

RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION



A Quarterly Information Service from the
Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture

Vol 7 (1986), No. 1

Interpersonal Communication and The Religious Communicator

Teilhard de Chardin predicted that, as the whole world became ever more tightly linked together by communication networks, we would experience the 'noosphere'. This would be a network of all human thought which would provide a new quality of communion between all people. The whole human race would be present to itself as it could never have been before.

But right now the reality is very different. Instead of people and nations coming together in a friendly exchange of ideas and experiences so that their sense of community develops, the tendency appears to be to use the communication media to divide the listening public up into increasingly narrow potential markets for advertisers; to isolate the peoples of one part of the world from the other in an East vs. West, North vs. South polarization; and to drive a wedge between private styles of intercommunication and public behaviour. The focus of this issue on interpersonal communication has an important bearing on the question of this split between groups and on the tendency to separate one's private and public lives. For example, excessive emphasis on total self-revelation to one's intimate friends can tend to undermine respect for the necessarily less intimate roles which contact with the wider society requires.

Inevitably communicators, and religious communicators in particular, frequently find this tension at the heart of their work. They are often the ones who have to try and reconcile the splintered groups into which society and religious groupings such as parishes, dioceses, and regions have become divided. It is perhaps in the area of justice and peace that such divisions may do the most harm. To the degree that religious communicators understand some of the causes of this tendency they can guard against its ill-effects and further their own work by taking advantage of its contributions.

This supplement will examine some of the causes for the split between private and public life as they have been expressed in the ideology of intimacy, explore briefly the Church's creative responses to the emphasis on more interpersonal forms of religious experience, and report one example of how a modern communications technology has been used to strengthen interpersonal communication.

I: The Ideology of Intimacy vs Discreet Disclosure

Malcolm R Parks, 'Ideology in Interpersonal Communication: Off the Couch and into the World'; Arthur P Bochner, 'On the Efficacy of Openness in Close Relationships' in Michael Burgoon (ed.) *Communication Yearbook 5*. New Brunswick, NJ; London, UK: Transaction Books, 1982. p.79-124.

From Instrumental to Expressive Communication

Bochner describes how US society has shifted in the past forty years from an instrumental approach to social life to a more expressive one. During the late 1960s' counter-cultural movement it was common to see society in either-or terms: openness vs. secrecy, frankness vs. restraint, dialogue vs. monologue, etc. More

traditional ideals for social behaviour received heavy criticism for inhibiting and discouraging the expression of emotions, and undercutting spontaneity. The writings of Roszak (*The Making of a Counterculture* 1969), Reich (*The Greening of America* 1970), and Slater (*The Pursuit of Loneliness* 1970) popularized these opinions. Meanwhile psychology was itself undergoing a revolution and

offered the counter-culture a more humanizing alternative to society's rigid structures. Maslow in *Towards a Psychology of Being* (1962), Jourard in *The Transparent Self* (1964), and Buber in *I and Thou* (1958) eased the shift to 'openness', 'self-disclosure', and 'dialogue' in a quest for 'peak experience' and 'getting it all together'. Utopia was just around the corner, thought the counter-culture, if only its followers could shake off and escape from all the traditional formulas of conversational ritual and proper behaviour based on well-defined roles.

Magazines Promoted New Communication Style

The media, especially magazines, in turn popularized this Utopian vision of relational norms. Previously people had assumed the world was unchanging, certain, and predictable. Thus there could be a single standard for sex-role behaviour. The emphasis was on the need for togetherness, the value of courtesy and the importance of giving compliments. Since the goal was to make the other person happy, planning, strategy and even duplicity to protect interpersonal relationships — little white lies — were permitted. The other person came first even to the extent of overlooking one's own feelings.¹

Then during the counter-culture of the 1970s in their quest for ideal relationships partners started to value freedom of expression, honest talk and absence of convention. Relationships seemed as changing as life itself. In such a crisis-ridden world each could talk about problems, openly reveal feelings and magnify self-importance. The main thing was to keep on communicating however dreadful the content.

