Russian Journal of Communication
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrjc20

Interpersonal communication: qualities and culture

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To cite this article: Michelle Scollo & Donal Carbaugh (2013): Interpersonal communication: qualities and culture, Russian Journal of Communication, 5:2, 95-103

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2013.805664

Russian Journal of Communication, 2013
Vol. 5, No. 2, 95–103, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2013.805664

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication: qualities and culture

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(*Received 1 May 2013; final version received 11 May 2013*)

This essay introduces a special issue of the *Russian Journal of Communication* on "New Directions in Russian Interpersonal Communication Research". The essay includes a brief overview of the field of interpersonal communication and discussion of a component often absent from its conceptualization, culture. The authors offer a new way of treating interpersonal communication, focusing on the situated study of interactional forms, structures, their cultural functions and meanings. Synopses of the five articles in the special issue are given, with these used to illustrate distinctive features of Russian interpersonal communication in some scenes and how interpersonal communication is culturally patterned and shaped.

Keywords: interpersonal communication; culture; Russia; ethnography of communication; cultural discourse analysis

The study of interpersonal communication enjoys a long and distinguished history. It is also a complex one, built as it is from a series of different research programs and trajectories. Often traced to the early 1900s and the later Chicago School in the works of Georg Simmel and Charles Horton Cooley, interpersonal communication studies took root in explorations of social processes of developing conceptions of self (through Cooley's "looking glass self" and later George Herbert Mead's studies of symbolic interaction) and the other (through Simmel's concept of the stranger and symbolic forms). There are also important contributing trajectories in the 1920s from Harvard's Business School through Elton Mayo's works in interaction processes and in the 1930s in the study of group dynamics as well as Bales' early works in interaction process analysis (see Barnlund, 1968; Knapp, Daly, Albada, & Miller, 2002; also see Carbaugh & Berry, 2001).

Reflecting social moments, as intellectual studies seem to do, and skipping decades of important works, the study of interpersonal communication in the 1960s and 1970s Vietnam War era in the USA focused on qualities of communication which could build more positive social relationships and could also contribute to better models of the person. A prominently powerful work such as Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson's (1967) *Pragmatics of human communication* demonstrates several ingredients in such a focus on persons and relationships. Early textbooks such as Keltner's

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Interpersonal speech-communication in 1970, Brown's and Keller's *Monologue to dialogue* in 1973 and later Stewart's *Bridges not walls* (from 1973 onward) illustrate the move to studying interpersonal communication as tied to the situated ethical considerations of living well, together.

While it is not our purpose here to sort through these variously complex historical trajectories, it is nonetheless instructive to remind ourselves about them. And when doing so, we can better understand from whence studies of interpersonal communication have come and anticipate directions where they may be going.

For purposes of introducing this special issue, we draw attention to several ways scholars have understood interpersonal communication, then note one basic inevitable quality we believe has been lacking in traditional scholarship.

Interpersonal communication as dyadic: Several scholars of interpersonal communication have over the years explored the unique dynamics of dyads and intimate couples. Wilmot's (1980) book, *Dyadic communication*, as Fitzpatrick's (1988) studies of dyads and family communication are both focused on interactions unique to couples, marital or otherwise.

Interpersonal communication as a function: Cushman and Craig (1976) defined interpersonal communication as that communication which is formative of and changes self-concepts and social relationships. In this view, interpersonal communication is not a context or unique social circumstance, such as between couples, but an accomplishment as when communication accomplishes self-definition and relationship management and transformation. The relational dimension of communication has been further studied and refined through the works in dialectical theory of Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery (Baxter, 2011).

Interpersonal communication as face-to-face interaction: Goffman (1967, 1969, 1981) authored several works which drew attention to social encounters and interpersonal interactions as basic cornerstones of socio-cultural life. His works began a long, diverse and distinguished field of studies which have explored actual encounters among people, using naturally occurring communication as data, with the nature of communication acts and events as primary theoretical concerns. Several strands of scholarship today are indebted to Goffman's earlier works including studies in Conversation Analysis, Ethnography of Communication and some versions of Cultural and Performance Studies.

