

## SELF-FACILITATING COMMUNICATION

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As a small boy I remember listening to my grandmother talk to herself as she went about doing her housework. At the time I found it a curious and humorous phenomenon. Since that time I have observed many other people doing the same thing, and have even found myself doing it occasionally! The simplest explanation for such behavior is that it is just the price one has to pay for getting old. However, this does not seem to be a adequate answer, since small children and middle-aged people often employ the same kind of communication.

Self-communication possesses an incredible power to determine what we become. It generally falls into two broad categories: (1) self-disparaging, self-defeating, self-destructive communication; or (2) self-facilitating, productive communication. When used improperly, speech may become an albatross around one's psyche. Mental institutions are full of people using disparaging self-talk. "Dummy," "stupid," "idiot," and "I'm no good . . . ." can be muttered against oneself till no hiding place can be found. However, it is not self-disparaging communication that I wish to discuss in this article, but rather, the more positive uses of self-communication.

I have chosen the label "self-facilitating communication" to describe a certain type of communication with one's self. It refers to a kind of self-talk which enables an individual to function better

in a given context. It may occur in solitude or in the presence of others. However, the impact of the message on others is of secondary importance. The fact that others may be present is incidental as far as this function of language is concerned. Self-facilitating communication is basically a type of intrapersonal communication, though the problem is compounded by the fact that it often occurs in the presence of others. Difficulty in classifying the term, however, does not diminish the importance of this communicative behavior.

It might logically be argued that all communication is self-facilitating, just as some would argue, in a broader context, that all behavior is communication. However, I am using the term to refer to the impact of silent or vocalized messages on the sender in several specific ways: (1) self-communication to aid in solving an immediate problem; (2) self-communication to release emotional tension (catharsis); (3) self-communication by which one is persuaded; (4) self-communication which provides diversion from a painful situation; and (5) self-communication for the purpose of amusing or entertaining oneself.

In recent years many articles have dealt with various aspects of interpersonal and mass communication, and a somewhat smaller number with intrapersonal communication. Some have argued that "all speech is a form of interpersonal behavior."<sup>1</sup> Judging by the number and nature of the articles published in journals, one could certainly be led to this conclusion. However, if one listens closely to the talk going on around him, he quickly discovers that much of it is not designed to communicate

information to others. It is directed more toward helping the individual cope with his own needs of the moment.

Some have suggested that self-communication--especially when it takes place out loud--is an elementary function of language development, soon left behind in the maturation process.<sup>2</sup> It is my contention that we never outgrow the need to talk-out our problems or needs, even if there is no one to hear them but ourselves. Meerlo, perhaps better than most, understood the importance of self-facilitating communication (although he did not call it that) when he said: "The built-in intention and goal of communication is always to arrive--at least for oneself--at a greater feeling of certainty and security, in short to a better adaptation. . . . Besides the information imparted, communication should contain an actualization of the self, a creative rhetorical assertion."<sup>3</sup>

I would like to look at five specific ways in which self-talk can help the individual to better cope with his surroundings. I make no claim that the categories discussed are discrete, but for the sake of analysis they will be considered separately.

### Problem Solving

One of the most important uses of self-communication is in problem solving. The self-facilitating effect of such communication is clearly demonstrated in an incident related by Dr. George I. LeBaron, Jr. Dr. LeBaron, a psychiatrist and an airplane pilot, tells of the following experiences during one of his solo flights:

