

Qualitative Changes in Communication Competency Among Women in Bihar, India: Heifer International's Impact on Personal Transformation

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ABSTRACT

The United Nation (UN) lists ending poverty in all its forms as the number one prerogative among seventeen sustainable development goals. One organization that is seeking to make an impact on those who live in poverty is Heifer International, a global nonprofit organization based in the United States, whose mission is “to end world hunger and poverty while caring for the Earth.” By using Values-Based Holistic Community Development, Heifer has helped to lift millions of people out of poverty. In this article, we present the results of a study we conducted in Bihar, India to assess the impact of Heifer International programming on participants’ communication competency. Grounded in over 100 interviews with women across four time periods, the results show that women who have partnered with Heifer International experience significant qualitative changes in communication competency across five areas: expressiveness, assertiveness, persuasiveness, openness, and positiveness. We discuss the implications of this work on communication competency and empowerment for women living in poverty and its impact on personal transformation.

KEYWORDS: communication competency, poverty, community development, personal transformation

Poverty is one of the pressing issues of the 21st century. According to the United Nations ([UN], 2021), people living in poverty have little to no income or productive resources, face hunger, malnutrition, lack of educational access, social discrimination and exclusion, and have minimal participation in decision making affecting their lives. About 85 percent of the world population live on less than \$30 per day, two-thirds live on less than \$10 per day, and every tenth person lives on less than \$1.90 per day (World Bank, 2020). In total, approximately 860 million people around the world live in poverty (Martin, 2022). With the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine war, and the climate crisis, researchers claim the number of people living in extreme poverty could increase by 420-580 million worldwide for the first time since 1990 (Sumner et al., 2020). Today, the UN lists ending poverty in all forms as the number one prerogative among 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs).

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Many international nonprofit organizations are dedicated to eradicating poverty. One such organization is Heifer International, a nonprofit based in the US, whose mission is “to end world hunger while caring for the Earth” (Heifer International, n.d.). Using an approach called Values-Based Holistic Community Development (VBHCD; DeVries, 2011; Dierolf et al., 2002), Heifer International partners with community members to establish local self-help groups that work together to save money, support one another, and invest in the future. The groups benefit from regular training and development and, at times, receive livestock to promote economic progress. Participants are then asked to “pass on the gift,” often by sharing their knowledge or livestock with new community members. Throughout its programming, one of the components that Heifer International focuses on is communication as a core skill set by encouraging beneficiaries to express their views, speak in public, and work collaboratively with others. Building communication competency is one of the areas that Heifer focuses on with their participants; however, the ultimate goal of intervention is raising beneficiaries’ living income through more effective agricultural and business practices. Through its community development efforts, Heifer International has impacted the lives of millions of families across Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

In this article, we present the results of a study conducted in Bihar, India, which assesses the impact of Heifer International programming on participants’ communication competency. Our data consisted of semi-structured interviews with 105 women living in poverty across the region. The analysis revealed that over the course of two years, Heifer participants improved their communication skills in five areas: expressiveness, assertiveness, persuasiveness, openness, and positiveness. The data showed that communication competency is an inherent part of the personal transformation process of participants who partnered with Heifer International. Our findings support the relatively unexplored claim that “empowerment is in part a communication process” (Shefner-Rogers et al., 1998, p. 321).

Although poverty is a global issue, communication research in this area is scarce. There is, of course, an extensive body of work focusing on the issue of poverty across disciplines (Davis & Sanchez-Martinez, 2014), but to our knowledge only a handful of studies have explored the communication practices (or development) of individuals or groups who live in poverty (Collier & Lawson, 2016; Harter et al., 2004; Novek, 1995). Research is needed to explore the communication of people living in poverty and understand how they might develop their communication skills through time, and the impact building communication competency could have on their lives. As Schraedley and colleagues (2020) argued, scholars need to explore “the communicative linkages constituting and sustaining food insecure communities” (p. 2). This article responds to this call.

This study also contributes to our understanding of the impact that nonprofit organizations might have on their beneficiaries, including people living in poverty. Current communication research in the nonprofit sector has strictly focused on understanding nonprofit organizations as the site of analysis itself—that is, how the organization functions internally or vis-à-vis their stakeholders—but not their beneficiaries (Biss et al., 2022; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Jones-Bodie, 2020). For example, Clair and Anderson (2013) offered a rhetorical analysis and critique of Heifer International’s promotional materials but did not investigate the actual impact of Heifer’s programming on the lives of the beneficiaries. As Koschmann (2012) argued, “[i]n addition to studying communication in nonprofit organizations, we should also advance communicative explanations of nonprofit organizations” (p. 139). A communication perspective of nonprofit organizations, Koschmann (2012) added, “should therefore lead us to [...] understand the lived experiences of relevant stakeholders” (p. 141). Our study pursues this direction by exploring the lived experiences of the most important stakeholders of Heifer’s mission: the very people it is designed to support.

This article, therefore, fills an important gap. We explore herein the communicative practices of women living in complete poverty. About 60% of our participants are illiterate and have never completed a formal education. We focus on what communication competency looks like for marginalized women living in one of the most impoverished states in India. We also address how their communication changes over time when they partner with Heifer International. Scholars need to explore and contribute to a global understanding of how communication intertwines with issues of poverty, in concurrence with Sheftner and colleagues' (1998) arguments that even the "communication aspects of empowerment remain largely unrecognized and understudied" (p. 322). This study contributes to the literature by seeking to understand both what communication competency looks like in the context of poverty and how individuals might improve their competency through time.

