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ABSTRACT

Designed to facilitate increased communication competencies of partners in two-person, relatively long-term relationships, the Communicating as a Couple workshop was developed and tested to provide knowledge of specific and useful competencies, along with a rationale, a supportive environment, feedback, and motivation. The four 90-minute exercise units dealt with basic communication principles and competencies for strengthening a relationship, for productive conflict, and for changing and maintaining a relationship. Exercises were designed for skills practice and awareness raising, and included meaning clarification, relationship messages, eye contact and physical distance, open ended questions, nonverbal communication practice, objective nonverbal description, voice practice, and structured self-disclosure, among others. Twenty couples participated and were tested; results indicated that neither the reported frequency of verbal aggression nor the amount of communication changed significantly, although the nature of the communication became much more positive and relationship cooperation and conflict-handling ability were enhanced. (Included are recommendations for developing the field of communication counseling, references, and two sample exercises.) (DF)

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE FOR ONGOING RELATIONSHIPS

by

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I

A RATIONALE FOR THE COMMUNICATING AS A COUPLE WORKSHOP

It takes no mental giant to see the pattern of increasing problems in our most private relationships. Among the specific problems are:

*The largest percentage of all police calls is for domestic disputes (family fights). The policeman has a greater chance of being killed or injured when responding to these calls than to any other type of call (Schonborn, 1975).

*Any individual in our society has a greater chance of being killed or assaulted by a best friend or mate than by a complete stranger. Such crimes are most likely to occur in the victim's own home, and usually after a "friendly" drink (Schonborn, 1975).

*Relationship crimes are much more violent than are aggressive crimes between strangers, consisting of more than one stab, and/or more than one gunshot (Wolfgang, 1966).

*Studies indicate that one out of every eight people in a given year have been slapped, kicked, punched, or beaten. One out of twelve has been threatened or actually cut with a knife (Stark & McEvoy, 1975).

It seems that the incidence of aggression is rapidly approaching the incidence of love in our society. Physical aggression is but merely an extension of verbal aggression. Therefore, physical aggression represents but a fraction of the problems which exist in contemporary two-person, relatively long-term relationships. Divorce statistics begin to give us a picture of the immensity of the problem. National statistics for 1976 indicate that the incidence of divorce had reached a new high of 4.8 per 1,000 population, and there was almost one divorce for every two marriages (Reader's Digest Almanac, 1977). These statistics have been increasing steadily for the past twenty years and escalating rapidly in the past few years. The numbers still do not even begin to express the other hurts in relationships which are glazed over with valium (our most abused prescription drug), or drowned in alcohol (our most abused non-prescription drug). We do know that the middle-age, middle-income housewives are one of the largest groups of drug abusers in our society.

I suppose as a scientist I should deal with these statistics dispassionately and move on to other things. As a humanist, however, my mind reels at the enormity of the carnage and hurt that goes on behind closed doors. We in communication claim to have knowledge which would help ameliorate these problems to some extent. If so, then it would seem unethical <u>not</u> to do something to alleviate this massive outpouring of human suffering. However, the tendency has been to seek and to teach communication knowledge as an academic rather than as a utilitarian exercise. I have more to say about this in the final section of this paper.

We do know that such inappropriate behaviors as spouse beating and child abuse are highly likely to have parental antecedents. Ashley Montagu (1972) vividly demonstrates that humans are not innately aggressive, but in fact,

learned to be aggressive. In particular, nonaggressive models are probably the key to a child becoming an adult who relates to others nonaggressively (Montagu, 1978). This strongly suggests that communication competencies can have an immense impact upon some of society's most potent problems.

Research in a variety of fields, much of it in our own, is pointing to the validity of a processual, developmental, symbiotic conception of relationships in which a change in communication affects the total relationship (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Davis, 1973; Duck, 1977; and Knapp, 1978). It is apparent that people can communicate in ways that will strengthen their relationships with one another, in ways that allow them to handle their differences constructively, and in ways that will allow them to change problem aspects of their relationships.

II

PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE WORKSHOP

Four years ago, given this knowledge and knowledge of the problems which exist in two-person, relatively long-term relationships, Jean Smith and I designed and taught a workshop which was intended to increase the communication competencies of both partners by having them practice specific communication skills with one another.

