

# The Concept of Self in Interpersonal Communication

Dr. Sweta Ghosh

Guest Faculty, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, India  
Email – swetamit10@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The paper presents a comprehensive exploration of the intricate relationship between communication, self-theory, and interpersonal dynamics. It begins by addressing the omnipresence of communication in human life. Communication, an integral aspect of human life, permeates all spheres of existence, encompassing both intrapersonal reflections and interpersonal interactions. The paper further explores the dilemma of communication, delineating between self-confirmation needs and those reliant on external validation. Then, the concept of self is examined, highlighting its formation through cognitive processes and social interactions, and its continuous evolution through experiences and developmental processes. The study delves into the crucial aspect of self-maintenance in communication, elucidating strategies individuals employ to safeguard their self-worth in interpersonal interactions. It discusses the role of personal characteristics, such as knowledge, motives, attitudes, personality traits, and emotions, in shaping communication dynamics and influencing interpersonal interactions. Moreover, the paper discusses the purpose of interpersonal communication, which emphasizes on self-awareness enhancement, social relationship improvement, and personal development. It distinguishes interpersonal communication from casual conversation and also explores the significance of interpersonal communication in building personal characteristics and fostering self-identification. Overall, the paper offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of communication and its profound implications for self-development, social connection, collective well-being and enriched lived experiences.*

**Key Words:** *Self-maintenance, Interpersonal communication, Personal characteristics, Self-development, Sociometer theory*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Communication has become an important part of human life, it occurs everywhere and it seems to be part of every activity we do regularly whether we are clicking on a shopping app, reading an e-book or talking to a road-side passerby. There is a dilemma about communication that separates reliance on self-confirmation needs and needs that depend on the confirmation from others. It is a question of intrapersonal (individual) versus interpersonal (social) satisfaction. For the clarification of the dilemma, there is the essentiality to study about the maintenance of the self in communication. Humans are always in conflict between the self and the society. There are several issues regarding such conflicts that are set out in various subjective terms such as:

- Being gloriously independent and alone versus securely and safely associated and interdependent;
- Magnifying the personal differences versus acknowledgement of kingship with others;
- Keeping distance versus seeking intimacy;
- Suffering from the pain of the separation versus pleasure of communication compensations.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF SELF :

The “self-theory” proposes that the term self is resulted when two forces (psychological and social phenomenon) act together over time (Mruk, 2006, pp 80-81). Human as the species has been designed to create theories actively about the world and to create meaning of our experiences including construction about self-theory. The self is the first and foremost creation of cognitive construction. As Jean Piaget suggested the concepts of schema and adaptation are related to self-theory. Primarily, the theory of self-starts with a crude schema connected to the human brain and gets modified with time and experiences. Approximately, at the age 18 months these interactive processes are concerned with consciousness creating a degree of self-awareness. With the development of experiences, a sense of self-sameness or “self” is created. The entire process of self gets stabilized with other emerging developmental and social processes,

which permits to create an identity around the self. This entire process goes through continuous development and modification as the human body; her personal competencies and social relationships become more and more matured and sophisticated (Harter, 2003, P 613).

### **3. SELF-MAINTENANCE :**

The basis of all human activities is the maintenance of self. We are always anxious to keep our self-safe and justified. Every one of us become uneasy when we feel our self-well-being is threatened and endangered. We tend to get concerned about injury to the self. All of us have the feelings of incompleteness, inadequacy and pride within ourselves, and we are always in demand for the reassurance, that we hope to be taken seriously and respectfully. It is intended that the self-maintenance strategies (both verbal and non-verbal) must serve us well while expressing inwardly and outwardly. The self-care in communication involves choosing of safety in communication process. Various strategies of self-maintenance are adopted to sustain the self against the real or imagined threat to diminish injury to self. To sustain our self-maintenance goal, we tend to prove ourselves worthy by upholding, defending, protecting and justifying ourselves (Barrett, 1986, pp 12-14).