In summary, this article adds value to several sets of academic literature on: (a) the relationship between communication and poverty, (b) the assessment of nonprofit organization and its impact on key stakeholders, and (c) the nature of communication competency in India. In the next section, we describe a conceptual framework we developed, which is grounded in literature in the fields of communication studies, nonprofit and philanthropy, and psychology.

Conceptual Framework

We developed a conceptual framework to define what personal transformation is and how to study it in the context of Heifer International's community development (including communication competency). The model synthesizes relevant research across fields of study and is grounded in informal interviews we conducted with dozens of Heifer participants across ten different communities in Nepal (Mirivel & Thombre, 2019). Our conceptual framework is informed by Mezirow's (1978) theory of personal change, which has been applied in several contexts, including education, health, and community development (e.g., Kitchenham, 2008, Massé et al., 2020; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Mezirow, 1981; Thombre & Rogers, 2009). Mezirow (1981) described personal transformation as the process of using a prior interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience to guide future action. At the onset, the individual faces an existential and disorienting dilemma. This experience forces a process of self-evaluation, observation, and assessment. Then, the individual takes concrete actions by exploring alternative roles and behaviors and seeking additional knowledge. Personal transformation completes when the individual acquires confidence in new roles and identities and reintegrates aspects of newfound wisdom in the self (Baumgartner, 2001).

Building on Mezirow's work, we define personal transformation as a multidimensional construct that denotes the process by which an individual creates profound personal change. It is a "nonlinear process involving self-reflection and the adoption of new and broader self-definitions" (Wade, 1998, p. 715). We further hypothesize that personal transformation in the context of Heifer's mission and approach to community development involves a significant personal change in seven interconnected elements: (1) sense of self and identity (Carter & Marony, 2021), (2) perception of others (Grootaert et al., 2004), (3) communication competency (Jablin & Sias, 2001), (4) state of leadership (Quinn & Quinn, 2015), empowerment (Sahay, 1998), intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993), and civic engagement (Adler & Goggin, 2005). From a theoretical standpoint, we see these elements as constitutive of personal transformation, but it is the goal of our research to delineate which elements are most salient and to understand the relationships between these elements.

This study focuses on one of the central elements of our model, which is communication competency (Jablin & Sias, 2001). Communication competence is often defined as “the potential to perform certain repeatable, goal-directed sequences of overt behaviors” (Spitzberg, 2015, p. 560). It encompasses at least two primary dimensions: effectiveness and appropriateness. By definition, effectiveness refers to the degree to which a communicator is able to reach specific goals in interaction. Appropriateness, on the other hand, refers to whether the communication behavior is aligned with expected norms, values, or culture of the context in which interaction is taking place.

In addition to these two dimensions, communication competency includes an interpersonal element. As Rubin and Martin (1994) defined it, interpersonal communication competence (ICC) is the “impression or judgment formed about a person’s ability to manage interpersonal relationships in communication settings” (p. 33). ICC features 10 dimensions, including self-disclosure, empathy, social relaxation, assertiveness, interactional management, and expressiveness. These are all areas in which we would expect some change to take place over the course of a person’s life, especially if training and personal development are occurring.

Communication competency has been widely assessed and measured in health care (McNeilis, 2001), management and leadership (Mikkelsen et al., 2021), personal relationships (Arroyo & Segrin, 2011), and education (Worley et al., 2007). However, scholarship in this area is primarily theoretical or conceptual, grounded in data collected in the US rather than internationally, and based mostly on survey responses from adults enrolled in higher education (e.g., Arasaratnam & Doerfelb, 2005; Beamer, 1992). Existing communication research is predominantly focused on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies (Waldron & Yunbluth, 2015).

There are, however, notable exceptions. Kvam’s (2017) ethnography of the means and meanings of communicative competence for Mexican speakers and Shefner-Rogers et al.’s (1998) study of women dairy farmers in India, which showed that “dialogic communication process can increase feelings of empowerment” (p. 322) by giving people voice and the ability to listen to others. Aside from a handful of studies, therefore, scholars have very little understanding of (a) how people living in poverty think and reflect on the nature of communication competency, (b) how they think about communication as a practice, and (c) how they might develop their communication competence over time. The current study seeks to find out the role that communication competency might play in women’s personal transformation and emancipation from poverty. Based on our review of the literature and our conceptual framework, we asked the following research questions:

1. To what extent is communication competency an element of personal transformation in Heifer beneficiaries?
2. How do women living in poverty in Bihar, India, participating in Heifer programming develop their communication competency over time?

With these questions, we now describe Heifer International and our methodological approach.

The Case

The case study for this project is Heifer International, a global non-profit organization whose mission is to end hunger and poverty while caring for the Earth. For over 75 years, Heifer has positively impacted the lives of millions of people around the world. In 2020, it launched a new project in India to transform the lives of over 70,000 households living in poverty in Bihar,

India. “Bihar is India’s third-most populous state, with 99 million people; its literacy rate (61.8%) is the country’s lowest” (Balani, 2017, para. 5).

Heifer International’s approach to community-development is unique. It is based on a participatory approach to rural development. Its philosophy of empowerment began with its founder, Dan West, and his experience during the Spanish Civil War, where he provided the needy with milk to end hunger and later realized that providing them a cow would make a much bigger impact. Today, Heifer uses VBHCD (Clements, 2012; Devries, 2011; Dierolf et al., 2002), which takes “sustainable development as a transformative process based on an understanding of people and communities as organic wholes” (DeVries, 2011, p. 43).

