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Communication Today: Were Watzlawick & Co. Wrong?

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*RE-PRINT ARTICLE***Communication Today: Were Watzlawick & Co. Wrong?**

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The sender-receiver model and the 5 axioms of communication have influenced how communication is spoken about and how communication is taught for more than 50 years. And this despite the fact that recent research calls into question some of these ideas. So, were Watzlawick & Co. wrong?

What do you know about communication? It is very likely that you were introduced to communication as a sender-receiver model. And you have almost certainly heard of the 5 axioms of communication formulated by Paul Watzlawick et al. (1967). Even if you cannot list them off the cuff, we are sure that “You cannot not communicate” or the idea that every communication has a content and a relationship aspect is part of your general knowledge.

Although both the sender-receiver model from the 1940s and some of the 5 axioms of communication based on it from 1967 are now scientifically refuted (Bavelas et al., 1967), they are very persistent. Communication is often still taught today as it was propagated over 50 years ago.

Does recent research call these outdated communication theories into question? Yes. So, were Watzlawick & Co. wrong? Yes, in terms of content in a few points. And again not, because for Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson the 5 axioms were already at that time only provisional formulations which could neither claim to be complete nor claim to be final (Watzlawick et al., 1969). Who might have thought that up to today many take them at face value.

Communication Theories as Technology Metaphors of the Last Century

The sender-receiver model is a classic communication model on which many communication theories that are still in use today are based. It was developed as information theory in the 1940s by the two telephone technicians and mathematicians Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949).

And as is so often the case, the existing technology shaped the theoretical considerations. The metaphor, which is still used today, describes communication as a transfer process in which one person sends information and another receives and decodes it. This idea was directly derived from the telephone technology of that time.

Watzlawick et al. (1969) were particularly interested in the observable interactions of human relationships that result from an interpersonal sender-receiver relationship. With their 5 axioms of communication, which they formulated as hypotheses in 1967, they investigated these interactions. With terms such as information, feedback, black box, redundancy and cybernetics, they too based their ideas on the telecommunication and control technology of that time.

Things Have Changed in 50+ Years

Much has changed in more than 50 years. On the one hand, we live in a technologically different world today than back then with potentially new metaphors. On the other hand, we also have 50 years more of experience and research in the field of communication.

And who could judge this better than Janet Beavin Bavelas herself, who was co-author at the time and who has researched the hypotheses of the past decades as a communication researcher. When we asked her what has changed since 1967, she gave the following answer: "It was my goal to become a research psychologist. (...) And so, I have done that for 4-5 decades of my life. And that changes things. If it didn't, we'd really be worried. If I've been looking at data for that long, and I found exactly what we said was happening in "Pragmatics", I would be cheating. (...) In fifty years a lot of things have happened. (...) Some [of the axioms] have worked pretty well, others do not" (Czerny & Dominik, 2018).

Communication Today: Ongoing Co-Construction Instead of Sending and Receiving

How can we describe communication in a contemporary way? Bavelas and her research team provide answers themselves.

In recent years with Microanalysis of Face-to-face Dialogue, they have developed a video- based conversation research method that reveals what actually happens in conversations moment by moment. And what they discovered is much faster and more created together than what we would expect with a sender-receiver idea. They show that conversation partners influence each other every few seconds. They constantly influence one another and thus co-construct the conversation together (Bavelas et al., 2017).

Conversation partners influence each other, for example, with their statements and formulations, with their questions, with their co-speech gestures and with their generic and specific listener reactions. And not just after something has been said, but continuously while the person is speaking. For example, they could show that the way we listen strongly influences what the other person says (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011)

With this, conversations change from something that happens alternating to something that we do together on an ongoing basis.

Co-Creating Together

This difference between communication as an alternating sending and receiving and of communication as something, we do together moment by moment seems small at first glance. However, this view has potentially world-changing implications.

While the traditional view of communication focuses on sending and/or receiving, this new view raises the question of how we interact together. Imagine the differences it would make if everyone realized that they, as conversation partners, are always jointly responsible for what happens. If everyone was aware that they influence conversations as much as their other conversation partners. And this, even if they "only" listen.

In this view of communication, the result of a conversation can no longer be assigned to just one person but is always jointly created. Statements like "My employees only talk about problems." or "He talked all the time." would need to change to "How can we interact more usefully together? We can neither blame conversation partners for what was said in terms of content nor for the course of the conversation but are always involved.

Further training on the topic

Join our Microanalysis online course and get to know what really happens in dialogue:

- English: www.sfontour.com/microanalysis
- German: www.sfontour.com/mikroanalyse

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