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Towards a Practical Communication Intervention

Florentin SMARANDACHE¹, Ștefan VLĂDUȚESCU²

Abstract

The study starts from evidence that several communication acts fail, but nobody is called to intervene and nobody thinks of intervening. Examining different branches (specialties) of the communication discipline and focusing on four possible practices, by comparison, differentiation, collating and corroboration, the current study brings arguments for a branch of the communication discipline that has as unique practical aim the communicational intervention, the practical, direct and strict application of communication research. Communication, as discipline, must create an instrument of intervention. The discipline which studies communication globally (General Communication Science) has developed a strong component of theoretical and practical research of communication phenomena (Applied Communication Research), and within a niche theory (Grounded Practical Theory – Robert T. Craig & Karen Tracy, 1995) took incidentally into account the direct, practical application of communication research. We propose Practical Communication Intervention, as speciality of communication as an academic discipline. Practical Communication Intervention must be a field specialty in the universe of communication.

Keywords: communication, communication research, social intervention, communicational intervention, Practical Communication Intervention (PCI)

Introduction

In general, any intervention in human life has, first of all, a sociological character. Taking into account the fact that one of the main sources of Communication as discipline is constituted by Sociology; we contend that such an in-

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strument must be a communicational instrument which can value the sociological experience of social intervention. Wolfgang Donsbach was the president of the International Communication Association (the most important world organization of specialists in the domain of communication). In a study with major impact on the scientific community, "The Identity of Communication Research" (2006), Donsbach shows that: "Communication research has the potential and the duty to focus on research agendas that can help societies and help people to communicate better" (Donsbach, 2006). The specialty from the universe of the discipline of communication that deals with *communication research* (having as a main aim the research of concrete communication phenomena) is Applied Communication Research. Essentially, Applied Communication Research, according to its title, is a practice of *research*, a practice of *inquiry*, and not *application*, or *intervention*. Obviously, *communication research can help societies and help people to communicate better*, but the help is a theoretical one. The practice that can be induced by *communication research* is one of lecture and enforcement of the theoretical human competence. Individuals read theories that are elaborated within *communication research*; they become more cultured and trained, they improve their theoretical knowledge of communication, they impregnate communication with the know-how resulted from *communication research* and consequently, they will communicate better. Nevertheless, *communication research* has an indirect influence on the individual practice of communication. Wolfgang Donsbach explains, further on: "that is, to make up their minds on any issue on a sound basis of evidence and as little influenced by other people or institutions as possible – be it great persuaders in personal communication, the news media, or political or economic powers, in either a national or global context" (Donsbach, 2006). *Communication research* really illuminates and educates the minds, and individuals are better informed and more capable of carrying out better and more successful communication. So, *communication research* indirectly intervenes in the daily communication practice; it intervenes only as preliminary preparation. In fact, pertaining to Applied Communication Research, *communication research*, as it is conceived by Professor Donsbach, remains a component of theoretical practice. We believe that communication must directly intervene so that it makes people communicate better; it must directly intervene in the improvement of basic communication competencies. Consequently, we contend that General Communication Science must develop one component dedicated to *direct communicational intervention*. Anyway, the discipline which studies communication (we will call it General Communication Science) will be one day obliged to extend its competence and will have to optimize its performance by the development of such an instrument of communicational intervention. Such a research direction was founded by Robert T. Craig and Karen Tracy (1995) under the title Grounded Practical Theory. This scientific orientation must be extended and consolidated within the larger domain of Communication. Communication needs a practical component, a component of *application*, of *direct communicational intervention*.

General Communication Science must be able to directly intervene, through programs of support in communication, of improvement of concrete communication relationships. As some people go to psychologists or psychotherapists to be helped in order to relate better with other people, *communicologists* must be called to intervene in situations of communication failure.

The Sources of Communication as Academic Discipline

As a discipline, communication represents ontological, epistemological, methodological and hermeneutical similarities to social sciences such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science. Actually, communication has taken over and adapted methods of all these domains-fields. Moreover, the fathers and founders of communication as a social or socio-human domain of study came from the universe/multi-verse of these sciences: Kurt Lewin and Carl I. Hovland were psychologists, Paul F. Lazarsfeld was a sociologist, Harold D. Lasswell was a specialist in political science. Marshall McLuhan and W. L. Schramm had a literature doctorate. Even today's great specialists originate in psychology, such as Charles R. Berger, and D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen. Robert T. Craig, Judee K. Burgoon and Michael E. Roloff are among the few ones who have originated in communication from the *speech communication* area. Ontologically, the four social sciences (sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science) form socio-scientific sources of Communication. Remarkably, Craig remembers two of these sources as *traditions* of communication (sociology and psychology). (Never forget that, with the help of C. E. Shannon, W. Weaver and N. Wiener, communication has both mathematical and cybernetic perspective as a source of foundation for the communication systems).

