Conflict Resolution: The Role of Human Communication

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TRULY effective and successful human negotiation and the resolution of conflict (also where South Africa is concerned) can only be developed by a process preceding actual negotiation. Destructive tendencies resulting from perceptions or expectations deeply rooted in different cultural backgrounds, can only be overcome through the conscious effort to create a basic, mutually acceptable communication sub-culture in which trust plays a central role. Rather than approaching any given negotiation situation with a fixed, preconceived action model already in mind, communication scholars will have to begin their work much earlier. Individual, social, and cultural components which exist prior to interpersonal communication situations will have to be identified and studied. This approach requires the initial acceptance of complexity, and the ability to allow specific conditions to assist them in discovering and developing situationally appropriate techniques.

It is not only fair, but a requirement for all scientists to identify the world view and the bases or theoretical assumptions, which they bring to the study of their subject. It is too easy to suppose that our mere assocation with so-called "scientific" work, or our use of certain "scientific" methodologies, automatically result in objectivity or a product which has an inherent truth — or any other value.

My own orientation leads me to point out that all contemporary communication theories are based on previously developed and individually accepted theorems, paradigms, or thought

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models which have evolved on the basis of vital, but often unstated *assumptions* about human beings, our world and universe, and their interaction or relationships. Such foundational concepts predetermine to a large extent our focused observations, in a world which presents us with a wide variety of stimuli and a variety of possible interpretations.

In Western cultures, especially in the United States, our theories and models have often been related to task-oriented communication,

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the resolution of problems or conflicts, and so-called barriers or challenges which we encounter during various communication processes. Our assumptions usually result in approaches whose specific and practical purpose is to assist us in intervening in such problem situations through various techniques, as well as by employing various learning and training approaches.

Unfortunately, these assumptions have also frequently resulted in unsupported, or weakly supported conclusions about the change- or adaptive-capabilities of human beings. We have at times ignored our failures, thus avoiding confrontation with our inadequate theoretical assumptions. We have undertaken little *basic* research leading to an understanding of underlying factors in cases of such failures, while heralding limited successes, or the novelty of specific approaches.

As one whose orientation to the study of human communication processes is heavily influenced by the consideration of international and intercultural factors, I find myself in agreement with Simons' (1974:200) statement that,

All human acts and artifacts constitute potential or actual messages ... All communicated messages have potential or actual persuasive effects ... Persuasive messages in social conflicts always take on meaning from their social contexts ... Influence in mixed-motive conflicts is neither a matter of the imposition of power nor friendly meeting of minds; instead, it is an inextricably intertwined combination of persuasive arguments backed up by constraints and inducements.

I am challenged by this brief summary, which indicates major areas of concern for the communication scholar.

Erving Goffman (1974) was among the social scientists who early-on addressed themselves to human sense-making or meaning-developing activities. He is thus one of the most important contributors to our work in communication and negotiation, because he sees human beings not only as *reacting* to an environment or to stimuli, but as individuals who are *actively engaged* in social-environmental interactions. His method, frame analysis, has been used to determine how experiences are organized for the individual. In effect, I find myself in agreement with Goffman's concepts that all new situations are confronted by individuals (1) on the basis of existing stereotypes or schemata; (2) who are capable of letting their perceptions modify later behavior, in other words, who are capable of active involvement, resulting in change; (3) and whose specific ways of acting depend heavily on their personalities and the influence their personalities have on their perceptions. In other words, I am concerned both with an individual's apperceptual style, and thus with that individual's field-dependence or independence as a basis for interaction, and the social environment in which any individual has to exist and interact. (See the extensive discussion of field-dependence and field-independence by Larson in Casmir: Intercultural and International Communication, 1978:478).

It is interesting, against this background that another, more contemporary German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann (1979) provides a number of useful insights exploring the relationship of trust, power, the social setting and interpersonal communication. I share with him a preference for functional analysis because, like him, I feel that *accepting* and *dealing with* complexity is an important function of contemporary communication research and theory development.

