Nov 7th, 4:15 PM - 5:30 PM

The Sponge Theory: Introducing a New Interpersonal Communication Theory

Ben Brandley
University of New Mexico, bbrandley@unm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/skc
Part of the Criminology Commons, Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons, and the Organizational Communication Commons


This Event is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Shared Knowledge Conference by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.
The Sponge Theory: Introducing a New Interpersonal Communication Theory
By: Ben Brandley
Department of Communication & Journalism

Abstract
Law enforcement is an extremely stressful career. In exploration of the influence of career stress on law enforcement officers’ relationships, data was collected from eighteen in-depth interviews and ninety hours of participant observation with American peace officers. The results of this research found that while all of the officers admitted to the omnipresent nature of their career stress, the majority of them repeatedly devalued the impact of present or potential detriments caused by that stress. For example, they often invalidated emotions through jadedness and dark humor, challenged the stance that their organizational culture is harmful (e.g. many officers undermined the actuality of toxic masculinity), and downplayed the benefits of honest emotional communication with colleagues, intimate partners, or therapists. From this research, the author began to develop a burgeoning communication theory called the sponge theory. This theory provides a new lens to understanding the interpersonal effects of stress by proposing four concepts that analogize highly-stressed humans with sponges: 1) absorption, 2) porosity, 3) intra-organism communication, and 4) regrowth. Through application of these concepts, the sponge theory offers an explanation of the interplay between social dynamics and organizational culture so that highly-stressed individuals may become aware of the systems and situations that affect them, and ultimately cultivate the skills necessary to successfully manage their stress.

*Special thanks to my former undergraduate advisor, Dr. Michael Ault, who conducted some of the interviews for this project and always gave me his full support of my often-unorthodox ideas.