VBHCD is grounded in 12 values and principles called the Cornerstones. The cornerstones include passing on the gift, accountability, genuine need and justice, and sharing and caring – all taught in a multi-day training and used to lead positive change. Heifer’s approach encourages people to use their collective strengths to overcome what is often felt as a hopeless situation. Pioneered by Mahendra Lohani in Nepal in the 1990s, VBHCD uses a shared leadership model and builds on the cornerstones to stimulate group wisdom and personal insights. Using the cornerstones as a framework, participants develop the attitudes, behaviors, and skills to improve their own lives and those of their communities.

In concrete terms, VBHCD proceeds by building local partnerships. Following the funding of a major initiative, the Heifer team works with community partners to connect with local families and invite individual household members to form or join a Self-Help Group (SHG). In India, SHGs are formed by individuals who work together to support one another and eradicate poverty in their families and communities (In Bihar, most SHGs supported by Heifer are women-only groups). Most groups have between 16-25 members. Once an SHG is formed, Heifer provides a series of training, each grounded in the aforementioned cornerstones. Training includes inspirational stories, exercises, as well as hands-on activities to improve nutrition and care for the animals. Most SHGs receive training around 6 months after the group has been formed to leverage group dynamics, which is often the time that participants receive livestock (such as goats or chickens). At 12 months of participation, SHGs often “pass on the gift” to pass-on groups – groups that the original SHG has helped to mentor. Around 24 months, Heifer slowly withdraws from the SHG and encourages the group towards self-sustainability. Over time, Heifer International has noted that VBHCD has helped individuals and groups who partnered with them to not only become economically self-reliant but also undergo a unique personal transformation. The present study investigates the impact of Heifer’s VBHCD model in enhancing the communication competency of marginalized women in Bihar, India.

Data and Methods

This qualitative study is based on interviews conducted with 105 women in two districts across the Bihar region in India. This study was reviewed and approved by our Institutional Review Board. Data were collected across four time periods: (a) baseline prior to Heifer intervention, (b) 6 months of participation, (c) 12 month of participation, and (d) 24 month of participation. Given the number of interviews (n=105) and the volume of transcribed text generated, our data set fits within the definition of ‘Big Qualitative Data’ (henceforth Big Qual; see Brower et al., 2019; Davidson et al., 2019). For our study, Big Qual represents primary qualitative data collected in the field drawn from at least 100 participants using an open-ended interview protocol (Brower et al., 2019). The use of Big Qual in our study is relevant as we assess how participants have been personally transformed due to their participation in Heifer VBHCD initiatives. The work is inherently longitudinal and therefore consists of interviews with participants spanning several time

periods. All of the participants were females (n=105; 100%), split equitably across the four-time frames: baseline (n=25; 24%), six months (n=28; 27%), 12 months (n=24; 23%), and 24 months (n=26; 25%). Approximately 60% of participants received no formal education, with only 13% completing secondary school. Approximately 95% of participants were Hindu and 5% were Muslim.

Data Collection

Data was collected in 2020 during the global pandemic, which made traveling abroad for research not feasible; therefore, we partnered with a third-party agency in India to collect the data using enumerators. Our approach is consistent with other scholars who have relied on a third-party to collect interview data during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mwambari et al., 2021, or with hard-to-reach populations in rural contexts as part of a culturally appropriate research team with intimate knowledge on the social milieu (Hershfield et al., 1993; Quetulio-Navarra et al., 2015). The third-party agency, a professional research organization with expertise in data collection in low-income rural areas in India, hired skilled and trained professionals to conduct the interviews. The enumerators were selected based on their education and experience conducting fieldwork. A total of six enumerators were used for this project (4 females and 2 males). All enumerators were not only trained prior to the current project but were also trained by the research team on how to effectively conduct qualitative interviews using our interview schedule and to follow appropriate protocols, as approved by our institutional review board (e.g., explanation of consent forms, confidentiality, and ethical standards).

To recruit participants, the trained enumerators visited local villages in two districts in Bihar. Heifer International provided a list of individuals across the regions who already qualified for Heifer support either by having been part of Heifer's intervention work or being identified as a community member in need of help. The enumerators then walked door-to-door to recruit participants for the study with the logistical support of the local field team. Consent was a required part of the process. After giving their consent, participants were interviewed at a time that was most convenient to them – often on the same day. The face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (60 to 90 minutes) were conducted using informal conversational techniques (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) in Hindi, audio-recorded, translated, and transcribed in English. Participants were de-identified and assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Our data set consists of over 130 hours of interview data and hundreds of pages of transcribed data from these interviews.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule developed by the research team. The interview schedule was designed to probe deeply into participants' experiences, including their early life and adulthood, family background, marriage, and relationships. We included a number of questions to understand and assess participants' communication competence. For example, we asked, "From your perspective, what does it mean to communicate well?" and "What changes have you noticed about your communication?" We also asked, "What is a challenge that you face when it comes to communicating with others?" and "Do you feel that other people listen to you?" In all, we asked a dozen questions specifically focused on communication competency. This interview schedule was first implemented among Heifer participants in Nepal, India, which was part of a larger project. Modifications to the interview instruments were made accordingly after receiving feedback from participants in Nepal who were not included in this study.