The intent of this workshop was (and remains) to minimize theoretical content, to maximize achievement of specific communication competencies which research might indicate are helpful, and to motivate participating couples to achieve those competencies in an optimal learning environment.

The general objectives for the Communicating as a Couple workshop were:

*To provide knowledge of specific, potentially useful competencies for two-person, relatively long-term relationships, in a logical sequence.

*To provide a rationale as to when and why these competencies might be useful.

*To provide a supportive, relatively nonthreatening environment in which to practice the potentially useful skills (e.g., couples are given a private room in which to practice during the workshop).

*To provide accurate, positive, immediate feedback to the partners while they are learning the skills.

*To motivate the couple to practice the skills in during the workshop, and to continue practicing them upon completion of the workshop.

I believed at the time the Communicating as a Couple workshop was developed, and I hold ever more strongly to the belief now, that the following teaching techniques are rank ordered in terms of their effectiveness in helping a person achieve behavioral communication competencies.

1. Practice the skills

2. Observe those who perform the skills well

3. Read about the skills

4. Listen to someone describe the skills

But I have even a stronger belief that the most effective instructional unit includes all of these techniques, with successively more time given to those higher on the list. While I immensely enjoy lecturing, I now use it only a small proportion of class time, primarily as a motivational device, and secondarily to provide some redundancy to material presented via the other modes.

I believe that the essential role of a teacher today is to develop an effective affective relationship between himself/herself and the persons in the instructional unit. In addition, I believe the teacher must constantly communicate that s/he believes in what s/he is teaching and is excited about the persons beginning to use it. Finally, the teacher who expects to teach relationship communication competencies must be as good a model of those competencies as possible.

I believe that much of the content in our so-called "interpersonal communication" texts is irrelevant to the needs of the couples who attend the workshop. The relevant information which remains is so scattered throughout the book as to make it useless and very frustrating to use. The problem is that the chapters of a typical interpersonal text are written around scholar-relevant rather than consumer-oriented categories. It is much easier to write (and to get like-minded reviewers to accept for publication) books with chapter titles like Nonverbal Communication, Semantics, Methods of Control, Communication Models, and even Public Speaking and Mass Communication (cf., Adler & Towne, 1975; Miller & Steinberg, 1975; and Tubbs & Moss, 1977), than it is to write and then get published a book with chapters on strengthening a relationship or on changing problem aspects of a relationship.

Can you imagine the frustration of the man who is attempting to page through chapters on verbal communication, nonverbal communication, semantics, etc., trying to pull out the information he thinks might help him save his marriage. Does it not make more sense that this synthesizing process might be done better by, more accurately and completely by the scholar? Only a few texts have taken on this task. Knapp's book (1978) is perhaps the most complete. My own book (Buley, 1977) is written to a freshman or lay audience and is therefore not as theoretical, nor does it synthesize the same amount of research.

III

TESTING THE WORKSHOP

Research to test the efficacy of the workshop suggests that it is very useful to the couples who have completed it. Short-term and long-term (6 to 12 weeks later) data were gathered on a variety of aspects of communication between couples who had completed the workshop and those who had not. The results indicated that, while there were several interesting results, the reported frequency of verbal aggression did not decrease significantly, probably because it was very low for both groups all along. Also, the amount of communication between couples did not increase. However, the nature of the communication between couples who completed the workshop became much more positive and remained so at the time the long-term measures were taken. The partners in these marriages reported that,

since they were much more sensitive to the effects of their communication on their mates, their communication had become much more positive, reinforcing, and tolerant (Smith, 1976).

Behavioral measures of relationship cooperativeness and competiveness taken directly after the workshop and 6 to 12 weeks later indicated that the workshop had a strong, continuing impact on this critical dimension, with couples who had completed the workshop much more frequently cooperative than those who had not (Smith, 1976).

Interviews taken at the later time indicated that 17 of the 20 couples involved felt their relationship was stronger and that they could handle conflict better. The remaining three couples said they had had no significant conflicts since the workshop, which in itself may say something about the workshop's efficacy (Smith, 1976).

