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Metaperspectives on Human Communication

Short version of the German publication:

Sperka, M. (1996). *Psychologie der Kommunikation in Organisationen: Eine Einführung auf systemtheoretischer Grundlage*. Essen: Die Blaue Eule

ABSTRACT

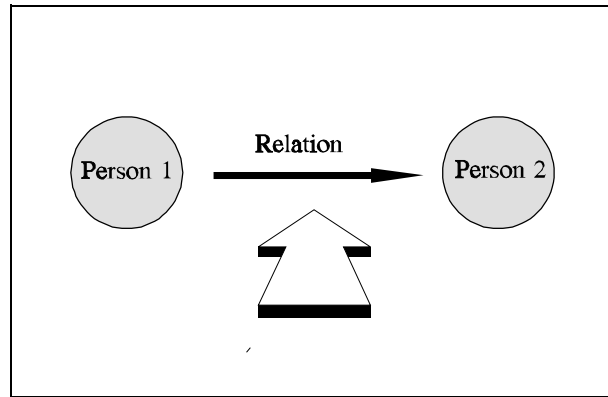
"Communication" can be defined in various ways. Accordingly the analysis of theoretical concepts reveals a multitude of different approaches to the field of communication. It was probably Fisher (1978) who was the first communication scientist who offered a more systematic view by differentiating four perspectives on human communication. Later Prigogine (1979, 1989) and Prigogine & Stengers (1990) - as natural scientists - described a development in natural sciences from static, mechanistic to dynamic system conceptions with a variety of implications for empirical research and theory building.

This book integrates many of the theories or types of theories of communication under four metatheoretical perspectives. These perspectives are based on the General Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) and more recent developments by Prigogine (1979, 1989) and others. Some comparisons between natural and social sciences are made and relations and differences are described.

Four metatheoretical perspectives on communication were identified:

1. The mechanistic perspective

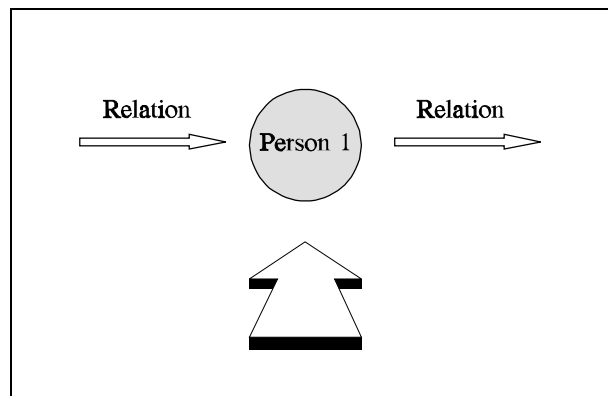
The mechanistic perspective on communication stresses the aspect of the "relation" between two or more components of a system. The formal term "relation" is conceptualized as an "information" that is transmitted through a "channel". Communication refers to the fact that the information has an impact on its receiver. A typical representative is the "Sender-Receiver-Model" by Shannon & Weaver (1949).



2. The psychological perspective

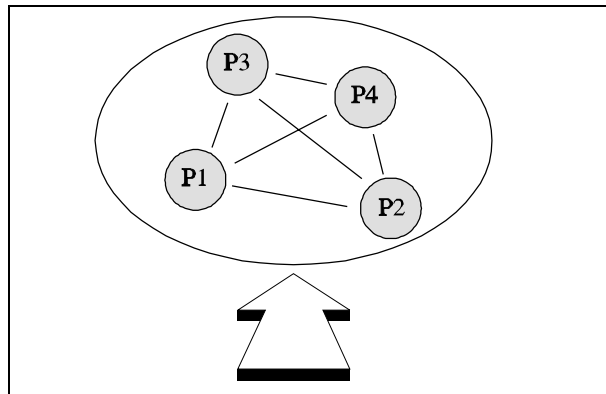
From a psychological perspective the "elements" of a communication system - the persons - are the focus of analysis. These persons are not passive receivers of a message but active individuals who process informations with specific mechanisms and use them according to their personal objectives and goals.

The "A-B-X-Model" by Newcomb (1953, 1961) can be considered representative for this perspective.



3. The closed systems perspective

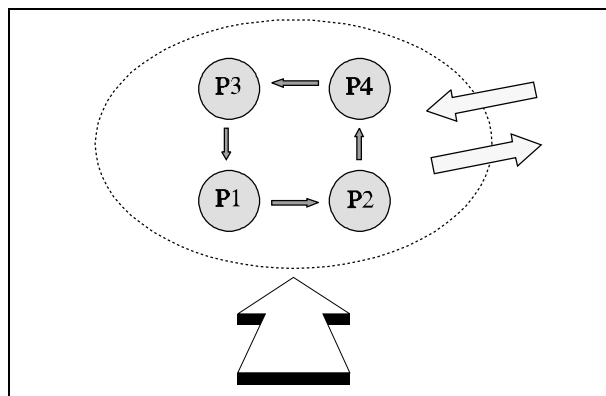
The closed systems perspective views communication processes on a macroscopic level of the system as a whole. According to the postulate of Gestalt Psychology the whole system is different from the sum of its elements. Macroscopic processes are not necessarily contained in the processes of the elements.



Communication in this perspective leads to "convergence" of opinions, attitudes etc. and to common symbols and shared meanings. Typical for this view is the "Convergence Model" of communication by Rogers & Kincaid (1981)

4. The open systems perspective

In an open systems perspective systems are constituted by continuously interacting processes. Communication is a means for creating and maintaining these processes. Theoretically this conceptualization is described for example by Weick (1985). The analysis of communication can take place on a micro- or macroscopic level. The first



refers to the possibility to analyse communication patterns between two or more persons (usually supervisor and subordinate) over a certain period of time. On a macroscopic level communication parameters (norms, etc.) are described with reference to their stability under different or changing conditions.

These four perspectives are not totally independent of each other but also represent different steps in evolutionary development. On the basis of some results of ethology, cultural anthropology, molecular biology and psychology a conceptual frame is described that outlines a possible course of the development of communication as part of the evolution of social systems.