

WATERING PLANTS AND COMMUNICATION WITH SIGNIFICANT OTHER

In the first vignette, you have asked your significant other to please take over care of watering of the plants, and they have agreed. There were four different variations of this question in our data collection, After a period of time, you notice 1) plants are not suffering but are not being watered to your standards. 2) a plant is *beginning* to suffer, 3) a plant is suffering; 4) many plants are suffering. We asked the respondent how they would normally respond in this situation; and to evaluate whether they felt their response was positive assertive, positive yielding, negative assertive, or negative yielding. Before looking at there answers, what might you do as your usual response? A possible other response? And how would you evaluate , your response on the four modes?

In the following material, we present 1) cases of individual differences between respondents to the same vignette gradation; 2) case examples of an individual's responses to different gradations; 3) a general coding of responses along the four modes; 4) questions of clarification in terms of how to code some responses: seeking wise responses and 5) suggestions for future research.

1.1 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PEOPLE, SAME VIGNETTE.

Below are two examples of respondents profiles, and their answers to question four (many plants are suffering).

EXAMPLE ONE. The first person was a married 31 year old RN, who saw herself as very assertive (6) on a 7 point scale, and wanted to stay the same; saw themselves as 4 on yielding, and wanted ideally to be slightly less yielding (3); . Yielding she said was "I will give in on an argument if I am not sure of my stand" and assertiveness as " I will speak up for myself and not let people walk on me if there is a situation I have an interest in."

She said her first response (10%) of the time would be to take back the plants and care for them and saw that as positive yielding. She said that her second possible response (much more likely: 90% of the time) would be to “throw plants out when dead” and saw that as positive assertive). What are your views of those answers? ¹

EXAMPLE TWO. Was also a married male Ph.D. psychologist, 47 He was high on yielding (5) and assertiveness (6) and his ideal was 6 on both. He defined yielding as flexible and willing to hear an opinion which differs from the one I have; and assertiveness as “do I defend my rights without intruding on the rights of others.” His first response (80%) of the time, was to take back the plants; (which he called positive yielding also) His second response (20%) of the time was to “point out how bad the plants look” and he called that positive assertive. (with which we would agree). Hhe also commented “I would never give up my plants and allow them to come to harm.”

So, the first person 90% of the time would let them die (and throw them out and called that positive assertive; the second person felt much more strongly about helping the plants survive. So, clearly, important variables include the “attachment” and “value” of the plants (and attachment and value of the relationship?) Also, we realized that we felt in terms of “wise responses” (either assertive or yielding) an important element was communication, and “taking back the plants” or “letting them die” didn’t evidence that.

1.2 SHIFT IN RESPONSE BASED ON VIGNETTE

¹ We assume she felt her first response was positive yielding because she didn’t speak up verbally regarding the agreement that was made, but rather “yielded” to the situation and took back the responsibility. However, we felt that taking back the plants without discussion also had a large assertive component. In terms of her second response, we felt that waiting for the plants to die and calling that positive assertive did not seem to us as a “positive assertive” response. This led us in the Shapiro Control Content Analysis Scale to have a place for “rater disagreement).

What we also wondered was would there be a “shift” in strategy depending upon the suffering of the plants, and how that might be related to their self-assessment on assertiveness/yielding.

EXAMPLE ONE. In this case, an individual was asked about different gradations of the vignette. The person was a female clinician, Ph.D., 31, who defined yielding as “modifying my behavior to increase the probability that the other person will have his/her needs/want met.” And assertiveness as “express my thoughts, feelings beliefs, preferences in a given situation. She wanted to increase yielding (current to ideal) (from 3 to 4) and assertiveness from 4 to 5).

In the vignette, in which the *plants appear to be surviving*, but the watering is not done to your standards, she said her first response would be to do nothing (80%) and that was appropriately yielding. We agree. Her second response (20%) would be to take over the task and she saw that as overly assertive. Again, we agree.

In the vignette in which one plant appeared to be suffering, she said she would “resume task myself” (90%) and saw that as overly assertive and her second response was to talk with other about standards (10%) and saw that as appropriately assertive. Her response showed a sensitivity to the shift in “suffering” in the two vignettes. It also showed that the difference between overly assertive (first response) and appropriately assertive (second response) involved “talking” about the issue rather than just acting unilaterally.