Recently, I have experimented with the workshop by bringing in a therapeutic dimension. I am co-teaching it right now with Dr. John Hudson, past President of the American Association of Marriage and Family Counselors. Dr. Hudson is also a professor of Sociology at A.S.U. We have done two workshops together. I am now fairly sure that this combination works much less well in practice than it appears it might on paper, not because we do not get along. In fact, we are very good friends. The problem stems from his natural inclination to want to extend the time for therapeutic discussion, and my natural desire to extend the time devoted to practice of relevant skills.

Evaluation of attainment of competencies in any given workshop is a very sticky area. While there are many acceptable ways to evaluate college students, many of these are not acceptable for evaluating the more private interaction between mates. On the other hand, the criterion audience for each person in the workshop is that person's partner. Consequently, many times the criterion of acceptable performance in the workshop is set by and compared to actual performance by the partner. Each takes turns attempting to meet the other's criterion. This may appear on paper to be competitively oriented, but in practice it works out very well.

IV

OVERVIEW OF THE WORKSHOP CONTENT AND COMPETENCIES

The following is a very general outline of topics and competencies for the Communicating as a Couple workshop. Normal time to cover each unit is about two sessions of one and one-half hours apiece, although the workshop expands or contracts in time depending on the expressed needs of the participants. Not all exercises are performed in all workshops in order to tailor each workshop to the couples' needs. Practice in assertiveness and listening occurs in several of the exercises, although not specifically included for specific practice. Finally, some exercises which are used primarily for facilitating an optimum learning environment are not included here.

Unit One (Exercises 1 - 7)

Basic Communication Principles (e.g., we cannot not communicate; all communication has a content and a relationship message; meanings are in people; our communication competence is independent of self; communication behaviors are contagious; and we should not always behave the way we feel.)

Sample Competencies

1. Each person will be able to differentiate between relationship and content messages of given behavioral examples.

2. Each person will be able to demonstrate a positive relationship message and a negative relationship message to the satisfaction of his or her partner. (Exercise 2)

3. Each person will be more accurate in interpreting his/her partner's nonverbal communication of such concepts as "concern" and "interest." (Exercise 1)

Unit Two (Exercises 8 - 12)

Competencies for strengthening a relationship (e.g., keeping a conversation going; mutual self-disclosure; performing mutual, noncompetitive activities; the effective use of eye contact, physical distance, vocal characteristics, and language; and the role of physiology).

Sample Competencies

1. Each person will be able to initiate a more intimate level of self-disclosure, according to the partner's judgment (Exercise 10).

2. Each person will be able to use his/her voice to increase partner's arousal positively, according to the partner's judgment (Exercise 8).

3. The partners will be able to discuss mutual noncompetitive activities, and decide on one or more that they will perform in order to further strengthen their relationship (Exercise 11).

Unit Three (Exercises 13 - 19)

Competencies for Productive Conflict (e.g., how to keep arousal from escalating out of control; types of conflicts; specific conflict competencies: ACE, RAM, RACE, and APAC —see Exercises 16, 17, 18, 19 & 20; and specific pathogenic behaviors to avoid or reduce in frequency—e.g., double bind, rejection, and interruption).

Sample Competencies

1. Each person will be able to demonstrate an ability to reduce his/her own arousal as measured by a GSR unit.

2. Given a topic to discuss, each person in the dyad will be able to restate in his/her own words what his/her partner has just said to his/her partner's satisfaction. (Exercise 13)

3. Given a conflict role-playing situation in which the partner's actions bother the person, the person will be able to specifically describe the partner's Action, the Circumstance in which it occurred, and the Emotion the person felt (ACE). (Exercise 17)

Unit Four (Exercises 20 – 26)

Changing and Maintaining a Relationship (e.g., the uses of reinforcement; Communication as reinforcement; the necessity of informing each other of what the other can do that would be reinforcing to the person; and using mutual contingencies).

Sample Competencies

1. Each person will be able to use his/her voice to increase the relative reinforcement potential of a compliment according to evaluation of the person's partner. (Exercise 25)

2. The partners will be able to formulate and evaluate possible relationship goals, and initiate mutual contingencies that will help them reach these goals. (Exercise 23)

3. The partners will discuss each other's desires to be touched (when, where, and under what circumstances), and then decide how to implement a change that will meet both partner's touching needs. (Exercise 26)

V.

