



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

# **Communication barriers in a Swedish academic workplace:**

**An exploratory study**

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## **Abstract**

“The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished”, says the author George Bernard Shaw (Shaw, 2011). This simple phrase indicates how frequent unsuccessful communication processes are among individuals in daily life. Like any other human activity, communication could be disturbed when barriers to communication appear. This study aimed to explore six significant communication barriers through conducting in-depth interviews: *linguistic, cultural, mechanical, hierarchical, gender and personal biases*, and how they could affect communication among ten coworkers in a Swedish academic workplace. The results of the study confirmed that some of these barriers do exist to some participants (coworkers), such as mechanical and gender barriers, while to others these barriers were not present as much and in some cases not at all. All ten participants agreed that hierarchical barriers were nowhere to be seen as well as personal biases while linguistic barriers were apparent but only on a small scale. As for the cultural barriers, the participants did not believe they existed. This result was related to a potential lack of knowledge in differences between cultures. The participants confirmed that overcoming the abovementioned barriers when they occur is of high importance and should be done instantly in order to ensure successful organizational communication.

**Keywords:** communication – communication barriers – effective communication – communication failure – organizational communication – misinterpretation

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## *1.1. Introducing Communication Barriers*

Communication in its most basic forms, according to the Webster dictionary, refers to the process of using words, signs, sounds and behaviors to express and exchange information, feelings and ideas to others<sup>1</sup>. It has been a part of basic human interaction since the beginning of humanity, and like many aspects concerning human's wellbeing; communication between two or more individuals could be disturbed or broken for many reasons. Scholars have given those reasons or obstacles that disturb communication multiple names like "communication barriers" and "barriers to understanding". "The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished" (Shaw, 2011), this indicates the frequency of disturbed communication processes amongst individuals. Some of the most common barriers reported in social and business studies include linguistic, cultural, hierarchical, mechanical and cultural barriers. It is implied that it is an absolute necessity for individuals interacting with each other to acknowledge these barriers and attempt to overcome them when they appear for successful and more productive interactions whether personal or professional (Madera, Dawson & Neal, 2014). Moreover, Rai & Rai (2009) reported that there are several obstacles that can prevent the message from reaching the intended recipient or from having the intended effect on the recipient. These obstacles, also known as barriers to communication, could be physical, external or mechanical, like defects in the communication medium and noise. They could also be semantic and language barriers, socio-psychological barriers concerning the communicators themselves and cross cultural barriers (ibid).

Organizational leaders and employees interacting together in professional settings generally, as well as individuals interacting together on a personal level, need to be aware of potential barriers to effective communication. In general, physical separation and differences in status, gender, culture and language could potentially either block or distort

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of communication:  
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communication>

effective communication. Riege (2005) introduced a big number of knowledge sharing barriers that would benefit organizational managers when considered. Knowledge sharing to begin with is a form of communication that takes place in organizations when performing organizational duties among leaders and their employees. And so, knowledge-sharing barriers make it difficult for organizational members to achieve their goals optimally (ibid). Some of the barriers mentioned that affect knowledge sharing include the hierarchical organizational structure and the physical work environment and how work areas are distributed. Andersson (2016) explored communication patterns to be able to describe communication barriers in a certain organizational setting and some ways to overcome those barriers. The study reported a number of findings concerning communication barriers such as technological barriers. Since all organizations, at the age of technology today, are almost completely dependent on technology in multiple organizational functions, this leads to the need for these organizations to strive to overcome any technological barriers that could appear and disturb the organizational communication.

Studies in the area of communication barriers have emphasized on the importance of acknowledging such barriers and eventually overcoming them. This could be achieved through combined efforts provided by organizational members with authority and subordinates as well, by training in effective communication (Rai & Rai, 2009). One company could have major technological barriers while the other one has major language barriers. It is important to locate the areas of weakness and focus on fixing them. Leaders and managers in organizations on both higher and lower levels as well as regular employees could find this current study especially valuable. Barriers to communication could occur between employees when dealing with each other, between managers and also between managers and employees. It is believed that gaining such knowledge by organizational members would be of great value for them and assist them in having an optimized work experience and subsequently achieve their organizational goals efficiently.

Similar studies to this current study, which shed some light on communication barriers among coworkers in a workplace, were mostly done in healthcare and educational contexts concerning communication barriers between nurses/doctors and patients on one hand and teachers and students on another hand, for this reason this study is believed to be significant because it will shed some light on communication behaviors in organizations among coworkers. Organizations and companies are just as important to every society as hospitals and schools are. Each contributes to the growth and prosperity of societies in different ways. And so it is believed that all of the before mentioned entities require constant monitoring to their communication systems both internally and externally, to guarantee a smoother and a more productive workflow and therefore guarantee an optimal work experience for coworkers and performance. According to Bassi & Fave (2012), an optimal work experience refers to “a good work life” by improving work performance, building long-term personal and job resources and enriching psychological well-being.

“Your ability to communicate with others will account for fully 85% of your success in your business and in your life”, says Brian Tracy, a professional Canadian speaker and author in corporate success, on his twitter profile. This indicates how crucial it is for individuals in a workplace to communicate effectively and efficiently in order to reach success in their careers whichever they were. A study was conducted by Conrad (2014), in which solutions were provided to organizational communication questions and problems, which appeared in a certain American newspaper. In Conrad’s article, he pointed out that the ability to communicate effectively was identified as the most important skill a manager needs for success, according to surveys of highly successful managers across the nation. Canary, Cody & Manusov (2008) explained the standards for assessing communication competence, which include “effectiveness”. Effectiveness refers to achieving the objectives one has for each conversation. When goals are achieved, communication is effective.

As cited in Conrad (2014), smooth functioning of a workplace is dependent on cooperation between the coworkers, which can be achieved if coworkers communicate

together effectively. By identifying the barriers to effective communication, one can create a calmer, more welcoming and a more productive workplace (ibid). Madera et al. (2014) furthermore suggested that addressing communication barriers with limited English speaking employees in a workplace could reduce role ambiguity and that has a direct effect on turnover. All of the aforementioned scholarly works are emphasizing on the necessity of addressing obstacles to communicating effectively in a workplace.

As mentioned in Bromme, Hesse & Spada (2005, p. 1), the term barrier is defined as “the gap between an initial and an end state”, based on psychological research on problem solving. For more clarification, “barriers are challenges which have to be overcome in order to attain a goal” (Bromme et al. 2005). Agarwal (2010, p. 28) talked about the barriers to communication and how these barriers distort the delivery of the intended message and also emphasized on how managers should be aware of such barriers for the purpose of improving their own communication skills. It is argued that there is a number of types of possible communication barriers, such as linguistic and physical/mechanical barriers (p. 29). Kramer (2001, p. 86-87) pointed out that communication barriers might be created by the sender or the receiver of the message, the communication environment itself, misunderstanding the communication context and lack of consideration for the audience. Communication barriers could also be oral, if the way the communicator speaks is flawed, or in a written form, if the communicator’s writing is flawed and they can also be nonverbal, when the communicator’s body movements distract the other party from concentrating in the message being communicated (p. 86). The following section will introduce communication barriers in more details.

### *1.2. The Organization Under Study*

Provided hereafter is a brief introduction on the organization under study, in which communication barriers was looked at closely, that is the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Some scholars believe that the organizational members themselves are the ones who continuously construct organizations through communicative processes (Johansson, 2007). According to Weick (ibid), “communication is the core process of organizing”. Moreover, organizational communication as an academic discipline refers to “the study



of symbols, messages, media, interactions, relationships, networks, persuasive campaigns, and broader discourses within an organization – be it a corporation, governmental agency, religious institution, social movement, or the like” (as cited in Johansson, 2007). Universities are considered to be “professional organizations” alongside hospitals, accounting and law firms, for such organizations primarily sustain professionalized occupations (Brock, 2006). In such organizations, professionals are not only the operators but also in managerial control (as cited in Brock, 2006). Furthermore on the definition of professional organizations, as cited in (McLean & Akdere, 2015), professional organizations are “composed of individuals united primarily by a common intellectual interest in a particular field”. In clarification, this type of organizations is an “authority body of a profession that aims to improve and enhance a specific profession and the associated stakeholders, including the people practicing that profession, those linked to that profession, and those benefitting from that profession” (ibid) and the purpose of such organizations is basically to serve the public by focusing on one profession, higher education that is in the case of universities, and generally such organizations are non-profit organizations (ibid). Non-profit organizations’ main purpose is to provide services to people by bringing them together to improve their societies economically and socially. The non-profit sector includes a variety of organizations that range from educational institutes, health care institutes, religious groups and other similar entities (as cited in Prugsamatz, 2010).

