

PLAY THEORY OF COMMUNICATION*

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Abstract A distinction is drawn between *information* and *communication*, the former implying work and change (communication pain and self loss), the latter play and entertainment (communication pleasure and self enhancement). A play theory of communication is proposed as a broad abduction in which the self as attitudinal is axiomatic, and for which Q technique and its methodology provide operational pragmatics. Cultural implications are discussed, and research directions are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

Ordinarily, communication theory is concerned with the transfer of information to bring about change or to cause action. Communication research, where it has not concerned information theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Cherry, 1957), has dealt very largely with the *persuasive* effects of communication (Hovland, 1953) or with attempts to change the attitudes and opinions of people (Klapper, 1961; Schramm, 1964). So considered,

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communication is of vast interest in every academic discipline (Ayer, 1955) and to every practical endeavor in the world. It is the "mover" in all individual, institutional, scientific, economic and national pursuits; it teaches literacy, informs the public, and extends markets (Schramm, 1964). Everywhere it is of "serious" import, bent on bringing about change and action.

There is another mode of communication, however, by which people are entertained. Gossip, the theatre, television, movies, comics, and the like are typical of its forms. This seeks no change in the world's affairs--at least it normally is free from such purposes, though attempts have been made to link it with "hidden persuasion" and similar practices. It isn't, ordinarily, serious--its most characteristic feature is that people enjoy it as "fun." As Katz and Foulkes (1962) have recently noticed, it has received little attention from communication theorists. Such attention as it has had has been to regard it as wasteful or diversionary, as an "opiate" for suppression of the masses (Lasswell, 1935), as a shameful enticement of people away from the serious business of the world (Gerbner, 1960), as serving to relieve the insecurities and anxieties of modernizing peoples (Hyman, 1963), or as a means for maintaining the status quo of a society (Toeplitz, 1963).

We are to propose that the two modes of communication--one "serious," the other "fun"--are profoundly different in communication respects. The one involves *communication pain* and the other *communication pleasure*; the one is characteristic of work, the other of play. The ultimate differences between them, however, concern the self attitudes at issue: In communication pain there is always a degradation of self; in communication pleasure the self is always enhanced.

THE THEORY

We owe the terms communication pain and communication pleasure to Szasz (1957). They stem from experimental psychology and from developments in ego psychology. Elementary feelings of pleasure and displeasure used to

be attached, like a plaster, to sensations and perceptions; and feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety were originally discussed with little ego reference (Szasz, 1957). Nowadays feelings are considered in ego-development terms: The soldier is ashamed *not* to jump with his buddies by parachute (Piers & Singer, 1953). Only recently, however, has a similar relating of pleasurable feelings to ego-developmental conditions been attempted (Szasz, 1957: 207). Our theory is in this direction, except that the conceptualization is lifted still further away from elementary perceptions and ego structures to a self-theoretical position.

Our general hypothesis is that all situations of work and change involve communication pain, and all situations of genuine play involve communication pleasure. The former is accompanied by *self loss*--such as occurs in shameful situations--experienced as self reduction, self denial, and the like. Situations of communication pleasure are associated instead with *self enhancement*, experienced as self existence, self enlargement, self integration, self expression and the like. Only with reference to the self, it is proposed, can one understand why play is enjoyed and work usually not.

It may seem that there is nothing to explain, and that to say that play is fun, and fun enjoyment, and enjoyment pleasure, is merely playing with words. But actually there is much to explain over a wide range of social theory, ego psychology and communication theory. There are connections, of course, between Freud's principles of pain and pleasure, the reality and fantasy principles, and these of communication pain and communication pleasure (Szasz, 1957). Questions can be raised, also, about certain affinities between Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance and ours of play theory. One feels, about Festinger's theory, that the *cognitive* element is ill-defined, and that the conditions of change are redolent of psychological hedonism: In terms of our theory the cognitive element has to be defined in self-theoretical terms, and conditions of change--such as psychological hedonism discusses--are never from those of communication pain to those of communication pleasure. But all

of this is for later consideration. Meanwhile we are to suppose that all "serious" communication, where the object is to bring about change (Klapper, 1961), or to persuade (Hovland, 1953), or to inform (Schramm, 1964), involves communication pain; and play, entertainment, and social conversation involves communication pleasure. The ultimate effects are upon the self.