Data Analysis

The authors of the current study analyzed the data using qualitative software called MAXQDA. Due to the open-ended nature of the interviews, the researchers first independently read each of the transcripts holistically to understand the participants' lived experiences and transformative changes across time. Based on the initial read, we created a shortlist of lean coding consisting of 5 to 10 codes (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Intercoder reliability was established by coding a few interviews initially and discussing any discrepancies in our understanding of the data until agreement. In our last phase, we conducted cross-case comparisons of our codes to identify potential themes and subthemes that emerged in our data.

Results

Analysis of our interview data shows that Heifer participants develop their communication competency over time. In the beginning, participants displayed minimal communication competencies. At six months, there is a significant degree of progress, followed by communication refinement at 12 months and communication confidence as participants reach 24 months. To address our first research question, the data shows that communication competency is an inherent part of our participants' transformation. To answer our second research question, which is focused on how they develop their competency, our analysis of the discourse revealed that participants' experience changes their communication in five critical areas: (a) expressiveness, (b) assertiveness, (c) persuasiveness, (d) openness toward others, and (e) positiveness in the experience and performance of communication.

Expressiveness

A key aspect of communication competence is expressing oneself coherently and effectively using verbal and nonverbal symbols. As Spitzberg (2014) explained, expressiveness includes features such as "vocal variety, facial affect, opinion expression, extensive vocabulary usage, and gestures" (p. 385). Expressiveness also encompasses the degree and amount of actual verbal communication that takes place, which is the aspect that we see in our data.

At baseline, participants showed a limited degree of expressiveness. The interviews were brief, short, and lacked relevant contextual depth. Excerpt 1 exemplifies some of the discourse that took place.

Excerpt 1

Enumerator: *Did you have any goals or aspirations growing up? What did you think?*

Kiran: *What do I say? (silence; no answer)*

Enumerator: *What is your strategy for the future? Do you have something in mind?*

Kiran: *Nothing as such.*

Enumerator: *Do you talk to people from outside of the village and from different castes?*

Kiran: *No.*

Enumerator: *Do you have any skills?*

Kiran: *I only work and have no other skill in particular.*

As exemplified in Excerpt 1, participants provided very little information, showed reticence in engaging with the enumerator, and provided minimal responses or none at all. At six months, however, participants' degree of expressiveness increased, and answers to questions became more descriptive. They took stances on issues, reflected more willingly about their relationships and life, and provided more substantive answers. By this time in the process, participants had often joined a self-help group and had received a number of training, including the cornerstone training. Excerpt 2 exemplifies the nature of expressiveness at six months.

Excerpt 2

Enumerator: *So, boys and girls should hold equal status?*

Sangeeta: *Yes, they both come from the same place/womb. Only if they both progress then will it be good. Even for marriage, it will be better. Don't have to beg in front of ten houses. If she is educated, she will get good proposals.*

Enumerator: *What was the change?*

Sangeeta: *We had worries. Not now. But our health is bad. We were harassed before we stayed away from poverty. But not now. It doesn't go away.*

As seen in excerpt 2, the participant provided more substance and depth in her answer to the first question and provided a glimpse of the everyday challenge of living in poverty. The participant was also more engaged with the enumerator, provided a rationale for her answers, and implicitly drew on the cornerstone training, which emphasized gender equality and treatment among boys and girls.

At 12 months of participation, members of the self-help groups provided even more substance in their answers and exhibited an increased engagement and ability for communication expressiveness. The interviews took longer to complete and participants showed enthusiasm in describing the changes they were undergoing. In one interview, for instance, the enumerator asked, "What have you learned from the training?" In response, our participant Rita said, "The training was over many days [...] it was like how to give your introduction, how to take an introduction, how to raise goats, how to feed them, how to keep them on the platform, etc." In another interview, the enumerators asked whether her son and daughter were treated differently. In response, our participant said: "No, we do not treat them differently. For us, both are equal. I offer the same food as I do to my son and the same kind of clothes as I do to my son."

At around 12 months, participants also took on additional roles and responsibilities within the group. Rita, for example, described her responsibilities as a treasurer of the group. "I go to the meeting," she expressed, "and collect the money and deposit it, and if someone is not able to give money, then I have to take guarantee that the money will be deposited by this date." She added, "And if someone asks for a loan, I confirm it with Didi [meaning "big sister"] first, and if Didi gives permission, I give the loan to them." Participants displayed an increased ability to find appropriate words to explain their position and experiences. Their responses were more fluid and expansive.

Participants at 24 months had spent considerable time in the Heifer program. They have interacted with different groups and people from in or out of their community. Their degree of communication expressiveness had also increased as they willingly provided more depth and substance in their answers. Excerpt 3 exemplifies a higher level of engagement in the interaction, ease in answering questions, and a definite answer to each question.

Excerpt 3

Enumerator: *What do people think about you? How do you look at the people?*

Shikha: *We look at the people with a positive mind. If we do not look at the people positively, they will look at us negatively. Therefore, we behave with the people generously and live with the people as a community.*

Enumerator: *What do you consider a significant achievement in life?*

Shikha: *You need to have money to achieve anything in life. If you have money, you can think of achieving something in life. Good behavior alone is not enough to achieve something in life. In the present age, money is everything. Otherwise, this year 2020, has also been a difficult time because of 'Corona.' People who were working earlier are now sitting at home.*

Over time, participants developed higher levels of communication expressiveness. Combined with the ability to express their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences more willingly and effectively, the data also showed significant differences in participants across time in their degree of communication assertiveness.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness reflects a higher degree of communicative skill evidenced by low anxiety, dominance, contentiousness, and a refusal to be intimidated by others (Alberti & Emmons, 2001). This aspect of communication competence correlates with verbal intensity, talkativeness, and good communication style (Norton & Warnick, 1976). Developing assertiveness requires developing skills in being an active listener, learning not to interrupt others, and reflecting on what was said to confirm what was heard. Problem-solving and compromising are also part of the equation, in addition to being empathic, expressing one's thoughts and views with confidence, and understanding the other person's perspective.