I began a climbing turn to a heading of 270 degrees toward the practice area west of the Sacramento River. At 1,200 feet, virtually everything, including the airport, disappeared. I was in a white haze seemingly at the apex of a cone providing me with about one mile of circular visibility below. I leveled off, throttled back to cruise and experienced a sudden attack of the hot chills accompanied by the realization that I was in real big trouble. There was an intense urge to deny the fact that I was airborne and I sincerely hoped that I would quickly awake from this nightmare. I had no chart. Total instrument time was 15 minutes. A little voice kept saying "fly straight and level and watch the artificial horizon." I kept wishing I were back on the ground. My paralysis was shattered by my own voice which said, "Okay, start thinking." At this point my brain shifted to the reflective level of functioning because I began to consider alternatives. To help the process, I talked. I reminded myself that I could keep flying straight and level; that the country was flat; that the Sacramento River was beneath me; that I had four hours of fuel; that calling for Mother wouldn't help; and that all I had to do was to get back over the airport. . . I reasoned that I could follow the river north, making a right turn when the Port of Sacramento appeared beneath me, and end up over the airport where visibility should be better. Fortunately, it worked. . . From that experience, I learned two important lessons. First, plan every flight with your own limitations in mind, and second, when you really need to start thinking, start talking--to yourself. Any time we think, we initiate an inner conversation with ourselves. Thinking out loud forces us to the reflective level of mental functioning, removing us from the urge to act impulsively. . . . If two heads are better than one, and you've got a problem, use your other head.<sup>4</sup>

Problem solving may call not only for mental alertness and rationality, but for physical strength and endurance as well. Talking to oneself may play a major role in achieving such strength. An excellent example of physical and mental endurance being enhanced may be seen in the account of Bishop and Mrs. Pike's ill-fated trip to the Holy Land. Diane Kennedy Pike related in her book, Search, the details of her struggle to find help for her husband after she

had left him behind in the desert. They had gone there to explore the countryside and meditate. Their car became stuck in the sand and they abandoned it, hoping to find help. Finding help on foot, they soon realized, was a nearly impossible feat, since they were several miles from civilization. Dr. Pike soon tired and Mrs. Pike left him to search for help alone. Help was not to arrive in time, however, and Dr. Pike died there in the desert. The following is Mrs. Pike's account of some of the hardships she went through during her several hours of wandering in the desert:

Not long after I climbed out of the base of the canyon, I began to feel utterly exhausted and depleted of all energy. I had not rested since leaving Jim, and I began to realize that getting help was not going to be a simple matter of climbing for an hour or two. The mountains went on and on, still looking like endless desert and canyon. I felt my body was too exhausted to make it.

Then a strange thing began to happen. I became aware that I was communicating with my body as if it were a friend along for the trip. . . . As I lay on the side of the cliffs, resting against the pointed, jagged rock, I would say to my body, "Thank you for not hurting when you lie on the rocks. Thank you for resting."

Then I began to say, "We must walk all night." I knew when the sun came up neither Jim nor I would have much chance of survival, but I thought if I kept walking all night at least I would be that much closer to someone's discovering me in the morning.

So I began to say to my body, "We must walk all night long. We will walk a few minutes at a time and then rest. Get up now. Go just a little way farther, just five minutes. Then I'll let you rest again."

When I spoke lovingly to my body, it was somehow able to respond. Strength came from somewhere, and it would get up and begin to climb again. To my right hand, these

words: "You must find a rock to take ahold of, a rock that will support you." It would search looking for a rock, and finally find one to hold onto. To my right foot, these: "You must find a rock to stand on." It would probe and search until it found something that wouldn't slide or give way. Then I would speak to my left hand and my left foot in the same manner.

My body somehow made its way along, hanging on the cliffs, climbing over the rocks, going around points of jagged rocks that stuck out where there was really nothing to hang onto, climbing up sheer rock faces where there was nothing to do but lift myself from level to the next. I would say to the muscles in my arms, "You 'll have to lift the whole body, you'll have to lift the body up." And the muscles would cooperate by lifting me.

I developed a strange kind of affection and love for this friend, my body, that was with me on this journey. I could tell the tremendous effort it was making--trying so hard to cooperate, trying to do what I was asking it to do.

I was also grateful to my body for not causing me any pain. I could feel my flesh being torn; my legs got bumped and scraped, my feet bruised and cut, my bottom gouged my hands and arms punctured and lacerated--but I did not suffer from the wounds. "Thank you for not hurting," I said over and over again to my body. "Thank you."

Once in stepping I turned my left ankle and sprained it badly. Out loud I said--as though speaking out loud would make a greater impact--"I know I've sprained you, but you cannot get stiff and you cannot swell up because we must walk all night." The ankle did not swell or get stiff; I was aware it had been injured, but I felt no pain.

