

## PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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### ABSTRACT

The study of interpersonal communication (IPC) is gaining importance in this milieu of globalization. We all need to develop interpersonal communication skills since interpersonal communication is woven through all aspects of living and is meaningful only in the context of living. As a multidisciplinary activity, the study of interpersonal communication includes much of psychology, sociology, anthropology, medicine, social psychology, psychiatry, clinical psychology, and touches on many facets of the language studies as well. The primary objective behind the conception of this article is not to assess the theories that show the relationship between psychology and interpersonal communication but to bring forth the 'intelligibility' and 'coherence' to the process and progress of research in the field of interpersonal communication. In this article, a constellation of theories and principles that share common assumptions and concepts are taken for study and analysis to understand the issues related to interpersonal communication.

**Keywords:** interpersonal communication (IPC), psychology, human communication, communication skills, transactional analysis (TA)

## INTRODUCTION:

The importance of interpersonal communication (IPC) has been growing especially in the context of globalization and privatization where the economies of the developed and the developing countries move from an industrial to service-oriented economy and that has placed IPC in the center among all other skills that help in developing and sustaining in business. Today's service economy puts a premium on relationship building among employees, peers, departments, organizations, and customers. Of course developing and maintaining these relationships is the goal of business communication. Cultural diversity, globalization, organizational restructuring, worker specialization, and technology contribute to the current emphasis on interpersonal skills. The multidisciplinary nature of IPC is fascinating the researchers to delve deeply into it. The social psychologists Robert M. Krauss and Susan R. Fussell's (Higgins & Kruglanski, Eds., 1996) research has proved this multidisciplinary characteristic of interpersonal communication and it has helped them in developing the *Social Psychological Models of Interpersonal Communication* based on this core idea. The American psychiatrist and scholar Jurgen Ruesch (1961) has identified 40 varieties of disciplinary approaches to the subject human communication, including architectural, anthropological, psychological, political and many other in explaining the intricacies of human communication. When we try to understand and develop communication skills we cannot escape these larger integration issues. Human communication is a complex and intriguing phenomenon. Both form (syntactics) and content (semantics) of the communication reflect the personal characteristics of the individuals as well as their social roles and relationships.

In this era of communication revolution, the effectiveness of communication has been emphasized in all contexts. But the primary focus is only on the elements of language not on the psychological (cognitive), social and cultural factors. What distinguishes interpersonal communication is the particular quality or character of interaction. In the words of Joseph Luft (1970)

Principles are not set of rules that tell us what to do or not to do in order to accomplish a specific task. Instead, they are global assertions and prescriptions that are general enough to provide insight into a wide variety of situations. They are designed to give us understanding and direction. When carefully and thoughtfully constructed, principles can be said to reflect the collective wisdom of the scholars and practitioners in a field (p.136).

The aim of this article is to highlight the links between psychology and interpersonal communication skills. Psychological approaches to interpersonal communication will help us in identifying the key concepts in developing interpersonal communication skills.

## PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN COMMUNICATION:

Psychology is generally concerned with studying the mind, the brain, and human behaviour. The frame work of human cognitive architecture is helpful in discussing how different types of thought, as well as the corresponding areas of psychology, relate to each other along a continuum, and how this continuum, in turn, relates to human communication processes. Cognitive, cultural, developmental, perceptual, and social psychology, all hold implications for communication research.

Alan Newell (1990), in his landmark text *Unified theories of Cognition* has thrown light on the psychological perspectives on human communication in detail. The fields of psychology and communication are closely related, to the extent that the line differentiating the two is often quite blurry. Psychology may be considered an established discipline when compared to communication. So communication may benefit from the relatively consolidated approaches of psychology. The relationship between psychology and communication has been productive in the past as well as in the present. So, the researchers in the field of communication will continue to both learn from and inform psychologists.

## UNDERSTANDING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION:

The unique characteristics of interpersonal communication can be explored by tracing the meaning of the word interpersonal. It is derived from the prefix 'inter' meaning "between", and the word person. So, interpersonal communication literally occurs between people. On one sense, all communication happens among people, yet many interactions don't involve us personally. Communication exists on a continuum from impersonal to interpersonal. The heart of interpersonal communication is shared meanings between people. We don't just exchange words when we communicate. Instead, we create meanings as we figure out

what each other's words and behaviours stand for, represent, or imply. Meanings grow out of histories of interactions between unique persons.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989, Vol. III, p. 578), for example, defines communication as "the imparting, conveying, or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc. (whether by speech, writing, or signs)". Gergen (1991) argues that the notion that people have ideas, formed in the mind, which are then conveyed to others by a process of communication, is pervasive in all cultures. In 1928 the English literary critic and author I.A. Richards (cited in *www.britannica.com*) offered one of the first and in some ways still the best definitions of communication as a discrete aspect of human enterprise:

Communication takes place when one mind so acts upon its environment that another mind is influenced, and in that other mind an experience occurs which is like the experience in the first mind, and is caused in part by that experience (117720).