A SUMMARY OF EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES FROM THE WORKSHOP

The following is not a complete list of all exercises performed in the Communicating as a Couple workshop, nor are the descriptions of these exercises complete. (Some exercises are included as an addendum to this paper as examples.) Each exercise is coded as a P (Practice of skill) or as an A (Awareness raising).

1. MEANING CLARIFICATION: TUNING IN TO EACH OTHER

(P) Couples are given two lists of phrases. Partners take turns nonverbally communicating phrases from the first list until mate guesses the phrase being expressed. Then, partners take turns describing the cues they use to know when a person is communicating a concept from the second list.

2. RELATIONSHIP MESSAGES

(P) Partners take turns expressing negatively-worded phrases from a list given to them in an attempt to make the relationship message less negative than the content message. Receiving partner then describes how the other partner could make the message more positive. Then, the partners take turns rewording the same phrases to make the content message positive. (Sample message, "Would you stop that and talk to me!?")

3. EYE CONTACT & PHYSICAL DISTANCE

(A) Partners are asked to communicate at different distances, with and without eye contact. Then, they are asked specific questions about the differences.

4. OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

(A) Partners take turns turning closed ended questions into open ended questions (or inventing their own open ended questions), and then asking these questions.

5. NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

(P) The main group is divided into two subgroups to play a modified form of charades in which phrases which could be feasibly said in a relationship are communicated nonverbally.

6. OBJECTIVE NONVERBAL DESCRIPTION

(P) Members of the main group take turns describing as accurately as possible the nonverbal behavior of one of the other members.

7. PRISONERS DILEMMA

(A) The main group is divided into male/female teams and then allowed to choose cooperative or competitive strategies to relate with one another, followed by extensive debriefing.

8. VOICE PRACTICE

(P) Given a list of sentences, partners take turns saying them using their voice to excite each other, while partner as receiver provides feedback on how to change voice to be more successful.

9. STRUCTURED SELF-DISCLOSURE

(A) (P) Given a list of incomplete sentences which start with public information and move to somewhat private information, the partners take turns completing each sentence and then move on to the next sentence.

10. SELF-DISCLOSURE

(P) Partners practice self-disclosure on their own without the structure of the previous exercise.

11. MUTUAL ACTIVITIES

(A) (P) Given a list of potential mutual activities to stimulate their thinking, partners each mark interesting activities, then they agree on activities they can perform together.

12. RELATIONSHIP COMMONALITIES

(A) (P) Partners focus their discussion on the task of developing a list of commonalities about which they may talk at future times.

13. VERBAL REFLECTION

(P) Partners select a topic to discuss. Then, before a person can present his/her own point, s/he must restate in his or her own words the partner's content message, to the partner's satisfaction (first part of exercise), reflect partner's apparent feeling message (second part of exercise), and reflect partner's relationship message (third part of exercise).

14. PERCEPTUAL DIFFERENCE CONFLICTS

(P) Partners analyze their day-to-day differences to see if they might be caused by differences in ability to see, hear, taste ("That pie is too sweet!" "No, it's not!"), smell, and so on.

15. (RAM) RESPONSE TO UNFAIR ATTACK

(P) Partners take turns responding with RAM statements to role-playing situations in which they have been unfairly attacked. The person Reflects partner's message, describes own Action and the Motivation for performing that action.

16. MAKE "A PAC" WHEN YOU ARE WRONG

(P) Partners take turns responding to role-playing situations in which they are wrong and should admit it. The person Apologizes and Proposes Action to be performed in similar Circumstances in the future.

17. USE "ACE" WHEN BOTHERED BY PARTNERS BEHAVIOR

(P) Partners take turns responding to role-playing situations in which partner's behavior is stressful. The person responds by describing the specific Action partner performed, the Circumstances in which it was performed, and the person's Emotion which occurred as a result.

18. (RA) ASSERTIVE INFLEXIBILITY

(P) Partners take turns responding to role-playing situation in which
(a) partner has performed a bottom-line behavior, or
(b) person is going to stop performing a behavior partner expects.
The person responds by Reflecting partner's message (followed by ACE if partner's bottom-line behavior), and then describing exactly the Action the person is or is not going to perform.