All of us have been strongly influenced by reductionist, objectivist assumptions as part of earlier theoretical orientations in the social sciences. As a result, we still tend to be much more comfortable with approaches which search for simplistic cause-effect relationships, or use linear constructs. Complexity appears bewildering to us, unmanageable, and because of our familiarity with methodologies which were developed specifically to respond to more linear or simplistic reductionist theories, we may feel *deprived* of these traditional, comfortable tools, which others provided for our research, when they do not seem to be adequate in complex situations. In other words, as scientists we face the common human condition of insecurity as we attempt to develop new approaches. Having to sever at least some of our comfortable ties to the past is not easy, but I agree with Luhmann (1979:5) when he states:

A second advantage of taking complexity as a fundamental problem is that its high degree of abstraction and universality blurs

the categorical distinction between psycho-logical and sociological theory.

For some of us, well established academic and professional categories have served as a "security-blanket." Giving up that comfort may again not be easy, but I agree with Luhmann (1979:5) that it is necessary, at least if we use approaches based on functional analysis, because such analysis

.... is not a matter of establishing connec-tions between established data or reliable knowledge through which, as a conse-quence, it gains further knowledge; it is con-cerned ultimately with problems and their solutions.

Researchers in the social sciences, who tended to follow models and assumptions pro-vided by the natural sciences, sometimes con-sidered an emphasis on problem solution to be suspect of less scientific. We need to decide if we as communication-scientists, -scholars, or -researchers will have to adopt a similar atti-tude towards our research, or whether we need to overcome it. In my own work and experience, Luhmann's (1979:5) conclusions are very real-istic,

From this perspective (functional analysis, ed.), problems, as well as their solutions, take on their meaning not from some as-sumed invariable, essential, property but from particular positions in a framework of alternative possibilities ... Given this ap-proach, the process of research in functional analysis is open to all kinds of possibilities.

Both Luhmann (1979:6), and I see human beings as conscious of our world's complexity, but also endowed with the possibility of select-ing their environments. Out of that process de-velop "fundamental questions of self-preser-vation" which have significant communicative dimensions.

I have come to see these human interactions as *mutual* cause effect relationships, as does Luhmann (1979:7) when he writes of " ... condi-tions of increasing social complexity" and that in order to deal with them effectively ".... man can and must develop more effective ways of reducing complexity."

Faced with the need for self-preservation in a world of increasing complexity, it becomes al-most self-evident that human beings need to develop trust, or systems of trust as " ... a more effective form of complexity reduction" (Luh-mann, 1979:8). Because I see such trust as providing more and more effective opportuni-ties for experience and action, I see also a need for studying the relationship between trust and various negotiation situations.

One of the more challenging issues raised by Luhmann is the relationship between trust and time. Time, quite clearly, is a culture-bound concept, which provides various opportunities and obstacles, especially in intercultural com-munications. Thus it requires understanding of how time-concepts, and indeed time itself, are used within specific cultural environments by various individuals. The dilemma lies in how to *balance* two aspects of trust and time, because "to show trust is to anticipate the future" (Luh-mann, 1979:10) while recognizing that "trust can only be secured and maintained in the pre-sent" (Luhmann, 1979:12).

My own interest in these problematic aspects of trust, related to both present and future, has been well-illustrated by a Biblical statement from the letter to the Hebrews, which indicates that those who would come to God would have to both "believe that He is" (the present dimen-sion) and that He is "a rewarder of them who seek Him" (the future dimension). Obviously, if even God is aware of this bi-polar relationship between Himself and human beings, it may behoove us to pay some careful attention to it as well.

Let me, therefore, be quite precise, and re-late my general interest to some readiliy identi-fiable, specific problems, within a setting with which you are very familiar, namely that of the present, past and future status of apartheid. As our eco-system, our total environment and cer-tainly our experiences of it, becomes increas-ingly complex, human beings experience a cor-responding growth in the need for assurance about their *present* condition. Trust in the pre-sent situation is frequently directly related to our individual past experiences, and historic ac-counts of the past. But it is equally evident, as Luhmann (1979:13) puts it, "that the formation and consolidation of trust is therefore con-cerned with the future prospects of what is at any given time the present."