"Thank you for not swelling," I repeated to the ankle each time I turned it again.<sup>5</sup>

Talking to oneself also proved to be facilitating for Charles Lindberg on his famous 33 1/2 hour flight from New York to Paris.

In order to stay awake, he often talked to himself. Several of these conversations are recorded in his book, The Spirit of St. Louis. One sounded like this:



If the turn indicator ices up, it'll get out of control anyway. There's no time--only a few seconds--quick--quick--harder rudder--kick it---

Don't do anything of the sort. I've thought all this out carefully and know just what's best to do. You remember, you are to obey my orders!<sup>6</sup>

The talking to oneself may facilitate other less serious endeavors such as athletic competition or studying for an exam. The unusual communication behavior of Mark "The Bird" Fidrych has drawn much attention. Part of his antics on the mound includes talking to the baseball--or if you will--to himself. Probably few observers would attribute his skill as a baseball pitcher to his self-talk. However, opposing batters probably wish his lips would stop moving.

From my own personal experience and in the opinion of several psychologists, it helps to study "out loud." For most people, this procedure tends to make the information more easily recalled at testing time. No scientific explanation will be offered here, but it does seem to work.

Interpersonal communication clearly seems to have a facilitative effect in the area of problem solving. It is such a common and widespread behavior that it is often overlooked. Indeed, the individual talking to himself may not be conscious of the fact that he is engaging in such behavior. Surely only the most skeptical will deny that communicating with oneself is beneficial when it comes to problem solving.

### Tension Release

A second way in which self-communication facilitates behavior is through tension release or catharsis. Much of the talk of psychotic and neurotic, as well as normal individuals, serves the basic function of releasing emotional tension.

One interesting example of communication used as a method of releasing tension may be seen in Hannah Green's book, I Never Promised You A Rose Garden. In this particular episode, Debbie, a sixteen-year-old institutionalized schizophrenic, is conversing with her doctor about her strange way of communicating:

"And it has a language of its own?" the doctor asked, remembering the alluring words and the withdrawal that came after them.

"Yes," Deborah said. "It is a secret language, and there is a Latinated cover-language that I use sometimes--but that's only a screen really, a fake."

"You can't use the real one all the time?"

Deborah laughed because it was an absurd question. "It would be like powering a firefly with lightning bolts."

"Yet you sound quite competent in English."

"English is for the world--for getting disappointed by and getting hated in. Yri is for saying what is to be said."

"You do your drawing with which language--I mean when you think of it, is it in English or Eerie?"

"Yri."

"I beg your pardon," the doctor said. "I am perhaps a little jealous since you use your language to communicate with yourself and not with us of the world."

"I do my art in both languages," Deborah said.<sup>7</sup>

Catharsis may also be achieved through the use of expletives. Words uttered when one is tense, angry, or hurt or not usually meant



to convey great cognitive content to people who may be within ear-shot. Whether the words used are the more or less standardized forms or those of a more personalized nature, the same release may be effected. For example, those with aversion to using certain "standard" profane words often find that the same goals can be accomplished through "euphemistic cussing"--that is, substituting acceptable words in the place of those an individual finds particularly abhorrent: "Shoot!", "heck!", or "darn it!" may serve the same functions as their more ribald cousins.

Catharsis achieved through self-communication often promotes a sense of well-being and emotional stability. Brown and Van Riper relate the following example:

We knew a little old lady once whose face was beautiful and serene despite some eighty years that had held much tragedy. We asked her secret. "I'm not sure it's any secret," she replied. "But every night after I'm in bed and before I go to sleep, I tell myself about every single good thing that happened to me during the day. . . . 'Sometimes I'm a bit embarrassed,'" she told us, "because occasionally I talk aloud to myself about these things and then other people think I'm getting senile. So I try not to do it aloud when other people are around. But I do it to myself anyway."<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, catharsis is also achieved through various religious chants and vocalizations. One specific form of expression which has gained rather widespread usage in our present society is the practice of "glossolalia" or "speaking in tongues." There are perhaps as many as 5,000,000 people in the U. S. today who consider themselves to be a part of the charismatic movement.<sup>9</sup> Many of this number either