On the other hand, communication reveals less ontological, epistemological, methodological and hermeneutical similarities to humanities like rhetoric, persuasion, semiotics, linguistics. In these do we identify humanistic sources of the discipline of Communication. Robert T. Craig (1999) Craig & Muller, (2007) considers semiotics and rhetoric the righteous *traditions* of communication. We would, convergently, say that the discipline of communication has more sources. Some are of a socio-scientific type, others are humanistic. Some are principal, others are secondary. The principal sources of communication as discipline are the eight mentioned already: sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, rhetoric, persuasion, semiotics, linguistics.

We retain that sociology is the fundamental source of Communication discipline. As a consequence, we admit that, primarily, communication should have more important similarities with sociology. Sources like pragmatics, philosophy, ethics, ecology and so on are appreciated as secondary. Naturally, these sources have influenced its ontological and methodological profile and identity

(Donsbach, 2006). As a consequence, the streams gather together in the river bed of the greatest of them. When two rivers meet, one stays, whereas the other joins it and then disappears: the name is given by the strongest one. Since it has appeared at the confluence and by the radiation of 8-10 sources of knowledge, communication is something different from each of them: the discipline of communication is an unpredictable emergence in comparison with its sources. Subsequently, communication has the characteristics of a social science (in accordance with the sociological sources or the political science) and the characteristics of a discipline in the category of humanities (according to its linguistic, semiotic, rhetorical and persuasive sources). It is Robert T. Craig who has insisted that the discipline of communication should be viewed as having a practical character, not a scientific one. And we certainly think that communication has a practical character. Due to its preponderantly practical quality, we do consider that communication has a scientific character. As communication has a more practical-applicative character than a hermeneutical-interpretative one, it must be seen as belonging to social sciences or social-human sciences.

What Kind of Practice is Communication Research? What Kind of Practice is Communicational Intervention (Application)?

Practice is the source, the criterion and the purpose of theory, of science. Science starts from practice and goes back to the design of practice. Throughout the years, the major stimulating and directive role of theory has been observed. Lewin said: "There is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Lewin, 1951: 169), and Einstein showed: "It is the theory which decides what we can observe" (apud. Heisenberg, 1971: 77). It may be also said that a good practice is the best theory. Anyway, there is no theory without any practical support and no practice without any as small as possible theoretical idea.

Everything that human beings do constitutes practices. Practices are all the activities of the entire world. Not all the practices are identical, and, especially, not all the practices take place at the same level, in the same context and so on. But, above all, all the practices happen between themselves. At the first level of practice, there are the practices as practices. These are practices per se, meaning the practices which besides their own purpose have no more other. Pure practices are pure engaging in activities, they are practices whose purposes are to be just practices. Craig believes that "Practices involve not only engaging in certain activities, but also thinking and talking about activities in particular ways" (Craig, 2006: 38). So, any practice would imply the activities plus *thinking and talking about activities*. And any practice could have two aspects, *conceptual* and *theoretical*: "Practices also have a conceptual - sometimes, even, a theoretical -

aspect” (Craig, 2006: 39). On another plan, we can say that there are four types of practices: (1) practice per se (pure practice or activity practice) or the first practice; (2) theoretical practice (practice of theorization of activity) or the second practice; (3) general conceptual practice (practice of thinking abstractly about the theoretical practice and the activity practice) or the third practice, and (4) the fourth practice, the applied practice of practice per se for the efficiency and the theoretical-conceptual value added to the second and the third practice. These ideas are available in the field-universe of communication.

Craig talks about *practice of communication*, *communication practices*, about the fact that “people everywhere are practicing communication” and “communication is a practice” (Craig, 2006: 40-45). He stresses that “communication per se is a practice (a coherent, meaningful set of activities)” and “in our culture” it has developed a “discourse about communication” which “has developed to such an extent that an academic discipline of communication studies (...): we call communication theory” (Craig, 2006: 41). Not only “is communication a practice”, but “(1) theory is a practice; (2) theory provides ways of interpreting practical, knowledge; and (3) theory is fundamentally normative” (Craig, 2006: 42). In other words, R. T. Craig thinks there would be two practices: one practice meaning “communication per se” and the other practice meaning “communication theory” as a form of “metadiscursive practice”: “I envision communication theory as an open field of discourse engaged with the problems of communication as a social practice, a theoretical meta-discourse that emerges from, extends, and informs practical metadiscourse” (Craig, 1999: 129). Communication is understood as discourse and communication theory as “metadiscourse (discourse about discourse)” (Craig, 2006: 41). Thus, communication is practice, meaning discourse, and communication theory is a different practice: meta-discourse.