EXAMPLES

A simple social greeting illustrates communication pleasure. One greets one's neighbor with, "It's a fine morning." The information is not informative--each knew beforehand that it was indeed a fine morning. The "message" could be a hundred different phrases--"How do?", "How are you?", "Hello!" and the like, all to the same effect. The greeting is entirely attitudinal, for the sake of being sociable: It is a tiny bit of theatre, of acting, of play.

Common conversation has long been known to be an interchange of such attitudes rather than of ideas (Simmel, 1950; Oldfield, 1947). We take the matter of attitudes a little further along the theoretical road by observing that self attitudes are at issue and that the self is enhanced in such situations. The change is only in the self; playfulness is involved; there is no transmission of information--it is merely bandied about, as in gossip, without purposes intrinsic to it.

Communication pain is well illustrated by a command given by one person to another. A father X commands his child Y to play a piece on the piano for a visitor. Y may react with apprehension--the self attitude is one of shame. Or he may dutifully play the piece--self worthiness is the self attitude at issue. Or he may "show off"--and the attitude is one of self indulgence or the like. All such are conditions of communication pain. Self worth is well known in Rogerian self psychology (Rogers, 1947): It occurs when conditions of worth are imposed upon a person by others on the basis of which he acts in order to be considered worthy. All such, however, according to our theory, are matters of communication pain. The situations are of *work* induced by communication, and in all such the

self suffers a degradation, as in shame.

But the child Y, playing the piece on the piano, may play it *for himself* (or *for itself*, as we are apt to say) and the self is now very differently involved. The playing is for fun, to please no one but the player. Such is communication pleasure; the self attitudes at issue are self enhancing, all the way from a pleasant conceit to a burst of self existence such as existentialism waxes philosophical about (Sartre, 1957). Conditions of communication pleasure are not "openness to experience" such as Rogers (1959) describes; it is existence in a sense of being for the fun of it, as enjoyment as such, as deep contentment, serenity, and many another self attitude.

It will be said that the same command may induce action to play the piece in either a communication-pain or a communication-pleasure manner: We have to recognize, however, that in the latter the command is incidental to the self-containing action--as a greeting is to the social attitude--whereas in communication pain the command remains integral to the playing. The proud father, so to speak, continues to command throughout the playing under conditions of communication pain.

PLAY VERSUS WORK

In a matter so tenuous--when people do not at times know when they are playing and when they are working, when they are serious, and when they are having fun--there is need for careful definitions. Play, of course, has been analyzed in detail by psychologists, notably by Piaget (1951). We shall take all such for granted, including consideration of games and meta-games (Szasz, 1961): Our concern is only with self attitudes in relation to play situations. It is sufficient to note that play is enjoyable, is voluntary, deals with what is not "ordinary" or "real," tends to seclusion, and is self sufficient (it begins and ends without outer effects). To quote Huizinga (1950):

... [play] is a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not

serious," but...absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is...connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules.... (p. 13)

It is scarcely necessary to add that play is apt to surround itself with secrecy, disguises and the like, and may have characteristic feelings along with it: The play mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, sacred or festive according to the occasion; a feeling of exaltation, tension, accompanies the action; mirth and relaxation follow (Huizinga, 1950, p. 14).

Play involves *competing*, but the prizes are honor and applause which enhance the self, rather than gain that lines the pocket. One dares to take risks, to endure tension, to bear uncertainty--such are the essence, as Huizinga said, of the play spirit. Caillois (1961) has objected that this overlooks the gain that accrues in lotteries and gambling, but a man may win a fortune in British football "pools" and continue to work as a plumber: The "fun" was in the magic of winning, the ecstasy of being the lucky one--and the money otherwise scarcely changes a thing. Throughout, one *plays* for "fun"--only the professional plays for money. The mountaineer climbs for the fun of it, risking everything: But the achievement is a heightening of self, of self standing. As many have observed, one may see oneself for the first time on a mountain top, in a self integration never previously grasped.

It will be said that some people work at play, and others play at work. From our standpoint what matters is what self attitudes are at issue.

Work, as distinct from all the above, is a facing of reality; it isn't voluntary; it steps into ordinary life. Indeed, most adults in the Western world know life very largely through work; there is nothing enchanting or captivating about it; it becomes mechanical, not a ritual; it has definite effects, producing ideas, services and goods; it can in principle be taken over completely by automation--serious, scientific, and without fun.

