Reinforcement

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T HE TERM 'REINFORCEMENT', AS a concept within fields such as human social communication (both non-verbal and verbal), learning theory, educational psychology, and applied behaviour therapy, has a lengthy history and very deep research base. Particularly prominent in the twentieth century in the psychological and educational literature, the concept has had less prominence in recent years, particularly in this postmodern era of thinking. Nevertheless, the significance of reinforcement as a theoretical and practical aspect of human communication, and as a key feature of skilled performance, remains today.

This chapter will examine the concept of reinforcement and its place within a social skills model of communication. The relevance of an understanding of how reinforcement plays a number of significant roles in learning to communicate effectively, and in the skilled use of communication in most of the modern forms we use, will be outlined and supported by international research findings from across the decades.

CLARIFYING THE CONCEPT

Simply put, reinforcement is a concept which has arisen as the centrepiece of what is called *operant psychology theory*, which is most associated with the writing and philosophy of the American academic, B. F. Skinner (1904–1990). Burrhus Frederic Skinner was an idealistic and inventive scholar of the twentieth century who may have changed the way we think about behaviour and life, but never quite succeeded in his professed aim to change the world in which people live (Bjork, 1993). His work was both revered and reviled by different sectors of the academic

and scholarly community throughout his life and beyond into this century (for a critique, see Kohn, 1993). Fred Skinner (as he preferred to be addressed) was, and remains, a controversial theorist. For many, he was the father of modern behaviourism and its major theorist of the twentieth century.

In operant psychology (as the Skinner-led field became known), the term 'reinforcement' is usually defined in terms such as the following: the effect of a stimulus, when matched with an emitted response (*an operant action*), increases the likelihood of that action/response being repeated.

In his classic short work *About Behaviorism*, Skinner (1974) was a little more specific and also offered two examples:

> When a bit of behavior has the kind of consequence called reinforcing, it is more likely to occur again. A positive reinforcer strengthens any behavior that produces it: a glass of water is positively reinforcing when we are thirsty, and if we then draw and drink a glass of water, we are more likely to do so again on similar occasions. A negative reinforcer strengthens any behavior that reduces or terminates it: when we take off a shoe that is pinching, the reduction in pressure is negatively reinforcing, and we are more likely to do so again when a shoe pinches. (p. 51)

There are different understandings of many of the terms surrounding the operant view of the world which of necessity need to be clearly differentiated in a serious academic discussion from common-sense or common usage meanings attached to some of these words. In addition, there are those who find the whole notion of Skinnerian operant psychology an unfortunate aberration of the twentieth century.

Frequently, in normal social discourse in English, people use the terms 'reinforce', 'reinforcement', and 'punishment', as well as 'negative reinforcement', yet most of these common usages are not in line with the theory and preciseness of the operant psychology where they originated. To clarify, Table 5.1 is a useful and simple way to show the different specific meanings of the base terms in operant psychological theory.

In this table, it becomes clear that the relationship between what are called 'contingencies' and the relevant 'stimulus' is the key to understanding the concepts, particularly the difference between *punishment* and *negative reinforcement* (which are frequently erroneously used as synonyms in common parlance). The term 'contingency' in this model refers to the direct linkage or consequential relationship – what Lee (1988), in her detailed discussion of contingencies, refers to as the 'if-then relationship'; for example, 'if you talk, you hear your own voice' (p. 61). Alfie Kohn (1993), the strident critic of operant psychology, refers to this in the following terms: 'But

Table 5.1 Operant model of reinforcement contingencies and stimuli

	Positively valued stimulus	*Negatively valued stimulus*
Contingent application	Positive reinforcement	Punishment
Contingent removal	Response cost	Negative reinforcement

Skinnerian theory basically codifies and bestows solemn scientific names on something familiar to all of us: "Do this and you'll get that" will lead an organism to do "this" again' (p. 5).

Kohn's criticisms have been widely reported, but his central thesis starts with the simple, yet deceptive, argument that reinforcement is just another 'scientific' term for reward. We will return to this and other criticisms of the reinforcement concept and its applications later in the chapter.

In operant theory, the application of a positively valued stimulus (be it food, a pat on the back, or verbal praise) that is contingent (clearly linked to the emitted behaviour) will be positively reinforcing and lead to a more likely repeat of that behaviour. So, in social interaction and discourse, parents use smiles, praise, and encouragement in language and social behaviour development. Schoolteachers also make liberal use of the skill of reinforcement in social and token forms (the latter covering the gold stars and written praise comments on school work as well). This aspect has a long history in teacher education, particularly in such approaches as 'teaching skills', and was a centrepiece of microteaching over 30 years ago as a major approach to the education of teachers (Turney et al., 1973).

Similarly, the application of a negatively valued stimulus contingent upon a behaviour (such as the infliction of direct pain) will constitute punishment. The removal of a positively valued stimulus (e.g. money in a fine for speeding) is called response cost, and the removal of a negatively valued stimulus (a thorn in a sock) is negative reinforcement.

The application of this model within many fields, but significantly in education and behaviour therapy, has led to reinforcement being one of the most researched topics in modern psychology and educational research. In addition, the concept and its implications have been built into social communication skills models (e.g. Hargie, 1986, 1997) and social learning models (e.g. Bandura, 1971, 1986) for over 50 years.

While there is confusion among many non-operant theorists and researchers and particularly among the 'general public' about what the terms 'reinforcement' and 'negative reinforcement' imply in research and communication models, there is a general acceptance of the notion that a behaviour that is 'reinforced' is one that is likely to recur. People are both familiar and comfortable with the usage in relation to various child-rearing advices and pet training, so that these terms are frequently used in phone-in radio, for example, in these ways.

In most models of social communication, there are elements of both *feedback* and *response*. Some of the writing and discussion of these elements can, at times, overlap and in fact lead to confusion, depending on the way the two terms are defined and utilised within the discussions. *Feedback* figures in most models as a 'loop' or an aspect of the model where message initiators receive (or are *fed-back*) information about the messages they have sent to others (see Chapter 2). *Response* usually refers to the actions or behaviours which have resulted from a communication or interpersonal interaction initiation. It is important for this chapter to review and clarify the differences between the two key terms, *feedback* and *reinforcement*.

REINFORCEMENT AND FEEDBACK

A key issue for many readers will be the difference and application of the two terms, *reinforcement* and *feedback*. This is a significant point for any discussion of social communication models. Just as there is confusion in the popular use of the two terms *negative reinforcement* and *punishment*, there is also confusion in the use of the two terms *reinforcement* and *feedback*. This confusion is not assisted when some writers actually use the two terms either interchangeably or as synonyms in ways that indicate they are one and the same concept. There is no doubt either that for some authors in the field there are elements of both *feedback* and *response* in the way the term *reinforcement* is being used in this chapter. What this indicates clearly is that there are inherent problems in the specialised usage of such terms and general slippage when they move into everyday language and usage.

In this chapter, we are arguing that there are clear differences between these two terms. As mentioned above, the key difference between them hinges on the idea of contingency or a definite causal link between an emitted behaviour and a stimulus.

Reinforcement involves a stimulus (food, praise, tokens) that, when linked to an emitted response, will most likely lead to that response being repeated. Reinforcement implies some changes and learning in a behavioural sense.

Feedback is simply a matter of the observation of an action, or some reflection or noting that the action occurred ('I was so frightened, my heart began to beat faster and faster'). Feedback implies an information loop which may or may not have links in the learning sense or in effecting any possible repetition of the behaviour. This view of the term 'feedback' is closely aligned to the study of cybernetics (see Chapter 2). Feedback in communication can be a reflection of what was said or acknowledgement that the communication was received.

While *feedback*, particularly in the cybernetic sense, has an important role in communication models and functions, particularly in the sense of understanding automaticity, it may or may not serve some of the communication skill learning necessary for human communication development that *reinforcement* certainly does. Some may see *feedback* as a more benign term than *reinforcement*, and this is due mainly to what is, for them, a distasteful element of possible manipulative bribery or reward and/or punishment inherent in the operant model term and supposedly absent from *feedback* (see Kohn, 1993; Schunk, 2004, for different views on this aspect). Nevertheless, this chapter argues strongly that *reinforcement* is a core human communication skill which is present and utilised frequently by all communicators. An understanding of the concept and its applicability and research and practice applications will be helpful to all who study human communication.

A common model of basic language face-to-face communication, particularly relevant in classroom teacher–pupil interactions, for example, has been referred to as the I-R-F, or the I-R-E model. In this model, 'I' stands for initiation, 'R' for response and 'F' for feedback, or, in the E version, for evaluation (see Mehan, 1978, for a very early version of the latter). It is suggested that this pattern of communication is a common one in many exchanges between people and is very often the dominant pattern in most classrooms, with 'I' being a teacher-posed question, 'R' a pupil response, and 'F' or 'E' a teacher's positive comment to the pupil.

A closer examination of the F/E component and what it might entail leads to the need for some differentiation as to when the feedback is more than just feedback and actually constitutes reinforcement in purpose and result. The model may be, in many instances (particularly in the classroom setting where it has been studied so much), more an IRR model, with the second 'R' being reinforcement. For this discussion, it is essential to consider when a feedback/evaluation comment becomes, or is, *reinforcement*. Reference to the three essential elements below (validity, valence, and contingency) will assist understanding here.