We would say that in communication “field”, Craig makes the difference between two kinds of plans and two kinds of practice. In our opinion, there can be delimited not only two plans, but three plans (three envelopes of knowledge) and four types of practice: (a) But before everything, there is the first practice or practice per se (pure practice or activity practice, occurrence-practice) meaning practice of communication, communication practice, communication discourse. In 1999, Craig appositively said that “communication theory” is “theory of this practice” (Craig, 1999: 123); (b) The second practice is theoretical practice (practice of theorization of activity) meaning communication theory, theory of communication or theorizing discourse about communication discourse, meta-discursive practice, and theoretical practice. This practice means the application of some research methods on the concrete communication phenomenon, events. Being an application method, this is an applicative practice with an applied character; (c) The third practice is scientific conceptual practice (practice of thinking abstractly about the other two practices: theoretical practice and activity practice), meaning communication science, science of communication, scientific

discourse, meta-theory (meta-meta-discourse). As far as “meta-theory” is concerned, we must remember that Craig, in his capital ontological study “Communication theory as a field” (1999), refers to it together with Muller (2007) alone at the chapter “Metatheory” without any further explanations; (d) The fourth practice is practice of concrete application in initial activity practice for the efficiency of concepts, theories, laws depicted from zetetic practices. The second and the third practices make up zetetic investigation practices.

In our opinion, communication science is a meta-theory, and its method is “meta-analysis” (Courtright, 2013). The whole communication universe forms the perimeter of preoccupation of General Communication Science. As regards the practice and discourse types mentioned above, communication universe presents three envelopes of knowledge. General Communication Science (GCS) is the socio-humanistic theoretical-scientific field that deals with the communication universe. This includes the three practices which form three knowledge-research-application frames: (a) Fundamental Communication Science (FCS) is the first envelop-frame: the constitutive branch of General Communication Science which deals directly and preponderantly with the conceptual basic, fundamental problems of communication. Applied Communication Science or *Applied Communication Research* (ACR) is the grounded-theoretical envelop of communication. “Grounded Practical” Communication Application-Intervention (PCI) is the implementation frame of direct practice for the general conceptual theoretical-applicative benefits. At a certain moment, D. French and M. Richards speak about “importance of fundamental Communication Science” (French & Richards, 1994); (b) *Applied Communication Research* is the theoretical-applicative level of General Communication Science, the “theorizing”-research level. The mission of *Applied Communication Research* stands for the specialized research of the concrete phenomenon and events, of communicative (pure) or conducted practices to discover, to separate, to extract, to abstract regularities, dependences, patterns, concepts, categories, theories, laws, principles etc.; (c) Practical Communication Intervention (PCI) is the purely practical component of General Communication Science and deals with putting into practice the results of theoretical and conceptual research. Its aim is the efficiency of communication practice. Practical Communication Intervention (PCI) constitutes the concrete use of the theoretical conceptual benefits. In science order, this is the fourth practice: a practice that consists of concrete induction of communication wisdom.

If general methods of Fundamental Communication Science (observation experiment research, content analysis, survey research, participatory research and so on) are applied in *Applied Communication Research* to study communicative practices, communication practices and practical practice, Practical Communication Intervention deals with proceedings, procedures and techniques to improve concrete and direct communication practice. Communication is created in *Grounded Practical Communication Intervention (Application)*. Phenomena,

