THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATION

L. Puddu, R. Raffagnino
Department of Psychology, University of Florence, Italy

Keywords: communication, interpersonal exchange, communication disorders, communication problems, communication psychopathology, dysfunctional communication, language impairment, internet addiction

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Nosography of communication disturbances
3. Problematic aspects of the communication process
4. Psychological aspects associated with problems of communication
5. Psycho-pathological problems and communication
6. Conclusions
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Notes

Summary

We are living in a time often defined as the *era of communication* with reference to the crucial role played by this process of social exchange in the various spheres of human activities.

The proliferation of ever more sophisticated *means*, *channels* and *strategies* of communication is a meaningful indicator of the centrality of this process, and, at the same time, a driving force in the field. This process of proliferation is matched by the increasing number of perspectives: anthropological, sociological, psychological, neurological, semiotic, linguistic, cybernetic, and so on by which the phenomenon is analyzed. We are dealing with transformations of a vast scale. These transformations are correlated, on one hand, to new and stimulating possibilities, expectations and hopes (at the geopolitical level, for instance, one thinks of the progressive opening up of frontiers and an increasing permeability of national borders), but, on the other, they are easily associated with sensations of loss of points of reference, models and values, creating a diffuse sense of precariousness and insecurity.

In such a situation, the ability to communicate adequately and effectively has become a more and more pressing need in appreciating the advantages of change and, at the same time, in managing the uncertainties that change produces. In reality, this skill is not to be taken for granted, as it is not widely diffused. In fact, problems involving communication, both in its dynamic and developmental aspects, as well as in its psychological effects, can be observed at different levels (personal, interpersonal, intergroup, intercultural).

Therefore, in dealing with the psychological problems of communication, one of the first things to do is to distinguish several macro areas of analysis:

- dysfunctionality in communication especially at the level of verbal and nonverbal expression;
- the problematic dimensions of the communication exchange;
- psychological aspects correlated to problems of communication;
- psychopathological problems created by communication.

In practice, the current debate on assessment criteria, practical applications and the possibilities of intervention in various spheres, as well as in the various psychological, relational and social contexts, is anchored to these general aspects.

1. Introduction

The term *communication* derives from the Latin verb *communicare*, meaning *to place something in common*, *to hold in common*, *to help participate*, *to become a part of*, *to share*, thus denoting its principal characteristic as a social act. In his well known essay of 1917, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey already asserted that society exists not only through the means of communication, but *within* communication itself. In fact, according to Dewey, the link between the words communication and community is not just a verbal affinity, but a substantial connection: communication is what makes it possible for human beings to possess things in common and, therefore, live in social community.

Communication is a basic psychological dimension of human beings and constitutes an important function for the development of the individual (as well as groups) in its various aspects (cognitive, affective, relational, social). It is through this process that a human being becomes conscious of himself (both as a social and subjective being), of his own life experiences, enters into relationship with other individuals, establishes interpersonal relationships and builds up his own personal identity and social position. In the working world, there are occupations, such as those in the helping professions (medical doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists), which, more than others, require a close consideration of communicative processes, though these are often neglected in traditional educational programs.

The classic definition of communication refers to the model proposed towards the end of the 1940s by Shannon and Weaver. This view was based on a mathematical approach that viewed communication as a process of *transmission of information* involving at least one sender (or information source), a message (or signal), a receiver (or destination), a transmitter, a channel and a code. The message elaborated by the source according to a code (*encoding*) is sent through a transmitter by way of a channel to a receiver that decodes it. Awareness of the difficulties often encountered in the dynamics of information transmission has led to the concept of *noise*, indicating any kind of interference (environmental or otherwise) with respect to the effectiveness of the process.

Further integrations of the model are constituted by the concept of *feedback* (the signal of return informing the emitter of the reception of the message) and of *homeostasis* (the

state of balance of the system). Both concepts, borrowed respectively from cybernetics (the study of the exchange of information that takes place among the elements within a system, and between the system and its surrounding environment) and from von Bertalanffy's systems theory, are closely linked. In fact, living systems tend to maintain their states of balance (homeostasis) through retroactive processes of control of the flux of information (feedback).

In the mathematical model of communication, the *semantic* elements are not considered, the very elements placed in the foreground in the *semiotic* approach. In fact, according to this point of view, the process of *signification* is fundamental, and is to be understood as the ability to produce messages that have a sense for the actors in the communication.