Both the students of communication along with the communication pundits are aware of the differences. They are also concerned about the way these differences influence the character of communication. Behaviour of a person shows the way the humans give effort to uphold and justify the self-arises from the threat to individual's well-being. The threat seems to be obvious in case of interpersonal communication as we put ourselves in association with other. In interpersonal communication, the self often gets threatened through various risk factors like fear of getting hurt, rejected, disqualified, or offended in some way (Barrett, 1986, pp 6-21). Interpersonal communication is a process in which from two to about twenty persons attempt to mutually influence one another through the use of a common symbol system, in a situation permitting equal opportunity for all persons involved in the process to influence each other. We can include within this label, the dyadic communication (between two people), communication in small group (numbering from three to twenty) and organizational communication (communication that occurs within an organization) (Brooks, 1976, pp 7-9).

### **4. PURPOSE OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION :**

Every communication process has a purpose to serve. As interpersonal communication relies tremendously on self-maintenance, so it can be said the prime objective is to preserve the positive side of self. Another unanswering aim in communication is to look after ourselves. As a communicator, we must keep ourselves intact – “together” — internally balanced, acting the way we want to be perceived and heard by the others (Barrett, 1986, pp 20-23). Interaction with others effectively doesn't occur automatically. It requires proper skills and techniques. For the development of interpersonal skill, it is essential to study individual human interaction. The study of interpersonal communication can improve the quality of human life

We can use interpersonal communication in many situations. People interact interpersonally to :-

- (a) Increase self-awareness and esteem
- (b) Improve our social relationships, or
- (c) Enable us to achieve the goals by changing another person's behaviour

Humans employ interpersonal communication for achieving the personal development. At first, they try to discover socially acceptable ways of appropriate behaviours. We learn to differentiate between the right and wrong from our family members and friends. Secondly, we continuously develop the notion of 'self' (who we are) through interpersonal communication. The ideas we have about our self-image or self-concept, come to us through this process (Brooks, 1976, pp 2-6)

### **5. ROLE OF PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION :**

Interpersonal communication plays an important role in building up a personal characteristic of a person. Personal characteristics are the complex of personal factors, including knowledge, motives, attitudes, personality and emotions, which shape the interactive process in respect of goals pursued, perceptions and interaction patterns.

#### **Knowledge**

The term knowledge incorporates a distinctive line between what is known and what is unknown. Knowledge as the cognitive process set up an action where an information is decoded, stored and retrieved from human memory. For any skilled interpersonal activity, knowledge about our social world and the way it operates, the people it encompasses and the circumstances where they find themselves, all such factors are bound together with shared communication codes. (Lustig, & Koester, 2010, pp19-23).

A clear differentiation exists between knowledge itself and the cognitive mechanisms responsible for processing, storing, and recalling information from memory. Familiarity with our societal dynamics, interpersonal relationships,

and shared communication norms forms the bedrock of adept interpersonal interactions. Access to pertinent information is invaluable in decision-making and execution of plans, serving as a constant resource throughout the communication process. Psychologists and communication experts often refer to schemas to elucidate how information is structured within an individual's mental framework, shaping their perception of the world and aiding interpretation of ongoing events. They have utilized the concept of schema to illustrate how information is structured within a framework that mirrors an individual's lived experiences, aiding in the interpretation of present circumstances. A schema can be conceptualized as a mental framework housing general expectations and knowledge about the world, encompassing beliefs about people, societal roles, events, and appropriate behaviours in various situations.

#### Types of Schemas

1. Self-schemas: These pertain to our understanding about ourselves.
2. Event schemas or scripts: They represent the sequences of events typical of specific, frequently encountered social situations, such as ordering a happy meal or purchasing a newspaper.
3. Role schemas: These involve concepts dictating our expectations of individuals based on factors like occupation, gender, and race, guiding their adherence to certain norms and appropriate behaviours.
4. Causal schemas: They enable us to form judgments about cause-and-effect relationships in our physical and social environment, influencing our actions based on the anticipations enabled by such schemas.
5. Person schemas: These aid in the social categorization of others, serving as organized sets of knowledge about their features and characteristics.

#### Motives

Understanding the underlying motives driving interpersonal communication involves addressing questions like:

- a) Why do people engage in interpersonal interactions?
- b) What drives participation in interaction at all?
- c) How do individuals select their goals?
- d) After setting goals, what motivates individuals to persist in their pursuit?

