
The Importance of Communication in Interpersonal Relationships

Anne Maydan Nicotera

Communication and Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships are a driving force in our lives. Most Americans report that the quality of their lives is determined by the number and quality of their interpersonal relationships (Campbell, 1980). Individuals with good relationships live longer and report less physical and psychological illness and greater satisfaction with life (Duck, 1981). The failure of interpersonal relationships has been associated with suicide (Stech, 1980), psychiatric problems (Bloom, Asher, and White, 1978), social stress (Chiriboga, 1979), and family instability (Albrecht, 1980). Effective communication is a crucial variable in determining the success of interpersonal relationships (Alexander, 1973; Murstein 1972). Communication is requisite for the maintenance of satisfying relationships (Alexander, 1973; Cushman and Cahn, 1985; Murstein, 1972, 1977), and the absence of effective communication causes relational failure (Alexander, 1973).

Two of the most important and problematic types of interpersonal relationships are friend and mate. Cushman and Cahn (1985) conclude from the literature three underlying dimensions of the friend relationship: trust, helping behavior, and self-concept support. As these variables increase in their intensity, the friend relationship increases in intimacy. Friends also fulfill two important roles: confidant and companion. However, as Cushman and Cahn also conclude, "while a clear pattern emerges from the research literature regarding

underlying dimensions and levels of friendship, the process by which one selects and sustains such relationships is far from clear" (p. 51). The research reported in this volume attempts to explicate that process in a variety of cultural settings.

The mate relationship accounts for the happiness, satisfaction, and meaning found in life (Albrecht, 1980; Alexander, 1973; Bloom et al., 1978; Campbell, 1980; Chiriboga, 1979; Cushman and Cahn, 1985; Duck, 1981; Murstein, 1972, 1977; Stech, 1980). Further, these relationships function as strong integrating forces represented by love and commitment. Cushman and Cahn (1985) conclude from the literature that love is an integrating force, whereas commitment is a focusing force. Specific attributes of mate relationships differ by culture, but recent research has distinguished two classes of mate relationship attributes: those variables that mark *entry* into such relationships, and those variables that lead to *intensity*. As variables in the latter class deepen, the mate relationship increases in intimacy. For example, in the United States intelligence and physical attraction are entry variables, whereas respect, affection, and psychological support are intensity variables (Cushman and Cahn, 1985). When one perceives an opposite-sex other to be intelligent and physically attractive, one is likely to enter into a mate-type relationship with that person. As respect, affection, and psychological support intensify in that relationship, it progresses to deeper levels of intimacy (Cushman and Kovacic, in press; see also Chapter 3).

Communication is central to the development and maintenance of all interpersonal relationships. The late twentieth century has seen an unprecedented preoccupation with communication processes (Cushman and Cahn, 1985). Self-help books, therapies, and advice columns rebound with the messages that ineffective communication is the root of all our social problems and that good communication is the ultimate panacea. "If you want to find a mate, save a marriage, get a job, sell a used car, educate the public, prevent a war . . . then communicate!" (Cushman and Cahn, 1985, p. 5). Problems of communication are not new to our age; this attention to such problems signifies a new way of thinking about and analyzing social relationships (McKeon, 1957).

Communication is a fashionable topic in contemporary social science. The danger here is in the potential for tautology. Social and interpersonal problems are caused by failed communication; their solutions lie in effective communication. Tidily stated, the problem seems simple, but the primary question of communication lies unanswered. What processes, for example, do we go through in developing and maintaining our interpersonal relationships? How does communication contribute to relational development? Why do some relationships develop past the point at which others stop?

Although our obsession with communication has led to formula answers and tautologies, such concentration on communication processes and problems is essential to sorting out fundamental questions about interpersonal relationships. Further, our fixation with communication is an insightful

response to several societal trends, all related to the “shrinking” of the world and the seeming development of Marshall McLuhan’s global village: increasing tolerance for diversity; interdependence within and between cultures; availability of the means of communication; and, finally, the need to express respect for diversity as a prerequisite for coordinating action (Cushman and Cahn, 1985).

