

Interpersonal Communication

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November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Interpersonal Communication*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38482>

Interpersonal communication is usually defined by communication scholars in numerous ways, usually describing participants who are dependent upon one another and have a shared history. It can involve one on one conversations or individuals interacting with many people within a society. It helps us understand how and why people behave and communicate in different ways to construct and negotiate a social reality. While interpersonal communication can be defined as its own area of study, it also occurs within other contexts like groups and organizations.

Interpersonal communication includes message sending and message reception between two or more individuals. This can include all aspects of communication such as listening, persuading, asserting, nonverbal communication, and more. A primary concept of interpersonal communication looks at communicative acts when there are few individuals involved unlike areas of communication such as group interaction, where there may be a large number of individuals involved in a communicative act.

Individuals also communicate on different interpersonal levels depending on who they are engaging in communication with. For example, if an individual is communicating with a family member, that communication will more than likely differ from the type of communication used when engaged in a communicative act with a friend or significant other.

Overall, interpersonal communication can be conducted using both direct and indirect mediums of communication such as face-to-face interaction, as well as computer-mediated-communication. Successful interpersonal communication assumes that both the message senders and the message receivers will interpret and understand the messages being sent on a level of understood meanings and implications.

Communication channels

Communication channels, the conceptualization of media that carry messages from sender to receiver, take two distinct forms: direct and indirect. It can be one of them.

Direct channels

Direct channels are obvious and easily recognized by the receiver. Both verbal and non-verbal information is completely controlled by the sender. Verbal channels rely on words, as in written or spoken communication. Non-verbal channels encompass facial expressions, controlled body movements (police present hand gestures to control traffic), color (red signals 'stop', green signals 'go'), and sound (warning sirens).

Indirect channels

Indirect channels are usually recognized subconsciously by the receiver, and are not always under direct control of the sender. Body language, comprising most of the indirect channel, may inadvertently reveal one's true emotions, and thereby either unintentionally taint or bolster the believability of any intended verbal message. Subconscious reception and interpretation of these signals is often described with arbitrary terms like gut-feeling, hunch, or premonition.

Context

Context refers to the conditions that precede or surround the communication. It consists of present or past events from which the meaning of the message is derived, though it may also, in the case of written communications, depend upon the statements preceding and following the quotation in question. Immediate surroundings may also color the perceived meaning of words; normally safe discourse may easily become contextually ambiguous or offensive in a restroom or shower hall. These influences do not constitute the message by themselves, but rather these extraneous nuances subtly change the message's effective meaning. Ultimately, context includes the entire world, but usually refers to salient factors such as the following:

Physical milieu: the season or weather, current physical location and environment

Situational milieu: classroom, military conflict, supermarket checkout

Cultural and linguistic backgrounds

Developmental progress (maturity) or emotional state

Complementary or contrasting roles: boss and employee; teacher and student; parent, child, and spouse; friend or enemy; partner or competitor

Theories

Uncertainty reduction theory

Uncertainty reduction theory comes from the sociopsychological perspective. It addresses the basic process of how we gain knowledge about other people. According to the theory people have difficulty with uncertainty, they want to be able to predict behavior and therefore they are motivated to seek more information about people.

The theory argues that strangers, upon meeting, go through certain steps and checkpoints in order to reduce uncertainty about each other and form an idea of whether one likes or dislikes the other. As we communicate we are making plans to accomplish our goals. At highly uncertain moments we become more vigilant and rely more on data available in the situation. When we are less certain we lose confidence in our own plans and make contingency plans. The theory also says that higher levels of uncertainty create distance between people and that non-verbal expressiveness tends to help reduce uncertainty.

Constructs include level of uncertainty, nature of the relationship and ways to reduce uncertainty. Underlying assumptions include that an individual will cognitively process the existence of uncertainty and take steps to reduce it. The boundary conditions for this theory are that there must be some kind of outside social situation triggering and internal cognitive process.

According to the theory we reduce uncertainty in three ways:

Passive strategies: observing the person.

Active strategies: asking others about the person or looking up info.

Interactive strategies: asking questions, self-disclosure.

