

## Chapter 3

# Communication Theory and the Reference Interaction

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**I**nterpersonal communication, or communication between persons, is a fundamental part of the work performed by librarians within the reference process. Librarians can learn much from scholars of communication. For example, consider rapport building, which involves conversation encouraging give and take, establishment of mutual understanding, and development of relationships. A reference librarian in an academic library was once asked: “Where are the *Psychological Abstracts* located?” She in turn asked: “Have you ever used them before?” Receiving a hesitant shake of the head in reply, the librarian then launched into a description of the organization and use of this index. The student interrupted to explain impatiently that she needed the location of *Psychological Abstracts* in order to meet one of her professors in front of them.<sup>1</sup>

Although this may seem to be merely a simple “misunderstanding,” it is a good example of how even an apparently uncomplicated query can be misconstrued. The librarian “read into” the location question, did not take it literally as intended but, instead, assumed that the user would want to proceed to use the index, as is the case in the usual reference scenario. This student merely needed to know the location; therefore, any other information was superfluous. In more complex question negotiations, in which the user may not have a clear idea of the information he or she seeks, the chances of miscommunication and misunderstanding are even more greatly increased. If the librarian had not blithely launched into an explanation of how *Psycho-*

*logical Abstracts* was used but, instead, had taken a moment to develop rapport—to ask the user if she was interested in learning about its use—the miscommunication could easily have been avoided. A brief conversational exchange that enabled librarian and user to understand one another could have prevented this moment of embarrassment and frustration.

In drawing upon communication theory to analyze and understand situations such as this, it is important to note that communication theory does not refer to any single theory or even a single object of study. Rather, it “can be used to designate the collective wisdom found in the entire body of theories related to the communication process.”<sup>2</sup> Seminal theories of communication developed between the late 1940s and the 1960s embraced a linear design in which messages and information are transmitted from a source to a receiver.<sup>3</sup> Communication is conceptualized as unidirectional and linear with the content (informational) aspect of a message being of primary importance.<sup>4</sup> The linear model’s emphasis on unidirectional transfer of content parallels the emphasis in the library profession that characterizes the reference interaction as transfer of information from the librarian to the user. In the example above, the librarian has information (how to use *Psychological Abstracts*) that needs to be delivered to the open and waiting mind of the user. Librarians frequently operate on this premise and then are very surprised to find out that the user may have another purpose and a different interpretation of the reference interaction.

In contrast to the content-centered conceptualizations of communication, a group of theories making up the relational view of communication favors a process model that characterizes communication as ongoing, dynamic, and reflexive, as opposed to static and linear. The relational view applies the premises of systems theory to human communication and the ideas of psychologists Jurgen Reusch and Gregory Bateson.<sup>5</sup>

Systems theory was developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy who believed that the world should be thought of as being composed of wholes and interrelated parts.<sup>6</sup> Systems theory aims to “integrate accumulated knowledge into a clear and realistic framework” and emphasizes the relationships between system members.<sup>7</sup> A *system* can be defined as “a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes.”<sup>8</sup> According to Stephen J. Littlejohn, a system has four components:

1. objects or members;
2. attributes, qualities, or properties;
3. relationships among objects;
4. the environment.<sup>9</sup>

From a systems perspective, control over the communication process is shared among the members of the interpersonal system rather than held in the hands of the sender (as assumed in the linear model). Also from the standpoint of systems theory:

human communication is not a one-way process, as suggested by sender-message-channel-receiver oriented models . . . but rather a multidirectional phenomenon with no distinguishable beginning or end.<sup>10</sup>

The premises of systems theorists were key to the development of the relational model of communication by a group of researchers that included Bateson, Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson. They worked together at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California, and became known as the Palo Alto Group, or the pragmatists. These researchers conceptualized the communication process as an open system.<sup>11</sup> Because open systems interact with the environment, they saw the context of a communication act as highly important. "Environments characteristically affect the systems which interact with them and are, in turn, affected by those systems."<sup>12</sup> As an interpersonal system changes in response to the environment or to changes within system members, the context of the message changes. In the systems view, there is no fixed meaning for a message. Messages are given meaning from the context in which they exist.

