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Interpersonal Communication's Peculiar Identity Crisis

Kory Floyd

British philosopher Alan Watts once said that trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth. I suppose he meant to suggest that we all struggle to figure out who we are; that we all have an identity crisis now and then. It occurs to me that Watts's comment may describe us collectively as well as individually. From time to time, groups have identity crises just like people do; and it is one of those times for the interpersonal communication (IPC) area. Ours is not a typical identity crisis, however. We currently struggle not to define *who we are*, but *who we aren't*.

Peruse the contents of the newest *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (Knapp & Daly, 2011) and you'll discover that the umbrella of IPC includes nothing less than personality, knowledge, biology, language, nonverbal behavior, emotion, social support, social networks, influence, conflict, computer-mediated communication (CMC), skills, workplace behavior, intercultural communication, romance, health care, family communication, and lifespan communication. That's a lot of aspects of the human experience covered by one division of the National Communication Association.

Those working in the IPC trenches may not recognize the problem with this breadth. It is relatively easy to explain how each of these topics intersects with interpersonal communication, as either a form of behavior (e.g., language), an antecedent for behavior (e.g., personality), or a context for behavior (e.g., health care). No topic on the list is truly irrelevant. Social support, conflict, and influence often occur in interpersonal exchanges. Interpersonal communication can take place in romantic, familial, workplace, intercultural, and computer-mediated contexts. It is surely affected by our personality and our biology. Where's the identity crisis?

The problem with casting such a wide net is that eventually it becomes difficult to know what to exclude. Knowing *what interpersonal communication is* requires knowing *what interpersonal communication is not*, and it is the latter challenge that

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is beginning to feel like biting one's own teeth. In response to the question "What communication is not interpersonal?," we might provide the basic-course answer: "Any communication at the intrapersonal, small group, public, or mass levels." Even then, an interpersonal scholar would have to hedge. Interpersonal exchanges are often rehearsed intrapersonally, making intrapersonal communication/social cognition an antecedent to interpersonal communication. The conceptual line dividing interpersonal and small-group communication is often so fuzzy as to be meaningless. Interpersonal exchanges often occur at the level of public communication, and people share interpersonal communication about mass communication. IPC therefore infuses every other level, making it difficult to distinguish cleanly.

To have any practical utility, however, a definition must specify boundaries. No definition of any phenomenon is useful, that is, unless it distinguishes between what it includes and what it excludes. I have little concern that the discipline's definition of interpersonal communication is sufficiently inclusive. The question is: "Is it exclusive enough?" Do interpersonal communication scholars have a consensual understanding of what phenomena lie outside of our purview? If we don't know what IPC is not, then, paradoxically, we can never know what IPC is. A definition that excludes nothing also defines nothing.

One approach that scholars have taken to the problem has been to limit IPC by definition to dyadic communication. This option at least distinguishes IPC from intrapersonal and small-group communication. It also excludes from the definition of interpersonal communication some contexts that *feel* very interpersonal, such as communication within families of three or more.

An alternative approach has been to define IPC according to the characteristics of the communication rather than the characteristics of the communicators. This approach usually defines IPC as close, supportive, relationship-maintaining communication occurring between people (whether in a dyad or not). Whereas this option could include families and other small groups as well as couples and even individuals under the umbrella of interpersonal communication, it tends to value only positive communication while failing to recognize that conflict, deception, instrumental communication, and other less-supportive forms of interaction are nonetheless "interpersonal."

Both of these options are better than a definition that excludes nothing, but neither sufficiently reflects the state of the interpersonal communication field. That may or may not be problematic, insofar as the most appropriate action may be to redefine some current forms of research as "other-than-interpersonal." Perhaps some of the research included in the *Handbook*, for instance, should not be considered interpersonal communication research but instead small-group, intercultural, or health communication research. Agreeing on (and applying) the boundary conditions of interpersonal would help to make those distinctions clearer.

Perhaps, instead, the most appropriate action is to construct a definition of interpersonal communication that specifies boundary conditions based on channel rather than the number of communicators or the content of communication. We would then decide, for example, whether CMC is a form of interpersonal communication or

not, irrespective of who is communicating or what they are saying to each other. Or, perhaps, it is all about the message, so a discussion between spouses about a relational transgression qualifies as IPC, but a discussion between the same spouses about paying the water bill does not.

If I had the answer, it wouldn't be an identity crisis. What I hope is that, even if you aren't an interpersonal scholar—and especially if you are—you can appreciate the problem. Which of the examples I have described in this article qualify as IPC and which do not? We cannot continue to respond, “It's *all* interpersonal,” because that reply betrays the fact that we seem to have little collective idea of where our boundaries lie. If virtually every form of communication is “somehow interpersonal,” insofar as it occurs between people, then *interpersonal communication* borders on the conceptually vacuous. Let's not be resigned to that; rather, let's take Alan Watts's observation as a challenge and see what we can produce in response to this peculiar identity crisis.

Reference

Knapp, M. L., & Daly, J. A. (2011). *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.