At baseline, many participants answered questions with short utterances such as "yes" or "no," and provided limited responses. The data also showed a lack of assertiveness and confidence, along with a general sense of hopelessness. In one interview with Rheka, the enumerator asked, "what inspires you? What do you want to become?" In response, she said: "What do I say? I hope I earn, and we get by, eat enough and live okay. I have only one daughter. I should have something for her." In another interview, the enumerator asked, "Are you happy with yourself?" The participant said: "What can I say about happiness? We consider ourselves happy if we get to earn and eat." Another participant, Kumkum, explained, "they don't have a good way of talking. If you, as an educated woman, come and talk to them and make them understand, they will abuse you and tell you to get away." Each of these responses shows a lack of confidence and a degree of personal anxiety.

As participants progress from baseline to six months, their degree of assertiveness began to change. First, they hold their views more firmly and acknowledge those of others. In one interview, the enumerator asked: "so boys and girls should hold equal status?" In response, Soni explained:

I don't feel bad for not having a son. But my husband feels bad for not having a son. In today's time, daughters can also do those things which a son can do. Now sons and daughters have the same opportunities.

Second, they disputed previously held negative beliefs. In one interview, Sangeeta explained how she had transformed. “My brother, my father, and my mother said the same as well,” she explained,

they used to all talk about how the villagers would say I wasn't capable of anything, and now no one can touch me. I am doing good work. The ones who have studied are still sitting at home and now look at her. She is successful without studying as such.

Third, they projected stronger identities. In one story, Babita explained her experience in the self-help group. “I like working in the group,” she said, “my group members now just tell me that I am much disciplined, and I feel I have to be disciplined considering the position I hold in the group.” “Without discipline,” she added, “I won't be able to manage the group well. If I am not strict and disciplined, then the other women in the group will hesitate to deposit money, and that will affect the working of the entire group.”

At 12 months, participants continued to build their assertiveness via their experience in the group. They became more comfortable, willing, and open to meeting others. Malti explained: “I learned how to talk to others, I got the courage to talk to others confidently, and I've also learned not to be jealous of others and make no distinction between caste and creed.” Another shared: “I had the qualities taught in the group for personality development, but other ladies who joined the group learned and developed the courage of talking to outsiders and not being jealous of others.” In a third interview, the enumerator asked about difficulties talking to people outside the community. In response, Jaya said: “Why will I fear anyone? Every person is a human being.”

At 24 months, assertiveness turned into confidence. Not only had participants been active in both individual and group activities, but they also stated their thoughts clearly, articulated their positions, and expressed a great deal of agency through their talk—both in how they described their stories and in the way they portrayed themselves in the stories. In one example, the enumerator asked, “Do you feel happy with yourself?” In response, Shikha said,

Yes, I feel happy. You take an example. One beggar is passing his life at the railway station. Think what his life is, and on the other hand, we are having the comfort of living in the room in our village. Our life is much better than his life.

In another interview, a participant shared a story about how she responded to a difficult situation:

When someone is suffering. I help them. So back in our hometown, somebody was ill and couldn't work or support their family. It was at that time that I went and helped that person with money and physically supported him as well.

Our participants, therefore, were claiming agency in their narratives and asserting themselves by responding to the circumstances of their lives. In short, our data showed that participants became more assertive. With time and experience, they moved from providing only minimal information and short responses to developing clear stances on various issues and topics while increasing their agency.

Persuasiveness

The third area of qualitative change is in the participants' degree of persuasiveness. Our data showed progressive differences across the four groups in light of their messages and participants' engagement in persuasion and awareness of the rhetorical dimensions of human communication.

At baseline, many participants revealed minimal experience in persuasive communication, whether experienced in interpersonal, group, or public speaking contexts. Their lives were limited to conducting household chores and taking care of their children. Husbands and in-laws also had tremendous decision-making power, affecting baseline participants' engagement in rhetorical activities. For example, in one interview, the enumerator asked whether the participant would like to improve her life. In response, Meena said: "Yes, I do feel like that. But all this will happen only if I'm allowed to move out of the house; such is my situation right now. My in-laws do not allow any one of us to move out."

Participants at baseline expressed powerlessness in their position and their degree of agency. They did not see themselves as successful in persuasion, whether with their husbands or children. In one interview, the interviewer asked whether the participant had talked to their husband about his excessive drinking. "He drinks a lot," Sanju said, "I try to make him understand, but he doesn't listen." In another interview, the enumerator asked about any conflict that had taken place between the participant and her husband. She responded: "It is his job to scold and nag, and it is mine to listen." When discussing children's education, participants often felt powerless in influencing their children to go to school or do their homework. As one person said, "We can try different methods, but the children don't listen."

At six months, participants' discourse revealed a gradual expansion of rhetorical skills. They spoke in front of others, expressed their views, and sometimes persuaded others to meet personal and relational goals. In one interaction, the enumerator asked whether the participant "put forth your views to the family." Rita said: "Yes, I do. If someone makes a mistake, I tell them off. I ask them why they are doing it and tell them not to do it. And if they do something good, I encourage them." In another interview, a participant shared how she persuaded her husband to join the group. "I made him understand," she said, "that I will be joining the group. He said it was good and that I should join." Similarly, we saw stories in the data about participants managing conflict differently. After being asked about disagreements and fights with her husband, one participant said, "We talk about it and resolve it." She added, "I have made him understand that if I get angry, he must stay calm and vice versa. When he gets angry, I will remain calm."

