Interpersonal Communication: Modeling Interpersonal Relationship, An Islamic Perspective

by Mohammad A. Siddiqui

Introduction

Communication today is increasingly seen as a process through which the exchange and sharing of meaning is made possible. Communication as a subject of scientific inquiry is not unique to the field of mass communication. Mathematicians, engineers, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and speech communicators have been taking an interest in the study of communication. This is not surprising because communication is the basic social process of human beings. Although communication has grown into a well developed field of study, Muslim scholars have rarely focused on the study of communication. Thus, a brief introduction to the widely used communication concepts and a framework for the study of communication within the context of this paper is provided.

In 1909, Charles Cooley defined communication from a sociological perspective as:

> The mechanism through which human relations exist and develop — all the symbols of mind, together with the means of conveying them through space and preserving them in time. It includes the expression of the face, attitude and gesture, the tones of the voice, words, writing, printing, railways, telegraph, and whatever else may be the latest achievement in the conquest of space and time.[1]

In 1949, two engineers, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, defined communication in a broader sense to include all procedures:

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[1]Charles Cooley, "The Significance of Communication," in B. Berelson and M. Janowitz (eds.), Reader in Public Opinion and Communication, New York: Free Press, 1966: 147-155.

By which one mind may affect another. This, of course, involves not only written and oral speeches, but also music, the pictorial arts, the theater, the ballet, and, in fact, all human behavior.[2]

Harold Lasswell, a political scientist, defines communication simply as:

A convenient way to describe the act of communication is to answer the following question: Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?[3]

S.S. Stevens, a behavioral psychologist, defines the act of communication as:

Communication occurs when some environmental disturbance (the stimulus) impinges on an organism and the organism does something about it (makes a discriminatory response) . . . The message that gets no response is not a communication.[4]

Social psychologist Theodore Newcomb assumes that:

In any communication situation, at least two persons will be communicating about a common object or topic. A major function of communication is to enable them to maintain simultaneous orientation toward one another and toward the common object of communication.[5]

Wilbur Schramm, a pioneer in American mass communication research, provides this definition:

When we communicate we are trying to share information, an idea, or an attitude. Communication always requires three elements—the source, the message, and the destination (the receiver).[6]

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[2]Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, The Mathematical Theory of Communication, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949.

[3]Harold Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in L. Bryson (ed.) The Communication of Ideas, New York: Harper and Row, 1948: 37-51.

[4]As quoted in John Newmann, "A Rationale for the Definition of Communication," in Alfred Smith (ed.), Communication and Culture, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966: 55-63.

[5]Theodore Newcomb, "An approach to the Study of Communication Acts," Psychological Review, v. 60, 1983: 193-404.

[6]Wilbur Schramm, "How Communication Works," in Wilbur Schramm (ed.) The Process and Effects of Mass Communication, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954: 3-26.

The above list is by no means complete, since there are numerous other definitions. However, it is a representative sampling of definitions from the broad to the specific. Most communication scholars agree that the essential part of the communication process is sharing of ideas or co-orientation. Some even say that if, between a sender and a receiver, there could not be a sharing of ideas, there was no communication.[7]

Communication may be studied at various levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and mass. Intrapersonal communication refers to fulfillment of internal human needs and sharing of ideas between the brain and other parts of the body or harmonizing thoughts and actions. The purpose of individual training *(Tazkiah)* is to facilitate intrapersonal communication. Interpersonal communication, on the other hand, is basically sharing of ideas between two persons. In a group, interpersonal communication would facilitate understanding each other and the goal or the task for which the group is created. In mass communication, the process of co-orientation becomes complex because of the 'massness' (large number) and the diverse nature of the receivers (public). This paper only deals with interpersonal communication and its relevance to the modeling of interpersonal relationship in a task-oriented group, especially the Muslim Ummah.

Co-orientation: The Essence of Interpersonal Communication

Co-orientation, or sharing of ideas, consists of two parts: (1) sharing of facts and information, and (2) sharing of values. The need to share facts, information, and values is basic and inherent in human nature. This need has been used as well as abused: used to develop human cultures, ideas, civilizations, science and technology and abused in expoiting this need for vested interests. Slavery, colonialization, and expansionism are but a few examples of vast human exploitation of their basic instinct-need to share information, facts and ideas.[8] The way human needs are fulfilled creates specific cultures, value systems and communication models.

An Islamic Perspective

The Qur'ān and the Sunnah provide a distinct way for humans to interact and share information and basic facts about life. The Islamic principles of sharing ideas and of communicating lead to what may be called the Islamic

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[7]Ibid.

