All Things Communication

A Review of

APA Handbook of Interpersonal Communication
by David Matsumoto (Ed.)
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Reviewed by
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"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

(Carroll, 1872, Chapter 6)

Had poor Alice simply been given access to David Matsumoto’s edited volume, the APA Handbook of Interpersonal Communication, she might not have experienced so much difficulty communicating with Humpty Dumpty. For in this book, Alice could have learned both theoretical and applied approaches to engaging in a more satisfying interaction with the haughty egg.

Not that this book is breaking new ground. To the contrary, all chapters have been previously published elsewhere. Matsumoto’s contribution, however, is to collect these works and provide a context within which to read them. As is befitting a “handbook,” the purpose for publishing this volume was to provide a state-of-the-art source referencing “active scientific and scholarly endeavors” in the field of communication (p. ix).

The editor underscores the importance of gathering such knowledge because both applied and theoretical communication research has emanated from such broad fields as sociology, linguistics, and psychology. He explains his passion for this field of study: “One of the reasons why humans can produce and live very successfully in highly complex, layered social networks is because we can communicate . . . shared intentionality,” allowing human cultures to have “survived and thrived” (p. ix).

For research to form cumulative knowledge, however, scientists must begin to standardize their terminology, methods, and, indeed, their theoretical perspectives. To create a handbook that would provide researchers with the most advanced level of knowledge possible, the first section includes seven articles examining theories that are driving current research. Then, to demonstrate the types of results that up-to-date theoretical perspectives are finding, Part II offers six chapters of applied research.

Leading off the first section of the book, Pitts and Giles recognize the difficulties that scholars encounter in trying to make sense of “seemingly kaleidoscopic encounters” (p. 3). Accordingly, they implore researchers “to move beyond disciplinary borders and into specific sites of human interaction and meaning-making” (p. 3).

In the burgeoning study of interpersonal communication, then, borders must be broken down. Methods need to move beyond “myopically focused . . . single-participant relationship reflections, staged laboratory investigations, and/or solitary case studies in a singular point of time” (p. 8). Rather, broader sociocultural, developmental, relational, emotional, health, family, social network, and economic influences must be investigated over time. Pitts and Giles are
particularly keen on adapting a life-span perspective, given the dynamic nature of interpersonal communication.

Echoing Pitts and Giles’s exhortation to explore and advance more expansive theoretical approaches, Thibault declares that it is time to “reconceptualize cognition and thinking as distributed processes that are spread across persons, times, and places, rather than being confined within the brains of individuals” being studied in face-to-face encounters (pp. 52–53). Driven by a technology-centered world, researchers now must also develop theories about how “technically medicated communication” crosses geographic, cultural, and time boundaries (Thimm, p. 72).

Ravelli and Stenglin (p. 77) review seminal studies and advance new perspectives to explain how a “feeling space” is negotiated during the process of communicating within the built environment. Locher advocates that theories can evolve by synergistically combining two previously separated fields of study. Her chapter on relational work, politeness, and identity construction, she hopes, will “encourage much more empirical research . . . to understand the intricacies of relational work in all its facets” (p. 135).

Brock tackles the difficulties of differentiating “positive” (humor, jokes, irony) from “bad” (mocking, gossip, black humor) communication activities by advocating for the “problem-solving potential of applied linguistics” (p. 156). Rounding out Part I, White points out the need to expand “appraisal theory” to help understand the “ideational, textual, and interpersonal” modes of “meaning making” (p. 162).

In the Applied Interpersonal Communication portion of the book, authors’ works have been selected to describe “how research findings have been instrumental to the development of intervention programs to improve communication, to [identify] key factors (competencies) that appear to be the key ingredients of effective communication, and to [examine] the efficacy of such programs” (p. xi). Weber’s contribution to the literature is the six properties of everyday communication: “ordinariness, authenticity, orality, privateness, informality, and lack of goal orientation” (pp. 207–208). As a result, Weber predicts, “an entirely novel research domain is emerging” (p. 210).

Muntigl’s findings can help counselors comprehend and respond to “the relevance of language in psychotherapy” (p. 231). Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou’s research on interpersonal management by youths’ communications is breaking new ground in endeavors to understand peer-group cultures. From one end of the age spectrum to another, the following chapter (Chapter 11) reports on a study of older adults’ language and discourse skills. By applying the World Health Organization’s new biopsychosocial model, the authors demonstrate that similar barrier-breaking research must be undertaken to “enhance our understanding of both group-level and individual changes in healthy aging” (p. 268).

Puccinelli’s chapter advances a call for more interpersonal communication research to include nonverbal competencies that are encoded and decoded along with oral exchanges. The final chapter appears to be a companion piece on competency but specifically deals with media. Here the authors conclude that research into media competence is severely lacking and that researchers need to develop the frameworks and methods to assess the exponentially expanding technologies that now facilitate interpersonal communication.

I have chosen to provide a thumbnail sketch of each chapter for this reason: A handbook is generally accepted to be a reference-filled volume that scholars can pull off the shelf as one would an encyclopedia or dictionary. Such books generally are not the type to be consumed while one is curled up in a comfy chair. Thus, I wanted the readers to know some of the topics that are covered.

Because the APA Handbook of Interpersonal Communication also offers a broad range of contemporary theoretical frameworks and applications, I can envision professors asking students to read a selected chapter or two. Beyond psychology, students of such fields as gerontology, sociology, psychobiology, linguistics, business, technology, and counseling could benefit from reading selected portions of the book.

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