Journal for Ethics in Social Studies
ISSN: 2559 - 7612
Covered in: CrossRef; RePEc; CEEOL; KVK; WorldCat; Google Scholar

2021, Volume 5, Issue 1, pages: 01-10 | https://doi.org/10.18662/jess/5.1/37

Communication within Couples - Function and Dysfunction

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Abstract: If we were to analyze most of the reasons for marital separation, we would come to the conclusion that many of them should have been subject to mediation rather than dissolution. The way in which the partners communicate as a couple positively or negatively influences the relationship between them and, through them, the relationship with the extended family. The level of self-esteem, fear of failure, fear of conflicts, dominance tendencies, cultural imperatives, etc. are among the main causes that influence the quality of communication between spouses. And if sociological and psychological theories see the conflict as only being a state that highlights the differences between partners, those that should later be subject to marital self-mediation, most individuals do not see the difference between conflict and scandal. They see conflict as an inevitable failure and its anticipation mainly creates the strategy of avoiding it than that of a frontal approach and solving the problem. Effective communication is based on the principle of openness towards the other and sincerity. The sincerity of one stimulates the sincerity of the other and the partners thus know the true feelings and needs of the other. The study aims to highlight the main resources of effective communication, insisting also on gender peculiarities in communication and specific dysfunctions in the message encryption algorithm.

Keywords: *communication; couple; communication disfunctions; gender stereotypes in communication.*

How to cite: Apostu, I. (2022). Communication within Couples - Function and Dysfunction. *Journal for Ethics in Social Studies, 5*(1), 01-10. https://doi.org/10.18662/jess/5.1/37

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1. Introduction

Communication is an essential, indispensable mechanism in the development of human relationships, which differentiates the animal world from the human world, through words. It is "a fundamental way of psychosocial interaction of people, achieved through symbols and social-generalized meanings of reality, in order to obtain stability or changes in individual or group behavior" (Tucicov et al. 1981, p. 54). A first group of interaction is the family, communication being the fundamental process through which the relationships between the partners that compose it are born, develop and mature (Huidu, 2018). The role of communication is thus essential in the formation and functioning of the couple as a system.

The nature of the relationship and its evolution are influenced by the way the partners of the couple communicate with each other, by the verbal and non-verbal language used, by the way they are understood, by the accuracy and clarity of the messages sent and received (Necula et al., 2018; Sandu et al., 2019; Sandu & Damian, 2018). Through open and honest communication, the information held by one partner becomes available to the other partner, ensuring good cohesion and thereby family solidarity (Galeș & Florea, 2021).

A relationship in which the partners do not express or listen to each other, do not understand their perceptions of reality, do not recognize their experiences and feelings or deny them is a relationship on its deathbed (Nuță, 2002b, p. 115). The individual is a communicative being who needs to express his thoughts, feelings, needs to be listened to and understood, needs to know the feelings (Florea, et al., 2020), opinions and wishes of the other (Juravle et al., 2016), to receive and provide information, communication being the most important act of the human being.

Communication means "telling those around you who you are, what you want, why you want a certain thing and what are the means you will use to achieve your goals" (Anghel, 2005, p. 7). Communication as a couple means speaking, but also staying silent, listening and understanding between partners, based on the availability of sharing the reality of desires, values, joys and suffering (Terec-Vlad, 2015). "Communication means creating bridges where there are chasms, making differences meet, bringing light where there is obscurity or darkness" (Nuță, 2002a, p. 12).

The communication process is based on several elements, necessary for optimal, efficient action between partners. These elements of the communication process are: transmitter, receiver, message, communication

channels, coding, decoding and feedback. The central element of the communication process is the sender, who represents the point of origin of the act of communication, being the one who, based on some reasons, initiates the communication and formulates the message he wants to address to the partner (Micquail, 1999, p. 29).

To transmit a message, the communicator must think about what he wants to communicate and how he will communicate it. He sets the purpose and meaning of the message that he wants his partner to decode and understand (Barbu 2015; 2016). In order for the message to gain meaning, its content must address issues that belong to both the sender's and the receiver's experience (Barbu et al., 2019). The sender is the only one able to encode the message he is about to transmit, in a logical form, known also to the receiver. If the message is not correctly coded, then its reception will also be erroneous, communication becoming practically useless (Anghel, 2003, pp. 34-35).

Once the communicator is satisfied with the encoding of the message, it is transmitted to the partner, who receives the message and decodes it. The receiver must make sure that he received correctly and that he understood exactly what the sender wanted, because he transforms the message into ideas, thoughts, emotions, feelings, desires, following the process of his own decoding. The way in which communication is carried out can support cohesion between partners, by providing signs of belonging in the form of a common language or conventions of verbal or non-verbal addressing (Micquail, 1999, p. 106).

The act of communication can be done both verbally and especially nonverbally. Of these, verbal communication includes the logical level (of words), which represents 7% of the total act of communication, the paraverbal level (signals transmitted by voice), which represents 28% of communication, and the remaining 65% represent the non-verbal level, that of signals sent by the body. Thus, verbal communication has a weight of 35%, the remaining 65% representing non-verbal communication (Nuţă, 2004, p. 21). Successfully achieving these levels results in effective communication.