TOWARD A PLAY THEORY OF COMMUNICATION

The theory that play is self enhancing and work self abnegating is a broad abduction (Stephenson, 1961) of the kind that along such lines explanations will be found for much that was inexplicable and that an indication is given for what to *look* for even when one can make no prediction as to what will be found. It is possible, if pedantic, to represent the theory formally. Axiomatic to it is the centrality-of-self framework on which Q methodology is based (Stephenson, 1961); its postulates include all those applicable to play theory, games and metagames and those which concern *self* as attitudinal (Stephenson, 1953); its pragmatics involve Q samples, Q sorts, and factor analysis, with audiences defined by Q factors (and not *a priori* as socioeconomic or demographic definitions). Its general hypothesis is that already asserted: that play is self enhancing and work the reverse, and that with respect to human communication situations this profound distinction separates "fun" from "serious" communication.

Even so, this would be an aid to description, not a hypothetico-deductive framework: The theory remains basically abductive. By abduction Szasz (1961) was able to show that *hysteria* has a play-theoretical explanation that psychiatry had long overlooked. Stephenson (1963), in the same way, was able to say that reading a newspaper has play elements *in the manner of its reading*. The reader puts himself into a play situation, as a child does when it plays "house," and behind the pages of the newspaper takes part in subjective play directed toward communication pleasure. So we enjoy the newsreading--even if the news is bad. Much descriptive work on entertainment, such as Plath's (1964) account of Japanese enjoyment of "after-hours," profits from play-theoretical regard.

There is need for a broadening of the theory in self-theoretical respects. The central concepts are those of communication pleasure and communication pain: but all self psychology can be included in the postulates, and we would like to place a limitation upon purely philosophical or speculative matters. *This we*

do by defining self attitudes operationally in Q-methodological terms.

There is much to do, of course, to develop the theory: we have been busy with studies in its terms since 1958. Here we can merely indicate, first, the broad lines of contact with *play*, and then hint at some of the self-theoretical implications.

PLAY AND CULTURE

With respect to play we are concerned in communication theory particularly with *culture*. There has been much discussion of mass communication in "high," "low," and "mid-culture" terms by MacDonald (1957), Shils (1960), Rosten (1960) and others. In our work, however, we begin with Huizinga's (1950) proposition that culture is impossible without genuine play.

We think of medieval culture as full of play--of jesting, tournaments, courtly love, and the dubbing of knights. The 18th century, in our Western culture, abounded in clubs, secret societies, artistic coteries, literary salons, brotherhoods, and every conceivable association for music, science, and adventure--all a "wholehearted abandon to play," that made it (according to anyone who loves the period) so rich as a culture. In the 19th century there was little room for play--there was a donning instead of the boiler suit, a growth of education, science, industry, and class consciousness, all free of folly: All was serious with achievement, work, and economics uppermost. Such is the broad context of play theory. And it is true today that in churches, in courts of law, in parliaments, in political systems and in armies there are many vestiges of play: The trouble comes, indeed, when we don't realize where play ends and work begins. Trials by law are still concerned as much with *winning* cases (whether the winner is innocent or not) as with finding out the truth of matters. The donning of wigs and gowns is symbolical of the play pursued. Wars used to be the sport of kings: they have become highly unsporting instead. All such matters are our concern. Nor is it incidental that Osgood (1962), long an authority in the communications field, should want

to be theoretical about conditions of war and peace--oblivious, however, as becomes an achieving American, of the play-theoretical matters at issue.

On the whole games are still played for the fun of it in English schools and colleges: they are largely professionalized in the U.S. where one plays for grades, and where even the coaches cry on losing a game! Colleges in the U.S. are places for work. Oxford, instead, used to be a place to learn to play, to learn how to debate, to discourse, and to be *scholarly*--without worrying one whit about research, a career, or work. Indeed one's degree at Oxford was for residence there rather than for passing an examination--so no one need fail. How fine an institution for self enhancement!

It will be said, of course, that a new culture is in the making in the U.S., and this may be true. But what is the hallmark of a culture? *According to our theory it must, in some way, relate to a self-theoretical matter.* The distinction between genuine play and false play, as between a genuine culture and a false one, is a matter of the self attitudes at issue. Genuine play, and culture, "presupposes limitation and mastery of the self, the ability not to confuse self with higher goals..." (Huizinga, 1950, p. 211). This, a most profound observation, is not a philosophical text but a self-psychological matter. For example, a good case can be made for the conclusion that much of America's "achieving society" is gained at the expense of a moderation and modesty of the self. The American's omnipotence is well known: He knows what is best for everybody and everything, and by that very token has scarcely begun to know himself. It is not incidental, therefore, that American experts on communication theory lost sight entirely of the fact that other peoples might want to do things their own way--as Lerner (1963) should have learned, but apparently failed to do (Pye, 1963).