Social exchange theory

Social exchange theory falls under the symbolic interaction perspective. The theory predicts, explains and describes when and why people reveal certain information about themselves to others. Social exchange theory argues the major force in interpersonal relationships is the satisfaction of both people's self interest. Theorists say self interest is not necessarily a bad thing and that it can actually enhance relationships.

According to the theory human interaction is like an economic transaction, in that you may seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs. You will reveal information about yourself when the cost-rewards ratio is acceptable to you. As long as rewards continue to outweigh costs a couple will become increasingly intimate by sharing more and more personal information. The constructs of this theory include discloser, relational expectations, and perceived rewards or costs in the relationship.

The underlying assumptions include that humans weigh out rewards versus costs when developing a relationship. The boundary conditions for this theory are that at least two people must be having some type of interaction. Social exchange also ties in closely with social penetration theory.

Symbolic interaction

Symbolic interaction comes from the sociocultural perspective in that it relies on the creation of shared meaning through interactions with others. This theory focuses on the ways in which people form meaning and structure in society through interactions. People are motivated to act based on the meanings they assign to people, things, and events.

Symbolic interaction argues the world is made up of social objects that are named and have socially determined meanings. When people interact over time they come to shared meaning for certain terms and actions and thus come to understand events in particular ways. There are three main concepts in this theory: society, self and mind.

Society: Social acts (which create meaning) involve an initial gesture from one individual, a response to that gesture from another and a result.

Self: Self image comes from interaction with others based on others perceptions. A person makes sense of the world and defines their "self" through social interactions. One's self is a significant object and like all social objects it is defined through social interactions with others.

Mind: Your ability to use significant symbols to respond to yourself makes thinking possible. You define objects in terms of how you might react to them. Objects become what they are through our symbolic minding process.

Constructs for this theory include creation of meaning, social norms, human interactions, and signs and symbols. An underlying assumption for this theory is that meaning and social reality are shaped from interactions with others and that some kind of shared meaning is reached. The boundary conditions for this theory are there must be numerous people communicating and interacting and thus assigning meaning to situations or objects.

Relational dialectics theory

In order to understand relational dialectics theory, we must first understand specifically what encompasses the term discourse. Therefore, discourses are "systems of meaning that are uttered whenever we make intelligible utterances aloud with others or in our heads when we hold internal conversations". Now, taking the term discourse and coupling it with Relational Dialectics Theory, it is assumed that this theory "emerges from the interplay of competing discourses".

This theory also poses the primary assumption that, "Dialogue is simultaneously unity and difference". Therefore, these assumptions insinuate the concept of creating meaning within ourselves and others when we communicate, however, it also shows how the meanings within our conversations may be interpreted, understood, and of course misunderstood. Hence, the creation and interpretations we find in our communicative messages may create strains in our communicative acts that can be termed as 'dialectical tensions.'

So, if we assume the stance that all of our discourse, whether in external conversations or internally within ourselves, has competing properties, then we can take relational dialectics theory and look at what the competing discourses are in our conversations, and then analyze how this may have an effect on various aspects of our lives. Numerous examples of this can be seen in the daily communicative acts we participate in. However, dialectical tensions within our discourses can most likely be seen in interpersonal communication due to the close nature of interpersonal relationships. The well known proverb "opposites attract, but Birds of a feather flock together" exemplifies these dialectical tensions.

The three relational dialectics:

In order to understand relational dialectics theory, one must also be aware of the assumption that there are three different types of relational dialectics. These consist of connectedness and separateness, certainty and uncertainty, and openness and closedness.

Connectedness and separateness

Most individuals naturally desire to have a close bond in the interpersonal relationships we are a part of. However, it is also assumed that no relationship can be enduring without the individuals involved within it also having their time alone to themselves. Individuals who are only defined by a specific relationship they are a part of can result in the loss of individual identity.

Certainty and uncertainty

Individuals desire a sense of assurance and predictability in the interpersonal relationships they are a part of. However, they also desire having a variety in their interactions that come from having spontaneity and mystery within their relationships as well. Much research has shown that relationships which become bland and monotonous are not desirable.

