

THE IMPORTANCE OF POSITIVE LANGUAGE FOR THE QUALITY OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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*Words know about us things we don't
know about them (Salome, 2002)*

Abstract. The present paper aims to explore and highlight the importance of positive language for the quality of interpersonal relationships, as stated in the specialised literature. The analysis is particularly relevant to practitioners working in helping professions. We underline both the significance of the power of words, grounded in their capacity to do harm or good, we describe the features of positive communication and identify solutions for a positive communications to increase the quality of interpersonal relations.

Key words: communication, positive language, interpersonal relationships

Introduction

The academic interest regarding the connection between language and the quality of human relationships springs from the fact that we live in a network of social relationships which are based on the complex, diverse and

dynamic interaction between individuals. Communication is fundamental for human interaction and is considered as one of the key factors in the development of a relationship (Finne and Grönroos, 2009; Dagger, David and Ng, 2011; Gavrilă-Ardelean, M. and Gavrilă-Ardelean, L., 2016).

Although the research in the area of verbal communication, as well as that of interpersonal relationships, has a long history, beginning with the 1980's, the specialised findings in the fields of psychology, behavioural sciences, social sciences have specifically highlighted and confirmed the importance of human communication for interpersonal relationships. The important role of positive language has been demonstrated for all human relationships – within the family, professional environment, personal friendships, etc.

For the sake of clarity, we will begin to address our chosen subject by focusing on the main concepts in question.

Positive communication and good quality relationships

One of the most influential descriptions of communication in world literature is that of the ancient book of *Proverbs* (incorporated into the Jewish and Christian biblical canon). The book makes use of a number of terms which are particularly significant in describing communication: lips, mouth, speech, tongue, and word. Thus: "The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment" (Proverbs 12:18-19);¹ "Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up" (Proverbs 12:25); "The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit" (Proverbs 15:4); "Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity (Proverbs 21:23).

Moving to recent scholarship, a particularly detailed definition of positive communication is that of O. A. Lentovich (2014), who describes it first of all as being characterised by certainty, acceptance, agreement or permission – it is associated with conviction, trust, assurance, gratitude, doubtlessness, precision, approval; secondly, it is regarded as having a positive, praiseworthy, favourable, and beneficial outcome; thirdly, it is said to express support, enthusiasm, peace, optimism, energy, help, and strength; fourthly, it shows progress or improvement, leading to development, movement in a beneficial and promising direction, it is full of hope and optimism; fifthly, it is efficient,

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¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version.

useful, productive, pragmatic, constructive, and practical, rather than theoretical.

When seeking to define good quality human relationships, Fincham and Rogge (2010) point out to a lack of consensus among specialists and mention the wide variety of definitions in specialised literature. Thus, Hassebrauck and Fehr (2002) suggest a number of related terms, such as: satisfaction, adjustment, success, happiness, company, and functionality. Also, Fletcher, Simpson and Thomas (2000) have identified six distinct constructs which have often been used to describe good quality relationships: satisfaction (Hendrick, 1988), commitment (Adams and Jones, 1997), trust (Holmes și Boon, 1990), closeness and intimacy (Aron, Aron and Smollan, 1992), passion (Aron and Westbay, 1996) and love (Fehr and Russell, 1991).

A clear majority of specialists around the world agree that positive relationships are closely connected with good quality interpersonal relationships. Harper, Wiens and Matarazzo (1978) have highlighted the role of communication in social interactions, arguing that the (verbal and non-verbal) communication abilities are essential in the construction of social relationships. Montgomery (1988) sees communication as the means whereby good quality relationships are maintained or even as the relationship itself (in its visible form), so that the quality of human relationship is clearly defined by the nature of communication.

At family level, more and more studies show that positive communication is at the heart of interpersonal relationships. Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) argue that long term harmony in family life is associated with positive communication, while negative communication is strongly associated with poor couple relationship (Arcury, 2013). Good communication is essential in a key element of functional families, while most family conflicts are deeply rooted in the communication difficulties among family members (Neagoe, 2007; Trancă and Runcan, 2013). Wiley (2006) argues that a strong couple relationship requires efficient communication, good communication skills, and adequate conflict management. Also, according to a study by Barnett and Rivers (1996), the respondents agreed that the quality of their relationship with their partners was crucial for their emotional connection, which, in turn, was defined as „a partner who truly speaks to you, who is a good listener, who is a good friend, who cares about you and appreciates you as a person, who does his or her part so that the relationship works”.

Referring to professional relationships, numerous authors claim that communication is at the centre of relationships (Fairhurst, 2016; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006). West and Turner (2006) believe that interpersonal communication helps people establish and improve their relationships at work. Fairhurst and Chandler have demonstrated that the

relationship between employees and their supervisors is built along the lines of their routine conversation. Thus, high quality relationships are characterised by communication in which employers and supervisors minimise the power distance between them, making use of communication patterns such as personal conversation, value convergence, informal problem-solving, while poor quality relationships are characterised by communication which stresses the power gap, close monitoring of performances, threats, and competition (Fairhurst and Chandler, 1989; Sias, 2009).

