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## SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

**Formulation and justification of the relevance of the problem.** Based on Berger and Luckmann's work, The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge, the author reviews the process of «social construction» and what it means to be «socially constructed». Central to social constructionism is understanding communication as a primary formative process, a basic human activity or practice through which people co-construct their social realities.

**Analysis of recent achievements and**

**publications.** The metatheoretical foundation of the study is rooted in the philosophy of social constructionism and systems theory developed in the writings of James, Dewey, Mead, late Wittgenstein, and Bateson (Wittgenstein; Lang, Little, & Cronen) [14; 6].

In contemporary communication literature, these traditions are most fully developed in the general theory of interpersonal communication known as Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) by Pearce, Cronen, and their associates (Pearce; Cronen;

Chen; Lang) [1; 2; 3; 4]. Persons and society do not exist by communication but exist in and through communication [6].

Viewing communication as practice puts a different emphasis on language and talk. It implies that language and discourse are a «matter of using and doing» rather than merely a vehicle for the representation of ideas. Language is not simply talk about action, it is action. It is a part of an emerging process in which people create themselves and their realities (Cronen & Lang) [3].

Further, meanings are also meanings «in use», meanings do not reside in words. As Wittgenstein stated, in everyday life, words do not in themselves have a meaning, but a use, and furthermore, a use only in context, they are best thought of as not having already determined meanings, but as tools, or instruments characterized by their use in making meanings.

The underlying idea is that there is no one fixed type of social order, people construct their social order (or orderliness) through communication rather than discover it (Wittgenstein) [14]. In this light, communication can be characterized as coordination, the process of organizing or constructing social orders (Pearce & Cronen; Cronen, Pearce & Harris) [4; 8].

Following this approach, a number of authors (Cronen & Lang; Weick) [3; 12] point out that there are conversational rules which allow us to describe the process of coordination, but the most important thing is that those rules are not fixed (or transcendent), they emerge in actual conversational practices, in live interactions. There are no fixed rules for «good communication», no formula, each communication process is created as a unique coordination of the parties involved. Consistent with this approach is the conceptualization of communication competence.

**The aim of the article** is to analyze a social constructionist approach and how it is manifested in today's social research across disciplines. The paper highlights the ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and practical foundations of constructionism that distinguish it from other approaches. Some implications for social researchers are outlined.

**The main material.** Today's communication research literature widely recognizes the significance of competence in communication interactions and argues for the need to understand its nature (Wiemann; Spitzberg and Cupach; Martin; Spitzberg) [13; 7; 11; 10]. The complex nature of communication competence has resulted in a great multitude of theoretical and methodological approaches and models.

The existing models of communication competence include competence as effectiveness and appropriateness, goal-attaining, interpersonal problem solving, social skills, adaptability, behavioral flexibility, interpersonal impression and perception, fundamental competence, linguistic competence,

social competence, relational competence, etc. (Cupach and Spitzberg; Chen and Starosta; Spitzberg) [5; 1; 10].

Reviewing these multiple approaches and models reveals that the focus in competence theory and research has shifted over time from an individualistic, traits and component oriented approach to an interactional, context specific, integrative approach. Earlier models tended to focus on individual communicators as the unit of analysis, assuming that: (1) individuals possess certain behavioral traits or skills which enable them to act competently across situations and contexts; and (2) individuals hold cognitive notions about what constitutes competent behavior and use those notions to form impressions about their own and others' behavioral performances (Martin) [7].

For example, Wiemann [13] proposed a model of five social skills requisite for a competent communicator to create a positive impression during an initial interaction: empathy, affiliation and support, social relaxation, behavioral flexibility, and interaction management.

Some researchers have found that cross-situational traits or skills do not provide adequate explanation and prediction of communication performance in specific communication situations. They concluded that perhaps the time has come to move away from global, dispositional theories of competence toward more situationally specific conceptualizations.

While this approach would not necessarily negate the use of competence traits, it would account for the ways in which those traits operate over time in specific situations (Cupach and Spitzberg; Spitzberg; Spano and Zimmermann) [5; 10; 9].

Consistent with the above is the social constructionist approach emphasizing at least two characteristics of communication competence: (1) its interpersonal or interactional nature; and (2) its context-specific or situational nature. A person can be viewed competent only in the context of a particular interaction or relationship (Pearce and Cronen; Cronen et al.) [8; 4].