### *1.3. Organizational Communication*

For the sake of this current study on communication barriers, it is of importance to identify organizational communication rather than looking at communication in general. Communication in an organizational context is defined as what happens inside an organization including all content and information exchange through formal and informal channels (Papa, 2008, p. 2). Miller (2009) had furthermore pointed out that organizational communication could take place among individuals inside and outside the organization with the main purpose of dealing and solving problems, or accomplishing common tasks and goals (O’hair, Friedrich & Dixon, 2010). As a matter of fact, communication is very valuable to organizations and it is one of the main aspects of modern organizational

foundation that could lead changes in organizations (Baker, 2002). Thus, communication is seen as a critical part of organizational functioning and success. Consequently, the existence of organizations would be difficult when communication is absent (Sethi & Seth, 2009).

#### *1.4. Organizational Culture in Sweden*

The first chapter of Schein (2010) emphasizes how crucial understanding a culture is in both social and organizational settings because by accomplishing that, one is able to understand and make sense of the countless puzzling experiences one goes through with their surroundings in those social and organizational settings. Smith, Andersen, Ekelund, Graversen & Ropo (2003) conducted a very interesting study exploring management styles in the Nordic countries, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. Understanding management styles in Sweden is believed to be valuable for this current study since it is concerning communication barriers in a Swedish academic workplace. The authors when exploring Nordic management styles reported that Sweden was categorized as moderately high on individualism (as opposed to collectivism), very low on power distance, between superiors and subordinates that is, and very high on femininity, that is according to Hofstade's famous survey that was conducted in 1980 to understand the differences among multiple existing cultures today (Hofstade, 1980). The concept of femininity here refers to male and female gender roles being relatively similar, and to the preference for good working relations. Moreover, it was reported in the before mentioned study on Nordic countries management that there are more female senior managers in Nordic countries than other nations. It was also reported that Swedish decision-making is participative and that it is very normal for a Swedish manager to consult their subordinates before making decisions.

Individuals everyday on personal as well as professional levels are surely facing communication barriers. Not dealing with those barriers especially on professional levels within an organizational setting could lead to harmful results to the organization. The overall purpose of this study is to offer an understanding of communication behaviors in a workplace among coworkers with a focus on the perceived communication barriers.

### *1.5. Aim & Research Questions*

This study aims to explore 1) what sort of communication barriers do coworkers experience within a single department in a certain professional organization in Gothenburg, Sweden: Gothenburg University (GU), and 2) how they overcome these barriers if they are doing so. 3) If they are not doing so, this study will attempt to provide recommendations after studying the issue and drawing conclusions on what could be done to minimize any possible damages that could be harmful for organizational goals. Such damages could be anything from inaction and misinterpretation concerning work tasks to bad work relationships and lack of knowledge among employees (Kokemuller, n. d.). As mentioned before in the introduction section, the significance of this study lies in its focus on communication barriers from an organizational perspective among coworkers in an organization rather than focusing on communication barriers in an educational setting between teachers and their students, as well as in a healthcare setting between doctors/nurses and their patients.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### *2.1. Communication Theory*

Scholars from different disciplines have been constantly theorizing communication over time. Shannon and Weaver's model of communication is one of the earliest concepts of communication and perhaps one of the most popular and widely used ones. In this model, communication is defined as the process of information transfer from a sender to a receiver through a communication channel that involved the process of encoding and decoding, and this process could be distracted by noise (Shannon, 1949). On the other hand, other scholars defined communication as a process that produces and reproduces shared meaning (Craig, 1999). On the practical level however, the transfer of messages can be done through verbal and nonverbal communication (O'hair et al., 2010). Qvortrup (2006) argued that: "successful communication is not a natural, but a highly improbable phenomenon. Thus, the effect of communication media is to limit the improbability of

communication success and the qualities of media can be measured by their impact on communication success”.

## *2.2. Social Identity Theory (SIT)*

Social identity is a person’s sense of who they are based on their group membership(s). According to the social identity theory, which was formulated by Tajfel in 1978, as explained in the Oxford dictionary of psychology (2015):

Social categories, including large groups such as nations and small groups such as clubs, provide their members with a sense of who they are, and social identities not only describe but also prescribe appropriate behavior, and membership of the social category of ‘student’, for example, determines not only how members define and evaluate themselves but also how others define and evaluate them. According to the theory, the basis of social prejudice is the enhancement of self-esteem by discrimination against out-groups.

The theory indicates that individuals tend to divide the world to *them* and *us* through a process of social categorization. This theory could be used as basis to explain the occurrence of the following communication barriers.

## *2.3. Definition of Concepts: The Barriers*

### *Linguistic Barriers*

Agarwal (2010) explained how linguistic barriers in conveying the message appear and that is because some words have different meanings, other words have many different synonyms and also many abbreviations have different meanings to different cultures. Adjectives like “beautiful” and “ugly” depend entirely on personal taste and sentences can convey different meanings depending on how they are spoken (Rai & Rai, 2009, p. 58-59). Further, Andersson (2016, p. 223) conducted a study investigating communication barriers in an organizational setting and found that using special terms when interacting with others sometimes causes misunderstandings due to the fact that some individuals might not be aware of the meanings of those terms. Peltokorpi &

Clausen (2011) conducted a study on linguistic barriers in foreign offices residing in a different country from the origin and reported that the main barriers were low motivation for the communicators to improve foreign language proficiency and the lack of a shared language between the communicators, which could cause misunderstandings (Hills, 2013). Additionally, scholars have argued that language barriers affect employees' attitudes and behaviors (Madera, 2011) and that they could create an environment of frustration, stress, dissatisfaction and absenteeism (Madera et al. 2014).

Hwang (2013) conducted a study in this regards and reported interesting findings about language barriers; such as, language barriers result in one limiting their choices of communication channels. For example, in this specific study some employees avoided telephone communication for that reason. Also in this study language barriers caused operational difficulties during the exchange of ideas and technical details and during discussions and negotiations. It was reported that language barriers also reduce the efficiency of informal communication, like after work dining and drinking, which play an important role in building relationships between coworkers (ibid). Research shows that language barriers are one of the biggest obstacles to smooth integration of immigrants into a new workplace (Madera et al. 2014).

### *Cultural Barriers*

As mentioned in Rai & Rai (2009, p. 63), cross cultural factors increase the possible problems of communication, for that reason many global business firms provide training in cross-cultural communication to company leaders in order to introduce them to some of the differences between cultures, such as those in concepts of time and space, social relationships, nonverbal communication, values and norms of behavior. Naturally, cultural values have a big influence on the way individuals communicate, cultures differ in communication styles, for that reason misunderstandings are common when individuals from different cultures who carry different values and beliefs interact even if they use a shared foreign language (Hills, 2013; Peltokorpi & Clausen, 2011). Researchers in this field had mainly attributed communication barriers to cultural value differences and that is due to the assumption that communicators from different cultures

must have a shared language, and that is English, so language barriers were not taken into account much (ibid). Culture related filters such as one's culture, gender, age, education, ethnicity and experience have an influence on communication in a workplace. However, they may or may not be considered as barriers, depending on one's understanding, awareness and acceptance of other cultures (Kramer, 2001, p. 89). Having different perspectives on the surroundings is also a barrier to communication. Individuals have different interpretations of one situation and that depends on their own experiences, interests and attitudes.

### *Physical-mechanical Barriers*

Moving on to the physical and mechanical barriers, Agarwal (2010, p. 30) identified some of the aforementioned barriers as follows; defects in the medium of communication, which include faults in the mechanical devices that are used for communication like telephone lines and similar communication tools. Rai & Rai (2009, p. 58) also pointed out that defects in the organization's communication systems, such as the flow and transfer of messages and documents could be a barrier to communication. Hills (2013) pointed out that communication errors and misinterpretations are more likely to occur with physical separation and lack of contact among employees. Similarly, Lunenburg (2010) suggested that walls could be removed if they caused delays in communication in a workplace. Further, Andersson (2016, p. 224) reported that within an organizational setting, technological concerns caused communication barriers, whereas some individuals in the concerned organization were not aware of some technological terms that were used by more technological personnel and software developers. Moreover, Bromme et al. (2005, p. 4) mentioned that one of the basic barrier presumptions related to problems of communication is the individual and mutual construction of "meaning" when information is exchanged via computers. The mutual construction of "meaning" is considered the central challenge. Moreover on mechanical barriers, such barriers could occur due to email overload. As cited in McMurtry (2014), scholars recommend that organizations use means other than email to communicate all employee information attempting to decrease email volume.