The above historical trajectories, however, with the exception of Goffman and its cultural siblings, in our view, have not taken the cultural foundations of communication, and of interpersonal communication, seriously enough. There are a few exceptions to this including the later theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (as developed by Pearce & Cronen, 1980) and the theory of Ethnography of Communication as apparent in this special issue in the works of multiple scholars (Nuciforo, Schmidt and Uecker, and Zbenovich and Lerner).

What we would like to draw attention to with this introduction to the special issue is twofold: (1) not only has there been a lack of focus on the role of culture in traditional interpersonal communication scholarship,[1] the very notion of "interpersonal communication" and, in particular, its conceptualization over the years may be, at times, culturally skewed; and (2) we note there has been a serious lack of published research on Russian interpersonal communication.[2] The unique contribution of this special issue, then, is not only several important articles on Russian interpersonal communication, but moreover what, taken together, they suggest about the role of culture in interpersonal communication, its study and conceptualization.

Regarding the former, and as outlined above in the various research programs and trajectories, interpersonal communication has been concerned from its inception with social approaches to self, other, dyads, relationships and situated face-to-face interaction. There has been a key intellectual difference over the years, hinted at in the above brief history, between two conceptualizations of interpersonal communication, what some have called "contextual" and "quality" definitions. Contextual definitions are often operationalized quantitatively, focusing on the

number of people involved in an interaction. If the interaction is dyadic, involving two people, it counts as "interpersonal", regardless if it is a bank teller cashing a customer's check or spouses in the throes of a heated argument. Over time, some interpersonal scholars realized they were more interested in the latter and sought to define interpersonal communication as a *quality* of communication, one that "occurs when people treat each other as unique individuals, regardless of the context in which the interaction occurs or the number of people involved" (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2009, p. 15). While there may not currently be consensus on how to conceptualize interpersonal communication, there does seem to be increasing momentum to base its study on various foci including multiple channels of verbal and non-verbal communication, issues of identity and relationship, with a focus on face-to-face and, increasingly, mediated interaction.

Culture is also increasingly being recognized as an important quality of interpersonal communication. We are at a point where there has been enough research done to demonstrate that interpersonal communication can be understood as including structures, forms and meanings which are fundamentally cultural, yet this positions investigators at a curious crossroads: this very research has brought into question what interpersonal communication indeed is and if our conceptions of it might at times be culturally skewed. Is there something that we can point to, the world over that can be productively treated as "interpersonal communication"? Does it have identifiable features or facets, types or forms? While "contextual" or "quantitative" definitions of interpersonal communication embrace all dyadic communication the world over as "interpersonal", one such "quality" focuses only on those interactions in which participants focus on the "personal", in which they "treat each other as unique individuals". This type of definition is serviceable for some purposes but as all definitions place studies on some cultural legs rather than others, such works move better in some places rather than others. This is inevitable.

Decades of cultural research suggest that in some cultural scenes, and in some social situations, communication may not and should not focus on the "personal" or "unique individuals". Where, then, does that leave interpersonal communication? As ethnographers, and with others in this special issue, we conclude it varies by culture. As a result, communication studies need developed which discover, describe, interpret and comparatively analyze the nature of interpersonal communication in situated socio-cultural scenes (Carbaugh, 2007, 2008, 2012; Philipsen, 1997, 2002, 2011). Which are multiply channeled, through various interactional dynamics, and carry different meanings about identities and relationships? These focal concerns about components of communication including self, other, relationships, socially situated and constituted in interaction can ground, theoretically, investigations within and across cultures.

So situated, several of the articles that comprise this special issue suggest not only that interpersonal communication is culturally shaped and meaningful in Russian ways, but moreover, taken together, provide a way to move forward with culturally sensitive and culturally inclusive conceptualizations of interpersonal communication. For example, there are three studies on Russian interpersonal communication and family, including children, parents and grandparents. That there are three articles on the role of the family in Russian interpersonal communication suggests some distinctive cultural premises concerning "family" as an important aspect of interpersonal communication. These premises and the cultural forms of communication through which they are cultivated such as "toasting" are not the same elsewhere.