Richards's definition clearly presents the link between psychology and the study of communication skills. M. E. Roloff defines interpersonal communication as ...a symbolic interaction between people rather than between a person and an inanimate object (p.96).

Mark L. Knapp and John Augustine Daly in their *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (2002) state:

Interpersonal communication can mean the ability to relate to people in written as well as verbal communication. This type of communication can occur in both a one-on-one and a group setting. This also means being able to handle different people in different situations, and making people feel at ease. Gestures such as eye contact, body movement, and hand gestures are also part of interpersonal communication. The most common functions of interpersonal communication are listening, talking and conflict resolution. Types of interpersonal communication vary from verbal to non-verbal and from situation to situation. Interpersonal communication involves face-to-face communication in a way that accomplishes the purpose and is appropriate (p.3).

Stewart & Angelo in their book *Together: Communicating Interpersonally* defines communication in the following manner:

Interpersonal communication is a mutual relational, co-constructed process, as opposed to something that one person does "to" someone else (p.131).

Foa & Foa's Resource Theory (*Societal Structures of the Mind*, 1974) focuses on the development of cognitive structures in the mind. Behavior is guided by motivational states. People are motivated to engage in certain behaviors whenever quantities of resources fall outside the optimal range. They posit that every interpersonal behavior consists of giving or taking away one or more resources, and that closely allied resources exchanges occur more frequently (i.e. love for love). Michael Cody defines interpersonal communication (cited in Myers & Myers, 1972) ...as the exchange of symbols used to achieve interpersonal goals (p.28).

An interpersonal communication focus emphasizes the process of the person interacting rather than the verbal content of the interaction, accentuates behaviours and skills which extend the alternatives available for interpersonal communication. It includes affective as well as cognitive dimensions drawn from the behavioural and other sciences as well as from the humanities. It is concerned about both verbal and nonverbal human messages and responses, and represents an emphasis on the objective investigation of the experience of person-to-person communication.

## **INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS:**

Over the years, a number of scholars interested in language-thought-behaviour relationships have formulated principles that are designed to assist us in overcoming some of the obstacles to effective interpersonal communication that could result from a misunderstanding of the way language influences us.

One of the most accessible theories of modern psychology, Transactional Analysis (TA), propounded by Eric Berne (1961) highlights the connection between language behaviour and interpersonal communication process in simple and comprehensible way. It encompasses communications, management, personality, relationships and behaviour. Eric Berne said that verbal communication, particularly face-to-face (interpersonal in nature), is at the centre of human social relationships and psychoanalysis. Transactional analysis is a social psychology and method to improve communication. This theory outlines how we develop and treat ourselves when we relate and communicate with others.

The unit of social intercourse is called a transaction. If two or more people encounter each other... sooner or later one of them will speak, or give some other indication of acknowledging the presence of the others. This is called transactional stimulus. Another person will then say or do something which is in some way related to the stimulus, and that is called the transactional response (p.79).

According to Berne, each person is made up of three alter ego states. They are: *Parent* (our ingrained voice of authority), *Child* (our external reaction and feelings to external events) and *Adult* (our ability to think and determine action for ourselves). "Ego states" in terms of Berne: A consistent pattern of feeling and experience directly related to a corresponding consistent pattern of behaviour (p.84).

The essence of Transactional Analysis lies in the principle that when we communicate we are doing so from one of our own alter ego states, our *Parent*, *Child* and *Adult*. Based on the state we send the stimulus or response. The person communicating the *stimulus* is called the *agent*. The person who responds is called the *respondent*.

The *parent* is our voice of authority, learnt and acquired attitudes we have developed through our life. The parent is the massive collection of recordings in the brain of external events experienced and perceived during our childhood. As per the view of psychologists, the majority of the external events experienced by the children are imitations of parents, relatives, teachers and neighbours. This ego state is appropriately called *parent*. In contrast to the parent, the *child* is formed by our internal reaction and feelings to external events in the childhood. Our *adult* is our innate ability to think and determine our actions and communication based on the data received. Berne describes *adult* as being ...principally concerned with transforming stimuli into pieces of information, and processing and filing that information on the basis of previous experience (p.92). In other words, parent is our *taught* concept of life; adult is our *thought* concept of life; child is our *felt* concept of life. These three states can be used to understand and analyze human behaviour. This concept has been also discussed extensively in Dr. Berne's popular book: *Games People Play* (1964).