Aside from these questions, humans are inherently motivated to fulfil their biological needs for sustenance, reproduction, and safety, which can drive interpersonal interactions.

#### Attitudes

Our Personality Attitudes are another highly significant personal characteristic that impacts upon interaction. There are three ABCs of attitudes that effect interpersonal interaction among the communicators:

- a) Affective – how one feels about the target, either positive or negative, in liking or disliking.
- b) Behavioural – one's inclination to behave in a certain way towards the target.
- c) Cognitive – one's knowledge or beliefs about the target.

As an illustration, I might hold a specific attitude towards my next-door neighbour, believing that he harbours jealousy towards me and intends to undermine my efforts (cognitive), leading to my aversion towards him (affective), consequently prompting me to avoid interacting with him (behavioural). Attitudes only define a tendency to behave in a particular way concerning a particular object of attitude.

#### Personality

Chamorro-Premuzic (2007) defines five factor model or big five traits of Personality, which encompasses the traits of extraversion, openness, neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Personality encompasses an individual's unique traits and characteristics, shaping their interactions with the environment and relationships with oneself and others.

#### Emotion

Emotion plays a crucial role in the communication process through three main avenues:

- a) Emotion-motivated communication: Behaviour driven by underlying emotions, such as road rage.
- b) Emotion-manifesting communication: Providing insights into a person's emotional state, as indicated by their demeanour.
- c) Emotion-inducing communication: Involving words and actions that evoke emotions in others, like recounting a sad story eliciting tears.

Apart from five factors, another factor that shapes the personal characteristics of a person in a interpersonal communication process is the "Age." The differing ages of participants will impact their behaviours and the expectations they hold towards one another differently in different situations. (Lustig and Koester, 2010, pp 21-23).

## 6. DEVELOPMENT OF SELF IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION :

Communication occurs in everyday life. A person's self-concept and self-esteem are shaped by those with whom she interacted. The self-arises in communication process, as it is a multidimensional process of internalizing and acting from

the perspectives of the society. It is quite complicated to describe the term self. We develop a self in the process of communicating with others. In the process of interaction with other, we as the communicators import or internalise, the receiver's perspectives, so that we can share receiver's maximum perspectives in the process. In the interpersonal process, from the moment we enter into the world of interaction, we learn how the receiver sees the communicator and in exchange the communicator takes receiver's perspectives inside her (Wood, 2010, pp 10-42). A study on interpersonal study suggested that interpersonal expectancies are associated with self-esteem of people. High self-esteem is significantly associated with positive expectancies about being able to produce friendly, accepting responses from others. Low self-esteem is associated, as predicted, with a lack of confidence about producing positive social reactions (Baldwin & Dandeneau, 2005, pp 36-89).

Traditionally, self-esteem has been viewed as an individual's personal assessment of themselves. Many theorists have argued that healthy self-esteem or self-worth should remain unaffected by the opinions of others. However, Sociometer theory challenges this notion by proposing that self-esteem functions as a psychological measure of how others perceive, or could potentially perceive, an individual, especially in terms of their relational worth. Consequently, it is naturally influenced by external evaluations. This functional perspective sheds light on why interpersonal feedback significantly impacts self-esteem (as it monitors acceptance and rejection), why public events exert a stronger influence on self-esteem than private ones, why the predictors of self-esteem involve attributes and events with potential implications for social standing, and why individuals seem driven to enhance their self-esteem despite its exact utility remaining elusive. In essence, individuals seek to enhance their relational value in the eyes of others, rather than merely boosting self-esteem (Leary, 2005, pp 90-92).

We humans develop the concept of self by internalising two types of communicated perspectives (Mead, 1934). Two types of perspectives that effects our communication process are: (a) Particular others and (b) Generalised others. Particular others are significant people who are relevant to us. They include family members, peers, teachers, friends, and co-workers etc. Fig 1 describes the way family member influences our self-concept during the communication process particularly during the interpersonal one. Reflected appraisals and direct definitions have the power to influence our self-perceptions positively or negatively. Reflected appraisal involves how we perceive ourselves based on the evaluations that others provide. Similar to scripts for theatrical performances, identity scripts delineate our roles, the manner in which we should portray them, and the fundamental components of our life narratives. Moreover, particular individuals influence our identities through attachment styles, which are patterns of caregiving that teach us about ourselves and others, as well as how to navigate relationships. Direct definition refers to communication that explicitly labels us and reacts to our actions, providing direct insight into our identity.