### *Hierarchical Barriers*

Individuals' placement in different hierarchical levels in organizations creates gaps in communication between the members of organizations, especially if the organization's atmosphere does not encourage open discussions and sharing ideas and feedback (Agarwal, 2010, p. 34).

### *Gender Barriers*

As mentioned in Hills (2013), men and women communicate in very different ways. A number of scientific studies had been done in that area and all results show the big differences between the two genders in communication, such as men are more direct than women in their speech or men give orders while women give suggestions (Kramer, 2001, p. 92).

### *Personal Biases*

It has been previously pointed out that personal biases and prejudices an individual might hold against another could function as a barrier to communication in a workplace (Hills, 2013). Prejudice in the workplace could be seen in many forms; discrimination against older workers, a certain religious group or certain minority groups (Kramer, 2001, p. 89). Hartley & Chatterton (2015, p. 206-207) also mentioned that relying on stereotypes when making judgments about others could be misleading and that affects the effectiveness of communication. Additionally, they mentioned that major barriers to understanding other people include one's own often misplaced confidence in their abilities to interpret others' behaviors and feelings. Rai & Rai (2009, p. 60) also described more barriers to communication that could fall under this category; such as self-centered attitudes, which refer to how individuals pay attention to messages that interest them and neglect messages otherwise. Also group identification, which refers to how individuals tend to reject ideas that go against certain groups they belong to.

### **3. METHODS**

#### *3.1. The Organization as a Concept*

Since this explorative study on communication barriers is focused on a specific organization, it is crucial to provide a brief introduction on the Organization as a concept. As cited in Miller (2009, p. 10), any organization should include five critical features and they are as follows; the existence of a social collectivity, the existence of individual and organizational goals, coordinated activities, an organizational structure and the embedding of the organization within an environment of other organizations; and GU does meet the abovementioned standards.

#### *3.2. Research Approach*

In this study, a phenomenological approach was used to acquire an understanding of the participants' experiences in order to meet the aim of this study. Phenomenology is a broad discipline and method of inquiry in philosophy, which is based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events "phenomena" as they are perceived or understood in the human consciousness, and not of anything independent of human consciousness (Mastin, 2008). Phenomenology reduces the experiences of people to "the nature of the thing" (Van Manen, 1990). A phenomenological reflection was built on the data extracted from the investigation of the coworkers' perceived communication barriers under study. Consequently, this study took an inductive logic of reasoning where the theory was determined after generating the data, the experiences of participants, rather than beforehand.

#### *3.3. Participants & Procedure*

In this study, ten participants (five males and five females) were interviewed about the concerned topic and all of them work in the same department in GU but allocated to two divisions in two separate yet adjacent buildings. In one building was the administrative division, with fourteen employees in total, and in the other building was the technical division, with sixteen employees in total, but both divisions are under the same department alongside five other divisions. The total number of employees in both



divisions under study is thirty employees. Eight out of ten of the participants were Swedes who spoke English and only two of them were not Swedes but moved to Sweden for career purposes and both also spoke English. Understanding and speaking the English language in addition to working in the organization for one year at least were the two elements of which the selection criteria consisted of. Four out of ten of the participants were holding administrative positions, as for the rest; they were holding more specialized positions in the department's field as shown in table 1 below. The permission of the technical division's head was granted in order for the interviews to take place and all participants did the interviews voluntarily, including the technical division's head. The participants were approached via email after the recommendation of the division's head and the interviews were scheduled with them as per their convenience during the months March and April of the year 2016.

**Table 1:** Participants

<b>Employee Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Position Type</b>
Emp01	Male	Associate Professor/Division Head
Emp02	Female	Administrative
Emp03	Female	Administrative
Emp04	Male	Administrative
Emp05	Male	Lecturer
Emp06	Male	Lecturer
Emp07	Male	Lecturer
Emp08	Female	Researcher
Emp09	Female	Associate Professor
Emp10	Female	Administrative

### *3.4. In-depth Interviews*

Conducting in-depth interviews, when considered as a method for qualitative research, is a technique that is used to understand the experience of others (Seidman, 1991). For that reason, the chosen method was to interview a number of employees in the concerned department in GU and document their perspectives on what communication barriers they

are facing from the following: linguistic, cultural, physical/mechanical, hierarchical, gender and personal biases; if there are any and how or what they do to overcome those barriers. The researcher's intention was to interview employees from both lower and higher/managerial levels in the hierarchical structure of the organization. The reason for this is to examine if there are differences in the barriers between those two types of employees. The interviews were conducted in English and were audio recorded only. In-depth interviews are most appropriate for situations in which one wants to ask open-ended questions that extract depth of information from the interviewees (Weiss, 1994).

### *3.5. Data Collection*

In order to collect data from the interviewees, the interviews were audio recorded after being granted the permission of the participants beforehand and all interviews were face-to-face and conducted in each participant's office space. The interviews did not take more than 20 minutes for each interview and the participants seemed pleased with the questions. Right before every interview, the participants were provided with an introduction on the research topic and were also given the interview consent form<sup>2</sup> to read and sign. The interview consisted of six open-ended questions<sup>3</sup> that mainly start with "have you experienced?" and "how do you think?" in order to give the participants the opportunity to talk freely about their feelings and experiences. The purpose behind the questions was to find out how often do the participants or the employees face communication barriers in their workplace and whether or not they deal with them as they occur.

### *3.6. Data Analysis*

The goal of data analysis is to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study through gathering the participants' experiences and feelings and comparing them later on. Since the data was gathered by audio recording, it was necessary to transcribe the interviews in order to be able to see all answers simultaneously to initiate the comparison and start analyzing. A transcription is a written record of an interview,

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> Shown in Results.

and it is considered to be an essential step in the analysis of qualitative research (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005). Not every word the participants provided was transcribed, for the participants and the interviewer both would drift a little bit sometimes from the sole purpose of the interview and share jokes or humorous comments. For that reason, only what was relevant to the questions was transcribed for analysis. This type of transcription is called “denaturalized transcription”, where stutters, pauses, nonverbal and involuntary vocalizations are removed, as opposed to “naturalized transcription” in which none is removed (ibid).

The transcriptions were read multiple times to acquire a sense of the data as a whole and after that the coding process was initiated. Coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The following step was to merge related codes together to form three categories, *departmental operations*, *departmental knowledge nature* and *departmental principles*, and the categories after that were allocated to two primary themes, **internal communication processes** and **workplace values** as shown in table 2 below<sup>4</sup>. The categories and themes were formed inductively from the data when forming the codes as well in order to provide a bigger umbrella of understanding in relation to the codes.

**Table 2:** Coding process example.

<b>Participants statements</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Theme</b>
“It is often that people do not have English as their native tongue, so sometimes that can be a bit limiting”	It’s a bit limiting to work using English because it’s not the employee’s native language.	<b>Limitation</b>	<b>Departmental operations</b>	<b>Internal communication processes</b>

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2 for full table.

<p>“We try to use different communication channels in order to communicate with each other but each technology has its benefits and drawbacks. It is a continuous process in trying to find a way to overcome these [mechanical] barriers”</p>	<p>Some employees complained from having information overload due to having multiple communication channels that are active. They also complained that having multiple communication channels could prevent certain info from reaching recipient in time.</p>	<p><b>Multiple communication channels</b></p>	<p><b>Departmental knowledge nature</b></p>	
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The coding process will be used as an aiding tool for data analysis in the discussion section in this paper where it is explained in more details. When analyzing the results, a number of relevant scientific journal studies exploring the same communication issues were used as a basis to determine the validity of the results of this research. This makes this paper a reliable system for gathering information and drawing conclusions on the concerned topic, communication barriers in a workplace that is.

### 3.7. Validity & Reliability

The validity of the research refers to the trustworthiness of the scientific finding, while reliability refers to the repeatability of the research findings, in other words, stable and consistent results (Brink, 1993). “A valid study should demonstrate what actually exists” (ibid). In the case of this study, making sure that the participants know that the research is anonymous so that they would feel like they could talk freely and express exactly how they feel was a step taken towards the assurance of validity of this research. Also conducting the interviews in the participants’ own office spaces insured validity because the interviews were conducted where they would feel comfortable talking with no others listening to what they said. The interview questions were viewed and approved by the supervisor before conducting the interviews to make sure they are clear and good enough to gather the required data. The reliability of the study on the other hand is indicated through the strong positive connection between the results or findings of the interviews, whereas the participants’ answers showed similarities and some repetition even though

the answers took two opposite sides. Some participants reported experiencing communication barriers while others reported the opposite. Reliability entails that “a researcher using the same or comparable methods obtained the same or comparable results every time he/she uses the methods on the same or comparable subjects” (ibid). Choosing a research method that is faithful to the phenomenological philosophy is an important step to establish validity and reliability (Söderhamn, 2001); and in-depth interviews as a method is believed to be faithful to the phenomenological philosophy.