Such *expressive* communication favoured an unpremeditated style in contrast to the older, more traditional 'rhetorical' approach. To some, the expressivist seemed to be unwilling to adapt to others, unhindered by the presence of another, insensitive to the many ways an idea can be expressed, averse to recognize role-taking as normal human behaviour, and reluctant to reflect before blurting out every spontaneous thought or feeling. Consequently instrumentalists—perhaps so called because for them interaction is a means to build relationships and not an end in itself—consider themselves as more sensitive to the very taboos and customs that in the long term help sustain relationships but which expressivists would jettison as hindering their complete self-expression.

Self-disclosure: Elusive and Having Exaggerated Claims

The keystone of expressivist relationships is self-disclosure administered in generous, constant and ever-increasing amounts. Despite general agreement that self-disclosure means the expression of private thoughts, feelings and characteristics, Bochner observes that there is still some debate whether a self-disclosing message has to be intentional and reveal something otherwise inaccessible.

Sidney Jourard pioneered the empirical study of self-disclosure as an enduring personality trait. After first unsuccessfully trying to measure self-disclosure as varying with the type of personality, he tried in the 1960s, using his Self-Disclosure Questionnaire, to correlate subjects' patterns of self-disclosure with their demographic characteristics, liking for target persons, psychological health, and physical contact. Then in the 1970s self-disclosure was studied in the laboratory as an interactional exchange process. More recently increased awareness that all of the circumstances affect self-disclosure has led to exploring the following key factors in the total situation: 1. *Breadth*, the number of topics disclosed; 2. *Depth*, or degree of intimacy; 3. *Duration of the disclosure*; 4. *Valence*, whether disclosure is negative or positive; 5. *Honesty*; 6. *Intent*; 7. *Relevance*; 8. *Affective manner of presentation*; 9. *Flexibility of the pattern of exposure*.²

There is also general agreement about the occasions for appropriate and successful disclosure: when it is reciprocated, done in small steps, relevant to the discussion topic, intended to improve the relationship, sensitive to the receiver, and part of a continuing relationship.

Despite the positive side of disclosure, Parks thinks that a good deal of current research on interpersonal communication has built its house on sand by accepting the exaggerated claims made for interpersonal closeness as a moral good which alone can promote full personal development in the face of an impersonal society. Such exaggeration has made intimacy into an ideology which 1. sets the personal self against the public self; 2. tolerates self-disclosure mushrooming into a dominant research topic; and 3. judges relationships mainly according to the degree of self-disclosure, so legitimate privacy is relegated to therapy. For example, when even appropriate self-disclosure becomes a *central* concern, the person is subtly coerced to disclose to prove one is free of the 'false' beliefs of society, such as that there is safety in low disclosure.

A More Realistic Assessment

On the contrary, Parks reports that research proves the exact opposite of the fantastic claims made for self-disclosure as a guaranteed remedy for loneliness and friendlessness. Disclosure does not itself cause liking and often inhibits it when disclosure is too frequently negative. Conversely, people will not open up and risk damaging friendly relationships.

Picture two persons seated next to each other on electronic chairs and wired so that all of the experience and consciousness of one person is totally available to the other. This Orwellian example captures what Parks takes as the spirit of the ideology of intimacy and its sometimes fantastic claim for happiness through complete empathy and ever-increasing self-disclosure.

Despite the impossibility of the goals set by the ideology of intimacy Parks admits that it is not a passing fad of the 'Me Decade' but part of a broader historical search for community. Therapeutical encounter groups and the human potential movement have taken up this emphasis, which has resisted the severest satires. Its appeal is due in part to a lament for a loss of real feeling in an impersonal world and the perceived decline of a sense of community. Parks understands this emphasis as flowing from the hunger for community on the part of multitudes isolated in apartments, and for a lost togetherness in communities fragmented by change and mobility. On the other hand, he thinks people today suffer no more from social dislocation than before during famines and wars.