At 12 months, rhetorical skills did not increase dramatically, but they improved with group participation. There was also an integration of the cornerstone values introduced in the training and a sense of allegiance. In one interview, the enumerator asked, "When others share their grief with you, how do you help them?" In response, Krishna said: "I tell them that worrying does not solve any problems; we should figure out a way to resolve our problems ourselves [...] That's how I help them." A few turns of talk later, the participant added, "I join in their grief and tell them that these things go on and are part of everyone's life. I tell them that there is no need to panic, and I assure them that we will support you in every way possible."

Comforting someone experiencing profound grief was a complex rhetorical act. In the example above, the participant gave support by focusing on that person's agency, a core value introduced in the cornerstones training (in the form of self-reliance). She also displayed empathy in her statement that she would "join their grief." And finally, she assured that the group would be available for support: "we will support you in every way possible." The script was shifting in that participants were now empowered to seek social support and provide it.

At 24 months, participants' rhetorical skills expanded by engaging in new and different roles, including serving in official capacities. In those roles, participants persuaded others to contribute to the group or encouraged members to make payments on time to repay a debt they borrowed from the group. In one interview, the enumerator asked: "Do people return the loans on time that you give them?" "Yes, they do, sometimes not," Kajal explained. "What do you do then?" the enumerator asked. "I talk to them and tell them to return the loan on time," she replied. Another participant described a similar circumstance. She explained:

Some people had a habit of creating a nuisance in depositing the money like postponing it for months, so I told them that it is only if the money is deposited on time that any progress would be made. They understood me and started depositing it on time.

In persuading others, group members find some success, which is both affirming and encouraging. Our data showed significant qualitative differences in their degree of skill and engagement in persuasion across the four groups. This competency was cultivated by their participation in group dynamics and roles, which slowly expanded their rhetorical skills.

Openness

The fourth dimension of communication competency was openness. Participants became more open to others and engaged with different people with more flexibility. As defined by Zeng and Xia (2019), interpersonal openness reflects an "important interpersonal characteristic for collective life [and features] tolerance, forgiveness, and acceptance of others" (p. 2). Interpersonal openness also took an other-oriented rather than a self-focused approach. In our data, participants slowly and gradually increased this capacity and developed it as a value.

At baseline, participants had minimal experience with people beyond the realm of their immediate family. As noted, they answered questions with a low degree of expressiveness and spent most of their time at home. In one interview, the enumerator asked, "Have you ever met someone from outside your caste or belonging to another nationality?" In response, Meena just said: "No." In a follow-up question, the enumerator asked, "If there ever is such a need, will you be able to interact with them?" In her response, she said, "Yes, if they would like to talk, I will speak to them." Although she was open to the possibility of speaking to new and different people, she cued that the interaction would be initiated by the other person rather than herself. Being willing and able to initiate contact with others is critical in interpersonal openness. In another interview, the enumerator asked: "Is there anyone in your family that you're able to open up and speak out your heart?" To answer, Sushila said: "No, not really."

At six months, participants' engagement with others opened up. They met new people, expanded their social network, and increased the frequency and degree of contact with members inside and outside the community. One enumerator asked Sangeeta: "do you find that you can sit and communicate with outsiders easily?" In response, she said: "We manage. We talk. It has become a habit now since we do it often. We don't find talking difficult." In another interview, the enumerator asked, "What do you like about the people who come from outside?" She answered: "Their opinions, thoughts, and how they talk lovingly." Another person said, "I find it easy to talk to people outside of my village. The way they talk to me, I talk to them the same."

At 12 months, and given the frequency of contact with new individuals, some participants affected by the program began to talk about initiating contact with others and wanting to discover them. In one interview, the enumerator asked: "How do you feel when someone from your

community comes and talks to you?” In response, Krishna said: “I like it a lot, and I also go and talk to them. There is a certain curiosity to talk to them, which encourages me to go and start a conversation, and I don’t hesitate in this at all.” Although this seemed like a rather small step forward in intercultural communication, the act of initiating conversation and becoming curious about others is critical. It signaled personal agency and openness to interaction, and a degree of humility. In addition, participants realized that they have value to add as well. In one interview, the enumerator asked, “How do you feel by sharing your experiences with others?” “I feel good by sharing my experiences. I think that they will also learn something from me.”

At 24 months, participants’ degree of openness widened. As shown above, participants developed confidence and assertiveness in their communication. In one interview, the enumerator asked: “How do you feel when you need to converse with outsiders or strangers?” Shobha said: “I don’t mince my words. When I talk to someone and agree or like what they say, I tell them. I also express my disagreement, if any. I do not fear anyone.” As defined earlier, interpersonal openness also includes a direction toward tolerance and forgiveness. This is well-displayed in this excerpt by one of our participants:

If somebody talks to you in a good way, you may consider him a good person. If someone talks in a bad manner, you should handle the situation and behave nicely to realize his mistake. When you are involved in social work, you have to take everybody along.

To summarize, our data showed qualitative differences across the four groups in participants’ degree of interpersonal openness. Participants became more open to others and expanded the richness of their communication practices and skills. At the same time that this happened, participants’ communication changed in their degree of positiveness.