### *3.8. Ethical Considerations*

Ethical considerations were maintained in this research by giving the participants the complete freedom to participate, also by keeping the name of the department, the name of the participants and their individual positions anonymous. As mentioned before, the participants had to sign a letter of consent before the interviews in which they stated that they were aware of the purpose of this research and aware that their contribution was voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at anytime and for any reason.

## **4. RESULTS**

A description of the answers to the interview questions will be provided below. The six interview questions on communication barriers in the department under study in GU will be listed down below and after each question a summary of the interviewees’ answers will be provided. Those answers, which were found similar were jointly grouped and presented together in one paragraph (e.g. Emp06/07 under the first question below).

**1) Linguistic barriers: different languages – different meaning to same words – special terms and phrases.**

**Q: Have you experienced any sort of linguistic barriers in your workplace with your coworkers or others? Please elaborate.**

- **If yes, have you tried to deal with them? How?**
- **Can you rate the importance of acknowledging this barrier?**

All ten employees reported that language barriers are faced but not on a big scale due to everyone's ability to speak and understand English well since the department is already dealing with research and studies that are conducted in English to enable them to be published internationally. All employees also agreed that any language misunderstandings are addressed immediately and that it is important to address and talk about which language to choose for the department's activities.

**Emp01** reported that linguistic barriers are commonly faced in the department since most of the workers are Swedish nationals and others are from other countries, in addition both groups are mostly working with the English language in the department. And so there are linguistic barriers because no one is using their mother tongue basically. However it is not very highly ranked and such barriers are always addressed. Additionally, the international group of people is in the process of learning Swedish and that is what is expected from them in this workplace and this makes it easier to reduce linguistic barriers in the future. Misunderstandings do occur due to these language differences but they are instantly addressed and being dealt with. Meetings are often held in English, sometimes in Swedish but those who do not speak Swedish are informed of the content later on. He also reported that it is very important to acknowledge such barriers because they have negative consequences, for important topics are not being discussed in one's first language, "*which means that the discussion is often on a shallow level*" he said.

**Emp02** stated: *“I’m not very good at English myself, so sometimes I do not really understand people who we hire from abroad before they can speak Swedish. Sometimes they never learn Swedish so yes there have been misunderstandings between us but often we have cleared it out after talking with each other back and forth or ask what they mean. I’m a personal officer so it is very important that I really understand what they say and what they mean”*.

**Emp03** explained that even though there are differences in the language of the department’s employees, it is not perceived as a problem because everyone is able to speak English whether they were swedes or others. It is a matter of making the decision which language to use in the meetings and discussions. *“The person who calls the meeting decides that either by specifying in the information that the meeting will be held in a specific language. Another way is to write the agenda or information regarding the meeting in the language that the meeting will be held in”*.

**Emp04** pointed out that language barriers were mostly seen in emails. *“There would be misunderstandings between people from different parts of Sweden even, some language differences between people makes it hard to understand immediately, it is always solved somehow but the first time you read something or listen to someone you can figure it out but not immediately”*. Emp04 also mentioned that for his role in administration, language barriers might not be as effective and serious as they could be for scientists and researchers.

**Emp05** emphasized once more that language barriers were not a big problem by saying: *“well everybody here speaks English, so there is not really a barrier regarding work matters. Of course for social settings I need the Swedish and I’m still working on it and hopefully improving”*.

**Emp06/07** mentioned that there are barriers only to a very small degree, everyone is used to speaking in English, it felt very natural, sometimes it might be difficult to determine

how to express words but since it is an accepted part of the culture and everyone is on the same level more or less, it never felt like a real problem to them.

**Emp08** stated that *“it is often that people do not have English as their native tongue, so sometimes that can be a bit limiting. But on the other hand everyone is helpful and supportive, we use words in Swedish sometimes. As I see it, it is not a big problem”*. Even in informal settings like lunchtime, which language to choose is often being discussed if non-swedes were present.

**Emp09** reported that the only problem with language the department faces is that some department members do not speak Swedish as they are not swedes but they are often being taken care of in that sense.

**Emp10** reported that in administration it was mostly the Swedish language in use because all employees are Swedes anyways, English is being used only in emails with foreigners. So for swedes that do not speak good English it is doable because emails do not require strong English terminology.

**2) Cultural barriers: different cultures – different values**

**Q: Have you experienced any sort of cultural barriers in your workplace with your coworkers or others? Please elaborate.**

- **If yes, have you tried to deal with them? How?**
- **Can you rate the importance of acknowledging this barrier?**

All employees believed that there could be cultural barriers due to cultural differences but not all of them were aware of those differences. That is due to their lack of knowledge in differences between cultures and in cultural studies in general. All of the employees also attributed any differences to one’s personality rather than culture. Moreover, they did think that an introduction to cultural concepts and studies could be helpful to an extent in understanding each other’s behaviors more.



**Emp01** stated: *“we have employees from Asia, Greece, Jordan, Poland, Italy and the United States. I view it as a personality problem but the correct interpretation I think would be regarding culture. But for me as a manager everything goes down to the person. That’s my material to work on. And besides, I do not have the skills to deal with it I need an external expert on cultures to do so”*.

**Emp02** explained how important it is to have some knowledge about different cultures especially one’s own culture and what differentiates it from others. She had acquired some knowledge through meeting different people and traveling and she stated the following elaborating on her answer *“it is absolutely very important to acknowledge this, I do not believe that people coming to Sweden should do things the way we do in Sweden, we also have to understand how people think and try to meet in the middle, it is important for me at least”*.

**Emp03** said that she did work with people who had different values like punctuality and respecting time but to her it has to do with the person and not culture. Some of the people with the differences are even Swedish she claimed.

**Emp04** explained how he does not know about culture differences so he could never base any differences on cultures. He also believes that in his administrative field cultural differences might not be as effective and apparent as they could be in the scientific and academic fields.

**Emp05** talked about his own experience since he is a non-swede and how Sweden and his country are on opposite sides culturally speaking but he did not view that as an obstacle. He reported: *“there are huge differences culturally speaking. But still I do not see this as an obstacle for my work, because as far as there is the will to collaborate together to make this work. And as long as everyone is tolerant with everyone else then it works. That’s how it is here”*.

**Emp06** worked with people from different cultures and he mentioned that differences should be worked out quickly. He commented: *“when working closely with a group of people, any differences that you have initially are worked out rather quickly and I tend to be quite flexible myself in adapting to whatever I need to adapt to in a group setting”*.

**Emp07** expressed how differences were not necessarily due to cultures but rather personalities and how it would be good and helpful to know about other cultures but still one cannot generalize.

**Emp08** stated that it is not one's country that matters it is the working culture they are used to that matters. According to her, every workplace has a certain culture; when individuals move around between workplaces the working culture they are used to could definitely have an effect on their communication and behavior. She also stated: *“I think it is good to know about cultures yes, knowing about cultures is a way to connect I believe. And that's important for people to collaborate in work”*.

**Emp09** confirmed that she did not face difficulties related to cultural differences even though she is a non-swede, she claimed that in the past she did but today she had completely adapted to the Swedish culture.

**Emp10** while working did notice different behaviors on foreigners, for instance non-swedes tend to be a bit more shy than swedes and more polite when communicating with figures in high positions she said, but due to her lack of knowledge, as mentioned before, in cultural concepts, she could not base her observations on real proof and she claimed that such different behaviors were not troublesome.

**3) Physical/mechanical barriers: defects in technology – physical separation – technical terms**

**Q: Have you experienced any sort of physical/mechanical barriers in your workplace with your coworkers or others? Please elaborate.**

- **If yes, have you tried to deal with them? How?**
- **Can you rate the importance of acknowledging this barrier?**

Only two employees expressed that they face mechanical barriers all the time especially with emails. It was reported by one of the interviewees that some individuals in the department prefer email communication, others did not instead they prefer phone or face-to-face communication. It has been also pointed out that overcoming those mechanical barriers is a continuous process in order to determine the best technology to use in a given situation. Those employees stressed on the importance of acknowledging and dealing with such barriers immediately. However, the rest of the employees did not complain at all from any major mechanical barriers. Moreover, physical separation was not a problem to anyone whatsoever, for those who are physically separated would arrange to meet whenever needed.