[8]Donald C. Bryant and Karl R. Wallace, Fundamentals of Public Speaking (5th ed.) Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1979: 49.

way of life. These principles are distinct from any other existing system of sharing of ideas and information. One distinction is the nature of the interacting system itself which is universal and free from any prejudicial treatment on the basis of race, color, language, and nationalities, etc. The other is the pragmatic nature of the system. The phrase *inna-l-ladhīna āmanū wa 'amilū-ṣ-ṣāliḥāt* ('verily those who believe and do good deeds') makes it most pragmatic. The need to share ideas is related to both thought and belief as well as action. Further, the comprehensiveness of the term *'Amal Ṣāliḥ* (good deeds) enhances the scope of co-orientation and sharing of ideas. Thus, the communication model within an Islamic framework would be the most pragmatic model providing an Islamic basis for co-orientation and sharing of ideas. However, such a model may only be developed by a team of social scientists having thorough knowledge of Islam and capable of Islamizing modern knowledge in Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, Anthropology and Communication. Such a communication model would, undoubtedly, facilitate an understanding of the ways Muslim individuals, groups, and societies should conduct their personal, social, cultural, economic, and political affairs.

A Model for Interpersonal Relationship

With the above perspective in mind, a simple model of interpersonal communication, to facilitate interpersonal relationship, is presented. Two factors continuously function in group work and each affects; and is being affected, by people, processes and products (outcomes). These factors are the *task activities* and the *relationship between the members of the group*. Task outcome is a product consisting of the integration of the best resources available to the group. Relationship outcome is a set of relationships between persons in the group that allows them to come together and work together. Effective interpersonal relationship involves both agreement and disagreement as well as love and conflict between and among the members of the group. Free and direct communication is the basis of good interpersonal relationship. The Qur'ān and the Sunnah provide ample guidance to develop a model of interpersonal relationship. If we consider the definition of Harold Lasswell we find that the Qur'ānic guidance is much more comprehensive and to the point than those provided by communication scholars, sociologists and psychologists. The Qur'ān deals with every element of the communication process. Qur'ānic emphasis on who, the sender or the messenger, leads to a sound, trustworthy, and concerned source.[9] The message *Says What* and

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[9]Verses 63-77, Chapter 25, in the Holy Qur'ān and numerous other verses emphasize this aspect of the servants of God who are the Communicator, the Source or the Senders/Messengers in the context of communication.

is also well formulated and clear and the *Channel* is unrestricted—it should be as free from noise[10] as possible. The destination *Whom* is not a particular race or nationality, rather the entire human kind[11]. The goal *With What Effect* is to achieve peace, equality, brotherhood, and prosperity in this world and salvation and pleasure of God in the hereafter[12].

The basis of co-orientation or sharing of ideas is a life based on reasoning. However, Qur'ānic concept and method of reasoning is different from other philosophical methods of reasoning. The Qur'ān leads to a reasoning that must not be abstract and that leads to thoughtful action. Unobstructed communication and the use of reason (and rational thinking) leads to the development of human thought and action necessary to build up healthy interpersonal relationships.[13] The Qur'ān points out several barriers to reasoning and consequently to the development of a meaningful interpersonal relationship.[14]

(1) Coercion *(Ikrāh)*

There should be no coercion/compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error.[15]

All forms of coercion must be removed from human thought and action. When God does not demand blind acceptance of His authority[16], how can a group leader or an Amir demand or force obedience? Obedience is required, not by blind following or force but rather through love of the goal/task, the group, and the leader/Amir. This love is developed in a free and uncoerced environment which is necessary to facilitate co-orientation and sharing of ideas.

(2) Imitation *(Taqlīd)*

Imitation, (ditto) copying, hampers the growth of interpersonal

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[10]Noise, in communication terminology, is defined as any cause of message distortion within the system (See Shannon and Weaver, op. cit.). For perfect interpersonal communication, information transmitted, in the form of messages, by the source should be equal, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to the information received by the receiver at the destination.

[11]This is evident in the Qur'ānic emphasis on *Al-Nās* (Mankind or Humankind). See 2:21; 3:3; 49:13, etc.

[12]See verse 201, Chapter 2. The Holy Qur'ān, 2:201.

[13]Ahmad Abd Al-Hamid Ghorab, The Qur'ānic Reasoning, London, Ta-Ha Publishers, 1981.

[14]Ibid.

[15]*The Glorious Qur'ān - Text, Translation, and Commentary* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Indianapolis: American Trust Publication, 1977, 2: 256 (means chapter 2 verse 256).