An experience which South Africa shares with many other nations, is directly related to the increasing complexity of industrial and

post-industrial societies which we have developed. Apartheid may have been a rather "simple" concept in an agricultural society where relatively little social interaction, and few complex social institutions existed. However, as the South African society made itself increasingly dependent on Black labour and its participation in the process of development, the realities of highly interdependent technological societies caught up with the earlier formulations of apartheid, which had been assumed to work well in those less complex situations. In effect, the maintenance of arbitrary separations between human beings became increasingly impossible. I am personally challenged by Luhmann's (1979:14) significant insights on such dilemmas, because of their direct relationship to the concerns of many contemporary communication scholars.

Whoever wishes to manipulate the present of others must be able to escape from it to another time. The impossibility of this means that all manipulation runs the risk, evident also within its own present, of becoming expressive and thereby betraying its goal. This can of course be obviated to a very large extent through social differentiation, role separation, barriers to communication and control of information (how could one more adequately describe such attempts by systems like apartheid?) — in short by social organization. The effect of this will simply be to arouse universal suspicion of manipulation ... Trust, therefore, can only be maintained if it finds a form which allows it to live with such suspicion and be immune to it.

In brief, any system of social manipulation and control, once it becomes thus identified and publicized, stands the risk of losing legitimacy, because no trust is afforded it in the present situation nor regarding its future viability. Thus suspicion rather than trust takes over. It appears quite obvious that in the case of apartheid and similar manipulative systems, opponents, as long as they have means of communication at their disposal which reach significant numbers of individuals, are capable of widely publicising their lack of trust and thus their lacking hopes for the future as envisioned by authorities, agencies, individuals or organizations in charge of the socio-political process.

Luhmann (1979) has also pointed out that trust is directly related to familiarity. In other words, only if we are familiar with our world and its component parts can we have trust. Some significant, related questions are: What kind of a world are we familiar with? Who interprets that world to us? And how much do we trust those, including the media, who do attempt to make us familiar with our world? In other words, what are the bases of our world-view? In the past, familiarity with the environment was heavily dependent upon cultural informants which were personally known to us, such as members of our families, teachers, and religious leaders. Because of growing mass-media impact, these traditional sources of familiarity have become less significant, and their long-range interpersonal influence has been replaced by vivid images presented in brief, concise, but shallow form in the mass media, or sometimes by political agitators intent on changing the world according to their own perceptions and goals.

This foundational exploration leads us full circle to the initial insistence that human beings *need* to find effective ways of reducing complexity in contemporary societies. Traditionally, the Western problem-solution model has been one which seeks fast results, because of its task- and problem solving-orientation, as well as its frequent crises-based requirements resulting from high interdependence and the low predictability of events within its eco-system. The communication model introduced into that dilemma is based on the concept of negotiation. However, such interactions tend to be limited to immediate concerns, with little appreciation for broader or deeper culturally and socially created bases, human needs and expectations, and individual's apperceptual styles, which are all "brought" to negotiation processes. It is frequently assumed that such factors will have little impact in view of the onslaught of significant crises. Stipulated mutual interests and needs, and the use of "effective communication-techniques" are expected to readiliy overcome such factors, or compensate for them.

Triandis (1976:175), however, provides us with a very different conclusion:

The concept of eco-system distrust seems to be useful. It suggests a focus for efforts to integrate blacks with this point of view into a society which requires trust. One must convince blacks with such points of

view that the system can be trusted, that people can be trusted, and that phenomona in their environment are related to each other in lawful ways. This can probably be done most successfully if the environment is made more reliable. However, it also requires much effort on the part of whites to disconfirm this point of view.