**Emp01**, in elaboration, stated the following: *“we try to use different communication channels in order to communicate with each other but each technology has its benefits but also drawbacks or strengths and weaknesses. It is a continuous process in trying to find a way to overcome these barriers”*. He also expressed how he daily suffers from information overload due to his managerial position and having multiple active communication channels.

**Emp02/03** explained that physical/mechanical barriers were not apparent in their work experience and they did not complain from technologies or communication channels, on the contrary, they seemed fairly pleased with the technologies they were using in order to communicate such as Skype.

**Emp04** on the other hand explained how some systems that are used by the administration like the HR and financial systems are always complicated and difficult to use. But he also expressed that it is normal due to them being major systems with countless functions.

**Emp05/06/07/09/10** stated that they never face any technological or mechanical barriers and if they do then it would be minor problems and they are often fixed in the shortest amount of time

**Emp08** expressed how they always face some sort of mechanical barriers in the department all the time. She provided an example of an incident that happened with her by saying: *“people would often send emails that meetings are cancelled last minute or earlier on the same day, I was on the phone and couldn’t check my email so I rushed to the meeting place and then realized it was cancelled because only then I could check my email”*. She also mentioned that they try to deal with them immediately and try not to get stuck in them basically. Finally, she commented on some of the systems that are being used in the department by saying they are “complex”, which could be harmful since those systems are essential to the work and do provide huge amounts of useful and needed information.

**4) Hierarchical barriers: communication gap because of power distance**

**Q: Have you experienced any sort of hierarchical barriers in your workplace with your coworkers or others? Please elaborate.**

- **If yes, have you tried to deal with them? How?**
- **Can you rate the importance of acknowledging this barrier?**

All employees found it easy to approach their superiors and described their workplace as “an open environment” when it comes down to communication. A communication gap between subordinates and superiors is not existent. However there is one problem, some

managers are difficult to reach just because they are too busy and nothing else. The employees did not rank this barrier high on importance.

**Emp01** thought that he himself is a manifestation of hierarchical barriers and that is because he is the head of division and there is always a lot going on with him. Hence it is difficult for his employees to approach him every time they need anything for that reason. However, he did mention that those who are proactive with finding information they need and do not rely completely on him as the head of division and instead would seek assistance elsewhere would not suffer from the abovementioned issue. Employees are encouraged to be proactive in the department as a matter of fact he said.

**Emp02/03/04** reported that they could talk to their managers very freely anytime so they have not faced hierarchical barriers in that sense. However, they did report an issue of which they often come across, and that is the amount of information delivered to them coming from their superiors. They say that there are no rules of how much information a manager can provide to their employees, so sometimes it is too little and at other times it is too much, according to how the employees feel.

**Emp05/06/07/10** expressed how they view the hierarchy as very flat. Managers and supervisors are called with their first names and they are treated the same as everyone else in the department. In fact they, the managers, do not expect to be treated differently. Subordinates could easily bring up matters and issues to superiors. Employees expressed how important it is for their welfare to not have any hierarchical barriers.

**Emp08/09** confirmed the flat hierarchy in terms of communication between superiors and subordinates but expressed a mutual concern by saying: *“we have a problem here, some researchers do not belong to certain groups, and so the managers are not always onto everyone’s topics. And these people are on their own and they go their own directions. Hierarchy structure is not very defined I think”*.

**5) Gender barriers: communication gap because of gender differences in perspectives**

**Q: Have you experienced any sort of gender barriers in your workplace with your coworkers or others? Please elaborate.**

- **If yes, have you tried to deal with them? How?**
- **Can you rate the importance of acknowledging this barrier?**

Only two employees, who are females, felt that there is a gender barrier in the department. As for the rest, they did not believe they exist. All employees felt strongly towards the importance of acknowledging this barrier because to them gender should not matter when it comes down to work performance.

**Emp01**, who is a male, has not experienced any communication barriers when dealing with his female employees, however he confirmed the importance of acknowledging gender communication differences and he himself would always try to read more about “leadership and feminist theories” in order to improve his leadership skills with his employees, females included. In elaboration he said on ranking this barrier: *“It is super high and super important, because if we fail to communicate to cross this gender gap then people, women in this case, will have less possibilities to excel just because they are women and I’m their manager and that would be horrible if it happens. I’m trying to do my best”*.

**Emp02/03**, both females, expressed how they felt that gender barriers do exist, on the academic level more than they are on the administrative level. They said that it is still hard for females to reach certain managerial positions; such positions are only for males. In elaboration on their feelings towards the topic they provided the following: *“the salaries and how high you reach in managerial levels, it is more men than women but I hope we can change that. More equal in the future”*. *“I’m 35 and I still have to show people that I have my job and that I can do it well enough. Sweden is known for gender equality and all that but that is just on the surface. Old men do not want to give away*

*power so no, no equality*". Furthermore, they confirmed that it is a topic that is being discussed all the time in attempt to enforce positive changes.

**Emp04/05/06/07**, who are all males, believe that gender barriers are not existent in their department. Many professors and researchers are women as well as some managers. Gender does not affect their communication with their coworkers at all. One of them said in clarification: *"We are strong individuals here regardless of gender, who they are as a person is a lot more important so I cant say anything that I would assign to their gender specifically"*. However, this barrier could be apparent to a small extent as one of the employees explained by saying: *"some males predominantly are in charge of the discussion in big meetings and that might be difficult for some females to get their opinion heard. But that's in big department group meetings not among people who work together on daily basis"*.

**Emp08/09/10**, who are all females, have not experienced any differences in communicating with their fellow male colleagues so they believe there are not gender barriers. One of them did state, however, that there are not many females leading research it is more males, and so she pointed out that this could be something they need to work on, but it is not considered a communication barrier in that sense.

**6) Personal biases: discrimination and stereotypes a person might hold**

**Q: Have you experienced any sort of personal biases or stereotypes in your workplace that you might hold against your coworkers or others that might affect your communication with them? Please elaborate.**

- **If yes, have you tried to deal with them? How?**
- **Can you rate the importance of acknowledging this barrier?**

None of the employees have experienced any sort of personal biases or stereotypes that affected their communication processes with their coworkers. However, some of them confirmed that these personal biases do cross their minds sometimes but they do not let

them affect their judgment when at work. All employees agreed that it is important to acknowledge this barrier because it is part of human nature to feel biased but it should not affect one's work relations whatsoever.

**Emp01** explained how stereotypes or discriminating certain groups like Arabs, Muslims or homosexuals do not exist at all and do not affect his communication with his coworkers but he does tend sometimes to discriminate an individual for their personality after multiple incidents of that individual behaving badly at work. *“There’s some sort of personality bias, or if I think that someone is behaving badly then I would say I would discriminate that person in a way, I know that if I dislike a person then I do not tend to do my best with that person, it is not likely that I cooperate with these people”*.

Similarly, **Emp03** confirmed that stereotypes do not affect her communication process with her coworkers; their work performance on the other hand does affect the communication. She mentioned that she would refrain from communicating with a coworker if they are known to be “sloppy” at work or if she had experienced previous incidents in which they didn't perform well.

**Emp02** stated that she tries her best not to let any personal biases and stereotypes affect her communication with her coworkers. *“I want to believe that I do not have personal biases, but I have because that’s how we are brought up, we have this kind of barriers us Swedish people but I want to work on it and take that away from me. I suppose I have without knowing, I try to be open minded, but I do not think I am it is not that easy at all”*.

**Emp04/05/06/07** explained how stereotypes do not and should not have an influence on their work relations at all. Even though they tend to have prejudices sometimes but they look past them and try to keep an open mind. Stereotypes are used “just as jokes”, one of them stated. For instance they would make jokes on the way non-swedes like their coffee without milk while swedes like theirs with milk.



**Emp08** expressed her desire to let go of stereotypes in general, as they should not affect one's judgment. *"I definitely think it is always present it is human nature and we change those stereotypes when we meet people who do not match them and that's good. We should avoid them"*. But she did not experience any specific incidents in the department in which stereotypes led her to refrain from communicating with someone.

**Emp09/10** never experienced any sort of prejudices that affected their communication with their coworkers, they joke with each other using stereotypes and nothing more. One of the employees gave an example of such jokes by saying it is mostly about Swedish people being from the south or the north and how they are different in the way they talk and so on.

