

COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS AND EMERGENCY SITUATIONS – A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *Communication is the Alpha and Omega of all our relationships and, as such, significantly impacts the quality of our daily lives. The art of communication has always intrigued its contemporaries—from public speaking in ancient marketplaces to today's short online video clips. The reason lies in a simple truth: an individual's entire process of self-improvement, reflection, and observation is ultimately validated through interaction with others. The importance of communication skills and appropriate approaches becomes especially pronounced in crisis and emergency situations, whether personal or professional. Responding appropriately in a difficult moment—explaining, calming, and reacting from the psychological ego state of the “Adult”—is not always easy. For this reason, increasing attention is being devoted to this topic, as communication in crises requires a deeper approach than conventional business or operational methods. It needs to be viewed through a psychological lens to be better understood and improved—which is the main focus of this paper.*

Key words: *Communication, crisis, emergency psychological situations*

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern human could be measured by their thirst for profit and their consumption capacity. In today's global context, people are predominantly perceived as consumers, with large-scale buyers holding greater value than smaller ones under current market principles. “Capitalism assumes that we will always act in ways that serve our own self-interest, which carries the fundamental presumption that human beings are essentially selfish—that we will always behave in ways that promote ourselves as number one.” This prompts an essential question: Is today's discourse, based on such assumptions, truly sustainable? Psychologically speaking, in crisis situations that are inherently challenging, this way of thinking and acting may prove disastrous.

2. RULES OF THE POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

The post-industrial society brings about a significant transformation in the lives and work of contemporary individuals. Modern capitalism, as currently defined, is based on two fundamental assumptions about humanity. First, it presumes that human beings are primarily economic entities who, as Adam Smith stated, possess a natural inclination to trade, barter, and exchange with one another. Second, capitalism assumes that individuals will always act in pursuit of their own rational self-interest—or at least according to what they perceive as beneficial. In the language of business, these principles are reflected in the pursuit of profit for its own sake, as well as in the presumption that every business exists to maximize its own interest—namely, shareholder profits measured through quarterly returns.

Assertions that the Earth exists to provide us with inexhaustible resources; that each corporation operates as an isolated entity without negative consequences for its surroundings; that business is untouchable and exempt from the broader context of life—these are merely precursors to a narrowly defined concept of what it means to be a person engaged in the modern business environment (i.e., the workplace). In today's increasingly demanding business conditions, we are witnessing rapid changes and severe economic challenges that confront every economic entity. In such a context of open and integrated global economy, competitiveness has assumed a central role in economic thinking, both in developed and developing countries. In previous periods, it can be said that in some countries competitiveness was based on certain comparative advantages, such as workforce qualifications, labor costs, or specific natural resources available within the country. However, in recent years, business conditions have undergone substantial change. The primary shift lies in the valuation of knowledge, now approached from a new, economic perspective. Today, the foundations of economic development are considered to be advanced elements and factors significantly influenced by—or based on—knowledge, developed infrastructure, high technology, innovation, and human resources. Competitiveness arises at the microeconomic level of society, depending on the quality of the microeconomic business environment and work methodologies, as well as operational practices and strategies at that level. Competitiveness, in this sense, represents a multidimensional approach to the economy and is necessarily present at the level of all economic actors and the nation as a whole. In such an environment, both companies and individuals resort to various techniques to generate profit and meet performance expectations—sometimes even employing methods that are not always legally or ethically permissible. Consequently, crisis situations may arise, ranging from minor and insignificant incidents to those that may threaten the lives of individuals involved and, more broadly, the surrounding environment. In these situations, appropriate communication—both internal and external—can be of exceptional importance and benefit.

3. COMMUNICATION AS AN IMPERATIVE

According to Anderson, communication is a dynamic process through which a person consciously or unconsciously exerts influence on the cognition of another individual by means of actions or materials conveyed through symbolic channels. The communicative act is therefore a deliberate process, motivated and directed toward the achievement of a specific goal. Secondary goals are often unconscious, representing the communicator's implicit desires and intentions. Communication is frequently defined as the exchange of information. Lasswell characterizes it as the symbolic exchange of information organized in the form of messages, occurring between two (even when one may be imaginary or fictional) or more subjects (potentially an unlimited number), either directly or via media, within a particular socio-political context and with specific effects. Lasswell also views communication as a continuous process of information exchange. In his perspective, the essence of communication lies in the transmission of messages whose functions may include warning, advising, informing, persuading, expressing opinions, and providing enjoyment. Social sciences approach communication from a particular standpoint, perceiving it as the totality of relationships among members of society. This connection is manifested on three levels: psychosocial, material, and mass communication. Organizational communication, on the other hand, involves the study of public relations, business communication, and the analysis of structures, functioning, and organization of communication networks and systems. The essential elements of successful communication, in all cases, include empathy and dialogue.