Competence involves a mutual interdependence with both participants having some control over the outcomes of the interaction. From this perspective, the ability of a person to achieve his or her own goals is not enough to be qualified as competent. As Wiemann [13] comments, one may be personally effective in achieving his or her goals but may be incompetent in an interpersonal sense, if such effectiveness precludes others from achieving their goals. A competent communicator is a person who is supportive of the faces and lines of others, who can have his way in the relationship while maintaining a mutually acceptable definition of that relationship.

The CMM's authors emphasize that competence cannot be described as a set of traits possessed by the individual in isolation from the context of a particular system. Nor can it be reduced to a normative

definition or formula, meeting expectations about certain communicative behaviors. «Communication competence must encompass more than individuals' ability to 'fit in' with preestablished patterns of meaning and action» (Cronen et al.) [7, p. 66].

From this perspective, any particular skill may be functional or dysfunctional depending upon the requirements of the system. In other words, it is not a possession or lack of a particular skill that makes a communicator competent. It is the way the communicator is enmeshed in a particular system. In relation to the system, individual competence can be taken as a continuum ranging from those who do not or cannot perform as expected (incompetent) to those who can and do perform as required (competent). Pearce and Cronen suggest three levels of competence: minimal, satisfactory, and optimal competence.

A person can be characterized as *minimally competent* when she or he has a restrictively limited ability to contextualize or make sense of a situation. It happens when the logic of the system in which this person is enmeshed is more complicated than his or her own. The minimally competent communicator cannot predict the implications of his or her act and cannot perceive the other's perspective.

*Satisfactorily competent* describes a person who is able to move effectively within the logic of the system, which implies the abilities to interpret implications of a particular act in a particular context, to align meanings and actions with others, and to take the other's perspective.

*Optimally competent* describes a person who is able to control his or her enmeshment (that is, the choice to participate or not to participate) within an interpersonal system (Pearce and Cronen; Cronen, Pearce, & Harris) [8;4]. Thus, individuals can be assessed as more or less competent based on the comparison of their abilities with the requirements of a particular social system or context.

Along with assessing communication behaviors of individual participants, the critical analysis allowed for some cross-case generalizations. It revealed that the most common communication problems or deficiencies experienced by professionals in their organizational discussions were:

1. *A lack of empathy and mutual understanding (or coorientation)* which included:

- not hearing or missing some of the presented information because of frequent interruptions and talkovers preventing the speakers from expressing their point of view in full;

- presenting a topic non-clearly, with poor articulation and without a preview or an introductory context for listeners;

- «misinterpreting» the speakers' meanings (when one party complained that their meanings were neither heard nor understood, instead different meanings were imposed on their words);

- fighting to establish one's own «truth» versus creating an agreement (when either party stayed with its own interpretations, unable to comprehend or to accept interpretations of the other party and to get some sort of agreement);

- a lack of awareness or understanding as to why disagreement happened

(each of the parties believed that they had expressed themselves clearly enough and wondered why the opposite party could not get it).

2. *A lack of behavioral flexibility* or maneuvering on the part of some participants which revealed itself when:

- participants had a limited communication tactics repertoire, would use repetitively the same behavioral patterns (such as complaining or asserting their own «truth») that proved to be ineffective under the circumstances, and would show no attempts to try alternative tactics;

- participants demonstrated (in other parts of the conversation) that they had a wide repertoire of tactics, yet, at a certain problematic point they would not be able to choose the «the right tactic» from a number of tactics available, that is, to chose the one that would be most effective to bring them to a desired outcome.

3. *Coordination problems* which were manifested as:

- frequent interruptions, talkovers, and multiple simultaneous dialogues which created chaos in the course of discussion;

- participants' dissatisfaction about unfulfilled goals of the meeting (what has been planned or expected from the meeting has not been achieved, in their view);

- deficiencies in organizing the meeting (including the selection of issues and participants for the discussion, preparation of necessary documentation, announcing a formal leader or chairperson to conduct the meeting, and defining or negotiating goals at the opening of the meeting);

- poor facilitative coordination during the discussion when the group talk might break into multiple simultaneous dialogues, the participant would concentrate on their local themes and miss some major information;

- uncoordinated actions (or misalignments) in the conversational process (when, for example, each of the participants would pursue different topics so that one participant would request specific information on the task and, instead of answering, the other participant would introduce some other topics that were, in his view, more important and, thus, would leave the first party dissatisfied);

- inability to «unlock» the conversation when it came to a problematic point at which both parties got stuck in one theme and could not move on to other issues.