Following the results section, the ten participants' answers to the interview questions will be analyzed using the coding process, which had been previously pointed out in the methods section, as a tool aiming to answer the research questions, which were 1) what sort of communication barriers do coworkers experience in a specific department in GU? And 2) how do the coworkers overcome these barriers? The concerned coworkers were asked about six significant communication barriers: *linguistic, cultural, mechanical, hierarchical, gender and personal biases*. In order to bring the results together to answer the research questions for the discussion process to be undergone, a general overview was taken of the results text followed by making codes of what stood out the most in the results<sup>5</sup>. For instance, when looking at the code "immediacy" in the full coding process table shown in the appendix, it can be seen that the code "immediacy" is facing four different participant statements with their descriptions taken from four different barriers' questions. In all these four statements, the factor immediacy was found to be in common, for that reason they were all placed facing one code. This coding process helps bringing related points of the results text together facilitating a clear structure for the discussion.

After creating codes associated with participant statements and their descriptions, codes that fit together were gathered and placed under one category to finally form three

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 2 for full table.

different categories each consists of relevant codes to one another. The three categories are: 1) *departmental operations* consisting of the codes: *immediacy, limitation and time management*, 2) *departmental knowledge nature* consisting of the codes: *complexity, multiple communication channels, lack of knowledge and humor*, and 3) *departmental principles* consisting of the codes: *equality, inequality, democracy and hierarchy*. The names of the categories were determined according to what represents the relevant codes. The categories after that were allocated to go under two primary themes, **1) internal communication processes**, which refers to information exchange between organizational members within the organization (Tkalac Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2012), consisting of the two categories *departmental operations* and *departmental knowledge nature*. The previously mentioned categories were placed under the theme internal communication processes because both the operations that are taking place in the department and the nature of knowledge in the department are part of the internal communication processes of the organizational setting. And the other theme is **2) workplace values** consisting of the category *departmental principles*. That is because the principles under study such as equality and inequality can also be viewed as values in a bigger sense.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of the study will be analyzed below using the codes from the coding process as shown in the table in Appendix 2. The analysis of the barriers will be demonstrated by listing down the barriers one at a time and within each barrier the associated codes will facilitate the structure of the analysis. Following the barriers' analysis, the Social Identity Theory will be used to build an understanding on the occurrence of the barriers. At the end of the discussion section, a list of recommendations that are believed to be useful to the coworkers under study will be provided.

## 5.1. Communication Barriers

### *Linguistic Barriers*

Immediacy: as far as immediacy goes in department operations, the employees often provided a repetitive answer “we deal with them immediately”. Starting with the linguistic barriers when occurring between two individuals with different native languages, it was expressed by the employees that such barriers must be dealt with immediately otherwise the whole point of the interaction is gone. Most of the employees in the department are Swedish nationals but there is still a number of non-swedes who come from all over the world. And so in the department the employees often need to switch to English, as it is the most learned common language among different ethnicities. Employees pointed out that misinterpretations and misunderstandings are common due to the fact that the coworkers are not using their native languages, but rather they are using a second language, English that is. Such misinterpretations and misunderstandings are dealt with immediately when they occur. An example was provided by **Emp02** on how to deal with linguistic barriers: “*often we have cleared it out after talking with each other back and forth or ask what they mean*”. This relates to what Andersson (2016) refers to in his paper as “special terms”, the author explained how misunderstandings occur when coworkers use special terms. In the case of this present study the special terms are in fact any terms in the English language, because English is not the coworkers’ native language, hence there will always be words and phrases that are possibly known to some individuals but not known to others and this gives room for misunderstandings to occur.

Limitation: furthermore on the linguistic barriers, as mentioned above, the employees in the department often find themselves needing to use their second language, English, rather than using their native languages. For that reason, the employees often find themselves limited when it comes to expressing and choosing words. Discussions and meetings when held in English are often being held on a “shallow level”, one of the employees had said.

Lack of knowledge: when it comes down to the lack of knowledge the non Swedish employees show of the Swedish language, these employees face linguistic barriers and

hence difficulties following up in meetings and discussions when being held in Swedish as well as in social settings like lunchtime or coffee breaks. Similarly, Hwang (2013) reported that language barriers reduce the efficiency of informal communication like after-work dining, which has a direct influence on building relationships between coworkers. However, the concerned employees in this study are constantly being helped and supported by their Swedish coworkers to learn the Swedish language and they are always provided with an English translation of what was said. This implies that the language help and support provided by the natives in informal situations are needed for non-natives to integrate in a workplace.

Democracy: it was explained by one of the administrative employees how the language used (Swedish or English) in meetings is decided only by the person who calls for the meeting either by specifying that in the meeting invitation email or by stating that in the meeting agenda. This could be a problem for individuals who speak only one language of the two when the meeting is decided to be held in the language they do not speak.

#### *Cultural Barriers*

Immediacy: recognizing cultural differences when employees from different backgrounds work together, the employees explained how people should be flexible in this case. If there was a will to collaborate together they would work out their differences instantly. *“When working closely with a group of people, any [cultural] differences that you have initially are worked out rather quickly and I tend to be quite flexible”*, stated **Emp06**. Misunderstandings are common when individuals from different cultures carrying different values and beliefs interact even if they use a shared foreign language like English (Hills, 2013; Peltokorpi & Clausen, 2011).

Lack of knowledge: As for the cultural barriers, the employees' lack of knowledge in cultural differences led them to attribute any behavior differences on personality rather than culture. One of them stated: *“I view it [differences] as a personality problem but the correct interpretation I think would be regarding culture”*, stated **Emp01**. When the employees were asked if they experienced any cultural barriers when dealing with

coworkers from different backgrounds, none of them were familiar or aware of the cultural differences in concepts such as time orientation, personal space, directness and so on. They all thought that there could be cultural differences but they could never point them out, so to them it was never a problem and as mentioned before differences were attributed to one's personality. Since the coworkers in the department come from all over the world as the head of division stated from "*Sweden, Asia, Greece, Jordan, Poland, Italy and the United States*", it is only normal that these individuals have very different behaviors and interpretations on life in general, according to Hofstade (1980). Sweden is on one side on the cultural difference scale, while Italy, Asia, Greece and Jordan are positioned on the other side of the scale. And so the employees expressed their interest in acquiring some basic knowledge in cultural studies, as they believe it would be of help in understanding each other's behaviors. This is supported by the fact that many global business firms provide training in cross-cultural communication to company leaders and employees in order to introduce them to the differences between cultures (Rai & Rai, 2009).

### *Mechanical Barriers*

Immediacy: Employees who faced mechanical barriers or defects in the technology that would distort communication processes expressed how such barriers happen all the time but they are dealt with in the shortest amount of time. It is a continuous process to find the best technology to use in a given situation, one of the employees had explained, but they try not to get stuck in those mechanical barriers or obstacles but rather they would try to deal with them and move forward quickly.

Complexity: some employees when asked about the mechanical barriers explained how they find some aiding systems or programs like HR and finance systems complex, and this could make the work progress go slower than needed. Aiding programs to research as well are found complex and these programs carry huge amounts of useful and necessary information but it is difficult to locate. This could have a negative effect on the employee's performance.

Multiple communication channels: Some employees complained when asked about mechanical barriers from having information overload due to having multiple communication channels that are active (email, phone & social media accounts). They also complained that having multiple communication channels could prevent certain info from reaching recipient in time. An example was given by one of the employees where she explained an incident that happened with her when she was rushing to a meeting while talking to someone on the phone and the meeting got canceled last minute and everyone was informed via email but she could not check her email before starting the phone-call, and so when she reached the meeting venue she found out the meeting was canceled. Such incidents are often faced by the employees, for that reason they are always trying to find the best technology to communicate together in a given situation, *“we try to use different communication channels in order to communicate with each other but each technology has its benefits and drawbacks. It is a continuous process in trying to find a way to overcome these [mechanical] barriers”*, stated **Emp01**. One of the recommendations pointed out in McMurtry (2014) in regards to dealing with information overload in emails was encouraging organizations to use means to communicate other than the email in order to reduce email volume.

#### *Hierarchical Barriers*

Immediacy: As for the hierarchical barriers, which manifest in the power distance between superiors and their subordinates, the employees had expressed how such barriers are not existent in their workplace. On the contrary, the subordinates could easily and instantly bring matters up to their superiors.

Time Management: the head of division when asked about the hierarchical barriers and denying their existence, in the sense of power distance between superiors and subordinates, expressed how his employees face difficulties when reaching him as their manager seeking help or advice due to his busy schedule and no other reason. *“I don’t have time for that so I become a bottle neck so people [employees] don’t get the info that should reach them”*. For that reason the employees in the department are encouraged to

be proactive and seek any information they might need without depending completely on their manager because the information could be found elsewhere as well.