Ignored but Important Aspects

Although the ideology of intimacy has highlighted some important aspects of the interpersonal process, Parks is convinced it has overlooked two whose neglect could hurt its goals. First, the ideology of intimacy has ignored or devalued those processes which regulate the circulation of information among individuals. Privacy, secrecy and the prudential use of information foster rather than inhibit intimacy, individual identity, group cohesion, legitimate authority and power, and social action.³

Parks observes that the use of privacy and other methods to restrict the flow of personal information occurs universally in human behaviour. But these methods, Parks notes, must be balanced with the openness, empathy, and self-disclosure needed to build up healthy interpersonal relationships. Thus just as privacy, secrecy and the prudential use of information foster one's close network of intimates, so openness, empathy, and self-disclosure promote contact with those one is not very close to. Individual identity actually develops by separation from the environment through privacy; the developing self is kept from others while deciding what to reveal. Privacy gives time to reflect, plan and observe oneself. Self-esteem rarely flourishes with a low level of privacy; prisoners in overcrowded cells demand less respect than white collar convicts in apartment-style prisons.

According to Parks, a strong sense of group cohesion may at times depend upon keeping its business from non-members or even withholding from members information uncomplimentary to the

group image. Secrecy protects groups by steering communication away from information detrimental to the group leaders' authority and credibility. Weaker parties in turn may use secrecy to resist abuses of authority and power. By keeping its business to itself a group bolsters the sense of group cohesion, guarantees that personal identity is not lost in the larger collectivity, and enhances the exercise of authority and power. By focusing the group and the individuals in it along their most common lines, additional or conflicting matters become irrelevant.

The Role of Less Intimate Relationships

Secondly, by its emphasis on more intimate relationships, in Parks' view the ideology of intimacy overlooks important social functions fulfilled by the more public and consequently less intimate ones, such as with casual acquaintances, neighbours, distant relatives: 1. **Diffusion of innovations** is helped by the less intimate relationships. Since intimates tend to know one another and recirculate the same information, more people are reached indirectly by less intimate relationships. 2. **Social comparison** is easier when people are less similar than in the more intimate groups. People need to compare themselves with others, novices to learn from the advanced, and those who want to sound out their ideas have a wider range of opinions off which to bounce their ideas. 3. **Social cohesion** and action are more possible with the help of the less intimate social relationships because these strengthen the total social fabric by tying the otherwise isolated intimate groups together.

Parks confronts the exponents of the ideology of intimacy with a contradiction. Privacy, secrecy, and the prudential use of information, instead of destroying society by frustrating perfect openness, rather help to create intimacy, cohesion and social action, and thus contribute to the development of individual and group identity.

Utopia: A Closer Look

Business organizations report only limited success in applying the principles of this ideology to foster greater openness. Otherwise

Parks notes that no other group has succeeded in fully achieving the ideals of intimacy, authenticity and closeness espoused by the ideology of intimacy. Therapy groups have had more successes than casualties but most of their positive effects are only short-lived. Larger scale examples like the kibbutz require many opportunities for privacy to keep them going. Communes often end up sacrificing their freedom and fellowship to an unthinking subservience to an 'inspired' leader.⁴

Were the goals of the ideology of intimacy taken up widely, Parks believes there would be a radical restructuring of society. Since communication takes time and energy, the ideology of intimacy would demand an exponential increase in communication without the societal guidelines, formalities, and roles to help manage the demand. As a result the less intimate relationships would suffer and society as a whole would shrink into ever tighter cliques, with little left of the social fabric but the random threads holding it together.

In a perfectly intimate world personal relationships would soon be emptied in a constant striving to reveal one's deepest enigmas. The quest for moments of intense sharing would leave little time, energy, or will to maintain the less intimate relationships. As the increasingly isolated intimate relationships have ever heavier burdens placed on them, dissatisfaction and even violence could result. Since the more intimate relationships need less disclosure, the level of articulate communication in society as a whole would deteriorate. Individual identity could suffer since individuation flourishes in diverse groups. Social consciousness and action in an intimate world would become circumscribed by the more narrow concerns of the smaller groupings of the more intimate relationships. The overall effect would be to restrict a sense of society as a whole to the small group's vision of society as only a small group writ large.

Thus the ideology of intimacy in Parks' view would frustrate the very thing it promises. Pursuit of the unobtainable would consume personal relationships, and people would be burdened by what was supposed to liberate them — self-disclosure, openness, and authenticity. The ability and will to take effective collective action would thereby diminish.