Paradigmatic Assumptions

These trends have led to a modification in our assumptions about the basic mechanisms of communication processes. For our purposes in discussing interpersonal relationships, the most central of these assumptions is the shift from a positivistic view of humans as reactors to a view of humans as actors. The rules perspective, as an alternative for communication theorists, was introduced by Cushman and Whiting (1972). Rooted in symbolic interactionism and speech-act theory, the rules perspective was intended to move the field of communication away from its preoccupation with laws and positivism. The rules perspective conceives of human beings as conscious, teleological actors who choose to enact specific behaviors based on their goals and the structure of social rules that govern and guide the specific situation (Cushman and Pearce, 1977; Cushman and Whiting, 1972).

The primary assumption in the rules perspective is the action principle: Social behavior is structured and organized. Action within and between human beings is not random. Humans govern their actions by implicit and explicit rules. Finally, choice is involved in social action. According to Cushman and Pearce (1977), rules take the form of the practical syllogism:

- A intends to bring about C;
- A considers that to bring about C s/he must do B;
- therefore, A sets her/himself to do B.

The possible range of actions (B) is delimited by the social rule structure. The practical syllogism illustrates the perspective’s epistemological assumption of a normative order in the regularities of human action (Cushman and Pearce, 1977).

Human behavior is classified into two categories: movement and action (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982). *Movement* can be defined as habit and is governed by nomic necessity, which accounts for reactive behavior and depends on a causal relationship. *Action* is evaluative, purposeful, and choice-oriented and is governed by practical necessity, which accounts for proactive or teleological behavior. Action is further classified into *information processing*—perception or thought—and *coordination*—consensus among individuals (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982).

In coordination situations, the basic unit of analysis is the standardized usage (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982). Acting in concert, individuals coordinate a standardized usage for social rules. The rule structure is

either created through negotiation or recognized as a previously existing rule structure (Cushman and Whiting, 1972). Regardless of its origin, the standardized usage is of primary interest to the rules theorist because it defines the set of alternative choices for behavior (*B* in the practical syllogism above).

Characteristics of a standardized usage are as follows: first, a shared class of intentions; second, a common set of expectations; and third, sequences of communicative acts that demonstrate the level of commitment to the standardized usage (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982). According to Cushman and his associates (Cushman and Cahn, 1985; Cushman and Craig, 1976; Cushman and Florence, 1974; Cushman and Pearce, 1977; Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982), all human actions necessarily involve rules. Furthermore, all actions requiring coordination with others involve communication and therefore communication rules. Rules theorists identify two types of rules: *constitutive* rules, which specify the action's content; and *procedural* rules, which specify appropriate strategies for carrying out the action (Cushman and Whiting, 1972).

Given such a conception of human action, *interpersonal relationships can be seen as coordination systems* (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982). The function of these systems is to develop and maintain consensus on individual self-concepts. Their structures are dyadic relationships, specifically friend and mate relationships. Their processes center around the development, presentation, and validation of individual self-concepts (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982). The following is a discussion of a general theory of the role of communication in interpersonal relationships grounded in the rules perspective; it focuses on self-concept and interaction as the generative mechanisms of relationship formation and growth.

General Theory of the Role of Communication in Relationships

Filters

Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) posit that relationship development progresses through a series of filters, usually conceptualized as stages. Several theorists have drawn upon this notion (e.g., Knapp, 1978; Lewis, 1972, 1973; Murstein, 1972, 1977; Nofz, 1984). Cushman and his associates (Cushman and Cahn, 1985; Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982) formulate a more complex theory of relationship development. They posit a three-step filtering process for both friendship and mate relationship development. First, individuals are faced with a *field of availables*. This field consists of all the others with whom it is possible to form a relationship. Research exploring initial interaction (typified by Berger and Calabrese, 1975; and Duck, 1976) has shown such interaction to be governed by standardized and general communication