Jacqueline J. Schmidt and Deborrah Uecker, in this issue, examine everyday communication between parents and their young adult children in Russia and the USA. What they find is that everyday communication in these countries is fashioned quite differently. For the US participants, these conversations are conducted every day or every few days, largely on the phone, while doing other things. The familial conversations focus on catching up, are direct in nature and often contain humor and frequent topic shifts. Conversely, for the Russian participants, everyday familial conversations occur one to two times a week, are largely face to face, with the conversation

being the sole focus of attention. They focus more on personal issues such as problems, are indirect in nature and go into more depth with a caring, loving tone. Based on their analysis, Schmidt and Uecker argue that Russian and US parents and children use different conversational rules for everyday communication to achieve the same ends: "to show love, respect and caring in the family". While different conversational rules achieve similar ends, one wonders if different sorts of family relationships are constructed in the process. Furthermore, note that Russian everyday family communication focuses more on the "personal" and "unique individual", whereas US everyday family communication is, relative to this Russian case, lighter and more superficial in nature.

The next article in the special issue, by Claudia Zbenovich and Julia Lerner, focuses on Russian-Soviet and Israeli educational discourses in family interpersonal communication among Russian-speaking immigrant parents, grandparents and children in Israel. This study likewise broadens the Russian focus on family in interpersonal communication to include another natively conceived important feature, "education". Here, the education of children is seen as an important component of Russian interpersonal communication in family life. Zbenovich and Lerner find two contrasting educational discourses in the interactions of Russian Israeli immigrant parents, grandparents and children: a Russian-Soviet discourse of *vospitanie* that centers on children's *vospitannost*' (manners) and *obiazannosti* (obligations) and an Israeli discourse of *chutzpah* that focuses on children's self-needs. Russian Israeli immigrant parents and grandparents try to inculcate the values and practices of the Russian-Soviet *vospitanie* discourse during interactions with children, yet children often linguistically and discursively resist this by recruiting elements of the Israeli *chutzpah* discourse in both code-switching to idiomatic Hebrew phrases and employing an argumentative style that is in opposition to the authoritarian communicative style of the Russian-Soviet *vospitanie* discourse.

With the juxtaposition of cultural cases, these articles bring to light both distinctive features of Russian interpersonal communication and that interpersonal communication is indeed, at a deep level, culturally fashioned and shaped. Further, note here also the focus of the Israeli *chutzpah* discourse which is "based on the centrality of self and the value of self-fulfillment". The Russian-Soviet *vospitanie* discourse, in contrast, focuses more on social manners and obligations as well as being a "self-disciplined person". In fact, the Russian parents and grandparents in the study take issue with the Israeli child-raising style for the very reason that it favors self-needs and self-fulfillment over manners, obligations and self-discipline.

In the third article on Russian family communication, Artemi Romanov examines intergenerational dynamics between Russian grandparents and grandchildren. The inclusion of a second article on the role of grandparents in Russian interpersonal communication suggests that they are natively conceived as an important part of the Russian family and Russian interpersonal communication. In solicited narratives told by grandparents to grandchildren, Romanov finds that Russian grandparents have higher communication satisfaction from stories about past events and lower communication satisfaction from stories about current personal events. Probing this deeper, Romanov finds that Russian grandfathers tend to tell more stories about the past and that remembering historical events is important to them, while Russian grandmothers tend to tell more stories about current personal events, with both types of stories functioning to pass on a reservoir of family history. Self-disclosures in historical narratives tend to be more positive in nature, while in current event narratives they tend to be more negative, often including painful self-disclosure. Regarding gender differences, Romanov finds that grandmothers' self-disclosures to granddaughters are "deeper and emotionally intense" and some contain "negative or embarrassing information" in comparison to grandfathers' disclosures to grandsons. Romanov suggests that the satisfaction Russian grandparents enjoy from telling narratives from the past may stem from return to their youthful, healthy days and creating a position of wisdom in the current

narrative, whereas stories of current personal events often invoke current difficulties with their health and life. Romanov also argues that the focus of Russian grandparent–grandchild narratives on past events is a "culturally specific phenomenon", particularly against the backdrop of their US counterparts.