[16]Ibid.: 38:29; 48:22.

communication. Imitation blocks sharing of ideas and leads to stagnation. The basis of communication, of all types, is progress. Allah invites humankind to think, to ponder, to reason, to meditate and then to accept,[17] all of which are ingredients to strengthen mutual trust and to enhance the interpersonal relationship. What is happening between and among Muslim individuals is exactly the opposite. Imitation has become a cornerstone of our individual and social lives. Imitation leads to prejudice and unreasonable and illogical behavior:

> When it is said to them: "Come to what Allah has revealed; come to the Apostle": They say: "Enough for us are the ways we found our fathers following." What! even though their fathers were void of knowledge and guidance?[18]

(3) Whims *(Hawa)*

The word *"Hawa"* means irrational desires, passions or any kind of human prejudice.[19] Whims are temporarily pleasing and self-satisfying. However, the terrible effect of whims is isolation which is opposite to co-orientation. Whims lead to injustice, tyranny, prejudice, pride and falsehood – all elements detrimental to the growth of interpersonal relationship. The Qur'ān says:

> Follow not your passions; Lest you lapse from Justice.[20] In another context the Qur'ān explains:

> And who is more astray than the one who follows his own lusts, devoid of guidance from Allah. For Allah guides not people given to wrong doings.[21]

> Needless to say, one of the most obstructing factors, in the growth of our society is our whimsical attitude towards each other and towards the way we want to achieve our goals.

(4) Conjecture *(Zann)*

To conjecture *(Zann)* is to guess or express suspicion about truth or fact.

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[17]Ibid.
[18]Ibid., 5:107.
[19]Ahmad Abd Al-Hamid Ghorab, op. cit.:5.
[20]*The Holy Qur'ān–Text, Translation, and Commentary*, op. cit.: 4:135.
[21]Ibid., 28:50.

This is one major activity that hampers free and direct communication and the growth of interpersonal communication and destroys the basis of interpersonal relationships. The Qur'ān forbids conjecture:

> O believers! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible); for suspicion in some cases is a sin.[22]

The Qur'ān has used this term in another context also: Most of them (unbelievers) follow nothing but conjecture/fancy; Surely conjecture can, by no means, take the place of truth.[23]

These are some elements that prevent co-orientation and sharing of ideas and hence a meaningful interpersonal relationship. There are many elements that facilitate co-orientation. Some of the most important, among those, are:

(1) Soberness *(Hilm)*

This is a quality that helps people to understand each other and helps them formulate the guidelines of interpersonal relationships. Addressing the Prophet Moses, the Qur'ān says:

> Give admonition only if it profits (helps).[24]

Soberness includes guarding the tongue and having patience.

To guard the tongue, the Qur'ān says:

> O believers! Let not some men among you laugh at others; It may be that the (latter) are better than the (former). Nor let some women laugh at others; It may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): Nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other; Nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames. . . .[25]

When the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) asked him, "What are the best forms of worship?" The Prophet said, "To pray on time." When asked again, he said, "No one should get hurt from your tongue." On another occasion the Prophet has been reported as saying, "If you want to

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[22]Ibid., 49:12.
[23]Ibid., 10:36.
[24]Ibid., 87:9.
[25]Ibid., 49:11.

say something about your brother or sister, say something good or else keep quiet."

(2) Preferring Others Above One's Own Self *(Ithar)*

This is yet another quality that facilitates interpersonal relationships. In the process of co-orientation, if one demonstrates a concern for others, it certainly helps the establishment of a relationship based on trust and confidence. Preferring others above one's own self leads to sacrifice and a higher level of understanding one's goals, environment, and obligations. For Muslims, the nature of their commitment to Allah and their responsibilities toward their mission as well as toward fellow human beings, demands that they should be ready to offer sacrifices in terms of their time, wealth, other possessions and, if necessary, their lives. This may seem to be out of context, but a true understanding of the *sender*, the *message*, the *channel*, (the environment as well as the means), and the *receiver* in the context of Islam and its mission makes it quite clear that this undoubtedly facilitates the interpersonal relationship as well as interpersonal communication.

Thus, the interpersonal communication model for the desired interpersonal relationship (desired in the context of the Muslim Ummah) can be described as a *two way process of sharing of ideas and concerns in an open and free environment of love and dedication*. The major characteristics of this communication model would include mutual respect, patience, trust and confidence, guarding of the tongue, soberness, and sacrifice. At a higher level of acting as well as understanding, interpersonal communication may also include the communication between each individual and his or her Creator, Allah. In that case the main purpose and the process is co-orientation and the main vehicle of that interpersonal communication is prayer (Salah), spending in the way of Allah *(Infāq)*, and a persistent struggle of co-orientation (Jihād).

This is a very preliminary effort to draw parallels between an emerging field of study, becoming increasingly important to all fields of social sciences and studies of human behavior, and a divine message. It is hoped that a response to this paper and deliberations by other social scientists will help modify, expand, and illustrate a model of interpersonal communication and relationships further.