rules (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982). Within the field of availables, there exists the second filter, the *field of approachables* (Cushman and Cahn, 1985). This field consists of all the others whom the individual finds desirable enough to approach for the purpose of initiating a relationship. A particular set of *entry rules* for the mate relationship and friendship guide such relationship initiation. (see pp. 9 and 10) Within the field of approachables there exists the third filter, the *field of reciprocals* (Cushman and Cahn, 1985). This field consists of those who have reciprocated the individual's attempt to initiate a relationship. These are the people with whom the individual has interpersonal relationships. A particular set of *intimacy/intensity rules* guide the growth of these relationships (see pp. 9 and 10). Once relationship pairs have been filtered to the field of reciprocals, they progress through four relationship levels. For friendship, the levels are acquaintance, casual friend, good friend, and best friend. For the mate relationship, they are casual date, steady date, fiancé, and spouse (Cushman and Cahn, 1985).

The Role of Self-Concept Support

Cushman and his associates (Cushman and Cahn, 1985; Cushman and Craig, 1976; Cushman and Florence, 1974; Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982) identify self-concept as a cybernetic control system for human action in coordination situations:

Human actions that take place within a standardized communication situation require common intentions, an established set of rules for the cooperative achievement of those intentions, and a procedure for manifesting the variable practical force the actors feel for participating in the coordination task. (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982, pp. 96-97)

Self-concept is an empirically verifiable construct that provides a theoretical representation of the conceptual forms through which individual actors understand and cope with the world. The construct *self-concept* thus allows the exploration of the link between thought and action (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982).

The nature of self-concept. Self-concept is composed of self-object relationships, which are divided into three classes (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982). First, the *identity self* includes self-object relationships which label what an individual is, such as "I am a teacher." Second, the *evaluative self* includes self-object relationships which declare one's feelings about oneself, such as "I am a good teacher." Finally, the *behavioral self* includes self-object

relationships which prescribe appropriate behavior for the identity- and evaluative selves, such as "I am a good teacher and therefore I must have my papers graded on time" (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982, p. 98).

Self-concept thus aids the individual in coordination situations in three ways (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982). First, the individual's encounter with an object provides information that can be generalized to other objects s/he categorizes in the same *class*. Therefore, s/he need not have an encounter with an object in order to define the self in relation to it. Second, such self-object relationships provide the individual with *expectations* for the nature of those objects s/he subsumes under the same rules. Finally, the self-concept, as it develops, provides the individual with *preconceived plans* of action (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982).

A self-object relationship constitutes a ready-made format for processing experience and initiating action. With such a system, a person is prepared to cope with the future and make sense out of the past. Hence, we regard the self-concept as an organized set of structures that defines the relationship of objects to individuals and that is capable of governing and directing human action. Furthermore, the self-concept, as an organized set of structures, provides the rationale for choice in the form of a valenced repertory (*sic*) of alternative plans of action. (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982, p. 98)

Self-concept and interaction. A primary coordination task for any individual in a communication situation is the development of intentions (Cushman and Florence, 1974). These are represented by *C* in the practical syllogism. Likewise, the individual must develop the means for achieving those intentions (Cushman and Florence, 1974). These action alternatives are represented by *B* in the practical syllogism. These intentions and the acts that achieve them are integral to the most basic coordination task—determining the self, who the individual is and how s/he relates to objects (and others) in his/her environment (Cushman and Florence, 1974).

The development, presentation, and validation of self-concepts is the central feature of the process of interpersonal communication (Cushman and Cahn, 1985; Cushman and Craig, 1976; Cushman and Florence, 1974; Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982). The function of interpersonal communication systems is to regulate consensus with regard to individuals' self-concepts; the structure is provided by "the standardized code and network rules that guide how and when we can obtain consensus in regard to preferred self-object relationships" (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982, p. 104). In interaction, individuals propose identities for themselves and others. These identities are negotiated in interaction: an individual learns who s/he is and what s/he can do in the presence of certain others. *Thus the self-concept,*

as it is developed, presented, and validated in interaction, defines the nature and type of the interpersonal relationship.