For example, a teacher may *initiate* a question, gain a pupil *response*, and *reinforce* that response with social reinforcement (positively regarded comments) relevant to *that* pupil and *that* response (therefore, contingent). It is suggested here that there should be three key aspects of such utterances in verbal interaction, which would mark the statements as reinforcement or 'beyond feedback'. These characteristics are as follows:

1   *Personal validity*. This term refers to the way an utterance must have some personal real meaning for the receiver to be able to perceive it as reinforcing. The message should be clear, in language that is understood, have personal links and signage (perhaps using the receiver's name), and be meaningful to the receiver.
2   *Personal valence*. This term refers to the power within the message and the way a receiver sees it to be of some value and impact. Valence is different from validity, as the former refers to the power and affect as well as effect of the message received whereas validity refers basically to the clarity of the meaning being received by the listener.
3   *Contingency*. This term refers to the consequential linkage between the initiation and the feedback. If the message is contingently related to the response and carries some valence, it is reinforcing. A mutuality of understanding between the communicators that any such message is contingent is also a factor in this aspect.

A further point of relevance to the discussion of *reinforcement* that should be noted is the different types of possible reinforcers which may crop up in social interaction (some of these variations will be mentioned later in cited research on the topic).

As long ago as 1973, MacMillan proposed a possible hierarchy of reinforcers ranging from what he called 'primary rewards', which related to basic human needs such as food and water at the lowest level, through token and social praise, and toward a highest level of 'self-mastery' as a form of self-reinforcement. Such a hierarchy echoes very clearly the famous Maslow (1954) hierarchy of human needs, which even today figures in many basic education and business texts as an explanatory model of what tends to drive people. Of course, different people react to different potential reinforcers, and while the satisfaction of simple basic needs, such as hunger and thirst, has quite powerful effects in the reinforcement sense in training animals, people and the communication processes between them are far more complex. Aspects such as the impact of what is termed 'social reinforcement', which includes praise and approval (or even monetary rewards), have to be learned, as usually such reinforcers have little actual value in themselves, but rather, represent, or are proxies for, other

personally valued aspects in life. In addition, many non-verbal reinforcers such as smiles, nods, thumbs up, and other gestures are learned and associated with particular positive elements and are often culturally bound.

The subtlety of many reinforcers in different social situations can be quite acute and even subgroup specific to the extent that it may be difficult for other out-group communicators to detect the reinforcing nature of the communication (gangs and cliques often develop in-group communications and signs to exploit this reality for exclusivity effect). In these situations, it may even be possible for the in-group reinforcers to be the opposite of what is perceived as 'normal' in the rest of society as a statement of exclusivity and differentiation. Adolescent language often uses opposite terms so that, supposedly, adults cannot penetrate their world (witness the way some cultures use as terms of endearment or 'mateship' the insult or even what is offensive language in 'normal' conversation).

A large part of social reinforcement involves social learning to imbue the comments and actions with some acceptable mutual value, which then sets the communications up as reinforcers when applied contingently. Sometimes these words or comments take on especially idiosyncratic meanings that are reinforcing only in very narrow contexts for a few individuals. Even most money is actually relatively worthless in itself; it is what it represents and what the culture, community, or nation members mutually accept it to represent as an exchange medium that makes it socially rewarding and thus a positive reinforcer. When nations are at war or in chaos, the currency often suddenly does revert to meaningless paper and coins, and has no social value. It then ceases to be a reinforcer.

REINFORCEMENT IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

So far in this chapter, we have defined *reinforcement*, described its theoretical roots, and differentiated it from *feedback*. We now turn to the direct application of the concept in a social skills model of interpersonal communication and how research on reinforcement has, over the years, contributed to the understanding and use of the idea within a wide range of fields of study and action.

Reinforcement in non-verbal communication

Reinforcement in non-verbal communication situations has been examined from a wide range of perspectives and with some interesting results and implications (Feldman, 1992). The range of areas where non-verbal reinforcers and applications have been examined includes health (doctor–patient and nurse–patient interaction and waiting room behaviour), business, teaching, the law, and so on (Feldman, 1992, has detailed discussions on each of these aspects).

Many of us in our day-to-day communications with loved ones or those with whom we have quite close and long-standing communication utilise non-verbal reinforcers. We become quite adept at reading and transmitting facial expressions and other gestures and even body language to provide reinforcement and react to that of others. Parents usually work hard to establish certain frowns and glares

as communication elements, and often develop idiosyncratic positive expressions as personal reinforcers with their children. Today, with the all pervasive use of television and its often ubiquitous partner, advertising, we have seen the development of a wide range of virtually created expressions and signs that, if successful, enter the general language as new reinforcers and 'in' expressions.

Over 30 years ago, Scheflen (1972) wrote about body language and social order, the subtitle of his book being 'communication as behavioral control', and he gave detailed illustrations of the ways people communicate and use what he called *reciprocals* in face-to-face communication, whereby body postures and gestures communicated affiliation, flirtation, and repulsion aspects. Suffice it to state at this stage that the *reciprocals* of Scheflen and the concept of reinforcement are not too far apart in meaning.

Non-verbal behaviour remains a major area of study, and aspects of this field are discussed in detail in Chapter 3, and referred to frequently in other chapters of this volume. The world of research and application of body language or non-verbal aspects of interpersonal communication is still a current issue, and numerous business, training, and other applications of research and theory are popular in the field (Feldman, 1992; Carlopio et al., 2001; Robbins et al., 2003). Most of these latter applications take early research and development and apply the findings to business behaviour or management training (e.g. Robbins et al., 2003). They are intended to familiarise managers and businessmen and -women with the ideas and possibilities of good communication and of uses and abuses of components of non-verbal (and verbal) communication in business dealings and employee management in workplaces. Some suggest effective reinforcers and other responses and how these may assist staff development or facilitate communication across teams (Hargie et al., 2004) and even cultures (Schneider & Barsoux, 2003).

Interestingly, Jones and Le Baron (2002) have argued for a convergence between verbal and non-verbal communication theory and writing. They posited that since these two aspects actually occur together, they should be studied together. In addition, they were quite critical of the division between quantitative and qualitative research paradigms and urged better use of both traditions in researching human communication. In recent years, the emergence of what is now known as 'mixed methods' (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003; Cresswell, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), where both traditions/paradigms *are* more integrated, reflects such thinking.

Reinforcement in the area of non-verbal communication is usually studied within interpersonal contact and communication and has quite a long history (Argyle, 1967; Argyle & Cook, 1967; Cook, 1977, for example, were early pioneers). Most of the research and evidence on the impact of non-verbal communication aspects of relevance to the concept and use of reinforcement links clearly to how people utilise facial expressions, gestures, and postures contingently to increase or decrease the communication pattern or flow between themselves and others (Hargie & Dickson, 2004). For example, the open palms extended on either side of the body and raised shoulders with a quizzical look on the face has become an almost universal expression for 'I don't know' or 'I don't understand' and can be seen being used across many cultures. Similarly, a clenched fist shaken in front of the face with a heavy frown is also a clearly negative response to a communication attempt. The dismissive wave of the hand to a hawker or beggar is also well set as an international negative. Many of these

expressions are becoming more internationally shared than in previous generations due to the massive international communications revolution of the late twentieth century. At the same time, some gestures and expressions remain relatively culture bound.

As mentioned earlier, the advertising industry deliberately and sometimes quite unsubtly manipulates the non-verbal aspects of communication to enhance sales and customer satisfaction. Fast-food chains train their 'crews' in steps which involve specific smiles, greetings, and pleasantries as positive reinforcers with the aim of generating good feelings in their customers and possible repeat business.

Non-verbal communication is now studied as a language in its own right by many researchers and writers, and the field abounds in references to elements which can be clearly seen to be linked to the ideas of employing reinforcers to facilitate and support increases in communication. In summary, reinforcement is employed non-verbally in communication in ways that are subtle and frequent in our daily lives and more manipulated in advertising and other elements of popular culture than we are prone to notice or admit.

Reinforcement in verbal communication

Of course, the majority of human social communication is verbal, with a wide range of spoken languages across the world. In each language, there is a large lexicon of words and terms that are imbued with praise and reward connotations. These are clearly meant to be used as responses to other speakers and hence figure strongly as social reinforcement in their application within communication.

Thus, whether we agree or not with the behaviourist's analysis in which the concept of reinforcement is theorised and researched, it is still patently apparent that our languages have many instances of terminology that assume words of praise and encouragement, and that these have some positive and linked effect to repetition of the behaviours to which they are responding. We use these words and terms deliberately to gain desired effects. Equally, we have a broad range of negative comments, some of which are used as severe criticism contingent on a behaviour and are meant to punish others.

As mentioned earlier, much of the research work on the place and effect of reinforcement in human communication took place in the mid- to late twentieth century. A good deal of research was also situated within the education field in two spheres: teacher education and special education. More recent work has centred on aspects such as behaviour therapy and modification of atypical behaviours in children and those with personality or communication disorders.

Some interesting recent research has highlighted the culture specificity of some aspects of reinforcement applicability. Weirzbicka (2004) presented research to show that the terms 'good boy' and 'good girl', as 'widely used in Anglo parental speech directed to children to praise them for their action', have 'no equivalents in other European languages'. In her interpretation of this assertion, she argued that the terms and their purported effects are culture specific and rooted in the English and American puritan past. Of course, many previous studies in the education sector have high-lighted the considerations, as specified above in the three criteria for reinforcement,

that validity and valence are related to the individualisation of reinforcement as well as the specific contingency. General praise is not always reinforcing under these considerations, and terms such as 'good boy/girl' are general and may interplay with different attributional ideas and motivation in the hearer. Brophy (1981) has discussed in some depth the issue of whether praise is the same as reinforcement in the educational literature, and concluded that much of the praise teachers use in the classroom is actually non-contingent and therefore is not reinforcing.

Parental use of reinforcement in the development of conversation and social skill has always been a strong feature in most cultures, and current 'good-parenting' volumes attest to the use of selective praise and encouragement linked to child behaviour as evidence of best practice (Christopherson & Mortweet, 2003). Again, specific praise related to the individual child and the actions/behaviours being responded to results in better take-up and repetition of the behaviours.