While Triandis' work specifically dealt with Blacks in the United States, and ghetto conditions as they existed and may still exist there, his conclusions appear to have much wider applications as well as validity. If one considers the fact that in industrial, and certainly in technological societies, Whites have had to develop new insights and skills concerning the relationship of individuals to organizations and human interactions, it would seem self-evident that increased problems have also developed our Blacks as far as trust and interpersonal relations are concerned. As our eco-system changes, these problems become especially significant for intercultural communication if one becomes aware that such system-changes tend to be dominated by "White-models" of communication and organization, based on "White-values."

Triandis (1976:175) makes a meaningful summary of the functional value which *distrust* rather than trust may have in Black communities both in the United States and elsewhere, and the resulting negative implications:

A case can be made that eco-system distrust is functional in the ghetto. However, a case can also be made that eco-system distrust is not functional in a modern industrial environment. An important aspect of modern industrial environments is that they are large-scale and assume that people will cooperate, conform to the norms of the group, and adjust to the rules set up by the leadership of the institutions. A person with high eco-system distrust is particularly unlikely to be a good "organization man." Furthermore, such highly bureaucratic institutions are not geared for people with low self-esteem, since they are unable to deal with individual cases, to counsel and support, and help the individual with a low self-esteem. The result is that a low self-esteem person is likely to find such environments very punishing and to leave them. In

short, the economic and social conditions of the ghetto creates psychological conditions which make adjustment to industrial or to middle-class environments extremely difficult, if not impossible.

To the extent then, that individuals from one culture must interact or negotiate with individuals from another one, their *familiarity* with the norms and techniques used in large-scale organizationally-oriented and highly bureaucratic societies, as well as their *trust* based on past-experiences with such systems, will greatly influence required negotiations. In effect, the highly divergent perceptions which individuals bring to any specific interpersonal- or group-communication process may severely limit the effectiveness of such efforts. Given the high complexity of modern-day technological societies, and unfamiliarity with their underlying value systems, their cultural assumptions, and their techniques, members of minorities, the so-called Third World, or others who attempt to interact with those from First World or Western-oriented organizations, face significant problems. As a result, they may consider it to be much "easier" to attempt to destroy the alien, unfamiliar, or, for them, dysfunctional system, than to attempt to learn or accept its unfamiliar rules, value systems and techniques.

Under such circumstances, revolution may seem "easier" than negotiation. That fact is often exploited, by means of what Ellul (1971) calls a "propaganda of agitation." It may appear much more functional to those not included in the initial development of a given system, which produced the negotiation process in the first place, to destroy it. That may be especially true if one has not been meaningfully involved in any *societal* communication processes. Over time, revolution may be seen as an attempt by the non-trusting, non-included individual to finally exert some control both over his present and future condition.

Unfortunately, such control by the poor or the masses is usually just another illusion. Revolution tends to be as much run by elites as other social structures and organizations. Revolutions thus can turn either into an ongoing process of bloodshed and disruption, as individuals try to hammer out mutually satisfactory future goals, or they evolve into another form of corruption, oppression of poor individuals, and

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bureaucratic control by a system which claims to be new, but which frequently resorts to very similar approaches as those used by the one it replaced.

Because, propaganda of agitation, according to Ellul (1971), is intended to disrupt, and to incite against a specified enemy, its ultimate aim is violent action. No wonder, that if specific results and a clearly developed timetable are not provided for the masses, such action may be difficult to stop, and may indeed continue as "new enemies" are found, identified and turned into specific targets. The so-called "Reign of Terror" in France, during its revolution, is an excellent example. It literally drowned in its own blood, as the process of accusation, agitation, and killing turned into an almost endless cycle. Against such a backdrop, negotiation with its assumptions about compromise and *mutually* satisfactory decisions, becomes impossible, and it may even appear to be immoral to the "true" revolutionary. Enemies have to be liquidated, not integrated.

Ellul (1971:71) writes:

Propaganda of agitation, being the most visible and widespread, generally attracts all the attention. It is most often subversive propaganda and has a stamp of opposition. It is led by a party seeking to destroy the government or the established order. It seeks rebellion or war. It has always had a place in the course of history.