Openness and closedness

In close interpersonal relationships, individuals may often feel a pressure to reveal personal information. This assumption can be supported if one looks at the postulations within social penetration theory, which is another theory used often within the study of communication. This tension may also spawn a natural desire to keep an amount of personal privacy from other individuals. The struggle in this sense, illustrates the essence of relational dialectics.

Coordinated management of meaning

Coordinated management of meaning is a theory assuming that two individuals engaging in an interaction are each constructing their own interpretation and perception behind what a conversation means. A core assumption within this theory includes the belief that all individuals interact based on rules that are expected to be followed while engaging in communication. "Individuals within any social situation first want to understand what is going on and apply rules to figure things out".

There are two different types of rules that individuals can apply in any communicative situation. These include constitutive and regulative rules.

Constitutive rules - "are essentially rules of meaning used by communicators to interpret or understand an event or message".

Regulative rules - "are essentially rules of action used to determine how to respond or behave".

An example of this can be seen if one thinks of a hypothetical situation in which two individuals are engaging in conversation. If one individual sends a message to the other, the message receiver must then take that interaction and interpret what it means. Oftentimes this can be done on an almost instantaneous level because the interpretation rules applied to the situation are immediate and simple. However, there are also times when one may have to search for an appropriate interpretation of the 'rules' within an interaction. This simply depends on each communicator's previous beliefs and perceptions within a given context and how they can apply these rules to the current communicative interaction. Important to understand within the constructs of this theory is the fact that these 'rules' of meaning "are always chosen within a context". Furthermore, the context of a situation can be understood as a framework for interpreting specific events.

The authors of this theory believe that there are a number of different context an individual can refer to when interpreting a communicative event. These include the relationship context, the episode context, the self-concept context, and the archetype context.

Relationship context - This context assumes that there are mutual expectations between individuals who are members of a group.

Episode context - This context simply refers to a specific event in which the communicative act is taking place.

Self-concept context - This context involves one's sense of self, or an individual's personal 'definition' of him/herself.

Archetype context - This context is essentially one's image of what his or her belief consists of regarding general truths within communicative exchanges.

Furthermore, Pearce and Cronen believe that these specific contexts exist in a hierarchical fashion. This theory assumes that the bottom level of this hierarchy consists of the communicative act. Next, the hierarchy exists within the relationship context, then the episode context, followed by the self-concept context, and finally the archetype context.

Social penetration theory

Oftentimes, when a relationship begins to develop, it is customary for the individuals within the relationship to undergo a process of self-disclosure. Self disclosure is "sharing information with others that they would not normally know or discover. Self-disclosure involves risk and vulnerability on the part of the person sharing the information". The reason that self disclosure is labeled as risky is because oftentimes, individuals undergo a sense of uncertainty and susceptibility in

revealing personal information that has the possibility of being judged in a negative way by the receiver. Hence the reason that face-to-face communication must evolve in stages when an initial relationship develops.

There are four different stages that social penetration theory encompasses. These include the orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange, and stable exchange.

Orientation stage: Within the orientation stage, individuals exchange very little amounts of information and they are very cautious in their interactions.

Exploratory affective stage: Next, in the exploratory affective stage, individuals become somewhat more friendly and relaxed with their communication styles.

Affective exchange: In the third stage, the affective exchange, there is a high amount of open communication between individuals and typically these relationships consist of close friends or even romantic partners.

Stable stage: The final stage, the stable stage, simply consists of continued expressions of open and personal types of interaction.

Also important to note, is the fact that due to current communicative exchanges involving a high amount of computer mediated contexts in which communication occurs, this area of communication should be addressed in regard to Social Penetration Theory as well. Online communication seems to follow a different set of rules. Because much of online communication between people occurs on an anonymous level, individuals are allowed the freedom of foregoing the interpersonal 'rules' of self disclosure. Rather than slowly disclosing personal thoughts, emotions, and feelings to others, anonymous individuals online are able to disclose personal information immediately and without the consequence of having their identity revealed.

