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Communication as Relationality

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Communication is a process of relating. This means it is not primarily or essentially a process of transferring information or of disseminating or circulating signs (though these things can be identified as happening within the process of relating). Instead, communication is the weaving and reweaving of visible and invisible four-dimensional webs, which constitute and reconstitute matter and ideation as humans, discourse, and other beings within a dynamic field of many forces. Such a conceptualization helps us out of the now stale debates of Western philosophy about the nature of communication.

Western philosophy from Plato through Derrida has repeatedly made the mistake of focusing studies of communication on the status of the word, sign, or symbol. The stream of conversation participated in by the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, and many others asked what and how signs mean, by asking how a particular sign or sentence “referred” to the “reality” for which it presumably stood. This line of inquiry assumed that communication was about referring to things, and it therefore focused attention on how isolated signs or propositions were related to real (i.e., nonlinguistic) things.

This idea that signs represented some naturally ordered reality was challenged first by the structuralists and then by the poststructuralist intellectual revolution. These critiques have been substantive, so that no one should any longer hold to a simplistic theory that words just refer to things. But the dominant strain of poststructuralism has, by its obsessive attention to negating the referential character of signs, reinforced the primacy of the sign and

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therefore has continued to focus theorization around signs (even while portraying signs as destabilized).

Signs and symbols, however, are merely components in the process of communication, which is better understood as a process of relating. Two people talking about a tiger in the jungle are not interested in a full and precise definition of *tiger*. Nor are they generally interested in denying that there is an essence to *tiger*. They are interested in maintaining certain relationships (me/my children) instead of other relationships (children/tiger's food). The referential properties of language are useful in such contexts, but only in a rough fashion, and any referentiality is always subordinate to the maintenance or reshaping of the web of relationships.¹ Even practices such as science, which appear to be heavily referential, are better conceptualized through the notion of relationships. The periodic table of the elements is a set of relationships, and any one cell of the table is vastly less informative than the relationships among the parts of the table (a fact highlighted by a comparison of the classic physics version of the table to the new earth scientists' version of the table; this is available at <http://www.gly.uga.edu/railsback/PT.html>).

The concept of relationship is unlike poststructuralist philosophy because relationality turns our attention away from the question of the sign. Nonetheless, the notion of relationship does have the key features of a poststructuralist concept. That is, it presumes fluidity and is nonessentialist. No relationship is static; relationships cannot be precisely and fully enumerated as to their qualities and boundaries. Indeed, even when laws try to stabilize relationships (e.g., "marriage"), the groups of relationships thereby constituted are nonetheless manifold and leaky. No two marriages are the same; no marriage is the same from moment to moment. No marriage can be summed up in any sentence or paragraph. A marriage is like two stars forming in proximity to each other: the gravity and energy of each centered collection of energy/matter influences the other, but the relationships between them are constantly changing. Relationships that are not legally codified are even less essentializable: think of the difficulties teenagers and twenty-somethings experience in classifying the various degrees and types of relationships among their romantic/nonromantic "friends."

Yet relationship is not pure difference. It is not merely change. Relationship is interdynamic *force*. Like gravity, a relationship is diffuse, invisible, perhaps immaterial, and yet it pushes and pulls. Relating or relationships exert influence. Communication constitutes relationships and, in so doing, it reconstitutes the entities that are related. Perhaps, however, the idea of relationship contains a fatal flaw, because it presumes that some "thing" (a person, a class, a place) exists as a discrete and stable entity, and

such things are then brought into relationship. Indeed, people often talk in this fashion about relationships. But this should be understood as a strategic essentialism.

Every thing that exists is in itself nothing more than a particularly, and perspectively, constituted set of relationships. *Perspectively constituted* means that it is understood as a thing, as something that can be named for a purpose, from a particular, time, place, and socially bound viewpoint. So one might talk about two nascent twin stars as being related to each other. But the “stars” do not exist as such. From a distance, one might imagine them as discrete entities, taking into account a long-term time scale that projects a “life history” for each aggregation of matter/energy by analogy to the life history of other such aggregations of matter/energy. But, the particular dynamics of the matter and energy in the area that is being called the star are influenced by the relationship of each atom to each and every other atom in the universe and the life history of all. There are no clear boundaries, no thing (no star) that has a discrete existence separate from the web of relationships of all to all.