Equality: the concept of equality was repetitive in the employees' answers to multiple questions. When answering the hierarchical barriers question, all employees confirmed that there are no hierarchical barriers between superiors and subordinates at all and that they are treated equally. Managers are called with their first names and they do not expect their employees to treat them any differently for any other employee. This is live proof of what was mentioned in Smith et al. (2003) about Sweden that it scores low in power distance between superiors and subordinates.

Hierarchy: a repetitive answer to the hierarchical barriers question was that all employees believed that the hierarchy in their workplace is flat, their work environment is very open where employees can easily share their opinions and ideas and easily reach their superiors and very openly talk to them about work matters and complaints. This is another proof to what Smith et al. (2003) said about power distance being low in Sweden and this denies the existence of gaps in communication between the members of an organization as mentioned in Agarwal (2010). Although all employees believed that the hierarchy is flat and open, some employees additionally believed that the hierarchy is a bit undefined in some areas related to research. *"We have a problem here, some researchers do not belong to certain groups they are on their own, and so the managers are not always onto everyone's topics. The hierarchy is not very defined"*, **Emp08/09** confirmed. *"Even though my boss always says it is open for everyone to contribute, but on the other hand there is no frame where it is clear how to contribute"*. This means that to some researchers it is not clear how to contribute, which topics they can research and so on, which is why some feels like the hierarchy is not very defined.

### *Gender Barriers*

Equality: Another point that was repetitively brought up by the employees regarding gender barriers was how they all felt strongly towards equality between the two genders, males and females. The employees believe that the gender does not matter, what matters

is their personalities and their work performance, “*we are strong individuals here regardless of gender, who they are as a person is a lot more important*”, stated **Emp06**. This is also a reflection of what was stated in Smith et al. (2003) about how Sweden scores high in femininity which refers to male and female gender roles being relatively similar, and to the preference for good working relations. What was interesting in the results of the interviews is that all males did not feel any gender barriers or any differences related to gender, while females on the other hand had a different thing to say about this topic, as the following point will clarify further.

Inequality: furthermore on gender barriers, female employees do believe there is inequality between males and females when it comes to reaching high positions and salaries. More men are in high positions than women, more men are leading research than women and men have higher salaries than women in equal positions. One of these employees, **Emp03**, stated: “*Sweden is known for gender equality and all that but that is just on the surface*” and another one, **Emp02**, said: “*I hope we can be more equal in the future*” when elaborating on high positions and high salaries. This indicates that Sweden might be scoring high on femininity but gender barriers still exist and some females do experience them in their workplace. One male employee pointed out that sometimes males predominantly tend to take over meeting discussions and that could make it seem difficult for the ladies to share their opinions in such situations. This could be related to what was pointed out in Kramer (2001) when he explained how men are more direct than women in their speech and how men give order while women give suggestions. Only in this case, due to the fact that sometimes men tend to take over the meetings, this could lead to women feeling discouraged to even share their suggestions.

### *Personal Biases*

Moreover on lack of knowledge, when the employees were asked about personal biases and whether or not they affect their communication with their coworkers, they explained how certain stereotypes are built due to lack of knowledge of the truth. It is part of human nature to have them but it is important to work on minimizing them, seek the truth and never let them affect work relations whatsoever. “*It [stereotypes] is always present it is*



*human nature and we change those stereotypes when we meet people who do not match them*”, stated **Emp08**. This is supported by what was mentioned in Hartley & Chatterton (2015) on how relying on stereotypes when making judgments about others could be misleading, which affects the effectiveness of communication.

Humor: when asked about personal biases, the employees tend to use stereotypes to make jokes about each other. Stereotypes were never taken seriously, “*we can only make jokes sometimes about each other and we are all from Sweden, so we just make jokes about accents or whatever nothing serious*”, stated **Emp10**.

As shown in the coding process table in appendix 2, the three categories and two primary themes have emerged aiming to bring the codes together to provide a bigger understanding of the work environment in the concerned department in light of the six communication barriers under study. After analyzing the data using the codes, it can be said that the data sheds some light on the nature of the knowledge shared and exchanged in the department among the coworkers, the operations that take place in the department among the coworkers and some of the principles found in the department. Thus the data builds an understanding of what the internal communication processes in the department could look like as well as some workplace values.

### *5.2. Social Identity Theory Perspective*

As mentioned earlier in the theory section (page 12), the social identity theory (SIT) indicates that individuals tend to divide the world to *them* and *us* through a process of social categorization. This process of social categorization gives individuals a sense of who they are, a “social identity”, and helps them describe and prescribe appropriate behaviors of social categories, and that is according to the Oxford dictionary of psychology (2015). This theory could be used as basis to explain the occurrence of some of the communication barriers under study.

Starting off with the first two barriers since they are related to one another, the linguistic and the cultural. The SIT proposes that when an individual from culture A who speaks

language A would interact with an individual from culture B who speaks language B, each one of them could distinguish oneself from the other socially possibly by enforcing one's own culture and language. For instance, when a Swede interacts with a Chinese, each one of them comes from a culture that is completely different from the other and speaks a language that is also completely different from the other. Due to the social categorization process that could take place among the two in an interaction, linguistic and cultural barriers could arise and distort potential communicative interactions if not dealt with. A manifestation of enforcing one's language could be seen in the example given by **Emp03** when answering the first question about linguistic barriers where the employee explained that sometimes in department meetings the person who calls for the meeting would decide if the meeting would be held in English or Swedish. This indicates the possibility of non-Swedish speakers feeling excluded if the person decided for the meeting to take place in Swedish (enforcing their own language). The cultural barriers on the other hand could not be identified by the employees due to their lack of knowledge in general cultural differences, which implies that a social categorization process had not been accomplished and hence the SIT cannot be used to understand cultural barriers in this study.

As for the mechanical barriers, the SIT cannot be applied in this case because the barriers involve technologies rather than people. Moving on to the hierarchical barriers that could take place between superiors and subordinates, when applying the SIT, superiors would place themselves in one social category while placing the subordinates in another social category and vice versa. Once again this categorization process could cause communication barriers to appear. In the case of the employees interviewed for this study, hierarchical barriers were not experienced by any of the employees, which indicates that the SIT cannot be applied in this case as there was no room for a social categorization process to take place.

The same applies to gender barriers; due to the social categorization process individuals would distinguish and identify themselves as males and females, which could result into the appearance of the gender communication barriers. A manifestation of the SIT in this

case could be the example given by **Emp06** when answering the question about gender barriers where the employee explained how sometimes in meetings males predominantly take over meeting discussions, which could lead to females feeling like they could not share their opinions in meetings. In such cases, males are placing themselves in a social category apart from females by dominating meetings.

As for applying the theory on personal biases, when two individuals from different countries or from different parts of the same country (south and north) interact with each other, due to the social categorization process and due to the lack of knowledge about each other, personal biases and stereotypes could arise operating as a barrier to communication. An example could be the one provided by **Emp10** when answering the question about personal biases where the employee explained how the employees in the department would joke with each other using stereotypes on how, for instance, people from the north speak differently than those from the south of Sweden. A social categorization here could have taken place, which placed people in two categories; north and south and subsequently stereotypes arise. Luckily in this case stereotypes were associated with humor, whereas in other cases they could take a more serious turn.

### *5.3. Recommendations*

A list of recommendations was generated below after studying and analyzing the results of this study. These recommendations are believed to be of use to the coworkers in the divisions under study if met.

- For linguistic barriers, it would be helpful to provide guidelines that are known for everyone in the department concerning how to deal with language differences. Explicitly mentioning situations like meetings, new comers etc.
- For cultural barriers, it would be helpful for the employees if a training session is provided annually by an expert to introduce department members to basic, most common and scientifically proven cultural differences between cultures. Also an introduction on common stereotypes and how one should never generalize based on stereotypes would be of help.
- For mechanical barriers it would be good if each employee made it clear for the rest

of the coworkers what communication platforms they prefer in order of preference (email, phone, text etc.) and that is to avoid information loss or delay when having multiple channels. As for the head of division, since he suffers from email overload, a way to deal with this could be to ask his employees to always approach him personally for matters if he doesn't answer an email for a certain number of days or to leave him letters with their requests on his desk or under his office door if not available. As for the complexity of some aiding programs, newcomers should be provided with an orientation upon joining on the full capacity of such programs if not already being provided.

- Changing gender mentality will be so hard and challenging because it deals with the society as a whole not just this one department or this one organization. What females could do is express how they feel about inequality in salaries and high managerial positions and all gender inequality issues, provide proof that they are just as good as their male coworkers and propose to the management to make changes.