The specific approach or technique used in agitation propaganda, is also clearly identified by Ellul (1971:72):

In all cases, propaganda of agitation tries to stretch energies to the utmost, obtain substantial sacrifices, and induce the individual to bear heavy ordeals. It takes him out of his everyday life, his normal framework, and plunges him into enthusiasm and adventure; it opens to him hitherto unsuspected possibilities, and suggests extraordinary goals that nevertheless seem to him completely within reach.

In other words, from a communication standpoint and within the framework of this paper, at the very least an illusion of signifcant *participation* in the process and *trust* is thus created, something which the established order usually had not been able to provide. Ellul points out, furthermore, that such propaganda is especial-ly effective among the less-educated and less-informed. The use of certain key words is very much part of that approach, including, but certainly not limited to such terms as "independence" or "uhuru." However, a very significant challenge results when revolutionary movements attempt to legitimize their power, stabilize their social conditions, and turn to building rather than destroying some social order. As Ellul (1971:76) indicates:

One essential problem remains. When a revolutionary movement is launched, it operates, as we have said with agitation propaganda; but once the revolutionary party has taken power, it must begin immediately to operate with integration propaganda ... But the transition from one propaganda to the other is extremely delicate and difficult. After one has, over the years, excited the masses, flung them into adventures, fed their hopes and their hatreds, opened the gates of action to them, and assured them that all their actions were just a fight, it is difficult to make them re-enter the ranks, to integrate them into the normal framework of politics and economics. What has been unleashed cannot be brought under control so easily, particularly habits of violence or of taking the law into one's own hands — these disappear very slowly.

Thus negotiation and conflict-resolution, by means of previously untried communication processes, once again becomes an acute need. As change turns to new stability and conformity, old revolutionaries may become a threat rather than heroes and they are replaced by bureaucrats, often starting the entire cycle over again. From a North-American perspective, Millar and Rogers (1976) point out that axiomatically complex human relatioships involve the three dimensions of control, trust, and intimacy. In other words, they once more remind us of the vital interaction between the social-cultural environment and individual perceptions or expectations, illustrated above by Ellul's contributions, and Luhmann's insights. If one adds to that the four phases in decision-making directly related to human communication, which Fisher (1970) has identified as orientation, conflict, emergence and reinforcement, one cannot escape the important and decisive consideration of *interaction between*

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individual perceptions and social conditions suggested by Luhmann, "wrapped" as it were, in an ongoing communication process.

If one partner in a negotiation has had little opportunity to orient himself, or become familiar with the given eco-system, or is culturally unprepared to understand the process, the values, and the expectations forming the foundations of interpersonal interaction, grave problems result. These are further aggravated if the other is similiarly ignorant of his negotiation partner's expectations, cultural background, or perceptions. Thus, a great deal of dissent, conflict and waste of effort may result, in spite of any apparent desire to communicate with one another. Even greater problems have to be faced, if such a desire is not present. Bateson (195) has pointed out that human interaction is very much a question of *relationship*. Symmetry or complimentarity, according to Bateson and the Palo Alto group, determine much of the outcome of negotiations. For instance, dominant behavior which has been rewarded in some situations or cultures, may become highly destructive in others. American negotiation partners, or individuals who are assigned to various intercultural communication processes, usually are selected on the basis of the formal position or recognition they have achieved in thier own organizations, as a "reward" for relatively domineering behaviour. Their partners from another culture, may have been selected on the basis of very different qualities from those valued in American society. Since neither has been involved in the selection process leading to the choice of their negotiation partners, and they have had little opportunity to work out interpersonal relations because of the urgency of a given problem, the only interaction evolves very abruptly around a negotiation table. To put it another way, positive, meaningful and *instantaneous* relationships are expected to evolve almost miraculously, which must replace or supercede long-term cultural/social experiences brought to the meeting place.

