



EMERALD POINTS

COMMUNICATION AS SOCIAL THEORY

The Social Side of
Knowledge Management

JON-ARILD JOHANNESSEN



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The Social Side of Knowledge
Management

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD

Knowledge management here means steering, control and communication in social systems. Steering is the management perspective. Control is related to information processes, vision, goals, deviations and recovery of the system's courses. Communication is defined here by the statement: Who talks with whom over which channels with what effect. It is the communication part's place in knowledge management that we describe, analyze and elaborate in this book.

In this book, we continue to develop a new paradigm for knowledge management, which we started with in the book *Knowledge Management Philosophy* (Emerald, 2020). The new thing in this book is that we focus on communication in knowledge management.

With the new paradigm we lift knowledge management from the organizational level to the social level, while at the same time detaching knowledge management from the technical and solution-oriented models that knowledge management has previously been linked to. With the new paradigm, we focus knowledge management on epistemology, development, change and innovation in social systems.

This book is an attempt to develop a social theory at micro level, with communication as the essential social mechanism within the theory. We use system theory as the knowledge base for our way of thinking in this book.

In the book, we have developed 44 case letters.¹ These case letters are designed to deepen, underline and augment the 44 conceptual and empirical propositions we have developed.

¹ We use the term 'case letter' to refer to brief extracts from larger case studies that focus on the point we wish to emphasize in a description or analysis. The term case letter was coined by Mintzberg (2012).

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RUDIMENTS OF A SOCIAL THEORY AT MICRO-LEVEL BASED ON COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1980s, there has been an increasing focus on information, communication and knowledge as important resources for wealth creation. Several commentators see this as signalling a transition from an industrial economy to a more knowledge-based economy (Westfall, 2018). This new trend comes to expression in constructs such as intellectual capital, organizational learning, and emotional intelligence, as well as social and emotional competence (Smith, 2019).

Information, communication and knowledge are not viewed here as being things or concepts that some people possess, while others do not. Rather, they are seen as being things that are developed through interactive processes of communication, with people relating to each other.¹ This understanding of knowledge, information and communication prevents us from localizing these concepts to a single person or system.² Instead, we must think in

1 Here we define knowledge as the systematization and structuring of information for one or more purposes. By information, we mean the systematization and structuring of data, according to a specific code. Communication can be understood by asking: Who says what to whom through what channels and with what effect?

2 Stacey (2001, p. 5) makes a point of moving away from systemic thinking. In our opinion, we can benefit from using systemic thinking as a basis for communication theory, because this way of thinking preserves the relationship between the system and environment and an understanding of context, both of which are important to interaction and communication.

terms of a system of relationships, human processes and interpersonal communications.

According to interactionist theory (Mead, 1962; Stacey, 2001), knowledge cannot be stored and recycled because it exists in the interaction between the interacting parties. Interaction theory provides explanations of how knowledge is developed and transformed: ‘knowledge creation is understood as an active process of communication between humans’ (Stacey, 2001, p. 6). Interaction theory also provides explanations for social relationships and behaviour, communication processes and how we can improvise in order to organize.

Human relationships, communication and knowledge development all take place at the same level: the interpersonal. Just as we cannot have relationships without relating to something or someone, we cannot communicate unless we have someone to communicate with. Similarly, we cannot develop knowledge without a process of co-creation. Accordingly, the individual level and the social level are seen as identical in interaction- and communication theory, as it is presented in this book.

The explanations are to be found at the level of interaction, not at the individual level. The level of interaction is distinct from either the individual level, the social level or the link between them. This is the basic premise of the communication theory we are developing here, i.e. the level of interaction has a distinct ontological status in the communication theory we are developing in this book.

The main research question we will investigate in this book is as follows: How can we advance communication as social theory?

We have developed the following sub-research questions in order to address the main research question:

RQ1. How do our fundamental experiences form part of communication as social theory?

RQ2. How is identity a part of communication as social theory?

RQ3. How are relationships a part of communication as social theory?

RQ4. How are ideas a part of communication as social theory?

RQ5. How is contextual understanding a part of communication as social theory?

RQ6. How is flexibility a part of communication as social theory?

[Fig. 1.1](#) below illustrates a simple model for communication as social theory that we develop in this book. [Fig. 1.1](#) also shows how the rest of this chapter is structured and how the book is organized.

