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Communicating about Communication

I 'became' a Humanistic Psychologist before I knew there was such an animal. And I suppose that the growth of my interests is fairly typical - I enjoyed teaching and had to find a job to keep the wolf away from the door, but I didn't want to teach psychology in the way that I had been taught. Although my undergraduate course was a lot broader than most, it still hadn't fired my imagination. There had been a missing link somewhere along the line.

Eventually I tripped over an advertisement that sounded interesting - Lecturer in Communication. I took the job, now I'm firmly embedded in an 'academic growth area'; witness the forthcoming conference in London on the *Future of Communication Studies* with some extremely high-powered international speakers. I suspect that many readers of *Self and Society* are sympathetic to/interested in this area, and I should like this article to initiate some sort of dialogue. 'Communication Studies' is important in that if it develops along lines that I would approve, it will have objectives which are highly

compatible with those of Humanistic Psychology.

Do you want to know a secret?

One major sin of the Social Sciences is their failure to tell the general public what they are about. Announce 'I am a psychologist' to a group of strangers and you will uncover the often bizarre fantasies that people have about our 'powers'. I remember someone who refused to look me straight in the eye after I had made this pronouncement. Presumably he was worried that I couldn't switch my mind-reading beam off. At least I don't get this reaction if I announce myself as a 'lecturer in communication' - usually I receive a blank stare. If I continue to say that I'm interested in human communication as opposed to electronic engineering (telecommunications), people often say 'Oh! Yes! You mean psychology.' And you can't criticise people who are locked in this semantic fog when they have no choice. If I have no information to work on, I also rely on stereotypes. Unhappily, this situation also occurs in academic

circles. If I announce my interest in communication to a group of academics, they often try to pin me down to a conventional specialism like Psychology, or they dismiss me as 'just another whizz-kid clutching the latest academic hula-hoop'. 'Last year - the environment; this year - communication.' This opinion is often reinforced when they demand a much tighter definition of my specialism that I could legitimately expect of theirs.

There's a place for us. . .

Many published definitions of communication have misleading flaws. For example:

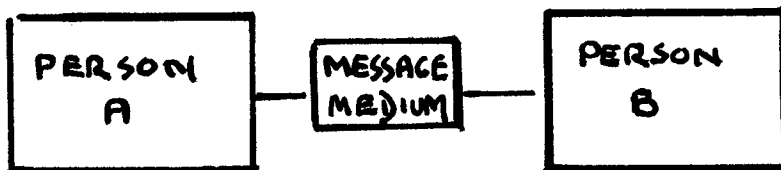
'Communication is the process of effecting an interchange of understanding between two or more people.'

Although this definition covers important notions of 'process' and 'understanding', it still implies that communication is something we can 'effect' i.e. that it may be seen as 'an activity', as something we 'do'. And this implies that I do not *have* to communicate. If I can choose to indulge in an 'activity' then I can choose to leave it alone. But communication is not a tap which we can conveniently switch 'on' and 'off'. Any act that I perform may send a message to another human being. My inactivity may also be seen as highly meaningful by other people (more's the pity!)

When I was discussing this point with a friend from another discipline, he promptly retorted that 'I had argued myself out of business'. If *all human activity* may be communicative, how can I call communication a distinct subject area? This objection misses the point because all other disciplines can be destroyed by it. If psychology is the 'science of human behaviour', show me a phenomenon relating to human beings that is *not* the subject matter of psychology! Similarly, for economics, philosophy and all other academic disciplines. Their most basic definitions can encompass nearly every situation and activity. And, of course, this does not mean that they are unworkable. Differences between disciplines are ones of level and emphasis. There *is* a place for communication. The range of events that it attempts to analyse is not discussed *systematically* by any other discipline. Other disciplines may analyse 'communication events' but they do not interrelate them or provide an integrating frame of reference.

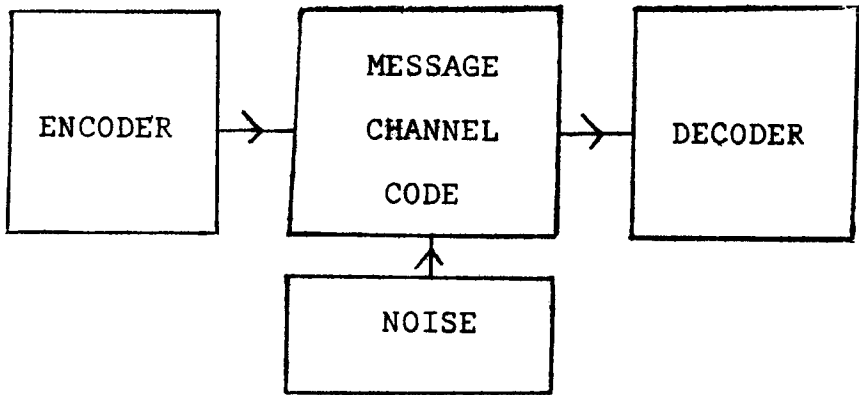
What's it all about?

Our approach to communication is to outline a basic model, and then to explore its implications, applications and limitations. We would reject the 'common-sense' model as being too crude, i.e.



We prefer to start with what might be called the 'engineering model'. It lists the variables that an engineer would concern

himself with if he wished to design a communication system, i.e.



Even this oversimplified version of the model is a rich source of implications and argument. Any course in communication should concern itself with the important questions it raises e.g.:

*- What codes do human beings employ?
How do the messages relate to the codes employed?*

These questions demand an analysis of language and non-verbal communication. Have linguistic analyses anything to offer to the analysis of group climates etc?

*- What are the limitations of human beings' encoding and decoding capacities?
Is the concept of the 'channel' adequate?*

The cognitive psychologist is usually concerned with the limitations of his subjects. How can his work relate to those psychologists who wish to expand awareness?

- Does the model 'explain' or 'describe' real-life situations?

Can it be applied at different levels?

Certainly it ignores the context - how legitimate is this? Perhaps you also feel that it is too mechanical by definition (see BIRDWHISTELL's discussion in *'Kinesics and Context'* p 65 ff). Is the

concept of 'noise' useful or an unfortunate 'rag-bag' category?

Bringing it all back home

In this very cursory attempt to outline areas of debate that we are interested in, I have tried to point them towards issues that many Humanistic Psychologists feel strongly about. There is one aspect of our approach that I have neglected - our feeling that communication is not simply a choice oasis for lofty theorising. We are interested in skills, in relating theory to practice, and in ensuring that people are aware of the theories which they practise.

I have now arrived back where I started. My psychological training did not relate the theory to 'me', or to my interactions. As a result, I was undisturbed by its implications - that was the missing link. I hope that my work in Communication will provide people with insights they can work on rather than simply providing fodder for semantic jugglers.

'Communication Studies' has started the battle for academic acceptance and respectability. I hope that it does not abandon the 'missing link' somewhere on route.