We see, therefore, that matters of grave import are involved wherever communication theory touches on the world's affairs. But nowhere, from Lasswell (1935) to Schramm (1964) or Pye (1963) or Lerner (1963), is there any recognition of play in relation to the cul-

tures they seek to study from a communication theory standpoint; and, of course, the self is everywhere ignored. It may seem a long way from a child's game to matters of grave international importance, but if communication theory is any good, it must cover the whole way.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Studies conducted in relation to the theory have been in three directions. There is need to test how far self attitudes are consistent with overt behavior. The play-theoretical nature of much in "public" communication--as distinct from scientific information--has to be documented. Entertainment itself requires study from the standpoint of the fantasy it engenders.

Consider the matter of fantasy first. According to Freud (1911), fantasy, like the measles, is a symptom of a disease--the adjusted person (in Freud's inner-directed world) has no need of fantasy, and too much fantasy leads to neurosis. This seems to us to be entirely lopsided. The fantasy one has in reading novels, attending plays, or reading poetry, can be genuine subjective play, i.e., good fun and communication pleasure. The self can *exist* in such subjective play. Of course no *work* is done: but the gain in self existence can surely be considerable, and who shall say that taste, sophistication, tolerance, and much else may come by this route rather than from the route of social control and the hard work of Freud's 19th century world? We have studied the reactions of housewives to the televised Army-McCarthy Hearings in 1954, as Wiebe (1958-59) had done earlier. Wiebe concluded that housewives enjoyed the hearings in relation to early internalizations--McCarthy was perceived as the "lonely hero," a father-figure, feared, but held in awe. A 1962 Q-method study of housewives, who saw the hearing eight years earlier, showed that one Q segment was exactly as Wiebe had described it. The enjoyment of high tragedy--of a Hamlet or of the assassination of a President--no doubt has its roots in similar early social controls. Myth is always playful.

But there is much indeed to do in that direction. Meanwhile, a simple test of consistency between self attitude as defined by the individual in a Q sort and his overt behavior as observed by participant interviewers, is provided in a study of television viewing behavior. People behave in front of a television set with characteristic *traditional*, *inner-directed*, or *other-directed* forms of social character (Riesman, 1950)--as anyone can observe, and as the television viewers represent for themselves in their own Q sorts.

With respect to "public" communication there is a whole vast field of research to pursue. The American press, for example, has long provided a distorted picture of communism in Russia over the period covering the two World Wars (1914-46--as Kriesberg [1946-47] has shown). Is this deliberate, or foolish? Is it not better to say that it involves communication pleasure elements? Consider, for example, the concept of *democracy*. It represents what people are prepared to talk about in public (LaPiere, 1954) rather than being any prescription for democratic actions. But is the conversation genuine play, or false? A study by UNESCO of the philosophical character of the concept (McKeon, 1951) indicated that out of a hundred or more contributors to a symposium, all experts on international law, social theory, philosophy and the like, only one (Plamenatz, 1951) remarked on the play-theoretical features of democracy. All the others took the concept very seriously, as though it brought about changes in the practical world. It is therefore not genuine play for these experts. The same applies to our views about democracy as tested by Q method: What one represents in a Q sort about democracy is one's *political* faith, and not any common understanding of democracy as such. The conservative has one view and the liberal another--but neither realizes that play elements should *really* be involved (Stephenson, 1965). Instead democracy is conceived in work terms, as though one must try to bring about *changes* in other people's beliefs, whereas in play terms one could merely enjoy being politically competitive.

CONCLUSION

These are merely hints of the wide range of studies made possible, and needed, in relation to our theory. A good deal of work has already been done and will be published in the near future (Stephenson, 1965). Meanwhile an area of study has been presented, and a dialectic for its discussion introduced. But again, since self-theoretical matters are at issue, Q method is eminently suited for the metatheoretical matters needed to give operational definition to the theory. We have barely touched upon this above; instead, attention has been called to play, fantasy, and entertainment as self enhancing, and to work, neurosis, and information transmission as self degrading. The latter may seem paradoxical and dogmatic--*ipse dixit*. It has much to support it.

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