## **6. FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

### *6.1. Limitation of the Study*

The results of this study may not be generalized to cover communication barriers in different workplaces in Sweden since they are collected at a department in GU covering two divisions. Moreover, ten participants were interviewed from both divisions, which is equal to 33.3 % of the total number of workers in the two divisions under study. And so, the results of this study are limited, however they can be viewed as a starting point and a direction for future and bigger research in the area of communication barriers in organizational settings, which could lead to the betterment of organizational operations. Because the more the area of communication barriers in organizational contexts is explored through research, the wider the findings and recommendations are spread and therefore more individuals, including organizational leaders and members, would benefit from them and put them to use as guidelines for smoother communication in their work environments. An additional limitation to this study is the fact that the interviews were conducted in English, which is not the participants' native language. This might have

influenced the answers to the interview questions in terms of limiting the participants when expressing their thoughts.

## 6.2. Future Research

Since this study was conducted on a small scale, directions for future research would be conducting the same study investigating communication barriers in organizational contexts but rather on a big scale so that it can be considered as a reference in further exploration of this field. For instance, communication barriers could be investigated in an entire organization rather than in one department only, covering a much bigger number of employees. And to take it even further, comparisons between communication barriers in organizations based in two or more different countries could be made. This way the study could embrace a cultural approach when conducting the comparison and dig deeper into the cross-cultural and intercultural aspects.

When conducting this study in communication barriers in an organizational context, no theory on communication barriers was found to support the study but other relevant theories were used. Based on that ground, it is suggested to develop a theory that explicitly points out the possible barriers to communication in any given context, healthcare, educational or organizational, for the sake of the growing interest in this field.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore six significant communication barriers through conducting in-depth interviews: *linguistic, cultural, mechanical, hierarchical, gender and personal biases*, and how they could affect communication among ten coworkers in a Swedish academic workplace. The results of the study confirmed that some of these barriers do exist to some participants (coworkers), such as mechanical and gender barriers, while to others these barriers were not present as much and in some cases not at all. All ten participants agreed that hierarchical barriers were nowhere to be seen as well as personal biases while linguistic barriers were apparent but only on a small scale. As for the cultural barriers, the participants did not believe they existed. This result was related to a

potential lack of knowledge in differences between cultures. The participants confirmed that overcoming the abovementioned barriers when they occur is of high importance and should be done instantly in order to ensure successful organizational communication. Social scientists who studied effective communication and barriers to communication believe that smooth functioning of a workplace is dependent on the cooperation between the coworkers, which can be achieved if coworkers communicate together effectively. By identifying the barriers to effective communication, one can create a calmer, more welcoming and a more productive workplace (Conrad, 2014). For this reason, it is believed to be of high importance for managers and employees in any organization to identify the barriers to communication faced in their workplace and subsequently strive to minimize them for optimal work experience and performance.

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## **Appendix 1:**

### **INTERVIEW PARTICIPATION CONSENT**

#### **Title of Research Project**

Investigating Communication Barriers in a Workplace in Sweden

#### **Details of Project**

This project is part of a thesis writing conducted by Halah Almazrooa, a student in Master in Communication program, Department of Applied IT, University of Gothenburg, supervised by Åsa Fyrberg, PhD candidate in Cognitive Science, Department of Applied IT, University of Gothenburg. The research aims to understand the extent of appearance and the effect of communication barriers in a workplace.

#### **Contact Details**

For further information about the research or your interview data, please contact: Halah Almazrooa, Department of Applied IT, Gothenburg University, on this email: gusalmazha@student.gu.se. If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone else at the University, please contact: Åsa Fyrberg, asa.fyrberg@vgregion.se.

#### **Confidentiality**

Interview tapes and transcripts will be held in confidence. They will be stored in the researcher's private storage data with encrypted password. They will not be used other than for the purposes described above and third parties will not be allowed to access them. However, you will be supplied with a copy of your interview transcript for you to keep and use as you wish.

#### **Anonymity**

Interview data will be held and used on an anonymous basis, without mentioning any names.

#### **Consent**

I voluntarily agree to participate and to the use of my data for the purposes specified above. I can withdraw consent at any time by contacting the interviewer.

TICK HERE:  DATE.....

Note: Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data

Name of interviewee:.....

Signature:.....

Signature of researcher.....

2 copies to be signed by both interviewee and researcher, one kept by each

## Appendix 2: Full coding table

Participants statement	Description	Codes	Category	Theme
<p>“Yeah we are trying to deal with them [linguistic barriers] in several ways”</p> <p>“When working closely with a group of people, any [cultural] differences that you have initially are worked out rather quickly and I tend to be quite flexible”</p> <p>“Technology failures always happen but everything is fixed in the shortest amount of time”</p> <p>“We can easily take things [issues &amp; complaints] up to our superiors it’s not a problem”</p>	<p>When it comes to language barriers employees tend to deal with them immediately.</p> <p>Some employees who recognize cultural differences stated that if there is a will to collaborate together then they would work out their differences instantly. People should be flexible.</p> <p>It’s important to deal with mechanical barriers immediately</p> <p>Employees can bring up issues to managers openly and immediately</p>	<p><b>Immediacy</b></p>	<p><b>Departmental operations</b></p>	<p><b>Internal communication processes</b></p>
<p>“It is often that people do not have English as their native tongue, so sometimes that can be a bit limiting”</p>	<p>It’s a bit limiting to work using English because it’s not the employee’s native language.</p>	<p><b>Limitation</b></p>		
<p>“I don’t have time for that so I become a bottle neck so people [employees] don’t get the info that should reach them”</p>	<p>Division head expressed the difficulty his employees face to reach him when needed because he is always busy and never has time.</p>	<p><b>Time management</b></p>		

<p>“The HR and financial systems are always complicated and difficult to use”</p>	<p>Aiding systems in the department are a bit complex and that could make work slower.</p>	<p><b>Complexity</b></p>	<p><b>Departmental knowledge nature</b></p>	
<p>“We try to use different communication channels in order to communicate with each other but each technology has its benefits and drawbacks. It is a continuous process in trying to find a way to overcome these [mechanical] barriers”</p>	<p>Some employees complained from having information overload due to having multiple communication channels that are active. They also complained that having multiple communication channels could prevent certain info from reaching recipient in time.</p>	<p><b>Multiple communication channels</b></p>		
<p>“Of course for social settings I need the Swedish and I’m still working on it and hopefully improving”</p> <p>“I view it [differences] as a personality problem but the correct interpretation I think would be regarding culture”</p> <p>“It [stereotypes] is always present it is human nature and we change those stereotypes when we meet people who do not match them”</p>	<p>Lack of knowledge of the Swedish language for non-swedes is a problem when socializing.</p> <p>There is a lack of knowledge in cultural differences and the employees attribute behaviors to personalities rather than cultures. They believe knowing about cultures would help in understanding each other.</p> <p>Certain stereotypes are built due to lack of knowledge of the truth. It’s part of human nature to have them. It’s important to work on minimizing them and never let them affect work relations.</p>	<p><b>Lack of knowledge</b></p>		
<p>“We can only make jokes sometimes about each other and we are all from Sweden, so we just make jokes about accents or whatever nothing serious”</p>	<p>Stereotypes are used for joking only.</p>	<p><b>Humor</b></p>		

<p>“You don’t treat managers very much different from anyone else”</p> <p>“We are strong individuals here regardless of gender, who they are as a person is a lot more important”</p>	<p>There is equality between superiors and subordinates. They are treated the same.</p> <p>Employees believe males and females are equal what matters is work performance.</p>	<p><b>Equality</b></p>	<p><b>Departmental principles</b></p>	<p><b>Workplace values</b></p>
<p>“The salaries and how high you reach in managerial levels, it is more men than women”</p> <p>“Some males predominantly are in charge of the discussion in big meetings and that might be difficult for some females to get their opinion heard”</p>	<p>Some employees believe there is inequality between males and females when it comes to reaching high positions. More men are in High positions than women. Salaries as well.</p> <p>Men are in charge of big department meeting discussions. Women sometimes don’t get heard.</p>	<p><b>Inequality</b></p>		
<p>“The person who calls the meeting decides the language either by specifying in the information that the meeting will be held in a specific language or the meeting agenda”</p>	<p>The person who calls for a meeting decides which language to use in the meeting.</p>	<p><b>Democracy</b></p>		
<p>“We have a problem here, some researchers do not belong to certain groups, and so the managers are not always onto everyone’s topics”</p> <p>“It’s more of an open environment, it’s a very flat hierarchy”</p>	<p>Some believe that the hierarchy in the department is not very defined because some researchers do not belong to certain groups.</p> <p>Employees believe that the hierarchy is flat.</p>	<p><b>Hierarchy</b></p>		