

Levels of Involvement

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At least since the publication of Johannesen's article on dialogical communication, our profession has been concerned with defining the essence of interpersonal communication. Johannesen's¹ article suggests that interpersonal communication should be defined by a "person-to-person" quality. This quality is obtained when each person is genuine or "true to his or her own self."

The use of "real self" as the criterion for determining when a particular communication has an interpersonal quality has been attacked by Hart and Burks.² Their article makes important points which need to be considered by anyone who teaches that interpersonal quality is determined by the genuineness of the person. The heart of their attack is that characteristics of a person's real self defy definition.

Alternative criteria for determining when the quality, *interpersonal*, has been obtained in a transaction have been suggested. One is based on the development of the rules for the transaction.³ When the individuals involved establish their own rules for the transaction, as opposed to operating from socially established rules, the transaction is termed interpersonal. But, again with this definition, it is impossible to determine when the rules are the product of individual action. Individuals do generate for themselves the same transaction rules as society's.

The definitional problem with both of these criteria is relevant and it needs to be solved if instruction and research in interpersonal communication is to advance beyond the stage of mysticism – those experts who mythically know when the criterion has been reached are the only ones qualified to judge the quality of the transaction. But, from my perspective, an equally important criticism is that such criteria force a unicontingent view of the quality of communication. The interpersonal quality is either experienced or it is not.

This second criticism remains in treatments of interpersonal communication which avoid the definitional problem. Knapp,⁴ for example provides stages of a relationship. In the third stage, the individuals manifest certain characteristics, such as the establishment of a shared phenomenon as "ours," which can be easily identified. It is at this third level that Knapp defines the beginning of interpersonal communication. Again, the *definition* of criteria for interpersonal communication is dichotomous.

In contrast, one list generally referred to as *Levels of Interaction*⁵ allows a gradation, but the degrees reflect the extent to which the people disclose themselves. The purpose of this article is to build a structure for considering the quality of transactions which can be operationalized and which permits some flexibility in determining quality. Such can be accomplished by establishing the *degree of manifest involvement between/among participants* as the criterion.⁶

There are six levels to this topology; the higher the level, the greater is the mutual involvement. It is apparent that the higher the level, the better the quality.

Yet, each level is appropriate at some time in a relationship; and, it might be argued in quality relationships, all levels are experienced. There is no demand for a quality relationship to always experience maximum involvement.

Level One: Passing

The *passing* level occurs when there is no mutual involvement. Neither person is concerned with what the other person is saying. Usually, it may seem that nobody is listening to anyone else.

The amount of passing communication is great and found in numerous situations. It is easiest to see when two individuals are angry with each other and will not consider what the other person has to say. "Rush times" when neither person has time to be concerned with the other tend to produce *passing* situations. Overloads, and obscure or too complex language which turns people off, have the same effect. Of course, lack of concern for others, for whatever reason, generally becomes discernible when people talk about two different things at the same time.

Passing communication is the lowest level and, thus, considered the lowest quality. Still, it should be noted that sometimes it is quite appropriate. Sometimes, all that is needed is for the person to get something off his/her chest; it may even be best if the other person is not listening. Other times, all individuals just need time to think.

Level Two: Phatic

Phatic communication occurs when the people are mutually involved with unimportant or trivial matters. No one cares much about the conclusions reached; the conversation is primarily a vehicle of togetherness or a means of getting to know the other person.

Various situations demand involvement at the *phatic* level. One which has received some attention of late is the "first four minutes"⁷ when we meet someone for the first time. Waiting moments before some scheduled event (such as at an airport) seem well suited for this level. Many social events, such as lunch periods, teas and receptions, are appropriate for "small talk."

Obviously, while this level represents a low level of involvement, it would be difficult always to rate it as "poor." It often serves as much to prevent self disclosure as to further it. Still there is a need for this level even in well established relationships.

Level Three: Complementary

Complementary transactions are ones in which the weakness of one person compensates for the weakness in another person. The needs of one person are fulfilled in fulfilling the needs of the other. Thus, the compensations are complementary.

Again, many different situations seem to engender this level of involvement. Shostrom⁸ defines four pairs of complementary relationships, some of which potentially represent a top dog--under dog contrast, such as "Dictator" and "Weakling." At the same time, the "dog" characteristics need not be present in the situation. Shostrom's four pairs include more desirable characteristics which might

be “actualized,” such as “Leader” and “Empathizer.” Shostrom’s types help us to identify many situations in the home, in business and in the classroom where one person is attracted to another because together they seem to make a “whole” in which the needs of both are fulfilled.

