DIALOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATION

Hook, D, Franks, B & Bauer, M W (eds) (2011) **The social psychology of communication.** Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-0-230-24736-9 pbk. Pages xv + 371.

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As a collection of essays on the psychological study of human communication, **The social psychology of communication** is rich in differing and often even competing theoretical perspectives and practical applications, and yet it also manages to be a book of singular purpose. As stated in the introduction, the goal of this collection is to "defamiliarize" the reader with regard to human communication to a sufficient extent so as to encourage fresh reflection on everyday social psychological processes. In this way the editors are suggesting the value of what they call an *interfield* approach to the study of communication, a marketplace of ideas in which multiple perspectives are encouraged without the prerequisite of a meta-theory smoothly linking them all. The book's 15 chapters cover a wide range of topics, theoretical schools of thought and areas of applied research. By exploring communication from so many thought-provoking angles, the collection succeeds in presenting the social psychological study of communication as a diversified field, one that has seen many accomplishments over the past few decades, and one that continues to be pregnant with questions and debates calling for further research.

In the introduction, the editors are quick to identify the book's global philosophical position. This is a collection of essays, all of which treat communication as *intersubjective* (and not simply focusing on the dissemination or reception of information), as taking place within the *social psychological context* of wider human relations (not as communication separated from its wider relational framework), and as *social psychological process* (not as isolatable, entitative objects). In short, this is a book on communication as *dialogue* between various kinds of social actors, be they individuals or collectives. There is little to nothing in the book on other influential perspectives within social psychology, such as neuroscience or implicit consciousness. This same word of caution holds for the specific topics covered by the various chapters. In chapters with broad titles such as *Religion as communication*, *The social psychology of political communication*, *Evolution and communication*, etc, the reader should not expect to find a thorough review of that

particular area, but rather a summary of a handful of positions, nestled within the dialogical approach, focusing on the given topic. However, if the potential readers are aware of the global philosophical position of the book and do not expect a broader textbook-like presentation of the topics covered, they will find that this collection of essays does a wonderful job immersing them into this diverse area of research and prompting further reflection on human communication in general.

As a collection of essays by different authors, the book is surprisingly successful at cross-referencing ideas between chapters and avoiding repetition. Chapter 1, on Vygotsky, is a good introduction to the general atmosphere of the book, and it leads neatly into Chapter 2, which itself leads neatly into Chapter 3, and so on. In fact, the cross-referencing and general flow between chapters can be so good that the reader is occasionally surprised when the standard issues associated with collected essays do arise (such as changes of writing style, assumptions of previous knowledge, different or even conflicting uses of similar terms, arguing the other side of a previously argued position, and so on). The editors have also added a glossary of key terms that can be quite helpful.

In the introduction, the editors highlight several philosophical threads that link various chapters (such as the tension between communication as actually sharing information between two actors and communication as at heart being strategic and egocentric, or the tension between treating communication as informative versus phatic). The editors are perhaps a bit overambitious in suggesting that these threads can be followed individually by reading the chapters in varying orders. While these individual theoretical links become clearer as one reads and reflects on the chapters, the book does not readily lend itself to such a "choose your own adventure" format. These suggested links may very well be interesting and even helpful for readers already familiar with the ideas covered, but they would most likely be simply confusing to readers for whom the chapters are truly introductions to the given topics.

Another "modern" feature of the book, are its numerous figures, text boxes, and tables intended to present additional, complementary information. While the tables can at times be helpful, with relation to the larger texts in which they are embedded they can often seem unnecessary or can be, at times, even confusing. A number of tables come before the concepts they contain have been presented, distracting the reader from the more important surrounding text and leaving him or her wondering whether something had been missed. The text boxes containing unpublished research, snippets from interviews, or anecdotes, can be thought provoking as freestanding mini-essays, but they too can also feel a bit disjointed from the text. For example, the opening pages of chapter 1 contain text boxes and photographs related to a case study of communicative learning between two children in South Africa. The reader expects this story to form the core around which the chapter will revolve, but by page 3 the example is dropped and never resumed. What is more, the example appears to be of horizontal learning between peers, while the majority of the chapter focuses on the benefits of Vygotskian mediation within teacher-student relations and on ways in which the *zone of proximal development* can be most fully extended. Despite this minor distraction, the chapter is very well written and is a great introduction into the study of communication through a Vygotskian lens. Lest this minor critique take on too much weight, it should be reiterated that many of the text boxes

contain fascinating freestanding or complementary information, such as Cathy Vaughn's honest exploration of her use of *photovoice* as a tool for giving voice to different communities in Papua New Guinea.