Furthermore, this theory assumes the stance that the decision making process of how much information an individual chooses to self disclose is ultimately rooted in an analysis of the costs and rewards that an individual may acquire when choosing to share personal information.

An example of Social Penetration theory can be seen when one thinks of a hypothetical situation such as meeting someone for the first time. When two individuals meet for the first time, it is the cultural expectation that only impersonal information will be exchanged. This could include information such as names, occupations, age of the conversation participants, as well as various other impersonal information. However, if both members participating in the dialogic exchange decide that they would like to continue or further the relationship; with the continuation of message exchanges, the more personal the information exchanged will become.

Relational patterns of interaction theory

Relational Patterns of Interaction Theory of the cybernetic tradition, studies how relationships are

defined by peoples' interaction during communication. Gregory Bateson, Paul Watzlawick, et al. laid the groundwork for this theory and went on to become known as the Palo Alto Group. Their theory became the foundation from which scholars in the field of communication approached the study of relationships.

Ubiquitous communication - The Palo Alto Group maintains that a person's presence alone results in them, consciously or not, expressing things about themselves and their relationships with others (i.e., communicating). A person cannot avoid interacting, and even if they do, their avoidance may be read as a statement by others. This ubiquitous interaction leads to the establishment of "expectations" and "patterns" which are used to determine and explain relationship types.

Expectations - Individuals enter communication with others having established expectations for their own behavior as well as the behavior of those they are communicating with. These expectations are either reinforced during the interaction, or new expectations are established which will be used in future interactions. These new expectations are created by new patterns of interaction, established expectations are a result of established patterns of interaction.

Patterns of interaction - Established patterns of interaction are created when a trend occurs regarding how two people interact with each other. There are two patterns of particular importance to the theory which form two kinds of relationships. These relationships are, symmetrical relationships and complementary relationships.

Symmetrical relationships - These relationships are established when the pattern of interaction is defined by two people responding to one and other in the same way. This is a common pattern of interaction within power struggles.

Complementary relationships - These relationships are established when the pattern of interaction is defined by two people responding to one and other in opposing ways. An example of such a relationship would be when one person is argumentative while the other is quiet.

Relational control - Relational control refers to who, within a relationship, is in control of it. The pattern of behavior between partners over time, not any individual's behavior, defines the control within a relationship. Patterns of behavior involve individuals' responses to others' assertions. There are three kinds of responses: One-down responses are submissive to, or accepting of, another's assertions. One-up responses are in opposition to, or counter, another's assertions. One-across responses are neutral in nature.

Complementary exchanges - A complementary exchange occurs when a partner asserts a one-up message which the other partner responds to with a one-down response. When complementary exchanges are frequently occurring within a relationship, and the parties at each end of the exchange tend to remain uniform, it is a good indication of a complementary relationship existing.

Symmetrical exchanges - Symmetrical exchanges occur when one partner's assertion is countered with a reflective response. So, when a one-up assertion is met with a one-up response, or when a one-down assertions is met with a one-down response, a symmetrical exchange occurs. When symmetrical exchanges are frequently occurring within a relationship, it is a good indication of a symmetrical relationship existing.

Identity management theory

Falling under the Socio-Cultural tradition and developed by Tadasu Todd Imahori and William R. Cupach, identity-management theory explains the establishment, development, and maintenance of identities within relationships, as well as changes which occur to identities due to relationships.

Establishing identities - People establish their identities (or faces), and their partners, through a process referred to as "facework". Everyone has a desired identity which they're constantly working towards establishing. This desired identity can be both threatened and supported by attempting to negotiate a relational identity (the identity one shares with their partner). So, our desired identity is directly influenced by our relationships, and our relational identity by our desired individual identity.

Cultural influence - Identity-management pays significant attention to intercultural relationships and how they affect the relational and individual identities of those involved. How partners of different cultures negotiate with each other, in an effort to satisfy desires for adequate autonomous identities and relational identities, is important to identity-management theory. People take different approaches to coping with this problem of cultural influence.