Communication is, today, one of the most frequently used terms. The word itself derives from the Latin *communicare*, meaning to converse, to reach agreement, to negotiate, to present something, to make common, or to share. The fundamental etymological meanings of these

terms point to the fact that the act of relating—at the core of communication—is essentially the establishment of community or social connectedness. Thus, communication is defined as a process in which information is emitted and received, or as the transmission or reception of signals and messages. Information can encompass a broad spectrum of content: facts, ideas, attitudes, intentions, but also gestures, body posture, facial expressions, clothing, sounds, or colors. In brief, communication may be understood as the individual production of symbolic content in accordance with a specific code that presupposes the reception of that content by others, also operating within the same code. The thesis that a symbol can be interpreted only within a specific cultural context is confirmed by the fact that a language—as a symbolic creation par excellence—can only be understood if one simultaneously grasps both its lexicon and grammar, wherein words are treated as symbols and the code as the system that organizes them. Communication is characterized by several key features: it is comprehensive and represents a central phenomenon of culture; it is continuous, never ceasing, with no clear beginning or end; it is based on the exchange of meaning within the act itself; it contains predictable, expected, or conventional elements; it occurs on multiple levels (between two individuals, between an individual and a group, or between two or more groups); and it takes place among both equals and unequals (in terms of gender, education, social status, etc.).

Therefore, it is essential to highlight the importance of communication and to present its fundamental classifications, as the very trait that distinguishes humans from other species on the planet is their ability to think, act reflectively, and communicate verbally with other living beings. If we consider the fact that every social relationship simultaneously constitutes a communicative interaction, it becomes particularly interesting to observe the historical development of communication from this perspective. From the primary family unit—the first community in which one lives and grows—through historically significant events and major turning points such as the invention of writing, the printing press, industrialization, and all the way to the rapid advancement of technology and the increasing pace of life, communication has continuously evolved and has always remained an essential and indispensable aspect of human survival.

4. GEORGE HERBERT MEAD’S THEORY OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

This theory marks a significant shift in the understanding and study of communication—from an emphasis on its effects to an exploration of the meaning inherent in communicative content. The theoretical foundation was established by George Herbert Mead in his seminal work *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934). Drawing upon insights from cognitive psychology, as well as findings from anthropology and linguistics, Mead posited that human beings do not live solely in the natural world, but also within a symbolic one. Culture, therefore, is not only a matter of interaction with the natural environment but also with a symbolic context. Furthermore, social relations are embedded within a cultural framework that is inherently symbolic, and communication is not merely behavior but, primarily, interpretation. Mead emphasized that “we must not think of meaning as essentially a state of consciousness or as a set of organized relations existing spiritually outside the field of experience into which we enter. On the contrary, we should think of it objectively—as something entirely situated within the field itself.”

Meaning, then, must be understood in a strictly objective sense—as embedded within the relational field itself, not as a subjective state of consciousness or a collection of mental structures independent of the current experiential context. The meaning of a message determines the very possibility of communication. Communication becomes possible only if the meaning of the message holds, if not identical, then at least approximately equivalent significance for both the sender and the receiver. “Isomorphism of meaning” is achieved

through the use of so-called significant symbols, which elicit the same sequence of internal responses (i.e., meanings) in the individuals engaged in communication. The emergence of significant symbols is closely linked to Mead's concept of the generalized other, which involves adopting the role of the generalized other in order to develop one's own identity. The ego identity (which Mead denotes as the Self) emerges from the symbolic interaction between the personal ego (I) and the social ego of the generalized other (Me). An individual develops their identity through the process of socialization, during which they acquire codes and the capacity to identify with certain social roles, which are aggregated within the generalized other. The development of ego identity takes place through symbolic interaction, from which mind (i.e., reflective consciousness) arises. Mead's most prominent follower was Edward Hulett, who conceptualized communication as symbolic interaction in which, through the use of significant symbols and various empathic processes, individuals constantly compare themselves to others—a process he referred to as a "covert experiment." This comparison occurs through the filtering of symbolically structured events from the environment within one's internal cognitive map.

This theory is also referred to as the Theory of Reflective Consciousness, and it has had a profound influence on communication theorists, ranging from functionalists to neo-Marxists. In the present work, it offers a significant contribution to the understanding of the symbolic world that surrounds us, as well as our comprehension of that world through communicative competence.

5. NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

In crisis situations, from a psychological standpoint, it is crucial to pay attention to the nonverbal behavior of all participants. Nonverbal communication, in conjunction with verbal expression, represents a primary medium in human interaction. "Nonverbal speech," in linguistic terms, is a metaphorical expression for nonverbal communication—an oxymoron whose literal meaning ("speech without words") is semantically unsustainable. In the field of communication studies, however, it is considered one of the two main categories of human expressive capability—a kind of meta-speech that arises from the use of nonverbal symbolic systems. In most cases, nonverbal communication is spontaneous and reflects the current emotional state of the communicating subject. However, it can also be deliberate and thus a consciously trained behavior. It represents a form of communicative practice in which messages are conveyed through paralinguistic, extralinguistic, and iconic symbolic systems. While there are specific communicative situations where subjects are forced to rely exclusively on nonverbal communication (by using so-called linguistic substitutes), in general, nonverbal communication accompanies verbal expression and serves as a semantic framework through which spoken or unspoken meaning is constructed. It is therefore evident that nonverbal cues initiate, prepare, facilitate, regulate, and conclude verbal communication. Nonverbal messages emphasize what is verbally expressed—they complement, clarify, relativize, and even contradict or negate the verbal message intended for the recipient.

In crisis situations where one must act skillfully and often quickly, nonverbal behavior plays a significant role. This is supported by a previously mentioned study in the chapter on communication, which confirms that "only 15% of people interpret a message based on what they heard, 35% evaluate the prosodic aspect—articulation, while as much as 50% of recipients focus exclusively on the appearance and behavior of their communication partner in the interaction at hand." Therefore, the specificities of nonverbal communication are thoroughly examined in communication disciplines (e.g., business, political, pedagogical communication), since verbal and nonverbal communication are inseparable. In recent years, this area of communication studies—nonverbal communication—has experienced significant

growth through numerous programs and training initiatives aimed at exploring the meaning of nonverbal cues. Apart from communication scholars, who first began the serious scientific study of nonverbal communication, this topic is now also of interest to physicians, politicians, analysts, managers, and the general public—who increasingly recognize the importance of nonverbal messages in the era of information, media, and the internet. People generally do not possess the ability to read minds. Some may have stronger intuition, but everyone can recognize emotions in their interlocutor—clearly displayed on the face, expressed through posture and body movements, and further intensified by vocal intonation, breathing, and other subtle cues. It follows, then, that the key to understanding a person's authentic behavior lies in nonverbal speech or communication. It consists of body language and is important because one cannot voluntarily control all the expressions that occur within milliseconds of speaking or acting. These expressions are spontaneous—and precisely because of that, they often communicate more than a thousand words. In such moments, an individual's inner state, emotions, and intentions are clearly revealed.

In most social situations, a person uses a well-practiced and frequently repeated automatic mode of communication, allowing them to maintain a desired self-image in the eyes of others—and in their own. This means that we do not always say what we truly think, and when it comes to emotions, we are capable of expressing a completely different image than what we genuinely feel. At the same time, we often do not even tell ourselves what we authentically believe or feel. As confusing or even discouraging as this may seem, it simply illustrates the functioning of the two halves of our personality. One half consists of our authentic desires, thoughts, and emotions, while the other represents what we manifest to others. Between these two parts lies a series of defensive or mediating mechanisms, which an individual develops over the years to protect their delicate inner self and preserve a positive self-image. To clarify, the positive self-image is maintained “internally” with the aid of certain defense strategies such as self-deception, repression, suppression, and minimization of one's own behaviors. For example, if someone wishes to see themselves as a good person, they may pretend not to have selfish desires (such as the desire for power or aggressive impulses), even though these desires remain present and unfulfilled in their social environment. Nevertheless, much of what a person truly is—though it may have been hidden, denied, or symbolically renounced—still finds a way to surface, often at the most inappropriate moments, in the form of bodily or facial expressions.

6. PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT

"Nonverbal codes do not operate in isolation but function in combination to perform various communicative roles, the most significant of which, according to Burgoon and Guerrero, include message production and processing, impression formation, relational communication, expressive communication, mixed messages and deception, interaction management, and social influence." (Janicijevic, 2000: 303). For these reasons, nonverbal communication plays a decisive role in psychotherapy, where the therapist is primarily interested in what the client attempts to conceal through their expressions and in what they are verbally expressing at the moment. Wilhelm Reich, the founder of body psychotherapy, devoted considerable attention to the signs of bodily expression. As a result, he developed a number of techniques that enable the perception of emotional expression through bodily observation—beyond merely reading nonverbal cues and patterns, these techniques also monitor breathing changes and muscular tensions throughout the subject's body.