In an attempt to write introductions to the various topics covered, many of the authors create lists of terms and concepts helpful or necessary for understanding the theoretical schools they are presenting. At times such lists are truly helpful. At other points however, this thoroughness is achieved at some cost to readability and didactic utility. At various points the book also suffers from a somewhat confused vocabulary, despite obvious efforts of the editors to combat this inevitable challenge. Some terms are not explicitly defined, or are defined only after having been used a number of times. As one moves between chapters and their respective theoretical vantage points, the differences in meaning between similar sounding terms are not always made clear for the reader. What is understood by such concepts as "majority" and "minority," "deviance" and "rule following," can vary greatly between theories. Since the book is largely successful in creating the feeling of a unified whole, such shifts in meaning might lead inattentive readers astray, at least momentarily. Once again, such issues are to be expected in such collected essays and with so many perspectives presented, it would be surprising if they did not appear.

A similar issue can at times be found in relation to broader constructs or methodologies discussed within the different chapters. If the reader is not already versed in the given perspective, they may find ostensibly familiar concepts being used in slightly different and unfamiliar ways. For example, in discussing the serial reproduction task used in Bartlett's classic work (chapter 8), the methodological and practical differences between the more common study of memory and the less common study of rumour and are not fully explored. In chapter 12, on religion as intersubjective practice, by treating "magic" as "strategic-instrumental" in nature, the author rather quickly dismisses it from his treatment of religion as mutual, collective communication. While the pejorative connotations of "magic" may allow some readers to quickly pass over this dismissal without pause, when "magic" is read as the more widely accepted "mystery," readers may find the definition of religious communication somewhat incomplete. In identifying deviance as inherently progressive and thereby linking it directly with minority rights of the practical, "real-world" kind, chapter 4 does not anticipate the reader, who may not be so connected with this school of thought, thinking about the many historical cases in which the rise of deviant thinking has lead to horrible outcomes for concrete minorities. Despite a smattering of such issues, by and large, the chapters do a good job of presenting the theoretical frameworks in which they each are working. By and large, they clarify potential conceptual ambiguities and anticipate classic objections by identifying and addressing them before they become distractions for the reader. Logical and practical issues with the perspectives presented are generally openly addressed by the authors. For example, in discussing the theoretical work of Paolo Freire (chapter 2), the authors point to the challenges associated with reconciling the notion of horizontal communication with a linear progression of learning. Elsewhere in the same chapter the authors discuss the difficulty of reconciling the numerous benefits seen when the downtrodden are given voice in the identification of societal ills, with the simultaneous awareness of the frequent inability of disenfranchised groups to identify elements of their own disadvantage. Rather than additionally problematizing these perspectives for the reader, such transparency makes the arguments

more palatable in their honesty, more suggestive of future research within the given framework, and more suggestive of the additive value of the various theoretical vantage points presented in previous and subsequent chapters. As identified in the editors' introduction, such broadening of the reader's thinking on these issues is the goal of the book. The goal is not to convert the reader into a supporter of any theoretical school in particular. Individual authors can, at times, forget this relatively modest goal and make arguably grandiose claims about the insight gained from a given theoretical perspective. If such occasional over-exuberant steps afield are the price for what are enthusiastically written, thought-provoking and self-reflective chapters, it is a price well worth paying.

The social psychology of communication contains a number of elements that would suggest it may be treated as an introductory text to the field. A wide range of individual topics are covered by the various chapters, the basic tenants of each perspective are presented, and the editors have provided a helpful and insightful introduction, as well as a useful glossary of key terms. However, it is much more than that. As an introduction to the field, the book is perhaps a bit beyond the reach of the average undergraduate or someone without some background in the social sciences. Yet, in presenting such an array of perspectives, and suggesting overlapping themes and points of disagreement between these perspectives, the book succeeds in inspiring deeper reflection on the basic issues surrounding the social psychological study of communication. This reflection may come in the form of agreement with, or objection to, the various theoretical or applied suggestions made in the chapters. Or it may come in the form of puzzlement about various aspects of communication itself, as shear wonder at the phenomenon. More likely, the reader will jump back and forth between agreement, objection, and wonder. When this occurs, the book has accomplished its goal.