A further perspective on the analysis of the communication process is the pragmatic approach promoted by the Palo Alto School starting in the 1950s and an outgrowth of studies by Gregory Bateson. This approach takes into consideration the *rules* that govern the use of language in various *contexts* and *situations*, evaluating the adequacy of communication on this basis. Among its most useful aspects are: a) the distinctions between the levels of *content* and *relationship* within the message, expressed in numerical and/or analogical form; b) the concepts of *symmetry* and *complementarity* and, finally: c) the concepts of *punctuation* and *meta-communication.*

These aspects can provide interesting possibilities to understand communication process dysfunctions. In short, each message transmits, in analogical (prevalently nonverbal) and numerical form (prevalently verbal), not only informative contents, but also indications as to the kind of relationship that one has, or intends to have, with the other as well. A relationship that can be fundamentally structured in symmetrical terms (equality of rights and duties between the parties involved) and complementary (inequality in the sense that one party is in a dominant position and the other subordinate).

In a system, communication is expressed through an uninterrupted and circular sequence of exchanges, although the parties involved tend to effectuate some form of *punctuation.* That is to say, they establish an arbitrary initial point of departure for the sequence and then work out a connection between cause and effect.

The concept of *metacommunication* is thus crucial as it refers to the possibility of communicating on the communication process. In addition to understanding what is happening, the participants can focus on how the communication process is taking place and on their intentions and expectations.

In bringing attention to the use of communication in relation to its context, communication pragmatics focuses on the manifest dimension of the process and tends to overlook the historical and subjective aspects. This approach evaluates exclusively only the functional and dysfunctional outcome of the process without taking into consideration the individual and social-cultural components (cognitive, emotional, affective, experiential). These aspects have more recently been re-evaluated, in particular, in the light of developments occurring in cognitive and constructionist models.

Increasingly more relevance is being given to the *interpersonal sensitivity*, *ability* and *competence* of the individual, with reference to his capacity to feel, perceive, and express contents relative to himself, to others and to his interpersonal and social environment in its widest sense, as well as to respond appropriately, taking into account and accepting elements of diversity as well. These aspects involve a variety of components: *cognitive* (flexibility of thought, lack of prejudice, consideration of others' expectations, scripts) *motivational* (motivation and availability are basic to communication), *emotional* (listening, acknowledgement, acceptation, expression of emotions) and *social-relational components* (respect of social norms and the rules of conversation). Of course, to carry out an effective communication exchange, it is fundamental to activate *listening* and *empathy.* That implies, not only lending one's attention to what your conversation partners are saying, but also understanding their point of view.

If communication pragmatics, departing from the assumption that any and all behavior is communication, retains that it is impossible not to communicate, successive study has criticised this position. Just to cite one example, Anolli (2002) holds that such a theory would not permit us to point out and identify the peculiarities of communication with reference to *behaviour, information* and *interaction*. He proposes a different definition of these terms and argues that communication can be defined as an interactive exchange where *intentionality* has a fundamental role. Intentionality is to be "understood both as the ability to consciously manifest one's intentions and as the capacity to perceive the intentional actions of his interlocutors, being able to distinguish them from accidental or involuntary actions" (p. 125). Such an ability or skill may come up against what has been called *intentional opacity in the communicative act*, referring to the fact that mental and intentional contents are inaccessible to a direct reading on the part of the interlocutor.

Communication exchange can involve not only single individuals, but also more or less broad social groups and diverse cultures (intercultural communication) as well. The space where communication takes place is highly defined in the psychosocial and cultural sense, and the communicative process presents ample and important distinctions, for instance, among different cultures or among social groups within the same culture. Each group possesses a system of shared rules and norms that define human behaviour in positive or negative ways. Communication, as a social act, in order to be effective and functional, cannot be understood without taking these norms and rules into account. These rules may be explicit, or even implicit, sanctioned informally by custom within more narrow or wider groups, or universal. So, it is necessary for the partners to have what Mizzau calls *meta-linguistic consciousness,* that is that they recognize that different codes belong to a specific culture, environment, or a single individual, as well as the norms that regulate the communication process (e.g., turn-taking, self disclosure, maxims of conversation). In addition they must take into account the social roles, the context of the relationship as well as the situation in which the exchange takes place.

2. Nosography of communication disturbances

At the clinical level, specific disorders in communication regarding both verbal and nonverbal aspects of language have been identified and classified.