Figure 1: Family Influences on Self-Concept

Source- Wood, J.T. (2010). *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters*, Sixth Edition, Fig 2.1, P-43.

Interpersonal communication is intimately intertwined with self-identification and the establishment of interpersonal connections.

- At first, communication within an interpersonal context distinguishes itself from casual or superficial conversations by its intimate nature. Interpersonal communication serves as a platform for exchange among close friends or individuals in intimate relationships. It entails the merging of the distinct self-concepts of those engaged in the interaction. To facilitate such merging, each participant must divulge information about their unique self-perception or self-conception. On contrary, the casual conversation, chit-chat, and small talk remain distant as they revolve around external individuals and objects unrelated to the individuals involved, and do not hinge on their unique self-perceptions.
- Secondly, interpersonal communication stands apart from casual conversation due to its supportive rather than neutral tone. While engaging in interpersonal communication, one doesn't necessarily have to agree with everything the other person says, but it does require supporting them as a unique individual or someone of



significance. Maintaining a positive rectitude is crucial for such interactions. In casual conversation, however, this level of commitment and rectitude for the other may be lacking, either manifesting as neutrality or negative egocentricity.

- Thirdly, interpersonal communication is characterized by its adaptability rather than strict adherence to predetermined patterns. Flexibility in this context denotes a readiness to listen, recognize, and comprehend the other person's self-expression, and to be open to reevaluating one's own self-perception based on the mutual understanding that arises from the interaction. In essence, both self-identity and the dynamics of relationships are shaped by the interaction, influenced by the nurturing, accommodating, and adaptable qualities of the participants involved. Mere conversation is shaped by societal norms and predefined roles, often diverging from the ideal self-concepts of the participants.

## 7. CONCLUSION:

Communication serves as an indispensable component of human existence, permeating every facet of our lives. It encompasses both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions, catering to individual self-maintenance needs while also facilitating social interaction and connection. The process of self-development and maintenance is intricately linked with communication, as individuals navigate between the realms of self-awareness and social integration. The construction of self begins with cognitive processes, gradually evolving through experiences and interactions with others. As individuals engage in communication, they internalize perspectives from both particular others and generalized others, shaping their self-concept and self-esteem. By understanding the complex interplay between self-theory, personal characteristics, and communication dynamics, individuals can foster healthier self-concepts, navigate interpersonal challenges, and enrich their lived experiences. As we continue to explore the multifaceted nature of communication and its implications for self-development, we unlock new and boundless possibilities for personal growth, social connection, and collective flourishing. Moreover, the Sociometer theory challenges conventional notions of self-esteem, highlighting its role as a reflection of relational worth shaped by external evaluations. This holistic perspective underscores the intricate interplay between individual identity and interpersonal dynamics, illuminating the quest for relational validation embedded within human communication.

## REFERENCES:

1. Barrett, H. (1986). *Maintaining the Self in Communication: Concept and Guidebook*. Houghton Mifflin Company: Alpha and Omega.
2. Baldwin, M.W And Dandeneau, S. D. (2005). In Baldwin, M.W (Ed.) *Interpersonal Cognition*. New York: The Guilford Press.
3. Brooks, W. D. (1976). *Interpersonal communication*. Dubuque, Iowa: W.C. Brown Co.
4. Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2007). *Personality and individual differences*. Blackwell Publishing.
5. Harter, S. (2003). The development of self-representations during childhood and adolescence. In M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity*. New York: Guilford.
6. Leary, M.R (2005). In Baldwin, M.W (Ed.) *Interpersonal Cognition*. New York: The Guilford Press.
7. Lustig, M. W. (2010). *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication across Cultures*, 6th ed. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.,
8. Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
9. Mruk, C. J. (2006). *Self-Esteem Research, Theory, and Practice: Toward a Positive Psychology of Self-Esteem*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc
10. Wood, J.T. (2010). *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters*, Sixth Edition. USA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.