Elsewhere (see: Casmir, *Intercultural and International Communication,* 1978) I suggested a communication model responsive to the concepts of "mutuality", "trust" and "consubstantiality" developed by others. It basically requires participation by all involved in the *de-velopment* of what I have called a "third realm", functionally and situationally created. That approach tries to avoid any attempt at one-sided "persuasion" or undue "influence", which tend to make the perceptions and goals of one partner so dominant that all that is left for the other is to be either submissive or to revolt. It is not the traditional "Western-model", which tends to require compromise or the victory of one side over the other. Rather, it *situationally* develops rules and norms, and begins by identifying values which are acceptable to all sides in the negotiation process. It even allows for the development of specific new techniques which are functional in a given situation. It operates, in other words, as much as possible, not on the basis of *preconceived* structures, values, techniques and expectations, but rather on the conscious evolution of a situational "communication sub-culture", which is in the best mutual interest of all participants. Required for such an approach, obviously, is time, and association over time. However, it makes possible, as Luhmann suggested, *trust* in future, because of present *experience* and *familiarity.* It is a model of communication based on *human* needs for trust and security, rather than one based on the primacy of crisis-solutions or *institutional* needs.

I believe such an approach to be in keeping with pheonomological assumptions identified by Hyde and Smith (1979:350), as well as others:

An interpretation is, therefore, never a "presuppositionless apprehending" of experience; it is always conditioned by the understanding that constitutes the intersubjective domain of a persons' culture wherein the interpretation originates. This intersubjective realm of understanding, in turn, constitutes the parameters of rationality, wherein the members of the culture learned to think and behave in ways that other members can sensibly comprehend. Intersubjective thought and behavior presuppose a fore-having.

If there is any way to overcome destructive tendencies which we may bring to a communication situation, it has to be through the *conscious* effort to *create* a basic, mutually, acceptable communication sub-culture, which is not merely dependent upon past experience

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and preconceptions. Indeed, when we discover successful, untrained communicators in intercultural communication situations, we usually can identify such unconscious or subconscious attempts to create a mutually supportive interactional process. It is then not based on dominance or even compromise, but on respect, and concern with more than the past or even immediate maintenance needs of a formal process.

This model also requires that in negotiation processes we identify the relative field-dependence or field-independence of individuals. While all human beings will have to begin with preconceived stereotypes or schemata which are made necessary by the human conditions, it is clear that relatively *field-dependent* people need and will actively seek clues and inputs from their environment. Field-independent individuals, on the other hand, are much more dependent on their own internal "frame-of-reference". as they interact with others. I make no value judgements here. However, it needs to be understood, that if field-dependent people are involved in negotiation processes, they will be more open to their environment, while relatively field-independent individuals will be much less dependent upon their environment and more on *internal* stimuli and processes, as they try to "make sense" of their world.

What I am calling for, then, is a process *preceding* actual negotiations. Specific techniques should be allowed to evolve out of situational requirements and available human resources. Only then would it seem possible to create pre-conditions which may result in changing deep-seated perceptions or expectations, deeply rooted in cultural backgrounds, while producing mutually acceptable and congruent behavior or results.

The challenge to communication-scholars and -scientists thus is to *begin* their work, if it is to lead to effective negotiations, much earlier than we have done in the past. It appears to me that we need to learn to identify the individual- and social- or cultural-components which exist prior to interpersonal communication situations, including negotiations. Such efforts require very different assumptions from those we have used within a simpler reductionist-objectivist framework of the past. The approach suggested here requires the *initial acceptance* of complexity, and *variety* of possible approaches to negotiations, based on available resources and situations. It requires the ability to let specific conditions assist us in discovering and developing techniques, rather than approaching any given situation with a fixed, preconceived action model already in mind.

Science, and certainly Social Science, can have an important impact on the human condition. Communication, and especially the negotiation process, requires concern with *situationally appropriate techniques.* Just as important, however, is our ongoing attempt to understand ever more adequately those individual, cultural and social *pre-conditions* which shape the total eco-system in which human interactions evolve. Only then, does it seem to me, can we hope to begin to responsibly assist in the development of truly effective, efficient and successful human negotiations and the resolution or management of conflicts.

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