At the Social Relations lab at Columbia University, the research experience deepened my knowledge in the field particularly because I had to be very careful about giving instructions to participants and handling time to have them do the same thing at the same time, something I had not done in my previous experience. I also had to handle multiple things at a time such as making sure that they were completing the task

according to the instructions and making sure that equipment was working properly. My learning strategies were also important because I had to learn how to use Sound Studio and Praat to be able to do data entry. Yet the most important thing I consider is to have been able to participate in data collection, as well as data entry and data analysis. Before I had only participated in data collection only. I now know the whole process of doing research that enriches my experiences and strengthens my abilities in the field. It also motivates me as I further my studies in psychology.

The only negative aspect I can think of is not to have been able to run as many experiments as I would have liked to. Another RA and myself were in charged of running the experiments yet since he was always during the afternoon shifts, and I was in the afternoons only on Fridays because other days I worked in the morning, he got to cover most of the experiments. Still I had good experience and ran many experiments, too.

Finally, I have deepened my experience in doing research. This lab gave me the opportunity to realize how important and how interesting research is, in particular in the field of social psychology which is the field I would like to focus once I get to graduate school. The research per se is a valid approach to investigate how social relations function in day-to-day life. Social relations, in particular social rejection is, in my opinion, related to how tolerant we are, and this area is of major focus in my opinion. This social tolerance can also be measured by the approach we have when interacting with other people, whether it is multiculturalism or colorblindness. It is the basis of the study I have been involved in that makes me go deeper in this area. By obtaining a position similar to this and which researches on the area of my interest, I will also be able

to contribute with the knowledge I have and gain more experience as I finish my undergraduate studies and continue to my graduate studies.