Current theory of language teaching heavily emphasises the need for young students beginning school and in their early literacy and oracy years to be 'scaffolded' (that is supported and encouraged by a more skilled language user, be it parent, caregiver, or teacher) within the theoretically conceived 'zone of proximal development' (a Vygotskian concept which means that area of potential learning space just beyond current competence). Such terminology and its implications for a social construction emphasis on all language development has been pervasive in most language-teaching texts and research in the past two decades (Green & Campbell, 2003; Anstey & Bull, 2004). The implications of these theories do not necessarily support reinforcement ideology, and in some instances their advocates would take some offence at any such links, but the examples often cited include parental and teacher praise and encouragement in language that is clearly interpretable as contingent reinforcement-type feedback, rather than some neutral conversational interaction.

In business, the use and understanding of the impact of verbal reinforcers in communication and management, as well as human resource management, has a well-established background. Even a brief perusal, for example, of websites advertising workplace and management courses in such areas as 'interpersonal communication skills in the workplace' will demonstrate the centrality of elements of reinforcement theory and application in handling effective communication practices across such diverse areas from 'difficult staff at work' to 'effective productive employees'. Any reliable search engine on the World Wide Web will give results on each of the aforementioned terms as search words that will open up a myriad of websites.

As stated above, the applicability of the concept of reinforcement in understanding how we, as human communicators in social interaction, behave and develop is important within the overall communication field (Place, 1998). Most analyses of the skills we utilise to develop conversation and language will frequently bring the communication theory and research reader to the topic of reinforcement. Whether the current literature tends to offer alternative terms, such as praise and encouragement or response, is not the issue, as the underlying theory and conceptualisation remain cogent. The specificity of the concept and its roots in operant psychology are not currently mainstream in the literature, but strong elements of research and application of the ideas and principles are still evident with applicable results.

REINFORCEMENT IN THE NEW COMMUNICATION MEDIA

In the second half of the twentieth century and into this millennium, the 'new media' have become essential and central to communication patterns in most modern and postmodern nations. The new media are heavily visual (even the cellular telephone is moving into a medium for more visual content), although multimedia elements are becoming more prevalent as time goes by. Included in this general category for the purposes of this discussion are email, Web pages, interactive Internet chat rooms, blogs, and the ubiquitous text message, photo, and other image services of the modern cellular telephone networks. Many of these media are used more by the younger generations and have a linguistic edge which is starting to emerge as almost a new dialect, or even a new language with standardised English short cuts and symbolic elements at times reminiscent of rebus symbols in early twentieth-century reading instruction in schools.

Research into aspects of how these media are changing communication patterns and interactivity is emerging, and there will be much more to come in the near future. What is interesting for the purposes of this chapter is that the skill and use of *reinforcement* are easily identified when these modern-use media are investigated. Most of the symbols which are so heavily used in cellular telephone messaging, for example, include various ways of praising or rewarding, or positively reinforcing comments and messages. These symbols include emoticons, such as smiling faces and hearts, which may be attached to messages. Similar symbols in various keystroke combinations also are found in many emails, particularly between close friends who share the dialect.

Interestingly, the basis for some of the thinking about the modern media and its place in social communication theory includes recent work on what has become known as the 'computers are social actors paradigm' (CASA) (Bracken & Lombard, 2004; Bracken et al., 2004). Bracken and her colleagues have argued that computer users interact with the computers as social entities, and that reinforcement from a computer appears to have the same or similar effects as that from people in social communication (this might remind many film aficionados of the famous computer, HAL, in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*).

It is important in this set of considerations, however, to differentiate the use of some of the media from among the remainder, in terms of the extent of interaction with a device that is a mediator of communication between two people, as compared to the situation where the computer or device is programmed in a way that appears to be non-mediating and has some apparent stand-alone qualities. Arguments for thinking computers, chaos theory, memetics, and the emergence of nanotechnology and devices with inbuilt elements of 'fuzzy logic' are starting to make the science fiction computer with a mind of its own a closer possibility than previous generations would have imagined.

Direct synchronous communication in which both parties are device connected in real time is one clear case of mediation, and the communication device is just a filter or medium between normal face-to-face encounters with all the attendant issues that may generate. There has been a long history of this type of communication through the development and use of the telephone, and many of the modern devices have merely extended this into a range of social and time and distance dimensions as a

development of that paradigm. The advent of telephone etiquette, and specific language patterns of greeting, answering and conversation punctuation, enhancers, and inhibitors, has been the subject of considerable work over many decades. Asynchronous communication (where the parties are operating in different time spheres or zones but still communicating) is something which used to be only in the domain of letter writing but now also happens through email and various discussion forums and other interactive patterns.

Different from both of these situations is the computer as a programmed teaching or interactive device. Here the communication may have a range of interactive elements that allow different responses and 'conversations' or interactions to happen, depending on an algorithm or sequence which has been built into a program within the device. Some of the modern versions of such communication packages at their crudest level are the telephone-answering systems in which the caller punches in a number for a specific submenu service. The rigidity of this simplest 'voice-mail jail' version has become a modern social curse, and it is the subject of many a complaint (Hargie et al., 2004). More sophisticated aspects would include interactive games and institutional educational teaching programs. The latter may often have built-in tests and progress checks with planned reinforcement schedules and social reinforcement comments in voice or text. Early research in this area seems to indicate that computer text criticism, for example, is quite powerful in its effects on motivation and recall (Bracken et al., 2004). This field is ripe for additional detailed research and development.

At this stage of the chapter, it is important to consider that these modern media and their implications for communication theory and research are where the leading edge will be for the first half of this millennium. Whether reinforcement, as a conceptual framework, has a large place in this development and in the study of how and why and in what ways people interact with machines, and how the human communications are or are not mediated by devices, will be a fascinating aspect to watch. There is no doubt that early work in programmed instruction and computer-mediated instruction, for example, suffered from a too heavy dose of behaviourist-dominated approaches emphasising small sequenced parts as the basic learning paradigm, and that this has led to a vigorous search for alternative theories and approaches.

THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION REINFORCEMENT

This chapter now moves to suggest that, in order to understand clearly the way *reinforcement* figures in human social communication, the concept of *communication reinforcement* may be a useful way to discuss and analyse the application of operant theory and models of communication. For the purposes of this chapter, *communication reinforcement* refers to the consequences of a communication from one person to others which increases the likelihood of further communication happening. The consequences of the emitted communication may be positive reinforcement in the form of social reinforcers, such as praise and other positive responses, and may be verbal or non-verbal, as with nods, facial expressions, or other gestures of approval or support.

Manipulation of communication reinforcement in research and therapy

Early research into the place and application of reinforcement theory in human communication emphasised the way positive reinforcement could be used in a deliberate sense to alter language behaviours and usage. Such research began in areas such as using reinforcement in increasing conversation skills and frequency, as, for example, in 'delinquent girls' (Minkin et al., 1976) or socially isolated elderly men in an institutional setting (Kleitsch, 1983). In addition, work employing negative reinforcement was conducted in the 1960s with a therapy group to stimulate conversation (a loud noise went off only when someone spoke) (Heckel et al., 1962). Likewise, there has always been considerable discussion of the linked (contingent) use of praise and reward by parents in assisting their children to develop language and social skills.

In the second half of the last century, particularly in the 1970s, there was a plethora of classroom-based research into the use of reinforcement in a range of forms and its effects on student classroom misbehaviour (O'Leary & O'Leary, 1977), language acquisition (Becker et al., 1981), and the shaping of various social behaviours (Kazdin, 1989). One well-known developmental programme in this genre, which has been and still remains a strongly advocated approach to early language development, is the Direct Instruction stable of materials and curriculum approaches. Commercially distributed under the DISTAR© label, this material is based on operant psychological principles and has been in existence for close to 30 years (Becker et al., 1981). The materials were developed in the USA and have been the subject of a number of specific reviews and projects, in which their applicability in developing language skills in children was well researched, showing often outstandingly successful results (Rhine et al., 1981). Basically, such materials emphasise a set curriculum sequence of behaviours that are presented with repetition and lots of positive contingent reinforcement to small groups of school-age children, and introduce small, carefully arranged elements at a time.

Another programme, aimed at language development in disabled children, that has similar reinforcement patterns as its basis is the TALK Language Development Program (Drash & Tudor, 1990). As originally described, this programme used positive reinforcement in a behaviourally oriented approach to teach language-disabled children to talk. In more recent years, these two authors have continued to work with language development in both disabled and non-disabled children, and have developed a model for the understanding and treatment of autistic children (Drash & Tudor, 2004). While their model has attracted considerable interest, it has not gone without criticism from other autism researchers (Carr & LeBlanc, 2004).

At the same time, the field of reinforcement application and behaviour modification has maintained a strong base in dealing with children with special educational and behavioural needs, as well as work in aberrant adult and child communication disorders. Speech-delayed, aphasic, and autistic children have been assisted by these techniques, based on the operant theories of language and reinforcement connections (see the Treehouse website (*www.treehouse.org.uk*) in the UK, where autistic children are taught by applied behaviour analysis (ABA) techniques featuring reinforcement).

In various places and writing across the broad field of operant psychology and

its many variants, terms such as 'applied behaviour analysis', 'behaviour therapy', and other variations distinguish the many approaches to utilising reinforcement concepts and practices to affect human behaviour and communication patterns. While these may have differing elements and emphases, they all have the concept of reinforcement as central and the application of it as the major means to change or adapt behaviour and language. Within this field, a recent development is functional communication training (FCT), and a number of studies have utilised this set of techniques, which use reinforcement to improve communication in children and some adults who demonstrate severe dysfunctional behaviour (Hagopian et al., 1998; Durand, 2002).