The now-classic *Pragmatics of Human Communication* provides the foundation for a large body of interpersonal communication research.<sup>13</sup> It deals with "pragmatic (behavioral) effects of communication" and identifies simple properties or "axioms" of human interaction. The key proposed axiom is: "Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication."<sup>14</sup> Thus, every communication has dual dimensions: content/report and relationship/command. To clarify these concepts, "The report aspect conveys information and is, therefore, synonymous in human communication with the *content* of the message,"<sup>15</sup> whereas "The command aspect, on the other

hand, refers to what sort of a message it is to be taken as, and, therefore, ultimately to the *relationship* between the communicants."<sup>16</sup> F. E. Millar and L. Edna Rogers interpret content as referring to "the object or referent specified in the message," whereas relational characteristics refer to the "reciprocal rules of interdependence that combine the persons into an interactive system."<sup>17</sup>

It is important to understand that the relational model proposed by the pragmatists is concerned with both the effect of communication on the receiver and the effect the receiver's reaction has on the sender. Thus, focus is on "the sender-receiver relation, as mediated by communication."<sup>18</sup> The interactivity of the communication process is of vital importance to the pragmatists who reject theories that "limit themselves to the study of communication as a one-way phenomenon (from speaker to listener) and stop short of looking at communication as an *interaction* process."<sup>19</sup>

One of the assumptions of a linear model is that the sender (or source) of a message is in control, that the goal of communication is to transfer information from sender to receiver.<sup>20</sup> The relational perspective asserts that control is not centered in the sender nor in the receiver, rather, they are both part of a larger system that forms their relationship.

Additional axioms proposed by Watzlawick and his colleagues describe other important aspects of communication. One proposes that "human beings communicate both digitally and analogically."<sup>21</sup> Digital code is verbal language; analogic code is nonverbal.<sup>22</sup> Another axiom distinguishes symmetrical and complementary interactions.<sup>23</sup>

When two communicators in a relationship behave similarly, the relationship is said to be symmetrical; differences are minimized. When communicator differences are maximized, however, a complementary relationship is said to exist.<sup>24</sup>

Following from this, the librarian-user interaction would be conceptualized as a complementary relationship because there is a difference in power, control, and status:

A boss-employee relationship is usually complementary, as are those between teacher-student, doctor-patient, policeman-automobile driver, president-secretary and other relationships based on inequality of control.<sup>25</sup>

### Value of the Pragmatic/Relational Perspective

The field of communication has many different theoretical approaches yet lacks a general, unified idea.<sup>26</sup> B. Aubrey Fisher points out that:

every theory of communication is another level of communication—a metacommunication—and is itself a created reality. The pragmatic perspective of human communication is certainly no exception.<sup>27</sup>

Although the relational perspective of the pragmatists is a “created reality,” and not without its critics,<sup>28</sup> librarians have much to gain by an examination of this work and its implications for the reference interaction. One major implication is that in order to fully understand the communication process and to construct theory that is an accurate representation or model, it is vital to view communication as a dynamic and interactive process rather than as linear or static. Both the content of a message and its metacommunication (i.e., communication *about* communication) characteristics must be taken into account because both are integral parts of the process. In reference interactions, this implies that focusing exclusively on the exchange of information, of finding the “right answer” to a user’s query, discounts the importance of the interpersonal dimensions. Yes, users may be given the correct information, but if they are embarrassed or made to feel uncomfortable in the process, a successful information exchange can be interpreted by the user as unsuccessful. Thus, human communication does not merely exist on the content level. Rather, it exists as part of an interactive system, taking place between the source and receiver. It is, therefore, not appropriate to study instances of communication removed from the context in which they occur. In the reference interaction, output measures (such as counts of reference transactions) may be provided as sole evidence of reference effectiveness. According to relational models, reporting reference statistics can give evidence of activity but alone can not be used as evidence of effectiveness.

As part of a system, messages do not have fixed meaning and may change over time as a relationship changes. It is also inappropriate to minimize or discount the impact that feedback has on the relational system. As a communication interaction unfolds, feedback promotes constant motion and change in the system’s structure. This implies that reference service can be

better evaluated by asking users for feedback, formally through surveys or interviews, or informally at the reference desk. User feedback can then be used to promote positive changes in reference service.<sup>29</sup>

Another implication of the pragmatic approach is that “Content competence is not equal to relational competence.”<sup>30</sup> This is particularly important to the problems of the librarian–user interaction. As noted in chapter 2, many studies have defined competence as being related to the search for the “right” answer. If evaluations of reference personnel consider “efficiency” and “effectiveness” to be the only indicators of competence, librarians who find the right answer may be regarded as competent even though their relational abilities, or “people skills,” are lacking.

### **Implications of Communication Literature for Study of Librarian–User Interaction**

The review of communication literature suggests several implications for study of librarian–user interactions. As noted in chapter 2, there are many gaps in the research regarding the interpersonal relationship between librarian and user. In particular, limited attention has been paid to the user’s perspective. From the pragmatic point of view, this has been a critical oversight. As a full-fledged member of the interpersonal communication system, the user is more than a passive vessel waiting to be filled with information.