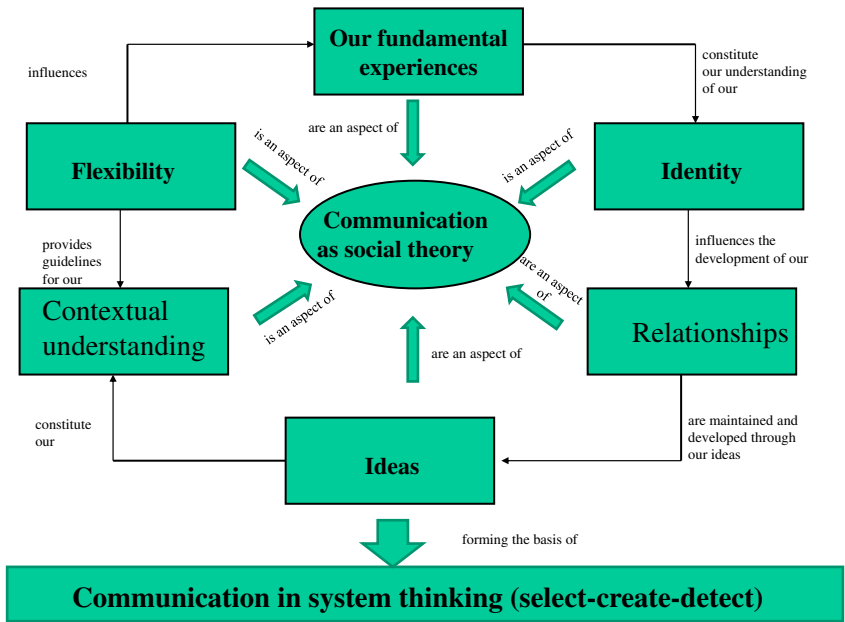


Fig. 1.1. A Model for Communication as Social Theory: An Analytical Model.

DESCRIPTION OF MODEL

An essential element of communication theory is that human relationships, meaning, identity and ideas are expressed through, and also reinforce, significant symbols (Stacey, 2001, p. 141).

What Are Significant Symbols?

The word ‘symbol’ is usually used to refer to something that represents something else. The Greek word *symbolon* means token, and *sym-ballein* means to draw together (Stacey, 2001, p. 102). Mead (1962) uses the word symbol in the sense that it constitutes an action between two individuals that binds them together. Accordingly, a symbol in Mead’s writing is linked to action, interaction and meaning. In order for an action to have meaning, an interaction must occur based on what Mead refers to as significant symbols, i.e.: ‘a gesture that calls forth a similar response in oneself as in another’ (Stacey, 2001, p. 106). In Mead’s terminology, significant symbols thus put the other person in a position to understand the meaning that is incorporated in

the action. This means that significant symbols create meaning, a shared identity and shared ideas within social systems.

To further understand significant symbols, it may be advantageous to refer to an analogy: attractors in complexity theory. An 'attractor' attracts other objects or things in the outside world and therefore has a controlling function in a development process. Similarly, significant symbols control the development of communication, human relations, meaning-formation, identity and the development of ideas.

Significant symbols form the pattern through which communication is developed (Pelkey, 2018). Specifically, this means that significant symbols form the themes, models, questions, etc. for communication between people.

The communication pattern between people may be considered against the basis of redundancy, loose coupling, power of definition and model power (Bråten, 1999). Redundancy ensures that interactions are maintained. Loose coupling ensures the maintenance of momentum and focus in the communication, even if one moves outside the immediate circle of experience. One does not need to participate in the entire communication process in order to understand the meaning because redundancy and loose coupling allow one to fill in what is missing and thus participate as a full communication partner.

Significant symbols may be understood in analogy to complex adaptable systems found in the natural world, such as bird flocks, herring schools, etc. These social systems change and adapt so that to an observer they appear to form an overall pattern, while in reality they are constituted of individuals. The analogy may be used to describe, understand and explain human interaction and communication. The spontaneous ability that such systems have to produce new overall structures (for instance, bird flocks) by focusing on micro-behaviour provides insight into how spontaneous patterns can be formed in, for instance, street gangs. When a critical number of individuals are able to adapt at the micro-behavioural level, the consequence will be major changes in overall patterns, which may for example emerge as new trends, new ways of thinking, new ways of relating to each other, new innovations, new communication patterns, and so on. With this understanding, micro-level behaviour and macro-level results become one and the same process: the interaction becomes the unit of analysis, not the individual or the collective level.