The basic approach of FCT involves an initial functional analysis of the behaviour that is seen as at issue (be it a misbehaviour or a lack of communication). The reinforcers that apparently currently support that behaviour are also noted in this stage. The next step is to organise for the child a new or different behaviour (it may be a simple oral statement or use of some communication cards if the child cannot yet verbalise). The significant interactors with the child (or adult) concerned then actively reinforce the new behaviour/communication each time the child exhibits it. The latter behaviour/communication is termed a replacement behaviour for the previously unacceptable behaviour. In FCT, the replacement behaviour is reinforced while the unacceptable behaviour is ignored. The FCT approach has a good deal of support and research basis in the literature on treatment of severe behavioural and communication disorders (Durand & Carr, 1991, 1992; Fisher, Kuhn & Thompson, 1998).

Applications of communication reinforcement in various fields

In addition to the above specific application of reinforcement and the operant model of psychology to learning and language aspects, there have been a number of related and derivative developments which have emerged over the past two decades, and which are currently bringing some new light to the applicability of reinforcement ideas and their relationship to human communication and behaviour. Two aspects which have developed in this vein are cognitive behaviour therapy and, more recently, relational frame theory.

Cognitive behaviour therapy is an approach with direct roots in Skinnerian thinking and operant psychology. This approach blends both cognitive therapy, which was pioneered by the psychologists Beck and Ellis in the 1960s, with behavioural therapy (or behaviour-modification techniques) for maladaptive behaviours in individuals. The use of language and reinforcement is involved in such aspects of treatment of behavioural problems as the use of 'self-talk' and reinforcement of appropriate thinking about the behaviours (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995). Cognitive behaviour therapy does not, like other therapies, seek to delve into the unconscious mind, as in more psychodynamic models, and tries to treat the faulty individual schemas and behaviours with specific reinforcement approaches common in behaviour-modification approaches.

Cognitive behaviour therapy seeks to treat people with communication and social behaviour disorders and maladaptive behaviour, and, as such, is an attempt

to bring the reinforcement concept into a modern approach whereby better human communication and behaviour can be assisted in such contexts. There is a good deal of research and writing on this therapy concept and its applicability to language and behavioural disorders (Goisman, 1997).

The second major recent development that has been developed from the Skinnerian operant basis, in what is termed a post-Skinnerian approach, is relational frame theory (Barnes-Holmes, Barnes-Holmes & Cullinan, 2000; Hayes, Barnes-Holmes & Roche, 2001). This is a recent and potentially powerful approach that argues for a new and different perspective on the way human language is discussed from a behaviourist point of view. As Owen (2002) states:

> Relational frame theory also suggests an entirely new theoretical approach to the *nature of language*. Specifically, it suggests that *language behavior is relational framing behavior* (see S. C. Hayes, 1994; S. C. Hayes et al., 2001, p. 144). That is, to talk about something is to frame that thing relationally in a particular way, and thereby to make a particular kind of 'sense' out of it. The value of this 'sense' can then be checked out against one's experiences.

Relational frame theory maintains that there is a place for contingencies of reinforcement in the traditional operant sense, but the basic book and theory exposition is set up as a critique of Skinner's original book, *Verbal Behavior*, and as such attempts to take the field beyond the Skinnerian views. The field of relational frame theory is emerging as one that has inspired a good deal of recent research and controversy as well. Two different reviewers of the basic book, edited by Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, and Roche (2001), have taken the group to task for a number of reasons, including that the text is difficult to read and complex (Salzinger, 2003), that the theory promises much but is less convincing to those who hold Skinnerian views (Palmer, 2004), and that there is some doubt as to the merit of seeing relational frame theory as a basic new theory. As Palmer states in the abstract of his lengthy review of the work,

> The authors dismiss Skinner's interpretation of verbal behavior as unproductive and conceptually flawed and suggest a new definition and a new paradigm for the investigation of verbal phenomena. I found the empirical phenomena important but the conceptual discussion incomplete. A new principle of behavior is promised, but critical features of this principle are not offered. In the absence of an explicit principle, the theory itself is difficult to evaluate. (p. 189)

The emergence of relational frame theory as a new paradigm with some promise is not doubted so much by writers such as Salzinger of the American Psychological Association, who concedes that the work is thought provoking and worthy of additional notice, research, and follow-up. Relational frame theory may offer a more useful approach to the place of reinforcement in human communication as a post-Skinnerian conceptualisation in this era of postmodernity, where many such behaviourist themes and approaches are anathema.

OVERVIEW

This chapter has presented the concept of reinforcement as a social skill that is essential in human communication. It has traversed the issues surrounding both the theory and the philosophical basis of the concept, which emanates from operant psychology, and the issue of distinguishing reinforcement from feedback, but with an acceptance of their linked nature in common parlance. The chapter has also offered some evidence that while the concept and understanding of reinforcement within the current communications literature in the twenty-first century is not seen as a mainstream approach in an era of postmodernity, there are still many advocates and researchers who are utilising this conceptualisation in communication, particularly in the area of treatment of language and behavioural disorders in children and adults. In addition, the emergence of approaches such as functional communication training and relational frame theory in the past few years has rejuvenated, to some extent, the place of reinforcement in the study and understanding of human communication.

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Reflecting

David Dickson

R EFLECTING, AS A FEATURE of skilled interpersonal communi-cation, is closely associated with active listening: with responding to the other in such a way as to convey interest, understanding, and engagement. The topic of listening, though, is taken up in another chapter of this book, so little more, as such, will be said about it here. Rather, the focus in this chapter is more specifically on both functional and structural aspects of the process called reflecting. Its various functions are outlined and contrasting theoretical perspectives brought to bear. A review of research into reflecting is also presented and conclusions drawn as to the interpersonal effects of this way of relating.

Before setting off in this direction, though, time spent reminding ourselves of some of the key features of interpersonal communication may be worthwhile. One of the commonly agreed characteristics of this transactional process is its multidimensionality. Messages exchanged between interactors are seldom unitary or discrete (Burgoon, 1994; Wood, 2004). In a seminal work by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), attention was drawn to two separate, but nevertheless inter-related levels at which people engage. One has to do with substantive content, and the other with relational matters which help determine how participants define their association in terms of, for instance, extent of affiliation, balance of power, and degree of intimacy and trust.

Content is probably the more immediately recognisable dimension of interpersonal communication, dealing as it does with the subject matter of talk – the topic of conversation. Through relational communication, on the other hand, interactors work at establishing where they stand with each other vis-à-vis, for instance, closeness and liking. Dominance and control are also important aspects of relational communication that

have to be managed, and some sort of implicit or explicit working agreement reached. While the issue of who should control the conversation may be a topic for discussion (content), such matters are more often handled in indirect and subtle ways. It is typically in *how* interactors talk about what they talk about that relational work is carried on. Dominance and control may be manifested in a plethora of verbal and non-verbal actions such as initiating topic changes, interrupting, maintaining eye contact, and speaking loudly.

INTERACTIONAL STYLE AND DIRECTNESS

An important consideration in the exercise of control is that of interpersonal style, a construct discussed extensively by Norton (1983) and more recently by Lumsden and Lumsden (2003). Style can be thought of as *how* what is done is done, with the characteristic manner in which someone handles an interactive episode. Cameron (2000) emphasised its expressive function in creating a particular 'aesthetic' presence for the other. Conversational style includes the degree of formality, elaboration, or directness adopted (Adler & Rodman, 2000). We will dwell upon the latter characteristic, directness, which has been commented upon in various domains of professional practice, including teaching (Brown & Atkins, 1988), social work (Seden, 1999), medicine (Roter & McNeilis, 2003), and counselling and psychotherapy (Corey, 1997). Referring specifically to interviewing, Stewart and Cash (2000, pp. 22–23) explained:

> In a directive approach, the interviewer establishes the purpose of the interview and attempts to control the pacing, climate, formality and drift of the interview. . . . In a nondirective approach the interviewer may allow the interviewee to control the purpose, subject matter, tenor, climate, formality and pacing.

Directness therefore involves the degree of explicit influence and control exercised or at least attempted (DeVito, 2004) and, correspondingly, the extent to which the conversational partner is constrained in responding.

Interviewers who follow a direct approach typically employ what Benjamin (1987) called 'leads': those with a less direct style make greater use of 'responses'. Although both terms are difficult to define unambiguously, responding has to do with reacting to the thoughts and feelings of interviewees, with exploring their worlds and keeping them at the centre of things. On the other hand, the interviewer who leads tends to replace the interviewee on centre stage and become the dominant feature in the interaction. Benjamin (1987, p. 206) put it as follows:

> When I respond, I speak in terms of what the interviewee has expressed. I react to the ideas and feelings he has communicated to me with something of my own. When I lead, I take over. I express ideas and feelings to which I expect the interviewee to react. . . . When leading, I make use of my own life space; when responding, I tend more to utilize the life space of the interviewee. Interviewer responses keep the interviewee at the centre of things; leads make the interviewer central.

Reflections are accordingly a type of response. They involve the interviewer striving to capture the significant message in the respondent's previous contribution and re-presenting this understanding. This has been described as mirroring back to the interviewee what the interviewee has just said, as grasped by the interviewer. Reflections can be contrasted with questions, for example, which often serve to lead in this sense.