Tensions within intercultural relationships - Identity freezing occurs when one partner feels like they're being stereotyped and not recognized as a complex individual. This tends to occur early on in relationships, prior to partners becoming well acquainted with each other, and threatens individuals' identities. Showing support for oneself, indicating positive aspects of one's cultural identity, and having a good sense of humor are examples of coping mechanisms used by people who feel their identities are being frozen. It is also not uncommon for people in such positions to react negatively, and cope by stereotyping their partner, or totally avoiding the tension.

When tension is due to a partner feeling that their cultural identity is being ignored it is referred to as a nonsupport problem. This is a threat to one's face, and individuals often cope with it in the same ways people cope with identity freezing.

Self-other face dialectic occurs when one partner wants to, but has trouble with, supporting their partner's cultural identity while also asserting their own. They cope with this by standing their ground, giving in, alternating in their support of each identity, and also by avoiding the issue completely.

Relational stages of identity management - Identity management is an ongoing process which Imahori and Cupach define as having three relational stages. Typically, each stage is dealt with differently by couples.

The trial stage occurs at the beginning of an intercultural relationship when partners are beginning to explore their cultural differences. During this stage each partner is attempting to determine what cultural identities they want for the relationship. At this stage cultural differences are significant barriers to the relationship and it is critical for partners to avoid identity freezing and nonsupport.

During this stage individuals are more willing to risk face threats to establish a balance necessary for the relationship.

The enmeshment stage occurs when a relational identity emerges with established common cultural features. During this stage the couple becomes more comfortable with their collective identity and the relationship in general.

The renegotiation stage sees couples working through identity issues and drawing on their past relational history while doing so. A strong relational identity has been established by this stage and couples have mastered dealing with cultural differences. It is at this stage that cultural difference become part of the relationships and not a tension within them.

Communication privacy management theory

Of the socio-cultural tradition, communication privacy management theory is concerned with how people negotiate openness and privacy in concern to communicated information. This theory focuses on how people in relationships manage boundaries which separate the public from the private.

Boundaries An individual's private information is protected by the individual's boundaries. The permeability of these boundaries are ever changing, and allow certain parts of the public, access to certain pieces of information belonging to the individual. This sharing occurs only when the individual has weighed their need to share the information against their need to protect themselves. This risk assessment is used by couples when evaluating their relationship boundaries. The disclosure of private information to a partner may result in greater intimacy, but it may also result in the discloser becoming more vulnerable.

Co-ownership of information When someone chooses to reveal private information to another person they are making that person a co-owner of the information. Co-ownership comes with rules, responsibilities, and rights which the discloser of the information and receiver of it negotiate. Examples of such rules would be: Can the information be disclosed? When can the information be disclosed? To whom can the information be disclosed? And how much of the information can be disclosed? The negotiation of these rules can be complex, the rules can be explicit as well as implicit, and they can be violated.

A rule based process Petronio views boundary management as a rule based process, not an individual decision. These rules, much like an individual's decision to disclose information, are developed using the following criteria: risk assessment, cultural expectations, gender differences, personal motivations and situational demands. Certain criteria can be more prominent when managing boundaries depending on the context. For example, if you're called to testify in a court of law against the co-owner of information, and the cost of not testifying would be imprisonment, the

situational demands are the primary criteria you'll use for managing your boundaries. Some rules are more fixed than others but they're all capable of changing under the right circumstances.

Boundary turbulence What Petronio refers to as "boundary turbulence" occurs when rules are not mutually understood by co-owners, and when a co-owner of information deliberately violates the rules. This usually results in some kind of conflict, is not uncommon, and often results in one party becoming more apprehensive about future revelation of information to the violator.

Cognitive dissonance theory

The theory of cognitive dissonance, part of the Cybernetic Tradition, explains how humans are consistency seekers and attempt to reduce their dissonance, or discomfort, in new situations. The theory was developed in the 1950s by Leon Festinger.