2. Communication within the couple

Communication as a couple, both verbal and non-verbal, initiates, develops and strengthens the emotional and mental bonds between the couple partners, thus ensuring the solidarity, authenticity and durability of the relationship. Without communication, that may seem like a union from

the outside, like a cohesion of the conjugal couple, in reality is just a deficient relationship.

Sometimes we want to tell others how much they mean to us, but we don't. We want to hear comforting and affectionate words and we are disappointed by how rare these messages are (Glenn Van Ekeren, 2000, p. 56). It is important that the partner does not wait for the other to take the initiative, sometimes manipulatively counting on his positive feelings, but to give up such thoughts and express what he feels, thus offering pleasure and satisfaction to the loved one. Unlocking such a situation does not come instantly from both partners; one of them will have to initiate an effective type of communication, that will stimulate marital harmony again. The appearance of conflicts in the couple that have the effect of blocking communication should not be seen as a failure. Conflict is a spontaneous or controlled expression of dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the marital relationship.

Therefore, making the decision to communicate must first mean making the decision to communicate honestly. "Pretending, censoring, dissimulating, lying - these are unhealthy actions for the harmony of a couple" (Nuţă, 2004, p. 48). If there is no honesty between the partners, that need to communicate emotions, then the partners will feel insecure and the relationship will not evolve, even if they stay together for many years, but will remain at a superficial level. They may often appear to be happy, but in reality, they are more miming happiness than experiencing it.

In order to increase the unity and solidarity of the married couple, apart from the emotional honesty that exists between the partners, it is also important that they keep within normal limits certain indicators that maintain the stability of the couple during communication. An important indicator in communication is the tone of voice, which refers to the way the voice rises or falls during a conversation between partners, which is important "both as a vocal technique and as a tool of persuasion. It is the tone of voice that conveys feelings and attitude, while words only convey information" (Prutianu, 2004, p. 15).

Through the tone of voice, partners can send cold messages, or messages full of warmth. Pleasure stimulates listening, while displeasure inhibits it, which is why it's good for partners to adopt that voice intensity that best disposes them to communication. "Choosing the tone according to the context and the situation in which one communicates is a problem that belongs to the science and art of communication of each speaker" (Hariuc, 2002, p. 130).

Volume (voice strength) is another indicator that the partners must take into account when communicating. The strong voice can inspire force, domination, but may also be a mask of a combative person who feels in danger and tries to do something or it can be a person who naturally has a high energy potential, and the risk is being perceived as aggressive. At the opposite pole there is the low volume of the voice, which inspires a passive, uninitiative, insecure person (Prutianu, 2004, p. 16).

The frequency with which one speaks is another indicator and refers to the verbal rate, which can be: slow (when speaking up to 200-250 words/minute), normal (250-500 words/minute), fast (over 500 words/minute minute) (Nuță, 2004, p. 25). Some individuals want to draw attention to what they want to communicate by acting subtly, by interrupting communication. Thus, pauses can be used to draw attention to the importance of the words to be said (rhetorical pause), they can be used as a result of some embarrassment or as an invitation to intervene in the dialogue for the partner (Chelcea, 2005, p. 84).

What is defining for the communication style and its effectiveness in a couple is the quality of the messages, their congruence and not the quantity. "Knowing what, when and how to communicate, in a partnership situation, constitutes an essential availability for the continuation of life as a couple" (Mitrofan & Mitrofan, 1991, p. 186).

Beyond the tangible aspects of communication, a whole series of reactions, gestures, discreet meanings double the words, giving them style, meanings and nuances. These are the specific elements of a deep type of relationship and are described by the concept of nonverbal communication. "Many human meanings - even most of them - are outlined by touch, expression, gestures, facial expression, with/without the help of words. Individuals observe each other, listening to pauses and intonation, observing clothing, looks or facial tension, all of this is how I take words into consideration" (Chiru, 2003, p. 31).

The bodily relation of the gestures prepares, supports and transports the verbal content of the message. "When the meaning of the non-verbal message conflicts with the verbal one (we say one thing and want another, highlighted by the non-verbal expressions), we are inclined to believe the non-verbal message, since non-verbal communications are often much stronger than the words that are spoken, revealing the emotional part of our communications" (Hariuc, 2002, p. 120).

In Leaher's approach, visual contact is the one that "claims, first of all, its function of regulating interaction, and then, defines positions of power and status, influence attitudinal change and persuasion, communicate

emotions and indicates the degree of affectivity, interest and attraction in relation to the interlocutor" (Chiru, 2003, p. 39).

According to the author J.F. Perez, the most effective way of communication is understanding, as it provides a consensus between the message sent, the behavior and the emotions that the partner who sends the message manifests and feels. The partner who is used to communicating understanding, shows calmness, tenacity, honesty, ensuring the balance and solidarity of the married couple (Mitrofan & Mitrofan, 1996, p. 175).