This logic led Cushman and his associates (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982) to postulate that "reciprocated self-concept support serves as a necessary basis for establishing any interpersonal relationship" (p. 104). Furthermore, they propose that different types of self-concept support lead to different types of relationships (e.g., friend or mate), and that different degrees of self-concept support lead to different levels of interpersonal relationships (e.g., casual friend or best friend). (Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich (1982) provide a thorough and cogent review of research literature grounding their conceptualization of self-concept.)

The role of self with friends. As discussed earlier, friends are divided into two types. Confidants are theorized to provide support for evaluative self-object relationships, whereas companions are theorized to provide support for behavioral self-object relationships (Cushman and Cahn, 1985). For the development of friendship, Cushman and his associates (Cushman and Cahn, 1985, p. 52; Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982, p. 107) posit three entry rules, applied to the field of approachables.

1. The greater an individual's perceived relationship between positive attributes of his/her own self-concept and the perceived attributes of another's self-concept, the greater the likelihood s/he will attempt to initiate communication arrived at by supporting those similar attributes.
2. The greater an individual's perceived likelihood that the other will accept an offer of self-concept support, the greater the likelihood that communication will be initiated.
3. The more frequently an individual provides messages that support some positive-identity, evaluative, or behavioral self-object relationships of another's self-concept, the greater the likelihood that the other person will perceive those messages as an attempt to initiate a friend relationship.

For the field of reciprocals, Cushman and his associates (Cushman and Cahn, 1985, p. 52; Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982, p. 108) posit two intimacy/intensity rules.

1. The greater an individual's perceived accuracy with regard to the similarity between his/her own and another's self-concept, the greater the likelihood that a friend relationship will grow.
2. The greater the reciprocated self-concept support, the greater the likelihood a friend relationship will grow.

The role of self with mates. A mate is defined as an opposite-sex other for whom one clears the field of competitors (Cushman and Cahn, 1985; Karp,

Jackson, and Lester, 1971). For the development of such a relationship, Cushman and his associates (Cushman and Cahn, 1985, pp. 57–58; Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982, pp. 109–110) posit five entry rules, applied to the field of approachables.

1. The greater an individual's perceptions that an opposite-sex other is physically attractive, the greater the likelihood of initiating communication aimed at establishing a mate relationship.
2. The greater an individual's perceptions that an opposite-sex other's real self relates to one's ideal self for a mate, the greater the likelihood of initiating communication aimed at establishing a mate relationship.
3. The greater an individual's perception that the male's real-ideal self-concept discrepancy is small, the greater the likelihood of initiating communication aimed at establishing a mate relationship.
4. The greater an individual's perception that an opposite-sex other is likely to accept one's offer of a relationship, the greater the likelihood of initiating communication aimed at establishing a mate relationship.
5. The more frequently an individual provides messages that (a) manifest self-concept support for an opposite-sex other's physical attractiveness; (b) characterize that other as relating to the individual's ideal mate; and (c) indicate a perceived lack of discrepancy between the male's real and ideal selves, the greater the likelihood that the other will perceive those messages as an attempt to initiate a mate relationship.

For the field of reciprocals, Cushman and his associates (Cushman and Cahn, 1985, p. 58; Cushman, Valentinsen, and Dietrich, 1982, p. 111) posit two intimacy/intensity rules.

1. The greater the female's perceived lack of discrepancy between her mate's real and ideal self-concept, the greater the likelihood the relationship will grow.
2. The greater the perception that there is reciprocation of self-concept support, the greater the likelihood the relationship will grow.

The Importance of Cultural Comparison

Friend and mate relationships are ubiquitous human phenomena and are vital to human existence. Every culture in the world acknowledges and encourages both types of interpersonal relationship. In short, interpersonal relationship formation is a universal human communication process. Different cultures define the character, function, and form of interpersonal relationships differently. Cultural systems dictate the foundations upon which relationships are based, the particular processes through which relationships develop, and the appropriate means for communicating

these things. Although the general process of interpersonal relationship development is universal, the question remains: *Within the universal process of relationship development, what processual elements transcend culture and what processual elements are culture-specific?* To answer this question, it is necessary to examine different cultures individually and specifically from a consistent theoretic stance.