For particular purposes, people isolate and name the aggregations. That is, speakers highlight particular lines of force and interaction. Moreover, there are some regularities in what human beings highlight and name as *things*. Indeed, aggregations of matter/energy with certain properties tend to strike humans as nameable or even name needing. In space, we tend especially to name areas with high densities of matter and energy and treat them as differentiated from areas of low density of energy and matter.² In the immediate human arena, we tend to name areas with high density of matter and/or unified mobilities (people, races, classes, towns, families), and we think about and thus emphasize relationships among these named entities for convenience. For many purposes, we concentrate on the more intense and immediate interactions among things that are closer in physical or social space rather than the more distal interactions, and so our notion of relationship is dominated by intense interactions around which we draw borders and which we then identify as discrete entities. But this is simply a convenience and a matter of particular interests (even if it turns out that evolution has sedimented this tendency in our nervous system). Nonetheless, these proclivities do not override a fundamental duality: that each collection of energy/matter that we treat as a distinct thing is constituted as it is by a particular framework that sees it as such *and* by an infinite set of relationships spiraling outward through the universe and all time.

The parent-child relationship is a powerful example. Children are initially not physically discrete from their biological parents. The United States has had difficulty deciding legally at what point a child becomes (should be

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treated as) an independent person. Even after birth, a child is not biologically discrete from its parents; it shares a connected lineage of genes and signaling substances from the ovum. In most cases, it also continues to augment its own body from that of its mother. Even more obviously, children are not socially discrete. They are not only under the care of their parents, but the parents shape the child by how much they feed it and hold it and hit it. But parents are only parents in relationship to the child, and the child shapes the parents as entities as well. Relationships are always multiway streets. As the experience of the American South proved, you can't have slaves if you don't want to be a tyrant, and the slaves control you even as you control them. Likewise, you can't be a master if you don't want to create slaves. All the same, in most contexts, people are able usefully to distinguish between parents and children, masters and slaves.

Individuals do not, of course, control relationships consciously and fully. Whether or not a child consumes lead and hence stunts his or her brain is as much a product of where the parent is in the social environment (and hence their possible placements in the physical environments) as it is of the parent's desires for the child or the relationships with the child. So when thinking of relationships among entities, this should be done fractally. That is, within each level of relationship is embedded another, similarly constituted by a set of dynamic interactions. Unlike fractals, however, every level interacts with every other. Perhaps using the term *relationality* will help remind us that a relationship is not a discrete, static entity but rather a process of the interaction of forces.

Thinking about communication as a process of relating is superior to either of the two dominant frameworks of thinking in the academy today—the referentialist school or the deconstructive strand of poststructuralism. Relationality captures the force that is exerted by language and all other modes of material being, but it does not create a metaphysics of presence. That is, it does not privilege the isolated things created by words over the *processes* of creation and disassembly which make for the constant changes in beings. Relationships are about both presence and absence, about both similarity and difference. The forte of the classical tradition was to emphasize and understand the creation of presence. The forte of Derridean-led poststructuralism (Derrida, 1974) has been to challenge—to erase—presence: to show the limits of positivist/presentist concepts. Understanding both of these traditions enables us to avail ourselves of a metaphysics or ontology and epistemology that grasps the interplay of presence/absence but in a form that exceeds simple choice between two opposed poles.

Relationships are innately constituted by degrees of similarity and difference, presence and absence. Let us confine ourselves to humans for a while.

To be a human is to be related to all other human beings. But this is not solely a set of identities or of differences. Every single living human being is biologically related to every other human being who has ever lived or will ever live. We are all the same, the same species. But this relationship is not identity. Every human is unique, different from every other human who has lived or will ever live. But more than that, the difference is originary. That is, when human beings became human beings, we were already different from each other. For example, the A, B, and O blood groups are not something that has evolved among humans. Chimps have these blood groups too. Humans became humans with differences from one another. But in addition to that, the differences vary in degree: humans have differential degrees of relationship to each other, just as the relationship of humans to chimpanzees is different in degree from humans to other animals.

The same pattern of inherent and gradational similarity and difference pervades our social being. Human beings are members of families, classes, races, and nations. A family is obviously constituted by both what is shared and what is different among its members. So, too, with a nation. But the concepts of race and class used in the United States have been flawed by the assumption that race or class must constitute an essential similarity. Black feminist thought has recently shaken up that idea, emphasizing the way in which race is always fractured by gender (and by class, among other factors; Collins, 2004). Scholars and activists are just beginning to describe a path for dealing with race and class as relationships of simultaneous difference and similarity, and only by seeing them as relationships with these qualities will U.S. society escape the current essentializing traps without reverting to a false universalism. Insisting on the gradational qualities of relationality will also augment that reenvisioning.