Positiveness

Positive communication is affirming and constructive and includes behaviors that “reflect our best, that produces personal and relational happiness and satisfaction, as well as those that challenge our self to move in the direction of others and to act ethically” (Mirivel, 2014, p. 7). In our study, the data showed significant qualitative differences across the four groups in their degree of engagement and experience with positive communication. Positiveness included practicing positive communication, noticing and experiencing positive moments in human interaction, and recognizing the ethical dimension of communication as a practice.

At baseline, participants’ discourse revealed minimal experience with positive communication, whether in terms of engaging with others or in their life experiences more broadly. For example, when asked to reflect on positive experiences in their marriage, participants either declined to comment, stayed silent, or said: “I do not understand.” In one interview, the enumerator asked, “what is your positive experience from your 12 years of marriage?” In response, Rheka said: “It’s a somewhat okay relationship, but it is sad. There is sorrow.” The enumerator probed more deeply, asking, “but was there anything positive?” “No,” she said, “there was no joy.”

Baseline participants reported low levels of positivity and experienced more negative communication, including violence. In one participant’s story, she said, “once during one of the fights, things got intense, and he told me to never come back to his house and that it would be better if a divorce happens.” In another interview, the enumerator asked, “What do you like about your child?” The participant said: “Nothing. He annoys me a lot.”

At six months, participants talked more positively about their relationships with others. In an interview with Babita, the enumerator asked about conflicts in the marriage. In response, she said, “We love each other dearly, but yes, we also fight sometimes, which is very natural in every loving relationship.” There was recognition and even enjoyment of the communication process. As Manju explained, “It feels good when I talk to other people; I get to know about other people.” In addition, although they were only a few cases, participants began to recall positive interactions. In one of our interviews, the enumerator asked if Sangeeta could remember when someone appreciated her in the past. Immediately, she said yes. She recalled an instance in which someone said that she had changed and progressed a lot: “My brother, my father, my mother said the same as well. They all talked about how the villagers would say I couldn’t do anything, and now no one can touch me. I am doing good work.” Someone she met also gave her encouragement: “He used to say not to feel shy and talk confidently. How can you progress otherwise? Only if you listen and understand what other people have to say, there will be some development.” Or, as Sanji explained, “People will remember our behavior. If we do well to people, they will speak positively about us.”

At twelve months, we saw a continued improvement and expansion of positive communication experiences. There was an increasing degree of confidence partially attained by the positive feedback that participants are receiving. In one interaction, the enumerator asked, “What do people praise you for?” In response, Sanju said: “People praise me for my kind behavior and also for the fact that I swiftly get their work done. People praise me because I show kindness towards others; I feel that too is an important reason.” Participants reported being listened to more frequently and without difficulty as well as becoming agents in that process, too. “Everyone listens to me properly,” one participant explained, “I also guide them and listen to them properly.” As participants’ confidence improves, they also realize that they contribute to the interaction: “I feel good by sharing my experiences, but I think they will also learn something from me.”

Combined with increasing communication competency was the understanding that participants could improve. A participant sought feedback from the enumerator about their communication in one moment. She said: “Please tell me the quality of my answers. Was I able to understand your questions properly and answer them? Did I make any mistakes?”

At 24 months, the women in the study showed increased awareness of the ethical dimensions of human communication and reflected on normative principles that guide its conduct. Devrani said,

If somebody talks to you in a good way, you may consider him a good person. If someone talks in a bad manner, you should handle the situation and behave nicely to realize his mistake. When you are involved in social work, you have to take everybody along; therefore, you should talk with manners so that no one feels bad.

In reflecting on the importance of communicating well, participants also recognized its political dimensions. Consider this one example:

When you talk well, everyone appreciates it. For example, we have the head man of our village, we have someone elder in the neighborhood, if people like that are considerate to us then we stand to gain. We are from the lower caste, so we need to be cordial with everyone around.

Women participants also began to understand the emancipatory power of good communication, often arguing that women should not fight and instead support each other. In one

interview, the enumerator asked, “What do you want to do to bring change in the condition of women?” “Women,” she said, “should not fight with each other. Women should have cooperation.” “They should have a good personality and behavior,” she added, “she should have her thoughts, and she should take her stand.”

At the same time, participants at 24 months reported strength in their communication. One participant drew on the cornerstone of self-reliance to explain the significant change in her life. “I joined the group,” Malti said, “then opened the store, which I manage today.” “I became self-reliant, and now I have my voice, and he listens to me. So, that’s how the change happened.” In another interview, the enumerator asked, “do others listen to you patiently while you convey your feelings to them?” In response, she said: “Yes, I convey my feelings truly without any bias, so they listen to me patiently. I feel good when people listen to us.”

To summarize, our data analysis showed significant qualitative differences across the 100+ participants interviewed at different periods of community development work. The data revealed significant changes in their communication competency across five elements of change: expressiveness, assertiveness, persuasiveness, openness, and positiveness. In light of these findings, we now consider the implications of our study.

Discussion

For over 75 years, Heifer International has developed an approach to community development focused on raising the standard of living for millions of people worldwide. This study shows that Heifer’s VBHCD approach in Bihar, India, is impacting participants’ communication competency. Over time, participants grew their communication skills in terms of expressiveness, assertiveness, persuasiveness, openness, and positiveness. They began to approach interaction differently, developed normative principles to live by, and aspired to better communication to bring people together.