In the next article on Russian toasting and drinking rituals by Elena V. Nuciforo, we see a turn to friendship and family relationships in Russian communication research. Nuciforo reveals how a communication action as mundane and ordinary as "a toast among friends" is deeply culturally patterned and meaningful, forging interpersonal bonds and emotions among participants. Nuciforo demonstrates how Russian toasting and drinking can be understood as a communication ritual involving symbolic phrasing that follows a four-part sequence of "(1) announcing a drink; (2) making sure everyone is ready to have a drink; (3) proposing a toast; and (4) drinking together". When performed correctly, this ritual celebrates deeply held values in "reaching 'понимание/ponimanie' (understanding) when everyone becomes an integral part of the group through interpersonal 'soulful' interaction, and together the group gets separated from the outside world". Co-production of the ritual by all participants is critical, including verbal and non-verbal communication and drinking, suggesting that the *form* of the ritualized sequence plays as much of a role in it symbolic enactment as its content. Interestingly, the "self" presumed here is a "sociocentric" one, embedded and constituted in a deeply collective relational web, not a unique and separable individual. Nuciforo explains that the drinking and toasting ritual symbolically invokes and co-creates a person who is "valuable" because s/he "is an integral part of the group". She also argues that correct performance of the ritual reconfirms and strengthens relationships and creates strong feelings of togetherness. Thus, we see how interpersonal interaction is culturally patterned and meaningful, invoking deeply held beliefs and values, while through its enactment co-creating culturally preferred identities, relationships, ways of interacting, feeling and living in place (Carbaugh, 2007).

Turning to the last article in the special issue, Skye C. Cooley and Lauren Reichart Smith remind us of the importance of identity construction in interpersonal communication, which is increasingly done online, in mediated interaction. Cooley and Smith examine self-presentation online in Facebook and its Russian equivalent VKontakte by comparing the "facial prominence of profile photos" on these sites "to examine how gender displays may differ across cultures". To do so, the authors measure "face-ism" by examining the head–body ratio of profile photos as well as user-provided information including number of friends. According to the authors, research has found "that both men and women observers prefer to have women framed from a more distant perspective than men", thus showing more of the body for women and more of the face for men. This is "a form of gender stereotyping", as "intelligence and dominance are centered on the head, while warmth and expressiveness are centered on the body" (Archer, Iritani, Kimes, & Barrios, 1983, in Cooley & Smith). Cooley and Smith predicted that Russian and US women, men, and VKontakte and Facebook users would not have differences in their degree of face-ism, which were all unsupported. On the contrary, there were large differences in how Russian and US women and men portrayed themselves in profile photos, number of friends as well as their overall user intent. Cooley and Smith argue that Russian users treat VKontakte more as a dating site, while US users treat Facebook more as a social networking site to maintain and rekindle friendships. On the whole, Russian users were younger in age and had fewer "friends", while US users were older in age and had a higher number of "friends". Cooley and Smith's research likewise points to how Russian and US users are putting "a virtually identical medium" to very different uses in the presentation of self and development of relationships, illustrating the cultural influence on interpersonally mediated interaction.

The five articles in this special issue, taken together, illustrate that interpersonal communication can be understood as culturally patterned and meaningful, and as uniquely shaped in

some ways among Russians. Returning to the "contextual" and "quality" definitions of interpersonal communication, the five articles illustrate the cultural skewing of some definitions of interpersonal communication which "treat each other as unique individuals" and focus on the "personal" (Adler et al., 2009, p. 15); in other words, notions of "the individual" or "self", "relationship" and "the personal" vary across interpersonal systems. All five articles focus on the importance of relationships in Russian culture, including family, friendship and romantic relationships with each through cross-cultural study demonstrating features distinctive to each. Three of the articles find that interpersonal communication is focused on the "personal" and "unique individual", which comes clearly into view through cross-cultural comparisons.

Schmidt and Uecker, in their study of Russian and US parents' and children's everyday communication, found that Russian parents' and children's conversations were more personal and emotional than their US counterparts which focused more on catching up and were lighter in tone. Conversely, Zbenovich and Lerner, in their study of Russian-Soviet and Israeli family educational discourses amongst Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel, found that the Israeli *chutzpah* discourse focused more on self-needs and self-fulfillment, while the Russian-Soviet *vospitanie* discourse focused more on manners, obligations and self-discipline. Nuciforo found that the Russian self (or preferred model of person) is best known, understood and valued in relation to others, as "an integral part of the group", this being affirmed through Russian toasting and drinking rituals. Taken together, across these five studies, it is therefore difficult to define specific notions of the personal, self, relationship or content in interpersonal communication cross-culturally. It is, however, serviceable theoretically to approach interpersonal communication as multiply channeled, variously shaped and meaningful, through distinct interactional communication practices.