The chapters of this book provide such examinations of several cultures. Some also provide cultural comparisons. Operating under the rules paradigm and the general assumption that interpersonal relationships are coordination systems, each chapter explores the general developmental process of friend or mate relationships in a particular cultural setting. In considering these investigations, we hope to provide insight to answer the question: To what extent are the developmental processes of interpersonal relationships truly universal?

References

- Albrecht, S. L. (1980). Reactions and adjustments to divorce: Differences in the experience of males and females. *Family Relations* 29:59-68.
- Alexander, J. F. (1973). Defensive and supportive communication in normal and deviant families. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 40:223-31.
- Berger, C., and R. Calabrese (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research* 1:99-112.
- Bloom, B. L., S. J. Asher, and S. W. White (1978). Marital disruption as a stressor: A review and analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* 85:867-94.
- Campbell, A. (1980). *The sense of well-being in America: Patterns and trends*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Chiriboga, D. A. (1979). Marital separation and stress: A life course perspective. *Alternative Life Style* 2:465-70.
- Cushman, D. P., and D. D. Cahn (1985). *Communication in interpersonal relationships*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Cushman, D. P., and R. T. Craig (1976). Communication systems: Interpersonal implications. In G. Miller (ed.), *Explorations in interpersonal communication* (37-58). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Cushman, D. P., and B. T. Florence (1974). The development of interpersonal communication theory. *Today's Speech* 22:11-15.
- Cushman, D. P., and B. Kovacic (in press). A rules perspective on communication theory. In F. L. Casmir (ed.), *Communication Theory*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- Cushman, D. P., and W. B. Pearce (1977). Generality and necessity in three types of communication theory, with special attention to rules theory. *Human Communication Research* 3:341-53.
- Cushman, D. P., B. Valentinsen, and D. Dietrich (1982). A rules theory of interpersonal relationships. In F. E. X. Dance (ed.), *Human Communication Theory* (90-119). New York: Harper and Row.
- Cushman, D. P., and G. Whiting (1972). An approach to communication theory: Towards consensus on rules. *Journal of Communication* 22:217-18.
- Duck, S. (1976). Interpersonal communication in developing relationships. In G. Miller (ed.), *Explorations in interpersonal communication* (127-45). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Duck, S. (1981). A topography of relational disengagement and dissolution. In S. A. Duck (ed.), *Personal relationships* 4 (1-27). New York: Academic Press.
- Karp, E. S., J. Jackson, and D. Lester (1970). Ideal-self fulfillment in mate selection: A corollary to the complementary need theory of mate selection. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 32:269-72.
- Kerckhoff, A. C., and K. E. Davis (1962). Value consensus and need complementarity in mate selection. *American Sociological Review* 27:295-303.
- Knapp, M. (1978). *Social intercourse: From greeting to goodbye*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Lewis, R. A. A. (1972). A developmental framework for the analysis of premarital dyadic formation. *Family Process* 11:17-48.
- Lewis, R. A. A. (1973). A longitudinal test of a developmental framework for the analysis of premarital dyadic formation. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 35:16-25.
- McKeon, R. (1957). Communication, truth, and society. *Ethics* 67:89-99.
- Murstein, B. I. (1972). Person perception and courtship progress among premarital couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 34:621-27.
- Murstein, B. I. (1977). The stimulus-value-role (SVR) theory of dyadic relationships. In S. Duck (ed.), *Theory and practice in interpersonal attraction* (105-27). London: Academic Press.
- Nofz, M. P. (1984). Fantasy—testing—assessment: A proposed model for the investigation of mate selection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50:428-38.
- Stech, S. (1980). The effect of marital dissolution on suicide. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 42:83-92.
- Valentinsen, B., D. P. Cushman, and L. E. Schroeder (1981, May). *The friend and mate formation processes: Testing a rules theory*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Minneapolis, MN.