3. Communication – gender specific aspects

A faulty communication style can generate misunderstandings, problems between the partners of the married couple, "and marital satisfaction appears to be directly proportional to the ability to have an honest dialogue with the other" (Mitrofan, 2002, p. 144). According to the reports of the author J.Gray, 74% of women who work and 98% of women who do not work believe that men's big flaw is the fact that they are not willing to communicate with them, especially at the end of the day (Tudose, 2005, p. 44).

Most often, blockages occur at the level of verbal communication. Although they speak the same language, they do not always manage to understand each other, the words having different emotional contents. Trivial problems can end up producing heated discussions which, if not resolved in time, can generate conflicts. In order to communicate, partners learn to recognize certain similarities of different situations, they learn from their own experiences, but at the level of communication, barriers and blockages may appear that disrupt the communication process between them.

Great difficulties in communication appear, first of all, as a result of a lack of knowledge between partners. It is difficult for couples to listen to each other when they communicate, it is difficult to make themselves heard when they do not know each other very well. That is why it is important that the partners acquire a minimum of information about the other. As the partners get to know each other, there is a transition from the set of "I-you" images to the image of the couple, the image of "we". This image of "we" manifests the tendency to overlap the partners, ensuring a unity and cohesion of the existing relationship between the partners (Mitrofan & Mitrofan, 1991, p. 96).

Focusing the dialogue on the process or goal constitutes another barrier in communication between partners, due to the existing differences

between men and women. Men communicate best when the dialogue is focused on precise topics, on obtaining results, compared to women who are process-oriented, more than goal-oriented (Nuță, 2001, pp. 153-154). Men value achievements, they want to express their competence, their motto being to analyze, to look for solutions before expressing their opinion.

Women are more process oriented than goal oriented, their motto being to analyze out loud. They like to talk and it is much easier for them to reach an understanding of a subject if they express it out loud, the purpose of the conversation being that of self-expression. Men are preoccupied with obtaining results or reaching certain goals, a certain status, efficiency "to the end". Women, however, focus on communication, cooperation, harmony, love, sharing and mutual relationship (Tudose, 2005, p. 129).

The communication barrier appears due to the fact that women like to talk, to express their opinions out loud, while men want to know exactly the purpose of the conversation to guarantee their effectiveness. That is why it is preferable for women to clearly and directly formulate what they expect from their partners, in order to be able to communicate and obtain the desired results. This is due to the way information is processed, which is another barrier to communication, also due to the differences between men and women.

Men process information silently and communicate only the end result, as they are solution oriented, often requiring time to think. They reflect in silence, search within themselves for an adequate answer, formulate it in their thoughts and finally speak it, because they have not developed the verbal ability to use words for communication (Tudose, 2005, p. 43). Women, on the other hand, think out loud, sharing their gradual discoveries with their partners.

The difficulty in communication arises due to the fact that women understand men's silence as their way of ignoring them. That is why it is preferable for women to explain to men their way of being, to give them time to think, without pressuring them or forcing them to verbalize their thoughts. Another impediment to achieving communication between partners is the tendency to prejudice communication as uninteresting. The fundamental error of partners adopting this attitude consists in ignoring the fact that sometimes they tend to classify an information as uninteresting, before listening to the ideas presented by the partner. Whatever the communication situation, the lack of interest of the partners in receiving the messages they address, inevitably lead to the failure of communication, to the distorted understanding of the meaning of the messages. Another barrier in the successful implementation of the communication process between the

partners is the way of expressing emotional feelings, due to the fact that, unlike women, men have a harder time accessing emotional feelings (Nuță, 2001).

Men lack confidence in their emotional contact skills, as they are self-oriented towards logical thinking, which is why they will not feel comfortable expressing their feelings towards their partner. The communication barrier appears precisely because women do not understand the difficulty of their partners in talking as easily about their fears and vulnerabilities, in expressing their feelings towards them and pressuring them, labeling them as "emotionless".

To be able to communicate effectively with men, the simplest strategy is to not interrupt them when they are talking. But, due to the gender differences between women and men, it is difficult for women not to interrupt them, because they feel the need to show their direct participation, so they cannot refrain from expressing their own opinions (Tudose, 2005, p. 46).

4. Conclusions

Certainly, there are differences in communication between men and women. Behind these differences, whole series of stereotypes and jokes seek their justifications. In such logic, men appear oversaturated with the verbal appetite of women and women appear dissatisfied with the degree of participation of men in their discussions. Many times, partners operate on the principle of "you are to blame!". The easiest thing for everyone is to pass the responsibility, the assumption and the blame. For this reason, communication becomes the strategy of self-protection, in which the discourse does not necessarily pursue the objectivity of the situations, but the strategy of individual security.

Phrases become strategic, everyone tries to reach their interest and relationships become artificial. Gary Smalley points out that some couples with a longevity of more than a decade do not, in fact, have at least 10 years of marital relationship, but 1-2 years of relationship repeated at least 5 or 10 times, because a dysfunctional communication limits the couple to a low level of privacy. Without effective communication, marital relationships become self-exhausting. Some will separate, while others will experience the latency of long-term unhappiness.

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