

Language and Communication Processes

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It is difficult to think of 'social' behavior taking place without communication; indeed, virtually all of the topics addressed by social psychologists implicate the communication of messages between individuals. It is even arguable that the social being exists only as a result of language and communication processes, such that the self, relationships, and other social phenomena are not simply mediated by, but are constituted through, these processes. Despite their evident importance, until rather recently, social psychologists have seldom explicitly addressed communication processes in social interaction (Farr, 1980). Kroger and Wood (1992) traced the prominence of language in texts of American social psychology and noted that it was rarely considered as a topic of scholarly inquiry, and researchers who were interested in this area were infrequently cited (see also Van Dijk, 1990). Indeed, in his review in 1967 of communication processes and language as a field of social psychology, Moscovici lamented the lack of systematic investigations of the role of language in individual and group interactions. It would appear, however, that over the last few decades interest in these processes has awakened with vigorous energy (cf. Clément and Laplante, 1983). This 'turn to language' in social psychology (Billig, 2001; Wood and Kroger, 2000) promises to enrich social psychological understanding of this essential aspect of social interaction.

As exciting as this development is, it would be inappropriate to think that a single research agenda dominates the field. Perhaps because of its novelty and the diversity of disciplines that inform it (including

sociology, linguistics, cognitive psychology, communication science, and others), this subdiscipline of social psychology is replete with ideas about how to define the topic, the level of analysis at which it should be studied, and the appropriate methods for doing so. This chapter provides an overview of some of the major theoretical perspectives, and offers examples of research programs in areas of interest to social psychologists, surveying primarily intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup processes. Due to space constraints, we do not claim to be inclusive; indeed, the field is large enough support its own handbook. Rather, our hope is to provide the reader with a general understanding of the various ways in which social psychologists have conceptualized language and communication and the kinds of issues they have studied.

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Broadly defined, communication is a dynamic process of transmitting and receiving meaningful information (cf. Clément and Noels, 1994; Krauss and Chiu, 1998). Much early work on communication followed the Shannon and Weaver model (1949), in which communication is represented as a vehicle for the direct linear transmission of information, disrupted only by the presence of 'noise' (Berlo, 1960). Terms associated with this 'conduit' or 'hyperdermic' model continue to be used today, whereby communication is assumed to involve a message source (or sender, encoder), a message (or

code, information, meaning), a channel (or medium), and a receiver (or target, decoder, listener). This basic model has been elaborated in various ways. For example, interactants are assumed to encode and decode information simultaneously and to provide feedback to the other regarding the effectiveness of the communication attempt (e.g., Schramm, 1973). The success of these efforts is constrained by contextual factors such as personality characteristics and idiosyncratic goals, situational features, prior relational history, social and cultural norms, and so on (Parks, 1994).

Even with these adaptations, several scholars reject this mechanistic model, arguing that communication is not well characterized in terms of a message transporting meaning from a source to a receiver. Adopting a more interactive perspective, such scholars variously describe meaning as being constituted, created, or constructed through the ongoing and interdependent interaction of the people involved (e.g., Delia et al., 1982). As each interactant interprets the behavior of the other, they form a shared understanding on multiple levels, including an understanding of identities, relationships, and social order. This constructivist view emphasizes the dynamic nature of meaning as a phenomenon that changes over the course of an interaction or relationship.

Verbal and nonverbal communication

Communication is often described as involving two interrelated aspects, verbal and nonverbal. As the verbal aspect, language is defined as a rule-based sign and symbol system, a conventionalized code shared by members of a community, through which individuals exchange or create meaning. It is often described as being comprised of various subsystems, including phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic subsystems (Krauss and Chiu, 1998). Nonverbal communication refers to that part of communication that is 'not words' (DePaulo and Friedman, 1998: 3), including gestures, touch, interpersonal distance, eye gaze, and facial expression, as well as nonlinguistic vocal cues, such as tone, inflection, and accent. Despite calls to consider verbal and nonverbal communication in tandem (e.g., Bavelas and Chovil, 2000), these two facets of communication have generally been examined independently in empirical investigations and have historically been discussed in separate literatures (Kroger and Wood, 1992). Nonetheless, nonverbal communication has been conceived as theoretically parallel to language in that cue systems can operate together to form consensually shared meaning among interactants.

One framework for studying this notion explicitly is the social meanings model (Burgoon, 1980). While

(such as eye contact, smiling, touch, etc.), it is argued here that what is more important for social psychological consideration is the actual function which the nonverbal behaviors play during social interaction. Thus, while it may be useful to examine and understand the structure of nonverbal communication to be able to deconstruct it and understand important contributing factors, what is more important is understanding the functions that nonverbal cues play in concert with one another in impression formation and management, communicating or interpreting an emotional expression, sending or receiving relational messages, exerting social influence, or attempting to deceive (to name a few). Thus, in line with a social meanings model, our chapter focuses on messages that are typically sent and interpreted with intent, are used with regularity among members of a given social community, and have consensually recognized meanings (Burgoon, 1980).

Burgoon and colleagues (Burgoon et al., 1996) make the distinction between structure and function of nonverbal communication clear in their treatment of unspoken dialogue. While wider than the purview here, they pull together work from anthropology, ethology and biology, physiology, sociology, linguistics, psychiatry and psychoanalysis, and social psychology, providing a comprehensive review of studies relevant to understanding both the structure and the functions of nonverbal communication. While many authors vary in their taxonomic view of the types of nonverbal cues which are important to consider in terms of the structure of nonverbal communication (e.g., Ruesch and Kees, 1956), the most common classification scheme is articulated by Leathers (1976) and Malandro and Barker (1983). This classification scheme includes kinesics (use of body), vocalics (use of voice), physical appearance (natural and manipulated endowments), haptics (touch), proxemics (space), chronemics (time), and artifacts (possessions).

While the study of various nonverbal cues has made important contributions to the field of nonverbal communication as a whole, understanding the social psychological and communicative functions of nonverbal cue complexes is more important in terms of understanding interpersonal interactions. The social meanings model would argue that examining one cue at a time (or even a few cues at a time) cannot provide us with much understanding of the richness of meaning which is communicated. Rather, what must be examined is the combination of cues *across* structural classification schemes which work together to provide consensually shared meaning. In other words, studies of eye contact alone may provide one interpretation, but when examining eye contact in combination with forward body lean, touch, smiling, and vocal warmth, a clear message of cognitive and social involvement