19. AROUSAL CONTROL

(P) Partners practice communication skills which help reduce their own and their partner's physiological arousal as they discuss topics which might normally cause a slight increase in tension.

20. SELF-CONCEPT AND APPRECIATION

(A) (P) Partners take turns telling partner how much and for what they are appreciated.

21. TIME TO COMMUNICATE

(A) Partners describe to each other the times they feel most like communicating during the day and the times they feel least like communicating. Then they agree on times they can set aside during a week to work on their relationship.

22. RELATIONSHIP INTIMACY

(A) (P) Partners complete a questionnaire concerned with the amount of time and frequency to devote to activities of various levels of relationship intimacy, and then discuss with each other the ways to optimize areas of agreement, and to compromise areas of disagreement.

23. GOAL SETTING

(A) (P) Given a list of possible goals to stimulate their thinking, partners discuss and establish specific behavioral goals for what they want their relationship to be like by a specific time in the future.

24. MUTUAL CONTINGENCIES

(P) In order to help meet relationship goals, partners agree to exchange one or two behaviors as mutual reinforcements until the behaviors become habits.

25. REINFORCEMENT PRACTICE

(P) Partners say specific reinforcing phrases (compliments) to each other while attempting to use verbal and nonverbal skills to make the phrases more reinforcing.

26. TOUCHING

(A) Partners discuss how and when they most appreciate being touched and to touch partner. They agree on the changes they want to make and when they want to start.

Complete descriptions of some of these exercises are included at the end of this paper. Most of them as well as others are included in Buley (In Press).

VI

TOWARD THE FUTURE: A CALL FOR CLINICAL COMMUNICATION

As I suggested in the first section of this paper, we live at a time when relationship problems continue to increase in incidence and intensity. We also live at a time when our society is rapidly becoming disillusioned with the ability of some social sciences to provide answers for these problems.

Our own field has become overly enamored with moving away from such performance-oriented areas as oral interpretation to move toward the tools of the social sciences. In order to become defensible as a social science, we felt we had to cut off our performance roots to emphasize the legitimacy of our burgeoning social science capability. As a social scientist, I, too, am concerned that we be seen as a discipline for providing credible scientific results. I am also concerned, however, that we be able to utilize these results in application to the most hurtful areas of our society: the two-person relatively long-term human relationship.

Just before I completed my Ph.D. in Communication, my well-meaning aunt asked my mother, "Isn't it great that Jerry's going to be a doctor?" My mother said, with a puzzled frown, "Oh, but he's not going to be a real doctor!" While this bothered me then, what bothers me now is that her response was more accurate than either she or I had imagined.

We do not do any doctoring for many reasons. We in Communication have attempted to cut off our traditional roots (e.g., oral interpretation) in an attempt to develop a defensible social science. We have achieved a modicum of success in both attempts. The number and quality of new perspectives and theories arising in our field is at least comparable to, if not surpassing, those in other social sciences. I frequently hear some of my peers saying with pride things like, "I teach all content, no performance." For whatever reason, performance-oriented courses seem to have become an anathema to those who want to be perceived to be "at the front edge of the wave."

Those of us who have begun to break that mold are criticized as being "prescriptive," and are therefore unaware of the "extreme complexity of human behavior;" or are too simplistic; or are not allowing for human choice. Those who have not been to the front lines to view the battle and the resultant relationship carnage; those who have not tried their theories in an attempt to help, only to see them fail; and those who have only dealt with students in a narrow age range are at best naive, and at worst dangerous if their ideas prevail. No science has ever survived as science cut adrift from the reality it purports to understand, predict and control.

We as scientists of communication rarely leave the sterile, ivory tower laboratory replete with the standard semantic differential, a 2 x 2 ANOVA, and 30 to 50 idealistic freshmen who have very little real knowledge of what it is like to have to deal with an intense relationship 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

To be a doctor of relationships means one must be able to observe behavior and suggest ways of improving it or changing it. These professional behaviors are more like those who teach performance than like those who teach content. More specifically, oral interpretation may do more to improve relationships in one session than most interpersonal-content courses do in a whole semester. Unfortunately, we have no tradition in observing and prescribing communication behavior in the area of two-person relatively long-term relationships. It is developing, however, as more and more communication professionals recognize the need for Clinical Communication.