events, situations and communication practices are produced in comparison with concepts, theories and principles of Fundamental Communication and practical conclusions separated in Practical Communication Intervention (Application). Practical Communication Intervention also includes communication practical knowledge, meaning communicative know-how. In the communication ontology essay (1999), Robert T. Craig talks about “Exploration, Creation, Application” of “communication theory” “applying communication theory by engaging it with practical metadiscourse on communication problems”, “applying communication theory involves engaging the traditions of theoretical metadiscourse with practical metadiscourse on real communication problems. It is in this process of application that the communication theory can be most logically tested in order to establish its relevance and usefulness for guiding the conduct and criticism of practice” (Craig, 1999: 146-152). From our point of view, this is the position of the second practice, Applied Communication Theory-Research, compared to the fourth practice, Practical Communication Intervention, the one in which problems of the first practice are concretely solved, problems of communication per se, but also problems of political communication with masses, public meetings, negotiations, crisis etc. In 1995, Craig and Tracy introduced a research direction named Grounded Practical Theory (GPT): “as a rational reconstruction of practices for the purpose of informing further practice and reflection” (Craig & Tracy, 1995: 248). As it is known, a theory is an idea of descriptive, explanatory or normative relevance about a set of practices and concrete phenomena. They view Grounded Practical Theory as an approach with a methodological, conceptual and theoretical-normative characteristic supposed to solve problems of communication practice in real world. It is followed to identify communication problems and issues of humankind and to find out practical communicational adequate solutions. Finally, Grounded Practical Theory would be either a “theoretical” intervention to solve some communication component conflicts or an intervention to optimize some communication processes. Programmatically, Craig and Tracy keep Grounded Practical Theory in the envelop-frame of Applied Communication Research. We think that, if Grounded Practical Theory starts from practice per se, - the first practice-, and selects a theory, it depends on Applied Communication Theory-Research then, as it is a pure research. When, in Grounded Practical Theory, the theory depicted from the examination of the first practice, practice per se, returns to some phenomena of communication practice or even to the starting communicational phenomenon, we believe that we no longer deal with the Applied Communication Theory-Research envelop-frame, but we are in the Practical Communication Intervention envelop-frame. In this respect, we view Grounded Practical Theory as a complex research, having a theoretical practice component, the second practice (which belongs to Applied Communication Theory-Research) and a fourth practice component to improve the practice (which belongs to Practical Communication Intervention). Through Practical Communication

Intervention, the circuit practice-science-theory closes by the action of science-theory on pure, natural practice.

Applied Communication Research vs. Practical Communication Intervention; communication research vs. communicational intervention

In the years 1970-1980, communication is institutionalized as an academic discipline. *Applied Communication Research* emerges as a natural development and building element. Among those who gave it a profile of resistance there are included: Hickson (1973), Cissna (1982), Miller, Sunnafrank (1984), Cissna (1987), Pettegrew (1988). Hickson is the one who launched the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* in 1973.

During 1990-2000, *Applied Communication Research* strengthened and developed its knowledge background. It also contributed a) to broaden the ideational theoretical and conceptual thesaurus of Fundamental Communication Science, and b) to demonstrate a consubstantial domain of communication called by us "Grounded Practical" Communication Application-Intervention which was born under the name Grounded Practical Theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995). For this stage of *Applied Communication Research* the contributions of such specialists as O'Hair & Kreps (1990), Cissna (2000), Wood (2000), Keyton (2000), O'Hair (2000) are very important. In the 2000s, *Applied Communication Research* is a knowledge envelop-frame reinforced in communication universe: Vangelisti (2004), Frey & Cissna (2009).

Since its founding in 1970, *Applied Communication Research* has undergone three phases: the initiation (starting) phase, the consolidation phase and the founding-acknowledgment phase as knowledge envelop-frame component of General Communication Science alongside with Fundamental Communication Science and Practical Communication Intervention: (a) Initially, Cissna, wondering in 1982 "what is Applied Communication Research?", identified the domain as "inquiry that sought to make a difference in the world through examining some feature of human communication" (Cissna, 1982: 1). *Applied Communication Research* was at the beginning and worked on its own profile, sought its place among research approaches in the area of communication; (b) In the consolidation phase, approximately 20 years after *Applied Communication Research* had been out of question: Cissna found that the domain was a "legitimate and respected area of communication study" (Cissna, 2000: 169). In the field of communication, *Applied Communication Research* was defined as a specific "area"; (c) In the consolidation phase as envelope of knowledge and research framework in the world of communication, *Applied Communication Research*

reaches the year 2010. Now, Cissna and Frey state: “The study of real-world communication concerns, issues, and problems is known as Applied Communication Research” (Frey & Cissna, 2009: XXIX). It is a *field of study* in which there happens “the systematic investigation of real-world concerns, issues, and problems to help people better manage them” and which is part of “communication discipline” (Frey & Cissna, 2009: XXIX-XXXIX). The two experts noted that the principles and practices of *Applied Communication Research* were used in several programs: “principles and practices have been employed in some exemplary programs” (Frey & Cissna, 2009: XXXIX).