**Recommendation.** Among diverse

communication strategies used by professionals in managing their communication problems, the following ones were identified as most effective:

1. *Opening or creating new space* happened when one party introduced some kind of a conversational constraint and the other party would say something that would introduce a new option or a new perspective on the issue and thus facilitate the proceeding of the conversation. One of the ways to create an opening was by reframing or metacontexting which meant placing an issue into a new and broader context.

2. *Recognizing disagreements or agreeing to disagree* applies to those situations when two parties might have an argument about different points of view, until one of them suggests that they recognize and accept each other's differences rather than prove themselves right. Utilizing this strategy might not necessarily resolve a disagreement, but it might alleviate it and set a temporary agreement (to accept the differences), which in the course of a growing tension might be as much important.

3. *Timely withdrawal* relates to those situations when two parties may be engaged in a debate and then one of the parties suddenly decides to withdraw or stop arguing. In spite of its seeming disadvantages (the debated issue stays unresolved, and the party who decided not to continue the argument, might be perceived as a «loser»), this tactic has a constructive, «unlocking» effect that might be mutually beneficial, especially at the point when the debate becomes too involved. Though it does not resolve a debatable issue, it helps to stop the escalation of tension (which usually accompanies any problematic interaction) and saves time for the discussion of other issues which at this point of the talk may be more manageable.

4. *Chunking down* can be described as asking specific questions about the issue that is either abstract in its nature or is presented ambiguously. That strategy was particularly useful in conversational management as a problem analysis technique and as a focusing technique.

**Conclusions and prospects for further researches of direction.** Communication as well as communication competence are to be understood within the context of a particular conversational interaction. As a contextual and situational construct, competence cannot be reduced to a number of fixed characteristics, a universal formula or «remedy» applicable to all communication problems across all social contexts. The analysis helped to better understand in what ways communication competence is a contextual and relational phenomenon and how it may vary situationally within the same interaction. The analysis also demonstrated how different communication choices in different conversational contexts yield different consequences in that they produce different social dynamics and different outcomes.

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## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: PROBLEMS AND CONSEQUENCES

**Formulation and justification of the relevance of the problem.** Nations and people of the world are increasingly interconnected and mutually interdependent. Globally, most cities and countries are becoming more diverse internally, with citizens and residents of varying races, religions, ethnicities and national backgrounds. Meanwhile, greater the risk is associated with economic or political aloofness and social isolation. All of these social forces are fostering increasingly more study of intercultural communication.

When people face a communicative (or operative) situation with an unexpectedly different «other» or «others», their deep, usually hidden assumptions may not work as well anymore. They have to form guesses on how to proceed and adapt; in other words, they form fictions. And then, more often than not, they get it wrong and that is what communication and life is all about. At best, they recognize what went wrong and correct their messages and reactions in creative ways; at worst, they deny, withdraw, become aggressive and dismissive. They form generalizations and quick judgments about the «other» which then, with a little or much help from some fear, become hardened (an obvious metaphor). On the dark (another metaphor) side, stereotyping, prejudices, stigmas, scapegoats, enemies, victims of «mobbing», etc. are the result. On the lighter side, they idealize individuals into heroes and create positive, rigid stereotypes of groups and cultures [2, p.1-2].

**Analysis of recent researches and publications.** L.Samovar and R.Porter point out that

as cultures differ from one another, the communication practices and behaviours of people will inevitably vary as a result of their different perceptions of the world. Intercultural communication, more precisely then, is defined as the study of communication between people whose «cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough» to alter their communication [6, p. 70].

Intercultural communication or communication between people of different cultural backgrounds has always been and will always remain an important precondition of human co-existence on earth. The **purpose** of this paper is to provide a framework of factors that are important in intercultural communication within a general model of human communication.

According to E.Ayee, intercultural and cross-cultural communication can be used interchangeably. However, we find it necessary to show a slight differentiation between the two [1, p. 2].

Intercultural communication involves interaction between people from different cultures whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter a communication event [6, p. 15].

#### **Presentation of the main material.**

Intercultural communication is also characterized by the fact that the people are simultaneously similar to and different from each other [5, p. 65]. For example, the cultures differ in values, language, nonverbal behavior, and conflict resolution, etc. However, similarities also exist in the cultures involved, for example in human experiences and in the fact that