EXAMPLE TWO. Was a male, age 58 in sales management, married; with a B.A, had the following self-description. (moderately yielding (4) and quite assertive (6). His ideal was the same: 4 yielding and 6 assertive. He defined yielding as considering and accepting the other’s position; and assertive as responsive insistence that your position be accepted. He was a daily meditator. He also said he was 3 on overcontrolling, 6 on appropriately assertive without being tense; and accepting of others (6)

His response was consistent across different situations, the plants appear to be surviving but s/he does not meet your standards in performing the task.” to many plants seem to be suffering to our spouse seems to be doing the job poorly and five plants have died. He said he would “do nothing” 100% of the time in the above situations and thought that was appropriately yielding.. He did not see the need for a differentiation in response. Would you agree with his self-assessment that doing nothing was positive yielding? We assume he felt that because an agreement was made, it was his spouse’s responsibility and therefore he was “accepting” of the outcome. We felt yielding was appropriate and positive in the first vignette, but overly yielding to not even mention there were problems in the second two. It seems a gentle discussion might have been appropriate.

Example 3 is a male, married school psychologist, 39. This person describes himself as a 3 on yielding, and wants to stay the same (3); and a 3 on assertive, and would like to be a bit more assertive (4). He defined yielding as “give and take in a relationship. Yielding is ok in an area where it doesn’t require giving up principles. And assertive as “knowing your opinion and stating your feelings with the motivation of power.”

Where as example two above, felt himself appropriate assertive without being tense (6) and accepting of others (6), and somewhat low on “overcontrolling (3), this person seems himself as lower on appropriate assertive (4); lower on accepting of others (5); and higher on overcontrolling (5) than example two above.

He was asked about all four gradations of the vignette.

In the situation in which the plants didn’t appear to be suffering, but the care was not up to his standard, his first response (80%) was “if I was not happy, I would take the plants back as it appears to have been my responsibility initially” which he evaluated as overly yielding. His

second response (20%) would be to tell his significant other his concerns about the plants and throw them away if she doesn't want to take care of them," He defined that as appropriately assertive. We'd say the first part (talking to her) leans toward overly assertive, because the plants are surviving. The second part—throwing them out-- is overly assertive because the plants are surviving (an example of overcontrol?) The then adds the comment "maybe she can convince me that her way is ok...I really don't care that strongly about it." This comment initially seems positive yielding. But what about the latter part: (I really don't care) is that positive acceptance, or is there an element of "giving up" negative yielding). But again, the plants are surviving, just not being taken care of up to his standards!

If only one plant was suffering, he would discuss the situation and if neither wanted to take care of them, throw them away. He saw that as appropriately assertive. We would agree. In the vignette where many plants were suffering, he said "since I don't want to care for them ,and it's apparent she doesn't either, I'd throw them away (evaluated as appropriately assertive). Again, if this was after a discussion, we would also agree. ²

1.3 CREATING SOME SUMMARY CODING FOR THE PLANT VIGNETTES.

Our next step was to create some summary coding for the respondents' answers to the Different vignettes. Here we looked at the grammar: e.g. look at grammar, active and passive voice; the affect associated with the behavior;

Q3: NEGATIVE ASSERTIVE : being too critical of how spouse is doing it (e.g., "confront angrily") and yell; throw out plants without any discussion; insist it be done my way to my standards; take back task in annoyance and frustration. Big fight; tell him he did an awful job. "Talk to him about his problems, if he doesn't care for the plants, he doesn't care for me." Destroy the remaining plants." "Take them to the flea market and sell them." Yell at the other person, making them wrong." Relieve the other person of the responsibility with angry words of rebuke. "Continue to teach the dumbbell." *Demand* significant other do it better. Create a crisis.

² Finally, when asked "if five plants were dying" the respondent said "I'm sick of these plant questions!" I'd discuss it with her then throw them out. Two thoughts; first, for him, the four gradations here between vignettes were too many to be of interest. Secondly, we apologize. Thank you for your efforts. We are grateful.

Taking back too much responsibility without discussion; “Pointing out that doing it his way caused the plants to die and if he had listened to me they would have survived.” This seems a critical judgmental response, a “my way is the right way” and no invitation to dialogue, to a q3 negative assertive response.