practice glossolalia or aspire to. One of the main functions of such expressions seems to be that it gives vent to pent up emotional tensions in a manner that is acceptable and even edifying in the eyes of some. Though usually done in an audible manner, the content is incomprehensible to others unless an "interpreter" explains it for them. Indeed, the vocalizations are often not understood by the person uttering them. Though some studies have attempted to prove that an actual language is being used (usually an ancient or exotic one), most linguists conclude that no identifiable linguistic units are being uttered. In other words, modern glossolalia consists of a series of vocalizations (usually with repetition of certain sounds) which do not fit into any present or past language system. This portmanteau of sounds does, nonetheless, serve a very useful purpose for the individual who feels a need for tension release. The need to "speak in tongues" may be brought about by a crisis in the individual's personal life or by the need for a more obvious and visible way to express one's faith.

It would be easy to conclude that "speaking in tongues" is a mark of a neurotic personality. However, such is apparently not the case for most users. Some studies indicate that users of glossolalia are no more neurotic than the general public--perhaps less so. Kildahl cites a study by the National Mental Health Institute indicating that individuals who spoke in tongues maintained a better state of emotional well-being than did non-tongue speakers: "They reported being less annoyed by frustrations, showing greater patience with their families, and having a deeper love for mankind in general."<sup>10</sup>

Wayne Robinson, himself a former user of tongues, also indicates that speaking in tongues is not necessarily a negative experience. He states: "If kept within the boundaries of common sense and propriety, tongues can be a source of emotional release and an aid against depression."<sup>11</sup>

Talking to oneself, then, may serve the useful function of helping one to relieve emotional tension.

### Self-Persuasion

A third result of self-communication--whether intended or not--is self-persuasion. By self-persuasion I mean a change in attitude and/or behavior on the part of a message source which results from listening to his own messages.

For example, Charles Lindbergh made his famous New York to Paris flight on May 20-21, 1927. For the next fourteen years Lindbergh was the best-known and best-loved private citizen in the world. In 1939 he became an anti-war activist, making countless speeches over the next couple of years. Some critics feel that his notoriety caused him to take himself too seriously. He started believing his pronouncements on a wide range of topics on which he had little expertise. He apparently fell into the trap of being convinced by his own words.

Psychologists have known for some time that under certain conditions behavioral compliance may prompt attitude re-evaluation. Verbalizing a particular proposition also tends to change belief/attitude in the direction indicated by the proposition.<sup>12</sup> Although some studies indicate that verbalization or active participation is

not a requisite for shaping attitudes most hold the position stated by Weiss:

It is generally well established that opinion change is greater when the subjects participate actively in the persuasion (role playing) than it is when they passively receive the persuasive communication.<sup>13</sup>

There appears to be further evidence indicating that a persuasive message repeated more than once may be more effective in bringing about self-persuasion than a message stated only once.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that words do have a potent effect on the sender as well as the listener is probably so obvious that it needs no documentation. However, I would like to mention two or three additional common situations where self-persuasion is likely to occur.

Consider the minister who speaks week after week on a finite number of topics. Perhaps he starts out with a mild conviction about the evils of alcoholic beverages. However, after hearing himself talk on the topic number of times he becomes a modern-day Carey Nations.

In the political arena it is undoubtedly very easy to talk oneself into certain positions. For example, it is quite possible--as President Carter has observed--that Richard M. Nixon actually convinced himself by his own repeated declarations that he bears no guilt for Watergate.

An additional area in which self-persuasion most certainly occurs is in the field of education. Many a young teacher, acutely aware of his/her limitations, has hesitatingly uttered purported facts and theories with fear and trembling. However, after several years of hearing oneself expound these ideas they become pearls of wisdom, and the teacher a clarion trumpet of omniscience.

## Diversion

A fourth function of self-communication is to provide diversion.

I refer to this kind of communication as "transmediational communication."

It consists of blotting out or ignoring the unpleasant realities of the moment by talking about trivial or unrelated topics. This serves to transport the individual away from the real-life trauma into a more pleasant, acceptable world. Psychologists have referred to it as "psychological closure" or "psychic numbing."