Transactional Analysis is a language within a language: a language of true meaning, feeling, behaviour and motive. It can help us in every situation, firstly through being able to understand more clearly what is going on. Secondly by virtue of this knowledge, we give ourselves choices of what ego states to adopt, which signals to send, and where to send them. This will enable us to create, develop and maintain better relationships through communication. Thus the core of Berne's theory helps us in developing effective interpersonal communication skills.

### INTERPERSONAL NEEDS:

William C. Schutz (1958) has developed a systematic approach to the understanding of interpersonal communication that is based upon interpersonal needs. According to Schutz, interpersonal needs can be divided into three categories. They are inclusion, control and affection. Inclusion refers to the need to maintain a satisfactory relationship with others and to have enough involvement and belongingness; control is associated with the need for influence and power; and affection refers to the need for friendship, closeness, and love. Each person's interpersonal needs are different. An awareness of the interpersonal needs of the individuals will enable us to better understand their communication behaviour. The Schutz system suggests that a successful interpersonal encounter is one where the interpersonal needs of the participants are satisfied. We engage in interpersonal communication and compare our opinions, attitudes, and beliefs with those of others.

In the same way, George C. Homans (1950) identifies three elements that are present when individuals get together to perform some task: sentiment, activity, and interaction. Sentiment refers to the need that motivated the individuals to join one another as well as to the positive and negative feelings that participants develop toward one another. Activity is the label given to the specific acts the participants perform that are related to their task. Interaction refers, among other things, to the interpersonal communication that inevitably occurs as the participants conduct their activities. Activity, interaction, and sentiment are all interdependent. That is, an increase or decrease in any one element affects the other two. Both these views highlight the psychological issues in developing interpersonal relationship while communicating with one another.

### SULLIVAN'S INTERPERSONAL THEORY OF PSYCHIATRY:

Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949), a pioneer in the field of interpersonal psychoanalysis, has paved the way for his followers in propounding theories on psychiatry based on interpersonal competence. He has been described as "the most original figure in American psychiatry." He believed that psychiatry is the study of what goes on between people. This is in contrast to Freud's paradigm that emphasizes on what goes on inside people.

Challenging Freud's psychosexual theory, Sullivan propounded the theory of psychiatry, which focused on the role of interpersonal relations, society and culture as the primary determinants of personality development and psychopathology. For him, personality is a hypothetical entity that cannot be observed or studied apart from interpersonal situations wherein it is manifested. The only way personality can be known is through the medium of interpersonal situations. Therefore the unit of study is not the individual person, but the interpersonal situation.

### LANGUAGE, BEHAVIOUR AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION:

There is a concrete and complex network of links among the elements such as language, behaviour and interpersonal skills in the process of communication. Social psychologists focused on behavior in interpersonal relations, their research served as a gateway for research examining communication in interpersonal relationships. In the words of Heath and Bryant (2000): Particularly since 1960, scholars adopted communication as the central term because they wanted to study it as a significant and unique aspect of human behavior (p. 59). Social psychologists like Heider focused on 'behaviour' in the context of interpersonal communication. Heider's theory of "naive psychology" suggested that individuals act as observers and analyzers of human behavior in everyday life. Heider stated: ...persons actively seek to predict and explain the actions of others (Berger & Bradac, 1982, p. 29).

Individuals gather information that helps them to predict and explain human behavior.

The naive factor analysis of action permits man to give meaning to action, to influence the actions of others as well as of himself, and to predict future actions (Heider, 1958, p. 123).

According to Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (1991:p.8) communication is... a dynamic transactional behavior-affecting process in which people behave intentionally in order to induce or elicit a particular response from another person.

In addition to the previous definition, they add the proponents of *a channel*, through which the communication takes place; *a responder*, who observe the communicative behaviour; *encoding* and *decoding*, i.e. the processes of producing and interpreting information; and *feedback*, which refers to the information available to a source that permits him or her to make qualitative judgements about communication effectiveness. As Samovar and Porter put it:

...communication is complete only when the intended behaviour is observed by the intended receiver and that person responds to and is affected by the behaviour (1991:p.12).

Thus their definition is largely based on intentional communication in an interpersonal context. This is only to show that there are several ways to define and understand the field of interpersonal communication in various dimensions correlating 'language' and 'behaviour'.

### CONCLUSION:

The above explorations and explanations bring out the 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' links between psychology and interpersonal communication. Researchers in the field of interpersonal communication are largely benefited by the socio psychological approaches to interpersonal communication. These findings enable them to move further in the progress of research with better understanding of the core concepts of interpersonal communication. The theories propounded by the pioneers in the field of communication and psychology help them launch new research, either by providing the testable hypothesis or by providing them with a heuristic approach to their research findings.

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