So, fine, perhaps conceiving of communication as relationship instead of as reference or dissemination is a better theory on the plane of “high theory” because it is more comprehensive: It accounts for more of the ways of being. What difference would it make for our “lower” theories: for generating predictions or giving accounts of the thousands of settings, genres, and types of human communication? A theory of relationality does not mean taking the relationship between two human beings as a model for all communication, though perhaps what has been called *relational* communication may have some greater utility and centrality to the discipline within such a paradigm shift. Instead, taking a relationality perspective on communication would mean always asking, “How are the interesting entities being constituted and related by this communication?” A few examples may help.

Begin with our pedagogy. Scholars studying communication apprehension (CA) have demonstrated that high levels of anxiety about communication

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(CA) inhibit a person's success in life and that some people can, to some degree, be helped to overcome CA but that some people will always have more CA than others (Allen, Hunter, & Donohue, 1989). Moreover, they have shown that some CA is differentially tied to particular contexts (state CA) and other CA (trait) is tied to individual human beings (Ayres, 1990). A relationality approach would refocus the discussion around the question, "What is the nature of the relationship in a given communication context such that it would generate arousal that would be experienced as debilitating fear or avoidance?" Instead of treating people with high trait CA or who respond to a particular context with high state CA as aberrant, a relationally oriented scholar would inquire as to why a person might find a particular context of communication to be an aversive stimulus. What kind of relationship does a single speaker standing in front of a group of other people delivering a monologue presume? Often it presumes a relationship of knowledge, superiority, authority, or credibility. Why do some people feel unable to inhabit such a position? Why has a given society developed the norm of such relational encounters? Thinking about CA in this way leads to different pedagogy about it.

In the first place, relational theorists would describe CA in a different, more full and accurate, fashion to students. Current textbooks talk about the biological arousal involved in CA and prescribe as cures things like practice and visualization of success. Honesty about the underlying relational assumptions in the way public speaking (and other) situations are constructed may or may not help people cope with their fears. Methods for approaching that account need to be developed and experimentally tested. But being honest with the students has its own merits. Moreover, it will help instructors be honest about what is being asked of the students and reveal the extent to which our suggestions for coping with CA are Band-Aids on an inherently problematic, or at least challenging, context. It may even reportray those who are low in CA as arrogant. Perhaps arrogance is a key to personal success, but perhaps celebrations of such arrogance should be tempered. Or, perhaps one might find that people with low CA simply have a different set of expectations for the goals and relationships in a public speaking setting. In any case, the relational perspective may urge direction of some research efforts to understanding the relational expectations of low-CA persons and making some comparisons, perhaps using the understandings of low-CA individuals as models to help high-CA individuals. In other words, the relational perspective suggests that there is some substantial descriptive work that has not been done about CA. Good science requires good observation as much as it requires good experimental design, because the experiments need to take into account the important naturally occurring factors. Relationality provides a framework for that descriptive work.

Relationality as a framework could also restimulate and reorient work in persuasion. This applies equally to instrumentalist and invitational perspectives.³ The instrumentalist approach has developed in psychology and the experimental side of communication studies, and it has focused on discovering techniques that produce higher levels of success in persuading others. The invitational perspective, launched by feminists such as Foss and Griffin (1995), has argued that all persuasion is inherently coercive, and therefore it is unethical to try to persuade other people of anything through any means.

The instrumentalist tradition of research on persuasion will have grave problems with a relational approach. Persuasion research that takes an instrumentalist focus has always had a greasy sheen. Such research has often been conceptualized as discovering nonrational approaches to getting what you want from someone. For the most part, the field has distinguished “good argument” from techniques of persuasion. At the most troubling end of the scale are techniques such as touching someone on the shoulder to increase the effectiveness of a sales pitch or such ploys as the “door in the face” and “foot in the door” techniques. Although social scientific research on such “techniques” can calm its conscience by taking an objectivist stance that says “we are merely seeking to understand how people are persuaded,” when these results enter the textbooks as examples of how to persuade, the ethical questions cannot be avoided. Even findings that dictate the use of visual images or the advantages of attributions of particular form, which on their face make us less nervous, stem from an orientation that presumes that the persuader has a superior ability to control the thoughts, values, beliefs, or feelings of the persuadee.