The complementary level has some desirable aspects. Certainly, the fulfilling of each other’s needs would be considered a desirable goal. The relationship, which is centered in this level of involvement, is a strong and generally stable relationship. Still, the relationship would be far less than ideal if its existence depended on the continued weaknesses of the people involved. The stability of this relationship is lost whenever one of the individuals no longer needs specifically the treatment which the other person needs to give. Thus, the relationship, itself, becomes a block to the growth of the individuals involved.

Level Four: Sympathetic

A *sympathetic* transaction takes place whenever one person (group) feels for another person (group). The emotion which links the two may be a positive one as well as a negative one. The emotion strengthens the involvement although the nature of the emotion differs for the individuals involved.

Emotion permeates life. Anytime when an individual sufficiently cares about the emotional state of another to become involved, then there exist the necessary conditions for this level. One person must understand and appreciate the emotional circumstances of the other.

Caring for another at times would be a “must” in any long term relationship. No one would want to be the center of concern all the time, but all want to disclose our positive and negative feelings to others sometimes and have those feeling understood. Typically the disclosure and understanding of feelings indicate a fairly well developed relationship.

Level Five: Empathic

Empathic communication happens whenever two or more individuals share the same emotion. At this level one is feeling *with* another as opposed to *for* another as in the fourth level. The mutualness of the felt emotion makes this a high level of involvement.

As with the *sympathetic* level, the omnipresence of emotions in daily life provides many opportunities for this level of transaction. Beyond opportunity, the people participating must have the desire and the capability to become involved at this level.

Level Six: Symmetrical

At the highest level, communication results from involvement which comes from mutual and equal respect. *Respect* here is assumed to be a positive word denoting a belief the other person(s) is/are capable of meeting the challenges of the moment. It implies the belief that the other person(s) is/are capable of making reasonable choices.

The conditions which produce this highest level remain unclear. From some views,⁹ the respect required at this level would be unconditional. It is the right of all

humans. The levels presented here suggest that probably this level is more often the result of the development of a relationship through the first five levels. Certainly the characteristics of this level might be very similar to those ascribed to person-to-person communication. The differences, however, may prove to be significant. Since the level is based in the degree of involvement (as opposed to *personness*), its manifestations should be seen in the transactions. The system invites operationalization.

The highest level is the most desirable and generally should be judged the best. Yet implicit in the system is the view that no relationship can or should exist entirely at the one level. From that standpoint, the best relationships would be defined at those which operate at each of the six levels at the appropriate time.

Toward Operationalization

Although the operationalization of this system will not be simple, it should be possible. The operationalizations would demand an analysis of transactions in assessing the degree and nature of involvement.

One caveat, although probably obvious, must be given. Any topic or situation may potentially be dealt with at any level. For example, the winning of an award would seem to suggest either *sympathetic* or *empathic* involvement. Yet the same situation may generate any level. If one person began to regret losing the award which another won (or even some other award) the involvement becomes *passing*. If one person is fairly apathetic then the level becomes *phatic*; and so on. It is the involvement manifest which defines the level.

The six levels represent a definition of quality communication which can be viewed in degrees. They speak to two aspects of a relationship; how a relationship might grow and how a relationship might be evaluated. Most importantly, the levels offer hope for outlining a system that we all might use in reaching a mutual understanding of one view of quality interpersonal communication.

NOTES

¹Richard L. Johannessen, "The Emerging Concept of Communication as Dialogue," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 57 (1971), 373-381.

²Roderick P. Hart and Don M. Burks, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction," *Speech Monographs*, 39(1972). 75-91.

³Mark Steinberg and Gerald R. Miller, "Interpersonal Communication: A Sharing Process," in Gerhard J. Hanneman and William J McEwen (Eds.) *Communication and Behavior* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 121-146.

⁴Mark Knapp, *Social Intercourse: From Greeting to Goodbye* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978)

⁵John Powell, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am* (Miles, IL: Argus Communication, 1969).

⁶John C. Condon, Jr., *Semantics and Communication* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1966).pp. 87-107, describes several types of communication which have some relationship in involvement.

⁷Leonard Zunin and Natalie Zunin, *Contract: The first Four Minutes* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

⁸Everett Shostrom, *Man, The Manipulator* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1973).

⁹The chief source of this view is probably Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scibner's Sons, 1970).