Another, related major implication is that the librarian–user interaction can no longer be viewed as a linear process. Instead, the encounter between librarian and user must be conceived as a process of interaction between the two. Communication theory offers approaches such as the relational model of the pragmatists and impression management that allow focus on the user and the relationship-building aspect of library encounters.<sup>31</sup>

Library researchers have begun to realize that the relational, interpersonal aspects of the librarian–user interaction are vitally important. Their work has found that attention to relational characteristics (such as self-disclosure, immediacy, and nonverbal approachability) leads to increased user satisfaction and comfort in the interaction. There is further need for research in this area that includes both content and relational dimensions, provides both librarian and user perspectives, and recognizes the importance of context provided by study in a naturalistic setting. These needs and the above theoretical foundations have shaped the study design and methodology reported in this book.

Notes

1. This example was also used in Marie L. Radford, "Interpersonal Communication Theory in the Library Context: A Review of Current Perspectives," in *Library and Information Science Annual*, ed. Bohdan S. Wynar. Vol. 5, pp. 3-10 (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1989).

2. Stephen J. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 5th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1996), 3.

3. For example, Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Ill. Pr., 1949); Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Pr., 1948); David K. Berlo, *The Process of Communication* (New York: Holt, 1960).

4. Nancy Harper, *Human Communication Theory: The History of a Paradigm* (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1979).

5. Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry* (New York: Norton, 1951).

6. Ludwig von Bertalanffy, "General Systems Theory: A Critical Review," *General Systems* 7 (1962): 1-20; ———, *General Systems Theory, Foundations, Developments, Applications* (New York: Braziller, 1968). For more in-depth discussions of systems theory, see Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*; Peter R. Monge, "The Systems Perspective as a Theoretical Basis for the Study of Human Communication," *Communication Quarterly* 25 (winter 1977): 19-29; Brent D. Ruben and John Y. Kim, *General Systems Theory and Human Communication*, (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1975).

7. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 2nd ed., 1983, 37.

8. A. D. Hall and R. E. Fagen, "Definition of System," in *General Systems Theory and Human Communication*, ed. Brent D. Ruben and John Y. Kim (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden 1975), 52.

9. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 1996.

10. Brent D. Ruben, "General Systems Theory," in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Human Communication*, ed. Richard W. Budd and Brent D. Ruben, (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1979), 120.

11. See Monge, "The Systems Perspective as a Theoretical Basis for the Study of Human Communication," 1977.

12. Ruben, "General Systems Theory," 126.

13. Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin, and Don J. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: Norton, 1967). For examples of the application of relational theory, see Judee K. Burgoon, David B. Buller, and W. Gill Woodall, *Nonverbal Communication: The Unspoken Dialogue* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); Judee K. Burgoon and Jerold L. Hale, "The Fundamental Topoi of Relational Communication," *Communication Monographs* 51 (Sept. 1984): 193-214; B. Aubrey Fisher and Katherine L. Adams, *Interpersonal Communication: Pragmatics of Human Relationships*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994); Littlejohn, *Theories of Human*

*Communication*, 1996; Robert Martin, "Relational Cognition Complexity and Relational Communication in Personal Relationships," *Communication Monographs* 59 (June 1992): 150–63; Frank E. Millar and L. Edna Rogers, "A Relational Approach to Interpersonal Communication," in *Explorations in Interpersonal Communication*, ed. Gerald R. Miller (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1976), 87–104; William W. Wilmot, *Relational Communication* 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995); Julia T. Wood, *Relational Communication: Continuity and Change in Personal Relationships* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995).

14. Watzlawick et al, *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 54.

15. *Ibid.*, 51.

16. *Ibid.*, 52.

17. Millar and Rogers "A Relational Approach to Interpersonal Communication," 87. For additional explanations of these concepts, see Fisher and Adams, *Interpersonal Communication*, 1994; B. Aubrey Fisher, "The Pragmatic Perspective of Human Communication: A View from System Theory," in *Human Communication Theory: Comparative Essays*, ed. Francis E. X. Dance (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 192–219; Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 1996; Malcom R. Parks, "Relational Communication: Theory and Research," *Human Communication Research* 3 (summer 1977): 372–81.

18. Watzlawick, et al, *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 22.

19. *Ibid.*, 14.

20. Brent D. Ruben, *Communication and Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

21. Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 67.

22. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 1996.

23. Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*.

24. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 3rd ed. 1989, 177.

25. William W. Wilmot, *Dyadic Communication*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1980), 102.

26. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 1996.

27. Fisher, *The Pragmatic Perspective of Human Communication*, 216.

28. See Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 1996.

29. See Suzanne Walters, *Customer Service: A How-to-Do-It Manual For Librarians*. (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 1994); Darlene E. Weingand, *Customer Service Excellence: A Concise Guide for Librarians* (Chicago: ALA, 1997).

30. Wilmot, *Dyadic Communication*, 98.

31. See Mary Kathleen Chelton, "Adult-Adolescent Service Encounters: The Library Context" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers—State Univ. of New Jersey, 1997), for a doctoral dissertation that applies Goffman's impression management to the study of adult-adolescent interaction in libraries.