II: Creative Religious Responses to This New Style

The manner in which the Church expresses itself is influenced by the society and culture of each era. For example, in the tightly organised, hierarchical societies of pre-nineteenth century Europe, the Church's communication style was similar. Moreover the Church enjoyed a privileged relationship with the ruling powers. With the rise of more democratically organised societies and the popular mass media such as the penny newspaper, the tendency was for governments and the Church along with them to open up more. Thus, argues Robert White, over the past 150 years a major shift in the Church's dominant style of communication has occurred.⁵

The implications of this shift have been becoming clearer, especially after Vatican II. One example of this shift is evident in the great appeal that the model of the Church as sacramental sign of Christ's saving presence exercises. Insofar as Christians experience love and mutual support in small groups, they accept the Church as a real sign of the love of Christ. This may explain the popularity of the many movements within the Church which rely on the small group, such as Marriage Encounter, Charismatic prayer meetings, and Bible study.⁶

In the light of research on the ideology of intimacy, it could well be asked if these groups are seeking in the more intimate relationships of the small group the sense of belonging denied them in the larger society. What prevents such groups from becoming closed in upon themselves is that as they mature they deliberately reach out to the larger Church and to the wider society.

For example, in Marriage Encounter couples have first to strengthen their own relationship before offering service to their parish or local community. The Focolare Movement, which started in war-torn Italy as a seed of hope in the power of love in the face of hate and destruction, first inculcates in its members the personal living of the commandment of love; this in turn overflows into ecumenical and other work. The Charismatic Movement, often criticised for being too inward looking, at its best flowers in the many individual and group contributions to the parish and diocesan Church, such as houses of prayer—but only after a solid foundation has been laid in personal and group prayerfulness. The Cursillo Movement, springing out of the deep faith of the Latin American Church, after giving an intense weekend of reaffirming one's baptismal commitment in a believing community, asks its members to follow this up with a regular small group meeting to carry out the good impulses experienced on the weekend.

The New Forms of Religious Communication

According to White several common elements recur in many of these current forms of religious communication: an open, intimate expression of personal religious experience and of affective prayer; an accepting, healing and integrating response from other group members; a non-directive style of leadership, giving little content but encouraging expressive participation; a more informal paraliturgical or sacramental celebration of the sense of unity experienced

in each other through the action of the Holy Spirit and in the presence of Christ; and an effort to link the expressions of faith and biblical reflection to service in the family or community.

The Freirian dialogical, 'consciousness-raising' type of group discussion has influenced this style of religious communication. Participants try to become more aware of their unthinking dependence on their culture and history. Group media use audio-visuals which reflect the cultural environment often become the focus of the discussion. This style of Freirian dialogue is useful not only when the group members are clearly suffering from the imposition of cultural patterns by those with the power and privilege to do so, but also in more affluent societies where advertising and the media as a whole exercise an often unseen and therefore uncriticised influence on general cultural and religious values.

The influence of this more participatory, dialogical and expressive style can be seen in Sunday liturgies which encourage participation and even dialogue. One-to-one guided retreats have replaced group retreats in many retreat houses. Instead of the teacher-centred approach catechetics uses the discussion group method and the media as the basis for reflection.⁷

Each of these and other movements based on the small group run into a similar problem: maintaining the balance between the closeness of the group's more intimate relationships with the impersonality of the much more numerous but less intimate relationships found at work, home, and the parish. Some groups bridge this gap with regular internal publications. In one case, Focolare, video tapes and frequent international telephone conferences knit its members together.

Astronauts' Memorial Service by Computer

Similarly, some members of the Small Computer Committee of the United Church of Canada have inadvertently found that fellowship can be built up and sustained through computer conferencing. Since 1982 the Canadian UCC has been exploring emerging computer technology, particularly in the area of electronic mail and computer conferencing. Recently the possibilities of this medium for group sharing were extended when a memorial service for the seven US astronauts who died January 28, 1986, was conducted on the UNISON computer network through the popular conferencing software 'Particpate'.

Four ministers of different denominations in North America prepared an interactive worship service, which was ready the night after the tragedy occurred. It consisted of psalms, scripture readings, and spontaneous prayers and reflections to which the participants across the continent could contribute during the service. This form of group communication meant that outsiders could participate or just look at the messages being exchanged.