Although not a panacea, the relational perspective brings into the open the assumptions of the relationships presumed in such an instrumentalist context. In health communication, these issues have been more explicitly broached. Scholars have asked to what extent cultural differences in health values, for example, need to be respected rather than simply overwritten with high-tech norms. But even here, the relational perspective allows greater explicitness. For example, one might ask, when does a high-literacy person have a right, perhaps even a responsibility, to attend to issues such as the use of natural numbers instead of percentages to communicate health risks to a low-literacy person of a different race, culture, gender, or class? What the relational perspective does is to contextualize “technique” *within* a relationship. Thus, the technique of selling cars by touching a customer on the shoulder gives us the ethical queasies because what is happening is that the context of one relationship (closeness, mutual care, trust) is being overlaid by one party unilaterally upon another relationship (selling a car). This is different from saying merely that one person is manipulating another person, because the fault lies

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in the fact that the manipulator doesn't really intend to establish the relationships of trust, closeness, and mutual care implied by the touch on the shoulder. It is therefore not sufficient to say that the buyer is responsible for not being duped. Rather, the seller is responsible for imitating or initiating a relationship he or she does not really want to enact.

Such techniques can rarely be said to be ethical because they rely on relational qualities that the initiator does not really wish to follow through. If one teaches that these techniques work, one should do so in the context of teaching students about the fluidity and defense of relationships as valuable entities with particular qualities, benefits, and obligations. But not all persuasion techniques will be of the character to falsely manipulate relationships. In contrast, techniques of risk communication will be appropriate adaptations to particular relational dynamics in some contexts and inappropriate manipulations in others. The standard of the advancement of mutual care serves as one important key to making such judgments (Noddings, 1984; O'Brien Hallstein, 1999).

The concept of relationality offers a different sort of challenge to those such as Foss and Griffin (1995), who have denied the appropriateness of persuasion altogether. These denials have been based on the belief that persuasion and coercion were impossible to distinguish. But that argument would invalidate any effort at communication whatsoever, because it is as difficult to distinguish when talking to someone becomes persuasion as it is to distinguish coercion from persuasion. As rhetoricians from both the right and left have emphasized, all symbol use is inherently persuasive, because all symbol use brings a host of loadings, interests, ambiguities, and entailments with it. It is impossible simply to mirror someone's own ideas to him or her and, to the extent that one is not a mirror, one introduces change in those ideas (even mirroring would introduce change by reinforcement).

The idea that one could forego persuasion rests on the belief in an autonomous self, and the relational perspective insists that there are no such things. Any two persons are always in some relationship to each other, and any relationship presumes ineradicable lines of influence, usually carried in part through the communicative flows of meaning and confusion that constantly remake the persons involved. So one cannot not persuade. Instead, the ethic of mutual care sets standards for a relationship and for communication in relationships. The older ideas of respect for the other and openness to changing one's own ideas are part of these standards (Ehninger, 1970), but additional criteria reside in attention to the sustainable quality of the relationship and to support for the other's needs/desires where that does not violate the quality of the relationship or any of one's own needs/desires that might be substantially greater. The concept of relationality thus rewrites the

agenda for persuasion ethics in fundamental ways and opens a new kind of discussion about goals and standards.

I hope that these examples have provided a sufficient set of hints as to how thinking of communication as a process of relating should reshape the field of communication studies. Other examples are ready at hand. The study of nonverbal communication should cease focusing on sets of universal gestures, facial expressions, or categories of distance and instead begin to be a full-bodied analysis of how nonverbal factors establish and maintain relationships in different contexts. Small-group and organizational communication already have much of the relational about them, but reorienting to relationality as a fundamental quality will allow expansion and deepening of these tendencies.

In a crucial way, the call to relationality is a statement that it is well past time that communication studies came into its own. For more than two generations of scholarship, communication has been dominated by the Western vision of the individual. In experimental studies, communication studies is still a poor relative to psychology because the discipline's leading researchers continue to follow the models and assumptions of psychology—which focus on the individual rather than the relational system in which communication happens. In rhetorical studies, scholars have continued to frame studies around the liberal individual—or around bashing the liberal individual—but there has been no alternative framework for thinking about how public or cultural communication constitutes human being (only that it should not do so, theoretically speaking). Taking seriously the concept of communication as relating will allow us to take seriously communication as a process with a distinctive ontology and unique methods. It will thereby allow us to better understand communication, which means to better understand the human animals who relate, and thereby constitute their being, through such incessant communication.

Notes

1. Wittgenstein (2001) initiated this line of thinking of language in terms of use, but his unfortunate choice of the “game” metaphor obscured the more fundamental property of relationality and prevented further development of the concept.

2. The nature of the four basic forces of the universe is consonant with such a view because each of the forces acts over a different distance with a different amount of force, but this merely accounts for why matter is differentially dispersed in the universe rather than being a uniform soup.

3. A third, communitarian, perspective dominates rhetorical studies of persuasion. This perspective is the closest to the relational perspective. There is insufficient space to deal with the differences with enough detail to be satisfying.

Additional Readings

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