In a similar vein, Tabler, Scammon, Kim, Farrell, Tomoiaia-Costisel, and Magill (2014) show that the adequate response to other people's emotions, as well as good management of uncertainties and the encouragement of personal trust are critical aspects of interpersonal communication between medical staff and their patients. From the patients' point of view, it is particularly important that they have the sense of being adequately heard and understood. High quality communication between staff and patients is closely related to the continuity factor in long term care. Similar findings are also highlighted by the research which has been conducted by Ha, Anat and Longnecker (2010), who show that the key factor of good relationships between medical doctors and their patients is efficient communication – it is the art and the heart of medicine!

The Power of Words

Given the fundamental role of words for interpersonal relationships, we shall try to create a picture of the power of words (to help or to harm), based on specialised literature. There are many popular sayings which tend to minimise the power of words, such as: deeds speak louder than words; an image is worth a thousand words, etc. Responding to this popular perception, we will try to show that words are capable to exercise an incredible power.

When referring to the power of words, we are referring to the transformations which our words can produce – at the level of cognition, feelings, attitudes and behaviours – in those with whom we interact.

Extant research on family relationships shows that families who practice a predominantly positive communication are less likely to develop behavioural problems, while these problems are much more likely to occur in families where negative communication prevails (Xiao, Li and Stanton, 2011). The communication patterns among partners are constantly linked to the quality of their relationship (Guerrero, Anderson and Afifi, 2011). Also, Gottman (1994) has identified four negative communication patterns, namely: criticism, defensiveness, disregard and blockages. These are regarded as the main problems which function as barriers to conflict resolution and are seen as capable to harm a relationship. Criticism attacks the other person's personality and devalues the relationship. Defensiveness implies the refusal of admitting

one's responsibility for a certain action by placing the blame on the other. Disregard for the other shows the lack of respect and may include insults, inappropriate jokes or sarcasm towards the other person. Blockages in communication indicate an emotional fracture among the partners, so that when they speak they have the feeling that they are not heard because the other partner is proud, hostile, cold or uninterested. These patterns are particularly harmful when they are regular, mutual and insufficiently balanced by positive behavior.

The psychologists Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley (1995) have identified a close connection between the communication with the children during their first years of life and the children's later academic performance. Two different types of communication have been identified, with contrasting effects on the children: one type, leading to poor academic development, uses very few words and includes a lot of interdictions and negative messages; the other, stimulating good academic development, uses a rich vocabulary and positive messages.

Key characteristics of positive communication

Scholarly literature in the field affords us the possibility to single out a number of characteristics of positive communication.

For Socha and Pitts (2012), positive communication includes those messages which stimulate hedonic happiness (e.g. positive influences, positive feelings) and eudemonic happiness (e.g. self-efficiency, mutual support, positive character traits, ethics).

According to Lentovich (2014), positive communication is a complex set of several variables, which, if combined in a live interaction, will produce a new quality of relationships. This may be defined as an interaction which is based on positive feelings, with regard to the mutual and satisfactory understanding of all parts. Thus, the components of positive communication include: positive intentionality, initiative, adaptation, empathetic listening, and social support.

Based on Cameron's research (2008), positive communication generates information exchange, interpersonal interaction and positive feelings, which enhance the connectedness within organisations.

Hamel (2005) describes positive communication as the lack of conflict in relationships and includes: words of appreciation and praise, compliments, encouragements, support and the expression of empathy.

Concluding remarks

Even a cursory investigation of the possibility that words can be used in order to improve a relationship is sufficient to validate the observation that

positive language is not a eutopia. To be sure, positive language and positive communication are not a panacea or a magic potion for interpersonal problems. Nor should they be regarded as a replacement of positive interaction within relationships. Instead, they should be seen as an augmentation of such communication, which sees positive messages as a deliberate investment into the potential of developing the personal strengths of all those who take part in a relationship (Gavrilă-Ardelean, M., 2015).

Alain Bosquet (as quoted by Salome, 2002) writes that "before being put into words, a statement, like a mammalian, must develop within a womb, where it receives the right of having a meaning, a sound, an origin". Thus, the thoughtful selection of words, before they are spoken, can undoubtedly have a major role in avoiding dysfunctional relationships and enhancing the quality of human interaction.

Within the context of helping professions, the practitioner offers information, support, and direction. The positive use of language is therefore essential. The way in which the practitioner uses her words, voice, gestures, facial expressions or visual contact can profoundly determine the quality of the service. In line with extant scholarship, which has been analysed in this paper, our conclusion is that positive language is a key element in the development of interpersonal relationships in general and in the practice of helping professionals in particular.

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