CASE LETTER: 'MODEL POWER'

The way in which the media set the agenda for communication, both locally and globally, provides an example of redundancy and loose coupling. 'Model

power' gives some people the power to set the agenda and control the premises for public discourse, at the same time as they control when new models will be introduced at the expense of old models. Model power gives some people control over the introduction and changing of, among other things, the theme of a communication. This is the theme around which a communication is organized, that gives strength to the significant symbols and accordingly to the development of a shared experiential world. A person who introduces themes that are inconsistent with the shared experiential world will be moving outside the significant symbols and will easily find themselves excluded in social settings.

In the following, we develop general hypotheses for each of the elements in the model shown in Fig. 1.1. We begin, however, by discussing some general features of communication theory in relation to some central propositions (Bunge, 1996, 1998, 1999).

P1. Micro-behaviours promote changes in patterns in larger systems.

Consequence: To promote change in social systems, we should focus on changing micro-behaviours.

MICRO-BEHAVIOURS

Micro-behaviours cannot be designed in advance or predicted. In order to promote the necessary level of spontaneity, leaders should focus, for example, on micro-behaviours. In bureaucratic systems, there are many rules that regulate the behaviour of actors at superior levels. In complex, adaptable systems that have communication theory as their conceptual model, there are a certain number of minimal rules that regulate behaviour at a micro-level. These local rules do not apply, however, at a general or global level. Behaviour at a global level is a consequence of micro-behaviours at the local level. In such systems, the rules are always set at a local level. In other words, interactions are based on certain local rules. These interactions repeat themselves and rely at all times on minimal rules (see Goodwin, 1994).

CASE LETTER: MICRO-BEHAVIOURS

Asplund's theory of motivation can help us understand micro-behaviours. In brief, this theory proposes that *humans are motivated by social response* (Asplund, 2010, pp. 221–229). The following statements can be described as

the central points in Asplund's theory of motivation. When people receive a social response, their level of activity increases (Asplund, 2010, pp. 221–229).

Asplund's theory of motivation coincides with North's theory of action. North's theory of action can be expressed in the following sentence: *Humans act against the background of a reward system that comes to expression in the norms, values, rules and attitudes of their culture (the institutional framework)* (North, 1990, 1993).

In this light, it seems reasonable to link the two theories to the following assertion that may apply to micro-behaviours: *People are motivated by the social responses with which the institutional framework rewards them.*

P2. Local minimal rules create global patterns of communication.

Consequence: To understand the patterns, one must reveal the critical minimal rules.

MINIMAL RULES

In complex adaptable systems, the individual actors adapt their behaviour to each other on the basis of the local minimal rules. The resulting patterns are the process of self-organization that creates communication. The pattern functions as an attractor and reinforces communication (see Stacey, 2001, p. 71). The global pattern of interaction is created through self-organization, based on local minimal rules, and it may be stable over a certain period, or vary cyclically, as a result of changes in micro-behaviours. Cyclical variation is determined by just a few critical variables known as attractors. Although the pattern is cyclical, it is impossible to predict. This has implications for the understanding of cyclical movements in many systems at a global level. This means that one cannot take individual behaviour for granted, but one must instead investigate individual behaviour within specific contexts.

CASE LETTER: PUNCTUATION

Through the process of punctuation, events are punctuated in a certain way to attribute causality; this is often done with a clear motive in mind. By creating linear causality that does not necessarily exist in the real world, one is then free to discuss cause and effect, which has been created through the process of punctuation (Bateson, 1972, pp. 292–293). A sequence of a process is selected and then bracketed. In this way, we separate what is punctuated from the rest

of the process. However, if we view the process as circular, then figuratively we may imagine this as a circle. The punctuation process divides the circle into small pieces; one piece of the circle is then selected and folded out into a straight line. This results in the creation of an artificial beginning and end (a circle obviously has neither beginning nor end), but is created through the process of punctuation.

P3. Global patterns of action have cyclical variations that are not predictable.

Consequence: Although patterns and pattern changes may be understood, they cannot be predicted.

CONCLUSION

In the communication theory we are developing in this book, there are no general rules that control behaviour at a local level. It is the interaction of minimal rules at local level that creates global behaviour, not some general predetermined rules for behaviour. Attractors are reinforced and changed through small adjustments to the local rules. In this way, new patterns emerge that did not previously exist.

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