"Contextual" or "quantitative" definitions of interpersonal communication might at times seem to embrace all dyadic communication across cultures as "interpersonal"; however, much family communication would be left out as well as situations with multiple friends, which, according to the studies in this special issue, are natively conceived as important features of Russian interpersonal communication. Further, some contextual definitions of interpersonal communication may be so broad that they run the risk of being bereft of much real theoretic utility: any kind of dyadic communication, anywhere, on any topic is "interpersonal".

How, then, to approach interpersonal communication in a way that is culturally sensitive and inclusive? One potential problem is defining interpersonal communication a priori, before understanding what exists in a scene for communication, what it is, if it is valued, how it is shaped and the work it does for participants. Perhaps it would be best to discover what "interpersonal communication" is for various peoples, the various ways of communicating that constitute this genre of communication for them, similar to what Bauman (1977) has called for in the study of verbal art and performance. One avenue for such inquiry is to examine local conceptions and meanings of communication in particular speech communities. One way of doing so is to focus on native "terms for talk" which has a long history in the tradition of the Ethnography of Communication (e.g. Baxter & Goldsmith, 1990; Boromisza-Habashi, 2013; Leighter & Black, 2010), with native terms for communication revealing cultural conceptions of communication, what they entail and the meanings they reveal for persons, relationships, emotion and dwelling in place (Carbaugh, 1989; Fitch, 1998; Katriel, 2004). Many readers of this journal who are familiar with the Russian language are aware of Russian terms that form a folk vocabulary for understanding dialogue in Russia such as "ponimanie" (a kind of collaborative meaning-making leading to understanding), "beseda" (peaceful conversation which may include an admonition in a non-confrontational way), "razgovor" (verbal exchanges of information and opinions which are usually linked to serious and sometimes difficult discussions on issues important for the participants), "razgovor po dusham" (communing with an open soul or soul talk) or Bakhtin's

formulation of "dialogicheskoe obshenie" (turning in talk to other people), "peregovori" (negotiation or official exchanges of opinions in order to reach a common goal) and "dogovarivatsya" (to settle matters down verbally or any official, or unofficial, exchange which has sought a common goal, or reached a common purpose through negotiation) (Carbaugh, Nuciforo, Saito, & Shin, 2011). Thus, cultural terms for talk provide a productive entrée into indigenous conceptions of interpersonal communication, what ways of communicating comprise this repertoire, their nature, meanings and functions for cultural members.

Another path would be to return to our forebears, Simmel and Cooley, Mead and Goffman, to their original interests in particular facets of human social and interactional life. Trained on their ideas, we can treat "interpersonal communication" as a set of foci, of communication components and concerns, such as self, other, relationships and the interactions in which they are co-created. We must not, however, forget their cultural shaping and meaning, that as people interpersonally communicate they are saying something about who they are, how they are related to others, how they should interact, feel and dwell in place (Carbaugh, 2005). And it is these very cultural premises that are put to use in interpersonal communication to fashion particular cultural identities, relationships, ways of interacting, feeling and dwelling. Let us move forward in ways, echoing Hymes (1972), which embrace diversity rather than abstract from it for our own purposes.

Notes

1. Work of this nature, however, is on the rise. See, for example, work in the ethnography of communication (e.g. Carbaugh, 1996, 2002; Covarrubias, 2002; Fitch, 1998; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Katriel & Philipsen, 1981; Poutiainen, 2005; Scollo, 2007; Scollo & Poutiainen, 2006; Tanamura, 2001) as well as recent volumes dedicated to interpersonal communication, relationships and culture (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996; Monaghan & Goodman, 2007).
2. See, however, Bolden (2008), Carbaugh (1993, 2005), Leontovich (2003a, 2003b, 2003c), Remennick (2009) and Romanov (2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). We would also like to point out that communication studies is not a recognized field or degree in the Russian higher educational system; therefore, work on Russian "interpersonal communication" may not be called as such and may be conducted under areas such as linguistics, pedagogy, philosophy and psychology. The Russian Communication Association is currently trying to converge researchers in these areas to develop a common vocabulary for the study of interpersonal communication. We are grateful to Olga Leontovich for sharing this information.

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