The DSM-IV-TR (the principal reference manual of psychopathological nosography at the international level), for example, provides for *Communication Disorders* "that are characterized by difficulties in speech or language" and include:

- **Expressive Language Disorder**: characterized by an impairment in expressive language development that may involve both verbal and sign language. This disturbance may manifest itself as a limited amount of speech and vocabulary, shortened sentences, simplified grammatical structures, limited varieties of sentence types (e.g., imperatives, questions), omissions of critical parts of sentences, use of unusual word order, vocabulary errors, difficulty in word-finding and acquiring new words and a slow rate of language development. Phonological Disorder, especially in younger children, is frequently associated with these impairments. There may also be a disturbance in fluency and language formulation.

- **Mixed Receptive-Expressive Language Disorder**: characterized by an impairment in both receptive and expressive language development, involving both verbal and sign language. In addition to the difficulties associated with Expressive Language Disorder, this disorder may manifest itself through impediments in understanding words, sentences and specific types of words. There may be different degrees of disorder. While in mild cases, there can be difficulties only in understanding particular statements (e.g., "if then" sentences) or types of words (e.g., spatial terms), in severe cases, there may be multiple disabilities (e.g., inability to understand basic vocabulary or simple sentences) and deficits in various areas of auditory processing (e.g., discrimination of sounds, association of sound and symbols, storage, recall and sequencing). This disorder is often characterized by quite poor or inappropriate conversational skills (e.g., turn-taking, maintaining a topic) and deficits in many areas of sensory information processing (e.g., processing rate, association of sounds and symbols).

- **Phonological Disorder**: characterized by failure to use appropriate speech sounds with respect to the individual's age and language. This may manifest itself in errors in sound production, use, representation or organization. The intensiveness of the disorder may vary from mild (with little or no influence on the comprehension of language) to very serious (complete unintelligibility of speech).

- **Stuttering**: characterized by "a disturbance in the normal fluency and time patterning of speech that is inappropriate for the individual's age" (p. 67). This disturbance manifests itself with frequent repetitions or prolongation of sounds or syllables, or other types of speech dysfluency (e.g., interjections, broken words, audible or silent blocking, monosyllabic whole-word repetitions). The intensity of the disturbance can be easily influenced by the situation: for instance, often it is more intensive when there is pressure to communicate and, on the contrary, reduced during oral reading, singing or talking to inanimate objects or to pets.

- *Communication Disorder Not Otherwise Specified:* indicating forms that "do not meet criteria for any specific Communication Disorder, for example, a voice disorder (i.e., an abnormality of vocal pitch, loudness, quality, tone or resonance" (p. 69).

In addition to these communication disorders, there are also other verbal and nonverbal language disturbances widely studied in current literature such as: aphasia, asemia, paraphasia, and gestual aphasia.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE **21 PAGES** OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx

Bibliography

Altman I. & Rogoff B. (1991). World views in psychology: Trait, interactional, organismic, and transactional perspectives. In D. Stokols & I. Altman, eds. *Handbook of environmental psychology*, Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, vol. 1, pp. 7-40. [A chapter examining the philosophical approaches underlying research and theory in psychology.]

American Psychiatric Association (2000), *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR), 1032 pp. Washington: American Psychiatric Association. [A description of the diagnostic categories utilized in the study and treatment of various mental disturbances.]

Andersen P.A. & Guerrero L.V., eds. (1998). *Handbook of communication and emotion: research, theory, applications and context*, 590 pp. San Diego (CA): Academic Press. [An interdisciplinary study of emotion that integrates theory and the latest findings of the research in this domain.]

Anolli L. (2002). *Psicologia della comunicazione*, 415 pp. Bologna: Il Mulino. [A collection of studies by experts in the field outlining the different aspects, dimensions, functions and dysfunctions of communication.]

Bateson G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution and epistemology*, 545 pp. Lanham, MD, US: Jason Aronson [Studies on the relationships between the facts of life, behavior and our knowledge from an interdisciplinary perspective.]

Bello R. (in press). Causes and paralinguistic correlates of interpersonal equivocation, *Journal of Pragmatics*. [An article dealing with a research on interpersonal equivocation with particular attention to paralinguistic cues.]

De Cataldo Neuburger L. & Gulotta G. (1996). *Trattato della menzogna e dell'inganno*, 323 pp. Milano: Giuffré. [A study on the definitions, accepted meanings and consequences of lying and deceiving communication in various areas and contexts.]