There are many reasons why we need Clinical Communication. An interaction between clinical and theoretical communication can only stimulate both. Theories will become more relevant and useful, applications will become more effective.

One of the major complaints I get from recent graduates who came to our field because of its relevance is that it is difficult to get a job. In some cases this is because they have a headful of knowledge, but their hands and mouths are skill-less. In other cases, the job market simply does not recognize the competencies that a communication-trained student brings to a job. Clinical Communication, as I envision it, would create many new jobs, especially if we can demonstrate impact above and beyond that of the other helping disciplines. These new jobs would be correlated to all three levels of college degrees. Also, internship programs could provide future theoreticians and practitioners with "hands on" experience at every level of education.

The development of interventionist and counselor roles would bring more and more of our people into direct contact with members of American society, and we will therefore begin to be recognized in a way that building good science alone could never do.

A Communication Clinician or Counselor would not merely be a substitute for a marriage counselor. Instead, the person would be trained to deal with human relationships at all levels of society, and in all possible combinations. The person would be taught to observe communication which exists, to prescribe alternative behaviors, provide for an appropriate learning environment, follow up on the results, and keep accurate records for future reference.

Within the context of our society, I believe the time is ripe for the development of Clinical Communication. Therefore, I believe a professional association should be started to help guide that development. We should begin, right now, ensuring that particular educational standards be met by people who would desire to perform the role and carry the label of Communication Clinician or Communication Counselor.

Within the context of our field, attitudes must be changed concerning the worth of a "prescriptive" approach. In addition, new Ph.D.'s, M.A.'s and B.A.'s must begin to believe that what they know can have an impact so they will take the risk of attempting to establish a practice. Again, a professional association could be very helpful in this area.

I am beginning to take the step. I would be very interested in talking to anyone else who has similar interests. I would also like to talk to anyone who would be interested in attempting to start what we might call the American Clinical Communication Association.

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COMMUNICATING AS A COUPLE - EXERCISES

Exercise No. 2 Relationship Messages

INTRODUCTION: As Dr. Buley described in the session, the relationship message of our communication is primarily carried by nonverbal communication. In the following exercise, you will be asked to practice your relationship message skill with your mate by saying particular sentences.

EXERCISE:

1. Sit facing each other with knees touching.
2. One partner starts the exercise by saying sentence number one (below) to the second partner. The second partner then describes whether the relationship message implies the two of you are equals or not equals, whether it implies the first partner cares for the second partner, and whether the second partner finds it acceptable. The first partner keeps saying the sentence until the second partner finds the relationship message acceptable.
3. The second partner then says sentence number one to the first partner until the first partner finds the relationship message acceptable.
4. Continue taking turns as described above until both have finished all of the sentences.

SENTENCES:

1. Where are my keys?
2. Have you seen the TV schedule?
3. What do you want me to do?
4. Are you going out again today?
5. Would you take the trash out, please?
6. Would you give me that section of the newspaper?
7. I don't want you to do that.
8. I want to talk to you after supper
9. Can you stop doing that a while and talk to me?

COMMUNICATING AS A COUPLE - EXERCISES

Exercise No. 8 Voice Exercise

INTRODUCTION: This exercise is intended to give you greater flexibility in the use of your voice when you communicate with your partner, and practice in interpreting your partner's vocal behavior.

EXERCISE:

1. Sit facing each other with knees touching.

2. One partner takes the first sentence from List A below and demonstrates it with an excited voice. (Remember: Higher pitch, faster, rate, louder, fewer pauses, and much variability in pitch, rate and loudness.) Then, the second partner takes the first sentence from List A.

3. When both partners have practiced an excited voice on all of the sentences in List A, take turns practicing an intimate voice with the sentences from List B.

LIST A:

1. Do you see how fast that car is going?

2. That outfit looks very good on you!

3. I like the way you wear your hair!

4. You really do that well!

5. I'm really glad you thought of this!

LIST B:

1. Hey, you really look good.

2. I like the way you talk to me.

3. I love you very much.

4. I'm really glad you thought of this.

5. I like it when you touch me like that.