In everyday life, nonverbal communication can help us focus on how a person communicates a desire, intention, or command. It is now clearer that verbal and nonverbal expressions can contradict one another—and in such cases, one should always trust the nonverbal signal.

Interestingly, children are much better than adults at leveraging the advantages of nonverbal communication, both in play and in interaction with adults. Adults, however, often choose to believe what they hear, even when nonverbal cues are "screaming" something entirely different. This is largely the result of upbringing and formal education, as the intellectual accomplishments of every culture are encoded primarily in verbal models.

Moreover, mastering nonverbal communication—especially body language—can turn one into a "human lie detector" in both professional and private settings. While this may not always be a comfortable role, it is undoubtedly a useful one. Naturally, individuals who are practiced liars often possess some knowledge of nonverbal communication. However, even they cannot fully suppress involuntary physiological reactions: their brain waves shift rhythm, their heart rate accelerates, and their facial expressions subtly reflect these changes. Commonly observed signs in deceptive situations include a rigid facial expression, limited body movement, minimal eye contact, and the tendency to touch the mouth or neck. Speech may be interrupted, with delayed reactions that should have been spontaneous. Of course, some individuals are confident and well-practiced in lying, maintaining steady eye contact. Yet even in such cases, subtle nuances often reveal the deception. For instance, a liar may unconsciously place a barrier between themselves and the listener during conversation—an unconscious attempt at self-protection, a need for a psychological shield. "One of the most intriguing discoveries during the course of this doctoral dissertation, related to nonverbal communication, is the insight that intentional nonverbal communication—such as posture, stance, and body positioning—not only influences how others perceive us, but also how we perceive and experience ourselves. In educational training programs, participants learn methods for improving body posture and for deliberately triggering positive emotions within themselves. This aspect of the training shares similarities with other communication models we have discussed, yet it is also distinct and unique, as it reveals that with a single decision—for example, to stand or sit differently—we can increase our self-confidence and leave a more favorable impression on others."

7. CONCLUSION

Crisis situations around us are increasingly prevalent. The depletion of natural resources and the accompanying environmental consequences are topics frequently covered in the media, and society generally agrees that these are crucial for the survival of humankind. Unfortunately, this consensus rarely translates into concrete action. According to research, current oil reserves—given the present rate of consumption—are expected to last only another fifty years. More frequent global floods signal that something significant is amiss. Moreover, severe global warming is contributing to increasingly extreme weather conditions, which in turn accelerate the melting of polar ice caps, causing sea levels to rise and threatening the submersion of many coastal cities and ports. To make matters worse, there is a looming possibility that the Gulf Stream may reverse its flow due to these environmental changes. Currently, the Gulf Stream prevents Northern Europe from turning into a frozen wasteland. Sadly, this is not the plot of some new science fiction film filled with spectacular effects, but rather the reality we are living today. Furthermore, this is not a distant future we are talking about—it is a very near one. This means that we may personally witness such a dire scenario unless swift action is taken.

Human beings, empowered by intellectual trends such as Newtonian science and its accompanying technology, Darwinian "survival of the fittest," and the core capitalist principles (the law of competition, the maximization of profit, and the accumulation of capital), have imprisoned modern business in a ruthless pursuit of competitive advantage within a world whose resources are being steadily depleted by its own activities. This is unsustainable. Like Erisichthon of Greek mythology, the business world appears destined to consume its own

resources—and eventually, itself. This is evident in the repeated fate of many companies that make it to the Fortune 500 list, only to fail within five years.

This systemic preference for large over small consumers increases inequality in the distribution of global wealth—not only among countries but also within individual societies. As extreme wealth typically goes hand-in-hand with extreme poverty, as seen in many nations both near and far, this imbalance poses a significant threat to political and social stability. Crime rates rise, families fall apart under the weight of hopelessness, and unrest, revolutions, and related phenomena ensue. The poor migrate toward wealthy regions, bringing about new challenges that can unfold in various directions. Subclasses emerge, a new form of colonialism arises wherein the rich exploit the poor, and the resulting sense of humiliation and anger fuels ever more terrifying and frequent terrorist attacks, of which we are daily witnesses. From a business perspective, all of this is extremely damaging. This insatiable drive to “have more” ultimately leads to self-destruction and triggers major crises.

Whether contemporary humanity will manage to communicate these challenges from a psychologically mature “Adult” ego state remains to be seen. For now, individuals can only work intensively on developing their competencies—especially their communication competence—by cultivating what is known as “Communicational Intelligence.” Indeed, being communicationally intelligent represents the Alpha and Omega of our lives—more precisely, of the quality of life that we live.

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