For example, have you ever listened to the inane topics discussed at a wake or funeral for a deceased person? If not, try it sometime! You may be amazed to hear information exchanged as to which make-up is prettier, whether radial tires are really better than non-radials, the chances of the Yankees winning the pennant, or why the weather has been so severe. Surely such topics have little to do with the death of a friend or relative. And that is precisely the point. Communication of this nature is not intended to convey pertinent information to others, but rather to remove oneself from an awkward or painful situation. It may be described as non sequitur at times, or perhaps presymbolic communication. What matters is whether it enables the user to escape, even if for a short time the trauma of the moment.

Examples of this kind of communication are not hard to find. A few years ago Time magazine<sup>15</sup> carried the story about the behavior of the survivors of a plane crash immediately after the disaster. Dead and wounded fellow-passengers were all around them. One might assume that the conversations of the survivors would center around

their recent experience. For the most part, this was not the case. According to the report most stood around talking about what they did for a living and singing "Frosty The Snow Man."

I recently heard of a former Vietnamese prisoner of war who talked out an imaginary game of golf with his non-present father and brother every day he was in prison. Such self-communication about his favorite hobby allowed him to maintain his sanity during the imprisonment.

Shelley may have been more on target than he realized when he said that we often use "a shroud of talk to hide us from the sun of this familiar life."

#### Amusement

One last function which may be facilitated through self-communication is entertainment or amusement. Many normal individuals often direct funny or sarcastic remarks at themselves. The obese person lying down for the night may humorously remark, "Hello toes. Long time no see!" It's the person who cannot poke fun at himself who is in danger of becoming psychotic.

An excellent example of humorous monologue may be found in Fiddler on the Roof. Tevye's daughter has told him that she plans to get married. He begins talking to himself about his prospective son-in-law:

What kind of a match would that be, with a poor tailor? . . . On the other hand, he's an honest, hard worker. . . . On the other hand, he has absolutely nothing. . . . On the other hand, things cannot get worse for him, they can only get better.<sup>16</sup>



Doubtless many other such examples could be cited where talking to oneself produced self-amusement or entertainment, even in rather serious circumstances. Suffice it to say, however, that self-amusement is a very important aspect of interpersonal communication.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article has not been to give an in-depth analysis of the various side effects facilitated through self-communication. What I have attempted to do is simply to point out some very practical facets of interpersonal communication seldom discussed in communication studies. We should not always assume that when a person talks he is doing so for the benefit of others. He may be reaping the major benefits himself in terms of problem solving, tension release, self-persuasion, diversion from traumatic situations, or self-amusement.

## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>B. R. Patton and Kim Griffin, Interpersonal Communications (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974), p. 304.

<sup>2</sup>J. Piaget, The Language and Thought of the Child (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1926), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Joost A. M. Meerloo, "Contributions of Psychiatry to the Study of Human Communications," in Frank E. X. Dance, Human Communication Theory (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1967), p. 132.

<sup>4</sup>George I. LeBaron, Jr. "Pussy Cat in the Cockpit," The APOA Pilot, December 1972, pp. 7-75.

<sup>5</sup>Diane Kennedy Pike, Search (New York: Pocket Books -- A Division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1971), pp. 44-47.

<sup>6</sup>Charles A. Lindbergh, The Spirit of St. Louis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 327.

<sup>7</sup>Hannah Green, I Never Promised You A Rose Garden (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) pp. 55-56.

<sup>8</sup>Charles T. Brown and Charles Van Riper, Speech and Man (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup>"A Charismatic Time Was Had By All," Time, August 8, 1977, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup>John P. Kildahl, The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 83.

<sup>11</sup>Wayne A. Robinson, I Once Spoke in Tongues (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publisher, 1973), p. 111.

<sup>12</sup>Irving L. Janis and Bert T. King, "The Influence of Role Playing an Opinion Change," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 49 (1954), pp. 211-218.

<sup>13</sup>Robert F. Weiss, "Role Playing and Repetition Effects on Opinion Strength," The Journal of Social Psychology, 1971, volume 85, pp. 29-35.

<sup>14</sup>Weiss, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup>"Air Crash Survivors" The Troubled Aftermath," Time, January 15, 1973, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup>Joseph Stein, Fiddler on the Roof (New York: Music Theatre International, 1964), p. 45.