REFLECTING: CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

Reflecting, as a topic of scholarly enquiry, is bedevilled by conceptual confusion, terminological inconsistency, and definitional imprecision, some of which has been alluded to by Hill and O'Brien (1999). An attempt is made here to disentangle the central themes. At a broad level, reflecting is operationally concerned with person A in some way grasping the significance of person B's preceding contribution and, in the form of a statement that re-presents this key message, making person B aware of A's understanding. Rogers (1951), who is commonly credited with coining the term although he later came to disparage it, regarded reflecting as a method of communicating an understanding of the other and the concerns expressed, from the other's point of view, and of 'being with' that person. Wilkins (2003) also highlighted a role in checking accuracy of understanding. Attempts to introduce greater precision and, in particular, to specify how these effects can be achieved by the interviewer have, however, led to some of the semantic difficulties mentioned above. (Causes of these incongruities, traceable to Rogers' evolving ideas and those of his colleagues, are discussed in the following section.) These inconsistencies and indeed contradictions can be illustrated by considering several definitions of the term. For French (1994, p. 188), reflecting 'is the act of merely repeating a word, pair of words or sentence exactly as it was said', a view shared by Burnard (1999, p. 85), for whom it is a technique that 'involves simply echoing back to the client the last few words spoken by him or her'. Contrast these definitions with the analysis given by Geldard and Geldard (2003, p. 76), who, in referring to a specific example provided, stressed that 'the reflection by the helper didn't repeat word for word what the person said, but expressed things differently. Thus, the helper used their own words rather than the other person's. This is essential . . .'. According to the first two definitions, reflecting comprises mere repetition of the exact words used by the client in the preceding exchange, while, in the last definition, this is precisely what reflecting is not.

Some have regarded reflecting as a unitary phenomenon (Benjamin, 1987), while others have conceived of it as a rubric subsuming a varying number of related processes. These include *reflection of content* (Manthei, 1997), *reflecting experience* (Brammer & MacLeod, 2003), *reflecting meaning* (Ivey et al., 2002; Freshwater, 2003), *content responses* and *affect responses* (Danish & Hauer, 1973), and *restatement* (Hill & O'Brien, 1999). Perhaps the most commonly cited distinction, though, is between *reflection of feeling* and *paraphrasing* (Hargie & Dickson, 2004). In some cases, ostensibly different labels have essentially the same behavioural referent (for instance, paraphrasing, reflection of content, and content responses), while in others the same label is used to denote processes differing in important respects.

To appreciate fully the issues involved and locate the sources of these confusions

and inconsistencies, it is necessary to extend our discussion of communication and what it entails.

A common distinction is that between verbal and non-verbal communication. Laver and Hutcheson (1972) further differentiated between vocal and non-vocal aspects of the process. The latter relates to those methods that do not depend upon the vocal apparatus and includes, for example, facial expressions, posture, gestures, and other body movements. These have more recently become popularised as *body language* (Bull, 2002). Vocal communication incorporates all of the components of speech; not only the actual words used (verbal communication) but features of their delivery (the vocal element of non-verbal communication). The latter has been divided, although with little consistency (Robinson, 2003), into *prosody* (e.g. speed, rhythm), *paralanguage* (e.g. timbre, voice quality), and *extra-linguistics* (e.g. accent). For ease of reference, though, and because their tight specification is not central to the thrust of this chapter, the more global term *non-verbal* will be used, for the most part, to label all three, together with body language (for a review of non-verbal communication, see Chapter 3). In the face-to-face situation, therefore, people make themselves known by three potential methods: first, and most obviously, by words used; second, via the non-verbal facets of speech; and third, by means of various other bodily movements and states.

Another common distinction in this area, with respect to that which is communicated (rather than *how* it is communicated), is between the *cognitive* and the *affective*. The former has to do with the domain of the logical and rational, with facts and ideas that are mostly predicated on external reality, although they can be subjective. On the other hand, affect relates to emotional concerns, to feeling states and expressions of mood. As explained by Cormier and Cormier (1998, p. 101):

> The portion of the message that expresses information or describes a situation or event is called the *content*, or the cognitive part, of the message. The cognitive part of a message includes references to a situation or event, people, objects, or ideas. Another portion of the message may reveal how the client feels about the content; expression of feeling or an emotional tone is called the *affective* part of the message . . .

In actual practice, of course, both types of communication coalesce. In addition, both can be conveyed verbally and non-verbally (via body language, prosody, paralanguage, and extra-linguistics), although it is generally more common for cognitive information to be conveyed verbally and emotional expression non-verbally (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). More particularly, the affective component of a message can take the following three basic forms:

1   *Explicitly stated*. Here the feeling aspect is explicitly stated in the verbal content. For example, 'I was terrified.'
2   *Implicitly mentioned*. In this case, feelings are not directly stated, but rather the affective information is implicitly contained in what is said. For example, 'I tried to scream but nothing came out.' Here the emotional message is grasped by 'reading between the lines'.
3   *Inferred*. The affective component can also be deduced from the manner in

which the verbal content is delivered – from the non-verbal accompaniments, both vocal and non-vocal. Research has shown that when the verbal and non-verbal elements of an emotional or attitudinal message conflict as, for example, when someone says glumly, 'I am overjoyed', the non-verbal often holds sway in our decoding (Knapp & Hall, 2002). In the case of inferred feelings, the verbal content of the message (i.e. *what* is said) does not play a direct part.

To summarise, communications may contain cognitive/factual material, affective/feeling information, or, indeed, as is more commonly the case, elements of both. Such content can be conveyed verbally (both explicitly and implicitly) or non-verbally (in vocal or non-vocal forms).

The cognitive-affective dimension would appear to be highly salient in this issue of reflecting, and is one factor at the centre of much of the inconsistency and confusion. A second concerns the extent of homomorphic correspondence between the reflection and the original message. In other words, does the interviewer merely repeat verbatim what was said, or is the interviewee's message reformulated in the interviewer's own words, while retaining its semantic integrity? (This dimension has more to do with the verbal than non-verbal modes of delivery. It is possible, however, for the interviewer, when repeating, to echo, more or less accurately, the original paralinguistic accompaniment. Similarly, the interviewer can mirror a non-verbal gesture. While such non-linguistic features have been regarded as an essential part of empathic communication, this has not usually been in the context of mere verbal repetition and so will not be discussed further at this point.) Since the question of repetition-reformulation has been alluded to and since it is less convoluted than the cognition-affect issue, it will be dealt with first.

Returning to the term 'reflecting', we should recall that one line of thought suggests that reflections are essentially repetitions (e.g. Burnard, 1999). Similarly, Nicholson and Bayne (1984, p. 36) wrote that, when using this technique, 'The interviewer repeats a word or phrase which the client has used ...'. They contrasted reflections with paraphrases in this respect. For others, as will be shown shortly, the cognitive-affective dimension is of greater relevance in conceptualising paraphrases. Simple repetitions have alternatively been referred to as verbatim playbacks (Gilmore, 1973), as reflections of content (Porter, 1950), but perhaps more frequently as restatements (Cormier & Hackney, 1999). In its most extreme form, according to Benjamin (1987), the restatement is an exact duplication of the original statement, including the pronoun used, although more frequently this is changed; indeed, the restatement may repeat in a more selective fashion.

Those who talk about restatements as repetitions tend to set them apart from reflections on the basis of not only form but also function. For some, restatements are of limited utility and, at best, have more to do with indicating attempts at rudimentary hearing than with understanding. Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor (2001) cautioned that consistent use runs the risk of making the interviewer seem foolish or even hard of hearing. Indeed, depending upon circumstances, restatements may even convey incredulity, disapproval, or sarcasm. Brammer, Shostrom, and Abrego (1989, p. 110) commented, 'Perhaps the most glaring reflection error of the novice counselor is to express the reflection in words already used by the client.' However, and more positively for Rennie (1998, p. 37), 'repeating exactly what the client has said at times is

useful because it signals to the client that what was just said is significant, worthy of attention, important. By the same token, it stimulates dwelling within what was said.' Reflecting, though, is commonly regarded as going beyond this level to convey listening, and promote deep understanding (Brammer & MacLeod, 2003).

Reflections, therefore, are typically located at the reformulation end of the repetition-reformulation continuum and have been described as 'statements, in the interviewer's own words, that encapsulate and re-present the essence of the interviewee's previous message' (Hargie & Dickson, 2004, p. 148). Comparable definitions in this respect have been provided by, among others, Nelson-Jones (1990) and Geldard and Geldard (2003).

Turning to matters of content, reflections are typically held to contain the essential core of the interviewee's previous communication Thus, they may include both cognitive and affective material. It will be recalled that some who have conceived of reflections in this general way have typically made further distinctions between reflective statements that are restricted to feeling issues and those concerned with what is frequently called 'content' (e.g. Cormier & Cormier, 1998; Hayes, 2002), although it is generally accepted that the difference is more one of relative emphasis than mutual exclusion.

Reflection of feeling is the preferred term for the affective dimension of communication, while those reflective utterances that focus upon factual content, by contrast, are typically referred to as *paraphrases*. Reflecting feeling has been defined by Hargie and Dickson (2004, p. 159) as 'the process of feeding back to Person B, in Person A's own words, the essence of B's previous communication, the emphasis being on feelings expressed rather than cognitive content'. Paraphrasing is defined similarly, although here the emphasis is placed on 'facts and ideas rather than emotions' (Hayes, 2002, p. 66). In spite of this criterion, definitions of paraphrasing can be found which include both affect and cognition. For instance, Lumsden and Lumsden (2003, p. 91) instructed those paraphrasing to, 'In your own words, restate what you think the other person is saying and feeling.' Similarly, Brammer and MacLeod (2003, p. 74) pointed out, 'Usually the paraphrase has heavy cognitive content, although it includes feelings if these are an important part of the helpee's message.'