Ekman P. & Friesen W.V. (1969). The repertoire of nonverbal behavior: Categories, origins, usage, and coding. *Semiotica*, 1, 49-98 [An article in which the authors analyse nonverbal communication distinguishing the various typologies.]

Fletcher G.J.O. & Fincham, F.D., eds. (1991). *Cognition in close relationships*, 364 pp. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum. [A series of chapters offering a comprehensive review of the growing literature on social cognition and close relationship.]

Fogel A. (1993). *Developing through relationships. Origins of communication, self, and culture*, 240 pp. London: Harvester Weathsheaf. [A comprehensive analysis about how individuals develop through their relationships with others.]

Forgas J. P. & Cromer M. (2004). On being sad and evasive: affective influences on verbal communication strategies in conflict situations, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 40, 511-518. [A study on the influence of emotions on people's tendency to engage in evasive equivocal communication when facing conflict situations.]

Gensini S. (a cura di) (1999), *Manuale della comunicazione*, 461 pp. Roma: Carocci. [A review of the principal themes and applications of communication from a semiotic perspective.]

Goldman D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*, 368 pp. New York: Bantam Books [A text outlining the five principal abilities of emotive intelligence and their effects on the effectiveness of interpersonal relationships.]

Goleman D. (2006). *Social intelligence: The new science of social relationships*, 403 pp. New York: Bantam Books [A model of social intelligence in the light of recent acquisitions in the field of the neurosciences.]

Gottman J. & Silver N. (1999), *The seven principles for making marriage work*, 288 pp. New York: Crown Publishers. [An analysis of communication and its dysfunctions within the marital context.]

Gray W., Duhl F.J. & Rizzo N. D., eds. (1969). *General Systems Theory and Psychiatry*, 473 pp. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. [A collection of essays providing a general outline on the history, development, concepts and applications of general systems theory.]

Gudykunst W.B. & Mody B., eds. (2002). *Handbook of international and intercultural communication*, 606 pp. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [A series of chapters dealing with the state of the art of research and theory in intercultural and international communication.]

Hall E.T. (1959). *The silent language*, 240 pp. New York: Doubleday and Co. [The author's theory of culture as communication.]

Hall E.T. (1983). *The dance of life: the other dimension of time,* 232 pp. New York: Doubleday and Co. [A collection of essays dealing with time and cultural behavior with an interesting distinction between monochronic and polychronic cultures.]

Hall J. A. & Bernieri F.J. eds (2001). *Interpersonal sensitivity: theory and measurement*, 392 pp. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum. [Major theorists and researchers describe and evaluate approaches, tests, and methods on our social perceptions and judgments.]

Young K.S., (1998), *Caught in the Net*: *how to recognize the signs of internet addiction-and a winning strategy for recovery*, 256 pp. USA, John Wiley & Sons. [A description of many of the symptoms and behavior related to spending too much time online and advice on how to deal with them.]

Raffagnino R. & Occhini L. (2000), *Il corpo e l'altro*, 460 pp. Milano: Guerini e Associati. [An analysis of nonverbal communication in relation to scientific knowledge, communication abilities   and awareness of self and others.]

Segerstrale U. & Molnar P. (1997) (Eds.), *Non Verbal communication. Where nature meets culture*, 309 pp. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum. [A collection of writings dealing with biologically determined universals in nonverbal behavior and communication.]

Watzlawick P., Beavin J. H. & Jackson D. D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication*, 285 pp. New York: Norton & Co. [A review on the theoretical framework and applications of the Palo Alto school's theory of communication.]

Biographical Notes

Luisa Puddu is researcher at the Department of Psychology of the University of Florence. She is a social and clinical psychologist and teaches environmental psychology at the Faculty of Psychology at the same University. She has published various studies on communication processes especially in forensic and courtroom procedures. Her scientific interests are characterized by a complex and interdisciplinary approach and embrace various fields: from inferential processes to problem solving, argumentation and persuasive communication.

Rosalba Raffagnino is researcher at the Department of Psychology of the University of Florence. She is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist and teaches clinical psychology at the Faculty of Psychology at the same University. She has published two books and many articles on nonverbal communication and marital relationships. Her broad scientific interests range from clinical to social psychology and currently she is working on an integrated model of psychotherapy of the couple and on risk and defence factor in the quality of marital relationships.