Q1 POSITIVE ASSERTIVE: Taking responsibility and acting, ranging from have a discussion about how plants are doing (ask, compliment and suggest, offer assistance, guidance) (vs demand, judge (q3). Discuss what I can do to help improve their quality of life. Make sure s/he “gently” knows how. Model how you have done it. Explore significant other’s feelings about doing it. Ask if partner wants you to take back the chore; or is it time to find the plants a new home (take the plants to work?) Ask again (in a non threatening way) my significant other to please honor the agreement to take care of the plants. “Point to the plants and say ‘May I help you?’” “Confront the situation, express my feelings openly, and be ready for a discussion. “Offer to care for them 50% of the time..” Try to be empathic “I know how hard it is.....how can I support you better? E.g., add a reward to the task.” “Remind them that plants are living things and need a little more TLC. I’d also help with their car periodically. (this situation is present in our home). “Hire a person to do it.” “Discuss in family situation calmly.”

Q4 NEGATIVE YIELDING -: letting go and giving up of responsibility; do nothing (but still feel upset) , feeling manipulated and pushed around, helpless, powerless. “I’d say to hell with the whole thing. “Avoid confrontation.” “Let them die.” “begrudgingly reassume the task, building resentment” Suffer in silence. Sulk. “Wish significant other were different” (Definitely Q4, . The respondent is not accepting the other, is not confronting the other (skillfully or otherwise), but is simply passively "wishing". ." Others took a more “who cares approach “Tough luck.” Who cares what happens to the damn plants.” “let the plants die, who cares.”

Q2: POSITIVE YIELDING. vignette one).; Accept when plants are doing ok, even if not to your standards. Do nothing. Recognizing that the relationship is more important than the plants. Keeping a perspective. (“As long as the plants are doing well, why should I insist on it being done my way).” If I gave the responsibility, I must also given her the authority, and that means butt out. <We decided was positive yielding because the respondent did not express any negative affect about being willing to “butt out.” Vignettes two ff: (allow him/her to learn from experience and release my own feelings of responsibility. “This exact situation has come up and I felt it was her responsibility to handle it as she pleases.” After the initial teaching period, I’d say nothing more. After all, I don’t want the task anymore.” “I’d start think about expressing frustration/ dissatisfaction, but that I chose to step back from their care, and need to be willing to accept the consequences

COMBINATION POSITIVE ASSERTIVE AND POSITIVE YIELDING:

Remind my spouse again of the importance of taking care of the plants, show him/her once again how to care for them (positive assertive?) and then release my concern for the blessed plants. (positive yielding).

1.4 EXPLORING GRAY AREAS IN ASSERTIVE/YIELDING, POSITIVE NEGATIVE: SEEKING WISE RESPONSES .

For the content analysis scales (cited above on this website), we explored nuances in coding. Part of that was helped by our discussions on these responses. Some example below and our discussions. Note that our coding often depended on the situational gradient of the vignette, and the person's affect and motivation (if expressed). We realized that the affect in doing a behavior (or not doing one: e.g., ignore, not say anything) was important: e.g. was it done with calmness, anger, a sense of helplessness, sulking, griping, resentment). Was it done "openly" and with direct communication?

EXAMPLE ONE. "If she assumed responsibility for the plants, it's up to her to ask for help if she wishes it. Otherwise all the plants can die, they're not important to me." (How would you evaluate that response in terms of assertive, yielding, positive or negative. How do you feel this might impact the relationship? (Dr. Johanna Shapiro commented:

"hmm, this is a tough attitude (q3 Negative assertive) but I'd say overall it's more q4, negative yielding. The respondent doesn't care about the plants; but he cared enough to ask her to water them in the first place. *What's missing is shared problem-solving*. "It's up to her to ask for help" seems too passive, not willing to confront the issue, but allow the dead plants to speak for themselves.

EXAMPLE TWO: "I want peace in the home, which is more important to me than healthy plants." This seems like a choice to accept what is happening and we would code it as positive yielding. The question relates to affect and the situational gradient (amount of suffering of the plants) .: e.g. Is doing nothing positive or negative yielding: e.g., let them handle it could be overly yielding; or positive yielding. (calm acceptance and allowing of other person to be responsible or passive, helpless withdrawal in the face of plant's suffering. While we admire the prioritizing of the relationship over the plants, it also seems important to make sure there is direct

communication, otherwise, we felt saying nothing on this issue (and others) could involve some aspect of negative yielding, passivity. As one person said: the issue wasn't really the plants per se: e.g., "I would consider not talking at all about the plants, but rather about his attitude toward caring (or not caring) about living things." "I would see this as communal property and a mutual loss, and share my feelings."