In some of these cases, as previously mentioned, the repetition-reformulation dimension, rather than the cognitive-affective, would appear to be the major consideration, with paraphrases being contrasted with simple echoic repetitions. In other cases, it would seem that a somewhat different and more subtle distinction is being exploited, although one which emerges only vaguely due to frequent lack of detail and clarity in the definitions provided. It would appear to involve primarily neither cognitive-affective content of interviewee message nor the extent of repetition-reformulation by the interviewer, but rather the mode of expression of the information divulged by the interviewee. Paraphrasing could accordingly be said to focus exclusively upon the verbal statement and, since feelings can be related in this manner, encompass both cognition and affect. Here it is very much the literal meaning of 'paraphrase' that is operationalised, and this appears to be the line followed by authors such as Lumsden and Lumsden (2003) and Wood (2004). Accordingly, although in the context of students' written work rather than face-to-face interaction, plagiarising rather than paraphrasing material was defined by Roig (1999) as involving the appropriation of a sequence of five or more consecutive words from the source.

    With this literal meaning in mind, researchers such as Haase and DiMattia (1976) employed paraphrases to promote affective self-referenced statements among subjects. Paraphrases regarded in this manner are contrasted with reflections, as defined by Benjamin (1987, p. 215), for example, in the following way: 'Reflection consists of bringing to the surface and expressing in words those feelings and attitudes that lie behind the interviewee's words.' Likewise, Northouse and Northouse (1998, p. 175) explained that, rather than focusing on '*what* the client has said (the content), the focus in reflecting is on *how* something has been expressed, or the feeling dimension'. Nelson-Jones (2004, p. 129) described reflecting feeling as 'responding to clients' music and not just to their words'. While paraphrases are restricted to what is actually said, reflections concentrate upon less obvious information frequently revealed in more subtle ways.

    This confusion can, in large part, be traced back to the word 'content', which features in many definitions of paraphrasing and sets it apart from reflection of feeling. Ivey and Authier (1978, p. 83), for instance, proposed that paraphrasing 'could be considered an attempt at feedback to the client of the content of what he has just said, but in a restated form'. However, 'content' has been used in slightly different ways, which have largely gone unnoticed, to refer to somewhat different aspects of the other's message, namely, mode of communication (i.e. verbal) and type of information conveyed in this manner (i.e. cognitive/factual). Note that the term is not used in a more global manner to describe *all* of the information communicated. The issue, stated as unambiguously as possible, would seem to be this: is 'content' taken to mean the verbal facet or the non-affective component of the message? It is, of course, possible for the verbal to be affective. Since the word 'content' is commonly used in the literature as the antonym of 'feeling', one would suspect the latter.

    Following this line of argument, paraphrases, defined as involving content, emphasise the non-affective or factual (e.g. above definition by Hayes, 2002), while reflections of feeling deal with feelings expressed both verbally and non-verbally. This is the stance taken by authors such as Cormier and Cormier (1998, p. 101):

> The portion of the message that expressed information or describes a situation or event is called the *content*, or the cognitive part, of the message. . . . Another portion of the message may reveal how the client feels about the content; expression of feeling or an emotional tone is called the *affective* part of the message.

The fact that 'content' concerns factual components and that reflections of feeling can draw upon affect, verbally stated, is underlined:

> Generally, the affect part of the verbal message is distinguished by the client's use of an affective or feeling word, such as *happy, angry* or *sad*. However, clients may also express their feelings in less obvious ways, particularly through various non-verbal behaviors. (p. 101)

By contrast, others would appear to equate content solely with the verbal mode of communication. It is therefore permissible when paraphrasing to include both aspects of fact and feeling, as has already been mentioned. Unfortunately, the position is even

less straightforward. Some authors seemingly straddle this particular divide. Ivey and Authier (1978, p. 539), for example, wrote that:

> responding to the feeling being expressed rather than attending solely to the content and decision issues is what is important in [reflection of feeling]. What the client is saying is the content portion of the message. One must also listen to how the client gives a message. It is this feeling portion of the communication to which you are to pay attention.

Here 'content' obviously refers to the verbal message, while non-verbal components are emphasised in relation to the communication of feeling states. Reflections of feeling utilise the latter, while paraphrases tap content. Thus, it could be assumed (and in accordance with the views of those already mentioned: e.g. Lumsden & Lumsden, 2003; Wood, 2004) that mode of expression is the defining characteristic and that paraphrases may mirror back facts and feelings *verbally* expressed. But in actual fact, Ivey and Authier (1978) stressed that paraphrases address the non-affective and, by so doing, invoke the cognitive-affective dimension as being of prime importance.

In concluding this section, it may be useful to re-present the three dimensions that seem to be conceptually central to structural aspects of reflecting, as much of the inconsistency and ambiguity existing in the literature stems from a lack of appreciation of, or confusion among, them. First, the cognitive-affective issue is concerned with the communicated message and the extent to which the reflective statement focuses upon facts, feelings, or indeed both. Second, the repetition-reformulation continuum addresses the extent to which the reflection recasts rather than merely parrots the original interviewee statement. The mode of communication of this message is the basis of the third dimension. (In actual practice, this dimension is not entirely independent of the second; that is, opportunities for repetition decrease in conjunction with decreases in explicit verbal presentation.) Was the information carried verbally or by other and often less conspicuous means? Allied to this is the implication that non-verbal messages are often more ambiguous than those verbally stated. (This, of course, is not invariably so.) The importance of the latter dimension should not be overlooked, however, especially in situations where the interviewee is striving to come to grips with a personal difficulty. Under these circumstances, a reflection which encapsulates an aspect of the problem of which the interviewee was but vaguely aware can be extremely beneficial (Egan, 2001). Mearns and Thorne (2000) explored the therapeutic significance of dealing with material on the edge of the client's awareness.

The difficulty of producing a consensual definition of reflecting should be obvious from the foregoing. Nevertheless, the following claims, although tentatively made, would appear warrantable. Reflections are statements that capture and re-present the essence of the interviewee's previous message. They can incorporate cognitive and affective components and are expressed in the interviewer's own words. Reflections which concentrate more single-mindedly upon affective issues, whether or not these were *explicitly* shared by the interviewee in the original communication, have more frequently been labelled reflections of feeling. On the other hand, those that address the non-affective content of the utterance have been called, for the most part, reflections of content or paraphrases.

REFLECTING: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The process of reflecting can be interpreted from at least three fundamentally different disciplinary positions. These are humanistic psychology, behaviourist psychology, and linguistics (more specifically, pragmatics). In keeping with the former, it is, in part, the communication of those attitudes and conditions promoting psychological growth and maturity. To the behaviourist, it is a means of influencing and modifying what people do and how they respond to their social environment. Finally, in keeping with pragmatics, reflecting can be thought of as part of the elaborate business of managing talk in the course of interaction.

The humanistic approach

The name Carl Rogers is habitually invoked in discussions of the most influential twentieth-century figures in shaping the humanistic movement in psychology. In the helping context, he is also acknowledged as the founder of the person-centred counselling movement, although Mearns and Thorne (2000) noted how uncomfortably this approach actually sits alongside other recognized humanistic therapies. A detailed consideration of Rogers' theoretical position lies far beyond the scope of this chapter. (For fuller details of Rogerian and neo-Rogerian thinking, see, for instance, Rogers, 1951, 1961, 1980; Mearns & Thorne, 2000; Thorne, 2002; McMillan, 2004.) At a rudimentary level, however, an outline of his theory of human functioning will be sketched, based upon several interlocking, key concepts. These include *the organism, actualising tendency, phenomenological field, self, positive regard*, and *incongruence*.

The *organism*, psychologically speaking, is at the centre of all experience and is a totally organised system comprising physical, cognitive, affective, and behavioural facets. It is energised by a single and immensely powerful motivating force, the *actualising tendency*. This concept lies at the heart of person-centred thought (Sanders, 2000) and refers to a positive influence toward growth and development. Wilkins (2003, p. 33) offered a broad definition along the lines of 'the tendency of life forms to develop more complex organization and to fulfil their potential'. Rogers (1951) underscored the inherent dynamism of this force in stating, 'The organism has one basic tendency and striving – to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism' (p. 487).

Were the actualising tendency permitted to operate unimpaired, the outcome would be a person in the process of becoming *self-actualised*. Such individuals show an openness to experience, self-trust, the adoption of an internal locus of evaluation, and a willingness to continue the self-actualising process (Irving, 1995). They are not dependent upon others as a source of evaluation but are confidently self-reliant in this respect. Few, unfortunately, live self-actualising lives. The personally experienced world of the individual is called the *phenomenological field* and consists of everything that is, at least potentially, available to awareness. Part of this totality relates to the self; the child develops a particular *self-concept*. This can be thought of as a view of self together with an evaluation of it. Significant others, such as parents, have a key role to play in this process due to the individual's need for *positive regard*. This need to gain the love, respect, and esteem of others important to the person is deep felt.

Such positive regard, however, is generally not provided unconditionally. Instead, certain *conditions of worth* are attached – the child knows that behaviour of a certain type must be displayed in order to win approval. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the child to behave not only in keeping with the actualising tendency but to ensure that conditions of worth are not violated. Such dual standards invariably lead to conflicts and attempted compromises. Within the individual is held in tension, as it were, a self-concept at odds with the organismic self (Hough, 2002). The outcome is incongruence; the self-concept becomes divorced from the actual experiences of the organism (Tengland, 2001). As observed by Butt (2004, p. 50), 'Rogers' theory proposes a split between the natural and the social: an organismic process that is good and true, and a social world that impedes and hinders.' Incongruence is associated with feelings of threat and anxiety and, consequently, the falsification or indeed denial of experiences leading to the distortion of the self-concept. This is the antithesis of becoming self-actualised.