Far from being the impersonal exercise that the service seemed to his son, who had stopped by the screen for a minute to ask what he was doing, the service struck Gordon Laird, one of the ministers, as intensely personal. He realised that through this computer conferencing system people can experience a measure of intimacy in a public forum. Laird was so moved by the whole experience that he resolved then and there to explore the creativity uncovered in computer communications towards 'freeing the imprisoned' and 'opening the eyes of the blind'. It is a sign of the possibility of bringing the public and the private spheres together as never before.⁸

Similar creative opportunities to use the new technology to enhance rather than subvert a sense of community await the religious communicator. In the context of interpersonal communication, however, the most pressing challenge seems to be to capitalise on the strengths of the current style of interpersonal communication, as these are evident in society and in the Church, and to correct and compensate for possible isolationism caused by an imbalanced attraction for the more private aspects of small group activities.

The Ideology of Intimacy and the Religious Communicator

Whatever one may think of Parks' position some challenges for the religious communicator readily come to mind. 1. *A new style and standard.* As society's expectations for interpersonal communication change, so does the style of religious communication. The 'talking head' of someone in authority appeals less to current viewers than the friendly sharing of opinions, feelings, and suggestions. The challenge is to find a happy balance between an appropriate sharing of the more personal self with a more official self. Pope John Paul II has taken a step in this direction for church leaders on the international level. What would happen if his example were followed on the diocesan and national level?

2. *Speaking up for greater respect.* Some television game shows feature couples who vie with each other to tell the public secrets unknown to the other spouse. Such shows may have a cumulative effect on social norms for self-disclosure between spouses. Furthermore, watching such a show may reveal a lack of respect for the integrity of others. It may then be appropriate to point out to producers that this type of programme may be putting undue pressure on the partners to reveal matter which is actually more suitable for the confessional than the broadcast game show.

3. *Develop a balanced view of the local and worldwide church.* The recently increased emphasis on justice and peace accentuates the need to strike a balance between coverage of the local and international aspects of the news. Much as individuals can have trouble balancing the development of their ties to the more and less intimate groups they encounter, so religious communicators may find that they have to stretch themselves out of accustomed modes of thought. Thus seeing the implications of justice and peace questions not only on the international level but also locally may lead to a greater emphasis on just wages for diocesan employees and teachers in religiously affiliated schools. An increased sensitivity to the need for long-term research on the church's work in communications could result from greater openness to ways of thinking different from what religious communicators find defined in an initial description of their job.

4. *Help unify disparate groups.* A possibly fruitful way to help counteract the tendency in the church and society towards separate groups--Marriage Encounter, charismatic, and the revived catechumenate, strong as these may be in themselves--would be to report to the whole community the activities of each smaller group so all can become more aware and to sponsor common activities to help otherwise disparate groups to work together. Often it is up to the religious communicator to try and pull things together on the diocesan and other levels so that congregations are not subdivided by groups each competing for their allegiance.

Footnotes

1. Virginia Kidd. 'Happily ever after and other relationship styles: Advice on interpersonal relations in popular magazines, 1951-1973.' *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1975, pp.61,31-39.

2. Gerard Egan. *You and Me: The Skills of Communicating and Relating to Others* Monterey, Calif: Brooks/Cole, 1977, pp.42-72. Though Egan develops the norms for appropriate self-disclosure in the context of a communications lab, his comments have more general applicability.

3. Sissela Bok. *Lying: Moral Choices in Public and Private Life*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

4. Stuart A Wright. 'Dyadic Intimacy and Social Control in Three Cult Movements.' *Sociological Analysis* 47:2. 1986, pp.137-150. There is good reason to believe that controlling intimacy between two members of such cults may help deter withdrawal.

5. Robert A White, SJ. 'The New Communications Emerging in the Church'. *The Way Supplement* 57. Autumn 1986, pp.3-25.

6. White, p.20f.

7. Ibid.

8. Small Computer Committee 1986. *A Memorial Service on the Unison Computer Network, Wednesday January 29, 1986, For the Seven Astronauts who died January 28, 1986.* For further information: Div of Communication, United Church of Canada, 85 St Clair Ave East. Toronto M4T 1M8, CANADA.