EXAMPLE THREE throwing plants away. Is this giving up (negative yielding)? Is it negative assertive? Does it depend on context: e.g., this is hurting our relationship and a way to solve this problem. (We would like to see communication tried first before such an action, and working toward a mutual agreement).

EXAMPLE FOUR. How would you classify one person's response (take care of the plants secretly and say nothing?) Is that positive assertive (toward plants) and avoiding conflict with spouse (positive yielding) or is it overcontrolling and negative yielding at same time? Again, ideally, we would hope for more open communication in the relationship.

EXAMPLE SIX: "C'est la vie", or more appropriately, "C'est la mort." How would you evaluate: . I'd be sorry the plants would not be around, but I would not get involved." How would you evaluate this?

Again, Dr. Johanna Shapiro commented

this is clearly yielding, but is it q2 (positive yielding) or q4, negative yielding. to me it seems more q4. if the respondent said, "i don't care about the plants, i'd just let it go," this might be q2. but since he would be sorry, then i think again there's an excess of passivity, not honoring his own feelings, not saying anything, not dialoguing.

WISDOM IN RESPONSES. We realized that in addition to "coding" we were really trying to develop, learn, evolve, what were the wisest responses, the healthy goal, and process. (As one person said, "I usually know what to do about a problem, but my first response isn't

always the best one).. This led us to our eventual discussion of a) it's recognizing the situation (and its severity), with nuance; noticing your own feelings—about the plants (how much do you—and your spouse—care about them; how much you care about your spouse! b) centering: i.e., partly it's not what is done, but how it is done: with centeredness, context, caring, listening, discussion. And c) then the content became what we later referred to as “dongjing” the best combination of positive assertive and positive yielding for a given situation.

For example some creative answers: “find easier to care for plants; suggest we get plastic plants; explore other decorating ideas, “Change house décor” take a course in plant care!” “Discuss and decide together how important the plants were to us and what alternative are available, s/he sharing what the problem is and agreeing to do better, my taking the task back, or giving them away.” “Suggest and compliment.” “Share how important the plants are to me and that I'm concerned.” “Point out that the patient needs tender loving care. How might we help them?” Try to be empathic “I know how hard it is.....how can I support you better?” Would it help if we alternated weeks?;) “insist on teaming”< depending on the meaning of "insist," this could be Q1 or Q3. We give it the the benefit of the doubt, and go with Q1. A better word choice might have been “invite, suggest, explore”.

1.5 ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS AND IDEAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON THIS

VIGNETTE::

- For some, it may be better to not go “in and through” on every item. Some just accept without discussion. It would depend on the importance and salience of the plants to the person; how often topics are not discussed; if there truly was no resentment being built up by not discussion them; if there could be open communication in other areas, etc.

- I wish we had the originals of some of the above responses (e.g., those we coded as q3 negative assertive) to see how they rated their responses (e.g. q1?) and also how they described themselves; (low or high assertive, low or high yielding and which they wanted ideally!)
- In the future, ask “couples” plant questions, at different stages of relationship (1 year; 2-5-; 5-15; etc; evaluate overall how happy they are in relationship; what are each of their thoughts on plants (how important they are to one, the other).

SUMMARY COMMENT. We were intrigued at how a simply series of vignettes about plants and spousal communication created such a wide range of responses, both wise and some not so wise. And gave quite helpful information about assertive, yielding, and the four modes of control.

We also were interested there was in some instances, quite strong affect, both regarding how connected the person was to the plants, and the meaning they attributed to the spouse’s behavior. For example, in some of the respondents, the data point of the plants created quite high affect about the viability of the relationship. As one person said “I would have major problems with someone who would let living things die from lack of care.” Another said, as noted, that peace was more important than the plants” (so letting it go and feeling it wasn’t that important in terms of the relationship.)

As a reader, looking at some of these responses, are there some that make you more encouraged (or less encouraged) about the viability of the relationship even from this small data point? We now turn to two more interpersonal situations, one involving what might be the “start of a relationship” : seeing an attractive stranger across a room; and one involving a question of

what to do during an intimate moment: when making love, and not feeling comfortable with what you partner is doing. It is to those we now turn.