For Rogers, the source of personal problems is, to a great extent, the conditional nature of positive regard. The individual already subjected to incongruence can be encouraged to further growth and psychological maturity within the context of a particular relationship where conditions of worth are removed from positive regard. This other should manifest *congruence* and provide *unconditional* positive regard. Since no attempt is made to impose values or be judgemental, threat is reduced, thus enabling the individual to explore feelings previously denied or distorted, and to assimilate them into the self-concept. As explained by Mearns and Thorne (2000, p. 77),

> [Person-centred therapy] takes away from the encounter the notion of a leader or director who will guide the client towards health or the resolution of difficulties. Instead, person-centred therapy proposes for the therapist the role of listener and authentic companion who positively 'prizes' all dimensions of her client.

Reflecting, as a way of listening (Cormier & Cormier, 1998) and a method of responding that imposes no external evaluative comment on client disclosures, thereby satisfies these requirements.

Reflecting is, however, more commonly associated with another characteristic of the effective relationship – accurate *empathic understanding*. In his earlier writings, Rogers (1951) proposed that the empathic counsellor assumes,

> in so far as he is able, the internal frame of reference of the client, to perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client himself as he is seen by himself, to lay aside all perceptions from the external frame of reference while doing so and to communicate something of this empathic understanding to the client. (p. 29)

It was considered that accurate reflecting is the most effective means of communicating this understanding to the client although, as will be outlined, subsequent views on this issue changed somewhat.

Developments have taken place in person-centred thinking over the years (see, for instance, Gelso & Carter, 1985; Mearns & Thorne, 2000; Wyatt, 2001). Three distinct phases in the ongoing evolutionary process labelled, chronologically,

non-directive, reflective, and *experiential*, can be identified, each characterised by a particular outlook on counsellor function and style. The non-directive counsellor strove to create a permissive, non-judgemental climate by unintrusively displaying acceptance. Clarification of client contributions in order to promote increased insight gradually was also provided. With the advent of the reflective era, greater stress was placed upon effecting a more integrated self-concept and putting the client more completely in touch with his phenomenological world. As far as technique is concerned, reflecting was employed extensively during both of these phases, but particularly in the latter. However, it would seem that subtle differences in use are detectable, which go some way to shedding light on the reasons for the various nuances of definition disentangled in the previous section. Thus, a gradual switch in emphasis took place from reflecting, largely at a fairly superficial level, the factual content of the client's verbalised message (and frequently doing so by simply repeating what was said) to dealing with the affective dimension through mirroring back, in fresh words, feelings expressed. Reflection of feeling became the most widely used technique.

Subsequently, Rogers (1975) utilised the concept of experiencing to account for what takes place during counselling and to provide an updated statement on the nature of empathy. Empathy became conceived as a process of 'being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear, or rage . . . whatever, that he/she is experiencing' (p. 4). It requires a moving closer to the client by gaining a greater awareness of his or her presently experienced inner world of perceptions, thoughts and feelings and the personal meanings attached to these. It is this process and the corresponding commitment of the counsellor to operate within the frame of reference of the client that is important, rather than the particular technique used. In marked contrast to earlier thinking, the supremacy of reflecting feeling as a means of interaction with the client is removed. Indeed, in rejecting the confusion of earlier definitions of empathy with the wooden application of technique, Rogers (1987, p. 39) wrote, 'I even wince at the term reflection of feeling.'

Reflecting is still a legitimate activity, nevertheless, but its effectiveness is dependent upon relating directly to clients' current experiencing and encouraging them to focus more intensely upon and become more fully aware of it. Reflecting should also assist in the process of converting implicit (or unverbalised) meaning into a communicable form without misrepresentation. Rogers came to see checking on accuracy of understanding as the important task being achieved. According to Wilkins (2003), he consequently preferred the labels 'checking perceptions' and 'testing understanding' to 'reflecting feeling'. Regardless of label, the therapeutic effect of responding in this way is to promote the individual's experiencing and consequently produce change toward greater congruence. Since such responses must be directed at the felt meanings experienced by the client, there is no longer the stipulation that reflections must deal with only affective issues. Memories, experiences, thoughts, fantasies, sensations, and such like have equal legitimacy and should be responded to as well (Merry, 2000). Content in this sense becomes less important. The reflective statement may be cognitive, affective, or perhaps more usefully both. Brammer (1993) introduced the variant *reflecting experience* to describe this technique. A further development is a greater move away from the explicitly stated and obvious in the client's utterance to inchoate and vaguely expressed concerns. In offering deeper levels of empathic understanding, the reflection should move beyond the familiar to point

tentatively toward experiences only faintly hinted at and less clearly grasped by the client (Egan, 2001; Tolan, 2003). Although possibilities of inaccuracy are increased, such reflections have the potential to move the client forward in experiencing to greater degrees of realisation. Here again can be identified a further source of the conceptual confusion discussed previously.

Empathy has been cast as a multidimensional construct with cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects (Irving 1995; Irving & Dickson, 2004). According to the latter, and for empathy to make a difference, it must be actually manifested in some way. As a piece of interpersonal behaviour, reflecting is accordingly one (but only one) of a number of possible ways of making someone aware of the fact that they are being empathically understood. Indeed, the point has been put that the specific behavioural expression is largely immaterial, provided that it succeeds in communicating a strong sense to the client of being engaged with in this way (Thorne, 1992; Wilkins, 2003). (It should also be mentioned that some, from a person-centred perspective, express increasing unease at the technique-ridden connotations of any behavioural terms such as 'reflecting', 'paraphrasing', and so forth.) Nevertheless, when used appropriately, reflecting is one possible method consistently mentioned when the communicative dimension of the construct of empathy is discussed (Authier, 1986; Cormier & Cormier, 1998; Hill & O'Brien, 1999; Irving & Dickson, 2004; Nelson-Jones, 2004). Furthermore, analyses of Rogers in videotaped counselling sessions have confirmed that, in fact, he made extensive use of reflective skills (O'Farrell, Hill & Patton, 1986; Lietaer, 2004).

Changes in person-centred thinking have taken place since first formulated by Carl Rogers. Much of the definitional confusion to do with the term 'reflecting' derives from this evolution. Nevertheless, from the point of view of this branch of humanistic psychology, reflecting can be thought of as facilitative communication with the potential to convey unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding thereby pointing the way to possibilities of personal growth and maturity through enhanced self-actualisation.

The behaviourist approach

Reflecting has also been interpreted and investigated in keeping with behaviourist principles. Beginning with Watson (1913), behaviourists have traditionally regarded psychological enquiry as an extension of the natural sciences. Behaviourism, though, is far from a monolithic system of thought (O'Donohue & Kitchener, 1996) but includes, among others, *methodological* and (more prominently) *radical* variants. Philosophical underpinnings of the perspective are explored by Hocutt (1996) and will not be pursued here. Behaviourists have historically restricted psychology enquiry to behaviour, environmental happenings associated with it, and the relationship between these two types of 'in the world' happening. The individual's environment is of paramount importance in shaping what individuals do and what they become. The goal of psychology is to describe, explain, predict, and control behaviour by identifying the regularities existing between it and features of the environment in which it occurs.

The early theorists, including Pavlov and Watson, placed emphasis upon

identifiable environmental stimuli serving to elicit particular responses from the organism according to predictable patterns. While some of these stimulus–response connections may be basic reflexes, others are learned. In either case, the individual was regarded as essentially passive, with responses triggered by stimuli in the form of environmental events.

Extending earlier thinking by Thorndike (1911), as enshrined in the *Law of Effect*, Skinner (1938) drew attention to the fact that the environmental consequences for an organism of those actions that are carried out have a considerable bearing upon what is done subsequently. This simple but immensely powerful idea formed the basis of his work on *operant conditioning*. Skinner stressed the *operant* rather than the *respondent* nature of behaviour. Instead of merely reacting to happenings as 'triggers', the organism was seen as emitting behaviour that operated on the environment to effect consequences which, in some cases, led to an increased likelihood of that class of behaviour being performed under comparable sets of circumstances. Such consequences are termed *reinforcers* or *reinforcing stimuli*, and operant conditioning is the process whereby they act to increase the frequency of occurrence of designated behaviour by being made contingent upon it (see Chapter 5 for a review of the area of reinforcement). As explained by Catania (2000, p. 23):

> Operant behavior is behavior that is sensitive to its consequences. When operant behavior becomes more likely because of the consequences it has had, we speak of reinforcement. Some consequences produce increases in the likelihood of operant behavior, and others do not.

Reflecting can be conceived of and researched in terms of operant conditioning procedures (Dickson, Saunders & Stringer, 1993). Reflective statements by person B, acting as reinforcing stimuli on the preceding contribution by person A, will make it more likely that person A will persist with this line of talk. The process can be thought of as one of systematic selection: 'Those responses that are selected increase in relative frequency, while most of the remainder decline' (Leslie, 2002, p. 52).

Reinforcement can take a positive or a negative form. *Positive reinforcement* is formally defined by Maag (1999, p. 71) as referring 'to any stimulus, when presented after the occurrence of a behavior, that increases the future occurrence of the behavior'. He goes on to describe it as 'the most powerful and effective method for increasing or maintaining appropriate behavior' (p. 278). With *negative reinforcement*, by contrast, an act is associated with the avoidance, termination, or reduction of an aversive stimulus that would have either occurred or continued at some existing level had the response not taken place. Behaviour resulting in the noxious stimulus being reduced, eliminated, or avoided will become more prevalent, the *sine qua non* of reinforcement in action. Examples of negative reinforcement in everyday life are common. We have a headache, take FeelFine analgesic, and the pain disappears, making it more likely that we will take FeelFine the next time a headache strikes.

