

Interpersonal Communication

R.D. Laing: Relational Perception

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This theory falls within the context of interpersonal communication. It was developed by psychologist R.D. Laing and focuses on interpersonal relationships and how communication affects these relationships. It goes to the core of relationships and explains how relationships develop through our perception of them.

First, the text lays out two important assumptions which can be made about the relational context of communication. (Littlejohn, 250). First it defines a relationship as, "A set of expectations two people have for their behavior based on the pattern of interaction between them". Second is that interpersonal theories operate under four basic assumptions:

- 1) Relationships are always connected to communication.
- 2) The nature of the relationship is defined by the communication between its members.
- 3) Relationships are usually defined implicitly rather than explicitly.
- 4) Relationships develop over time through a process of negotiation.

With these constructs in mind I'll explore the core of Laing's theory of relational Perception," found in (Littlejohn, 254-7). His thesis states that, "A persons communicative behavior is affected by his or her perception of the relationship". Therefore interpersonal relationships are defined continuously by our perceptions. At this point Laing makes an important distinction between behavior and experience. Behavior is defined as, "Observable actions of another person which are public". While experience is described as, "Internal perception and feeling which is private". So you can observe a persons behavior but not their experience.

Laing then explains that there are two levels of experience or perception called "perspectives". A direct perspective is taken when you observe and interpret anothers behavior while a meta perspective occurs when you try and, "Infer anothers perceptions or understand their experience". Meta perspectives may or may not be accurate, however in either case define the relationship internally and behavior usually occurs based on these meta perspectives. It is also important to note that the, "Conjunction between the two perspectives is understanding the other persons perceptions and feelings accurately. This creates the difference between feeling understood and actually being understood.

When meta perspectives are inaccurate Laing claims "spirals" can occur. This is where inaccurate assumptions about a persons experience or internal feeling can lead further misunderstandings.

Therefore behavioral patterns within an interpersonal relationship develop over time through an ever changing and developing set of expectations based on internal perception. These relationships can also be unintentional and non-verbal.

According to (Kaplan, 258-262) This theory is presented in a academic cognitive style. This is because the

theory, "Deals with materials which tend to be ideational rather than observational data, and its treatment tends to be highly theoretical, if not speculative".

This theory of relational perception is also a heuristic theory, which means it raises other questions and is a foundation for other theories within this context. For example a theory called the "Developmental view" by Gerald Miller and Mark Steinberg may have developed from this theory, (Trenholm, 159-61). Their theory is based on the assumption that, "As relationships follow a trajectory toward increased intimacy, three changes occur:

- 1) Changes in rules governing the relationship.
- 2) Changes in the amount of data communications have about one another.
- 3) Changes in participants levels of "knowing".

References:

- Littlejohn, Stephen W. (1996). Theories of Human Communication. 5th. ed. Belmont, ca: Wadsworth.
- Kaplan, Abraham. (1964). The conduct of Inquiry. San Francisco, Ca: Chandler.
- Trenholm, Sarah. (1991). Human Communication Theory. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.