When individuals encounter new information or new experiences they categorize the information based on their preexisting attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs. If the new encounter does not coincide with their preexisting assumptions, then dissonance is likely to occur. When dissonance does occur, individuals are motivated to reduce the dissonance they experience by avoiding situations that would either cause the dissonance or increase the dissonance. For this reason, cognitive dissonance is considered a drive state that encourages motivation to achieve consonance and reduce dissonance. An example of cognitive dissonance would be if someone holds the belief that maintaining a healthy lifestyle is important, but they don't regularly work out or eat healthy, they may experience dissonance between their beliefs and their actions. If there is a significant amount of dissonance, they may be motivated to change their attitudes and work out more or eat healthier foods. They may also be inclined to avoid situations that will point out the fact that their attitudes and beliefs are inconsistent, such as avoiding the gym or not reading health reports.

The selection process

Selective exposure- is a method for reducing dissonance that only seeking information that is consonant with ones current beliefs, thoughts, or actions.

Selective attention- is a method for reducing dissonance by only paying attention to particular information or parts of information that is consonant with current beliefs, thoughts, or actions.

Selective interpretation- is a method for reducing dissonance by interpreting ambiguous information so that it seems consistent with ones beliefs, thoughts, or actions.

Selective retention- when an individual only remembers information that is consistent with their current beliefs.

Types of cognitive relationships

According to cognitive dissonance theory there are three types of cognitive relationships: consonant relationships, dissonant relationships, and irrelevant relationships. Consonant relationships are when two elements, such as your beliefs and actions, are in equilibrium with each other or coincide. Dissonant relationships are when two elements are not in equilibrium and cause dissonance. Irrelevant relationships are when two elements do not possess a meaningful relationship with one another, they are unrelated and do not cause dissonance.

Attribution theory

Attribution Theory is part of the Sociopsychological Tradition and explains how individuals go through a process that makes inferences about observed behavior. Attribution theory assumes that we make attributions, or social judgments, as a way to clarify or predict behavior. Attribution theory assumes that we are sense-making creatures and that we draw conclusions of the actions that we observe.

Steps to the attribution process

The first step of the attribution process is to observe the behavior or action.

The second step is to make judgments of interactions and the intention of that particular action.

The last step of the attribution process is making the attribution which will be either internal, where the cause is related to the person, or external, where the cause of the action is circumstantial.

An example of this process is when a student fails a test, an observer may choose to attribute their behavior to internal causes, such as they did not study because they are lazy or have poor work ethic. They might also attribute their behavior to external factors such as the test was too difficult or they had a lot of other stressful things going on in their life that caused them to be distracted. We also make attributions of our own behavior. Using this same example if it were you who received a failing test score you might make an internal attribution, such as "I just don't understand this material" or you could make an external attribution, such as this test was just too difficult.

Fundamental attribution error

As we make attributions, we may fall victim to the fundamental attribution error which is when we overemphasize internal attributions for others and underestimate external attributions.

Actor-observer bias

Similar to the fundamental attribution error, we may overestimate external attributions for our own behavior and underestimate internal attributions.

Expectancy violations theory

Expectancy violations theory is part of the sociopsychological tradition, and explains the relationship between non-verbal message production and the interpretations people hold for those non-verbal behaviors. Individuals hold certain expectations for non-verbal behavior that is based on the social norms, past experience and situational aspects of that behavior. When expectations are either met or violated, we make assumptions of the behavior and judge them to be positive or negative.

Arousal

When a deviation of expectations occurs there is an increased interest in the situation, also known as arousal. There are two types of arousal: Cognitive arousal- our mental awareness of expectancy deviations Physical arousal- challenges our body faces as a result of expectancy deviations.

Reward valence

When an expectation is not met, we hold particular perceptions as to whether or not that violation is considered rewarding. How an individual evaluates the interaction will determine how they view the positive or negative impact of the violation.

Proxemics

A significant focus of expectancy violations theory is the concept of proxemics, or the study of individual use of personal space. There are four types of proxemic zones:

Intimate distance- 0-18 inches

Personal distance- 18 inches- 4 feet

Social distance- 4-12 feet

Public distance- 12 feet or more

Dyadic communication and Relationships

Dyadic communication is the part of a relationship that calls for "something to happen". Partners will either talk or argue with one another during this point of a relationship to bring about change. When partners talk or argue with one another the relationship may still survive at this point.