In addition to documenting this change, the findings of this study showed that communication was a critical element of personal transformation (see also Shefner-Rogers et al., 1998). As defined by Heifer International, our practical task was to explore the nature of personal transformation and develop a practical tool to measure it globally. This study provides an essential first step in responding to this task and documents the nature of that change in one component of our conceptual model: communication competency. In addition, we showed what that communicative transformation looks like.

For scholars interested in understanding and measuring communication competency across contexts and cultures, this study shows what communication competency and its development look like for marginalized women living in poverty in Bihar, India. It also offers the degrees of progression that might be possible to achieve as they seek to create a better life for themselves and their families. Although scholars have been working on conceptualizing the nature of communication competency for decades (e.g., Spitzberg, 1997, 2015), much of the theoretical work in this area is not focused on (a) marginalized groups, (b) individuals living in poverty, and (c) on the actual lived experiences of individuals who are improving their communication skills. Research has documented the impact of communication training in a wide range of contexts, but most of those fall into professional contexts such as leadership, health care delivery, or management – all of which involve people who are well-educated and in stable economic contexts (see Waldron & Yungbluth, 2015). This study makes a significant contribution by showing what communication competency looks like in a rural context and the role that intercultural sensitivity and openness play in the process. It also makes visible the direction and nature of the development of positive

communication competency through time for marginalized women in India and supports the claim that “empowerment is in part a communication process” (Shefner-Rogers et al., 1998, p. 321).

Although Heifer International recorded anecdotal evidence of personal transformation, this study provides empirical evidence of the qualitative nature of that change. In addition to the data itself, the findings should be used by Heifer International practitioners to promote their programs locally and internationally and support all of their fundraising efforts. The findings should also encourage implementers of development initiatives to reinforce the importance of emphasizing social capital growth within programming. In our partnership, we have already developed a video introducing our conceptual model and research project to all employees, helped to write an internal blog used for capacity-building purposes, and delivered several formal and informal presentations to Heifer stakeholders. We will continue to work with Heifer staff to spread the findings of this research internally.

Finally, our recommendation to Heifer practitioners and international development practitioners more broadly is to more formally implement communication training to deepen participants’ communication competency. This study shows that participants may naturally develop their communication skills in five primary directions. New communication training should enhance those skills and speed their development with this understanding. For example, the data show that participants have a number of difficult conversations early on. These include educating their children and finding the right balance between encouraging and disciplining them or talking to their husbands about their needs and dreams. Training geared toward these areas could make a tremendous difference early on. In addition, communication training in expressing one’s views or asking open questions could benefit participants as they work within their group.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings from our work should be viewed in light of several limitations. First, conducting interviews during a global pandemic in Bihar should be considered. It was challenging for the enumerators to reach villages with all the restrictions. The interviews were conducted while maintaining social distancing and other precautions required by the Indian government. This context, including the uncertainty associated with the spread of the disease, potentially affected the responses from our participants. We also witnessed that the global pandemic slowed down participants’ progress toward sustainable living, in part because schools had been closed and many had lost the opportunity to work.

Second, we see limitations in our qualitative data. Using enumerators for data collection is common in survey research but not popular among qualitative researchers. This study offers an opportunity to reflect on the value and challenges of using enumerators for interview data and qualitative analysis. On the one hand, the decision to use enumerators was shaped by a larger context—the spread of COVID-19 around the globe—which prohibited us from traveling abroad. On the upside, using enumerators had several benefits. First, it enabled us to collect responses from a large number of participants. Second, all enumerators worked and lived in local communities in Bihar, which enabled them to connect more quickly and establish trust with participants, as well as to speak a common language during the interview. And finally, our data shows that good-quality data can be obtained using enumerators. There are, however, some limitations. For example, when reading the transcripts, we saw opportunities in the conversation in which we (as researchers) would have probed more deeply or asked a second or third question to follow up. Second, some enumerators skipped questions or asked closed-ended questions rather than open-ended questions. Our recommendation for future projects is to offer further training to enumerators on (a)

consistency in asking questions, (b) using open-ended questions rather than closed-ended questions, and (c) probing effectively.

Third, this study focuses strictly on communication competency, only one of the seven elements of our conceptual model. We have not yet conducted an analysis to understand the relationship between the seven elements. We also do not have the data to show whether the training provided by Heifer or other factors triggers the development of communication competency and intercultural sensitivity.

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study show that community-development work can improve the communication competency of women living in poverty in India. Much can be learned from Heifer's approach to community development. Further research is needed to accurately capture the relationship between cornerstone training and the development of communication competency. In general, more research is needed to explore how communication competency continues to grow and develop through time beyond the 24 months guiding this study. Finally, we call researchers across fields of study to examine the nature of communication competency in marginalized communities and among men and women living in poverty worldwide. We need to learn more about the ripple effects that increasing communication competency can have on people living in poverty.

Conclusion

The present research reveals qualitative changes in women's communication competency across four-time intervals: from baseline to 24 months, in Bihar, India, a large region in India with over 120 million people. Our results show that women living in poverty experience a gradual positive change toward communication competency as an outcome of the partnership with Heifer International to eradicate poverty in their own lives and community. We introduced our conceptual framework for personal transformation and overviewed our methodological approach to support this argument. The core of the qualitative analysis shows the nuanced differences in our participants' discourse across time. Specifically, we showed how participants experience a progressive change across five areas of communication competency: (a) expressiveness, (b) assertiveness, (c) persuasiveness, (d) openness, and (e) positiveness. As our participants develop their communication competency, they also experience and share among themselves positive changes in their lives. This study shows that building one's communication competency is at the heart of personal transformation and emancipation from poverty.

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