Programs that are used consciously and in a special way for *principles and practices* are actually, in our opinion, concrete cases of Practical Communication Intervention (Application). In fact, the *principles* belong to Fundamental Science Communication and the *practices* which are referred to are related to Applied Communication Research. We would say that Practical Communication Application-Intervention is one of the *practices that have been employed*, meaning some good, acknowledged, tested, practices validated in Applied Communication Research. We see *Grounded Practical Communication Intervention (Application)* as a direct improvement of communication’s work by applying the concepts, theories, and fundamental cogitations of Applied Communication Research. It is a feedback of the theoretical practice; it is theoretical-practical, firstly practical application of the theory. In that general argumentative plan, Professor Craig emphasizes that: “Every theoretical discourse has essential practical aspects, and every practical discourse has essential theoretical aspects. Practices are theorizing to varying degrees, but every practice is theorized to some degree” (Craig, 1996: 461). *Applied Communication Research* produces theories, procedures, processes and techniques that can lead to improved communication. It generates theoretical constructs that have latent applicability. When we use their potential applicability, the approach does not start from *Applied Communication Research* envelop. The practical use of the research constructs resulted from *Applied Communication Research* is achieved in *Practical Communication Intervention* envelop. Clear: (a) *Applied Communication Research* is the domain of communication research; (b) *Practical Communication Intervention* is the activity of communication intervention. Within *Applied Communication Research* there are created constructs with *applicability* and within Practical Communication Intervention these constructs and concepts of Fundamental Science Communication are practically used. *Applicability* and *usability* form the core of both. Argyris believes that both *applicability* and *usability* would lie within the *Applied Communication Research*; he says that “applicability refers to relevance” and defines “usability” “as applicable implementing knowledge, to carry into effect, to fully fulfil, to bring to full success whatever the propositions of applicable knowledge assert” (Argyris, 1995: 1).

Part V of *Routledge Handbook of Applied Communication Research* (2009) (edited by Frey and Cissna) entitled *Exemplary Programs of Applied Communication Research* is a model for what *Practical Application Communication Intervention* means the implementation in the social environment of the conclusions resulted from the researches in *Fundamental Communication Science* and *Applied Communication Research*. Hecht and Miller-Day (2009) deal with “Drug Resistance Strategies Project: Using Narrative Theory to Enhance Adolescents Communication Competence”; in the article, the *fundamental* concept of communication competence and the *applied* concept of *narrative theory* are relevant. The implementation is denoted by *using*. Wille and Roberto (2009) thematize *Fear Appeals and Public Health: Managing Fear and Creating Hope*. In “global process of change” of behavior (Zamfir, 2013), in „organisational change” (Cojocaru, 2012), in doctor-patient relationship (Cojocaru, Cace & Gavrilovici, 2013), in “social gradient in health” (Bulgaru-Iliescu, Oprea, Cojocaru & Sandu, 2013) is inevitable a communicational intervention. The clearest “communicational interventions” (Carson, 1977; Lien, 2006), “communication intervention” (Lilly *et al.*, 2000; Prizant, Wetherby & Rydell, 2000; Goldstein, 2000; Rossetti, 2001) are recorded in crisis situations (see’s Communication Crisis) in medical contexts (Goldstein, 2002; Aldred, Green & Adams, 2004; enescu, 2009; Strunga & Bunaiasu, 2013). Examining the contributions of Palo Alto School at *interactional view* of communication, Carson spoke about “basic themes of psychopathology as communication disorder and psychotherapy as strategic communicational intervention” (Carson, 1977). Rao, Anderson, Inui and Frankel (2007) assert that “communication interventions make a difference in conversations” and that „interventions were characterized by type (e.g., information, modeling, feedback, and practice), delivery strategy, and overall intensity”. The communicational intervention has some dimensions which must be investigated.

Conclusion

As we have previously demonstrated, communication as an academic discipline has matured: (a) communication has gained a clear self-consciousness; (b) communication has become autonomous and lives on its own; (c) various emerging fields of communication have developed a strong and functional coherence, so that set of communication fields has turned into a universe with its own identity and recognizable profile; (d) the influence of disciplines which “labored” and “attended”, Socratically speaking, to the birth of communication as a discipline (Rhetoric, Anthropology, Semiotics, Psychology and Sociology) is not radiant and determinant anymore; (e) communication is mainly developing on its own account. Furthermore, we ascertain that within the communication universe there are structured new areas: such a field is Practical Communication Intervention.

Practical Communication Intervention is an unmediated injection of theory into practice; it must be a direct implementation. By Practical Communication Intervention, the theory-research of communication infuses the practice of communication. With the words of Steve Duck: there shall be “the systematic application of that work in a practical context”, “application of insights” (Duck, 2007, p. IX).

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