Positive reinforcing stimuli can take a variety of different forms. *Primary reinforcers* include such things as food, drink, sex, etc., the reinforcing potential of which does not rely upon a process of prior learning. *Secondary, token,* or *conditioned* reinforcers, on the other hand, come to be valued through prior association with primary reinforcers, money being an obvious example in contemporary society.

Skinner (1953) also noted a group of conditioned reinforcers typically paired with several other reinforcing stimuli in a broad range of circumstances. These were labelled *generalised* reinforcers. The giving of one's attention to another is an example:

> The attention of people is reinforcing because it is a necessary condition for other reinforcements from them. In general, only people who are attending to us reinforce our behavior. The attention of someone who is particularly likely to supply reinforcement – a parent, a teacher, or a loved one – is an especially good generalized reinforcer. (Skinner, 1953, p.78)

The implication is that various verbal and non-verbal behaviours associated with attention giving, for instance, have the ability to shape how others act in interpersonal situations through selectively acting as *social reinforcers*. Lieberman (2000, p. 208) defined social reinforcers, in broad terms, as 'stimuli whose reinforcing properties derive uniquely from the behavior of other members of the same species'. Social behaviour, by definition, presupposes the involvement of other people. In the main, the types of reinforcers that govern and shape it are also contributed by those with whom we mix and intermingle and are a powerful, though often subtle, influence on our actions. Buss (1983) suggested that they be thought of as either *process* or *content*. The former are an inherent part of interpersonal contact and include, in order of increasing potency, the mere presence of others, attention from them, and their conversational responsiveness. Too much or too little of these activities can be aversive: it is only at some notional level of intermediacy that they become reinforcing.

To switch to the second element of Buss's categorisation, the content of interaction can also have reinforcing ramifications. Here, Buss mentions acts such as showing deference, praising, extending sympathy, and expressing affection. Unlike their process counterparts, these are held to operate along unipolar dimensions. In other words, there is a direct linear correlation between amount and reinforcing effect.

For some, reflecting acts as a social reinforcer because it connotes attention, interest, and acceptance, thereby serving to increase selectively verbal output of the type reflected. In an early experiment, Powell (1968) examined the effects of reinforcing subjects' self-referenced statements (statements about themselves) by means of reflections. The results showed that when, in an interview-type situation, the interviewer responded by using this technique the frequency of such statements increased significantly. In effect, subjects talked more about themselves. Other research, which is reviewed in a later section of this chapter, has produced largely comparable findings.

Some researchers, while remaining within an operant conditioning framework, see reflections working in a slightly different way. When a certain action succeeds only in eliciting reinforcement in the presence of particular accompanying stimuli, that piece of behaviour is said to be under *stimulus control* (Lieberman, 2000), and those stimuli have become *discriminating stimuli* in respect of it. They signal the availability of a reinforcer for behaving in that way. When the overall context acts in this way, *contextual control* is in operation (Sarafino, 1996). Reflections may, therefore, function more as discriminative than reinforcing stimuli. Discriminative stimuli are part of the environmental context within which the organism responds. They signal

that reinforcing stimuli are available and, as such, are present at the time of responding rather than afterward (and differ from reinforcing stimuli in this respect). They cue the occasion for reinforcement but do not themselves reinforce. By reflecting feeling, for example, the interviewer may actually be signalling to the interviewee that subsequent reinforcement is available for further affective responses. In the sequential stream of verbal interchange, the task of locating sources of influence is, however, fraught with difficulty. The listener's utterance can be thought of both as a response to the speaker's previous comment and as a stimulus for the next (Leslie & O'Reilly, 1999).

To summarise, reflecting is a method of influencing verbal behaviour by affecting the frequency of occurrence of particular types of response This can be accounted for in terms of the behaviourist principles of operant conditioning and behaviour analysis. As such, reflective statements act as reinforcing (and perhaps discriminative) stimuli and, by implication, promote the class of response represented in the other's preceding line of talk.

The linguistic approach

A reflective statement, whatever else it may be, is part of talk and, as such, is subject to the sphere of influence of linguistics, particularly pragmatics, and amenable to techniques of conversational analysis (CA). Pragmatics explores the factors behind our choice of language, from among a range of possibilities in any given situation, and the effects of those choices on others (Crystal, 1997). It therefore concentrates on language put to use by people as they live their lives (Mey, 1993). CA has its roots in sociology (Gee, 1999) and, as pointed out by Pridham (2001, p. 230), 'argues that conversation has its own dynamic structure and rules, and looks at the methods used by speakers to structure conversation efficiently'. People normally succeed in understanding one another in ordinary conversations and manage their intercourse in a well-ordered fashion. But this can never be taken for granted, and the identification of the embedded rules and principles that underpin conversational coherence is of considerable interest to scholars of language (Jacobs, 2002). Conversationalists constantly work at making talk run smoothly. They anticipate possible confusions and misunderstandings and take avoidance action. When problems do arise, they are identified and repair strategies implemented. Stokes and Hewitt (1976) referred to these management procedures that keep conversation on track as *aligning actions*, and, as specific examples, Nofsinger (1991) discussed *continuers* and *formulations*. From this background, reflections could be regarded as forming part of the complex and often subtle operation of organising and orchestrating conversation.

The process of formulating talk can be thought of as providing comment upon what has been said or what is taking place in the interaction. It has been outlined as follows:

> A member may treat some part of the conversation as an occasion to describe that conversation, to explain it, or characterize it, or explicate, or translate, or summarize, or furnish the gist of it, or take note of its accordance with rules, or remark on its departure from rules. That is to say, a member may use some part

of the conversation as an occasion to formulate the conversation. (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970, p. 350)

For McLaughlin (1984), formulations serve to promote, transform, delete, or indeed terminate talk. They have also been found to be used by adults in pointing out and correcting mistakes made by children acquiring language (Chouinard & Clark, 2003), and by native speakers in conversations with adult second-language learners (Philp, 2003).

Reformulations may relate to something the person providing the formulation has contributed (A-issues or events), something the other participant has mentioned (B-issues or events), or, although less frequently, to both (AB-issues or events). A further distinction is that between formulations of *gist* and *upshot* (Heritage & Watson, 1979). The former involves extracting and highlighting the central events and issues featured in the immediately preceding utterance. Formulations of upshot go beyond this to frequently draw conclusions based upon assumptions that may or may not meet with the agreement of the other partner. It would seem that from this standpoint reflections could be regarded as essentially B-event or issue formulations of gist. (It should be also noted, though, that, in analysing Carl Rogers' verbal contributions in a counselling session, Lietaer (2004), in a study already cited, developed separate categories for reflections and reformulation.) It has been noted that formulations of this type are often tentative proposals and require a decision from the other interactor as to their acceptability. Likewise, in the helping context, counsellors have been urged to reflect feelings in a tentative way that always leaves open the opportunity of denial or correction by the client (Cormier & Cormier, 1998; Tolan, 2003). If the other is unwilling to agree to a particular representation of his or her position, one or more modifications are likely to be presented and worked through until agreement is forthcoming. The frequent association between a formulation of this type and confirmation by the other led Heritage and Watson (1979) to characterise them as *adjacency pairs*.

Adjacency pairs are a further feature of conversation that gives it structure and predictability. These are conversation sequences that are 'two turns long, having two parts said by different speakers in adjacent turns at talk' (Jacobs, 2002, p. 225). Furthermore, there is a rule-driven expectation that, in initiating this type of sequence, one positions the other in the role of respondent and places restrictions around what can be offered as an acceptable next speech turn. For example, questions beget answers; requests invoke refusals/acceptances; greetings initiate greetings, and so on. If reflection-confirmation/elaboration works in this way as an adjacency pair, then an obligation is placed upon the other either to explicitly confirm/deny the reformulation or to continue to elaborate the original pronouncement.

According to the two theoretical interpretations previously considered, reflections promote more intense experiencing or reinforce continued discussion of a particular topic. In line with this effect, Nofsinger (1991) also discussed *continuers* as conversational alignment devices that mark a listener's intention to forego making a substantive contribution to the conversation at that precise point. Following early work by Duncan and Fiske (1977) and Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1978), the mechanisms involved in *conversational turn taking* have been extensively researched. *Back-channel communication* refers to listener contributions that sustain the listener

role. They seem to signal that the listener is attentive, interested, even comprehending, but does not seek the floor at that point. A further possibility is that reflections operate essentially in this way. Indeed, their role in the interviewing/counselling literature is often presented as such. If so, reflections can have an additional alignment role as continuers or *minimal responses*, promoting the continuity of the conversational status quo in respect of topic and speaker/listener arrangement. Rhys and Black (2004) showed how Carl Rogers' use of 'mm hmm' was operating in this way in at least some of the instances when used by him in counselling.

But formulations would also seem on occasion to be a way of engineering a change of topic or even the termination of conversation. It has been reported that conversational lapses are often immediately preceded by an utterance of this sort (McLaughlin & Cody, 1982). Likewise, from their detailed analysis of doctor–patient communication, Stiles and Putnam (1992) discovered that reflective statements by doctors often seemed to cut patients off conversationally, rather than encourage deeper exploration. Likewise, Beach and Dixon (2001) identified a characteristic three-step sequence in their in-depth analysis of a medical history interview between a physician's assistant and a female patient. Here a reformulation by the medic led directly to a confirmatory response by the patient followed by a shift of topic initiated in the medic's subsequent conversational turn. For the authors, 'Such actions essentially detoxify topic shift, therefore minimizing the likelihood that movement forward in the interview can be framed as [the interviewer's] heavy-handed pursuit of a medical "agenda" removed from [the patient's] concerns' (p. 29).

How can reflection act both to stimulate deeper exploration of a topic and to preface a hiatus in the conversation or mark the occasion for a change of topic? One possible explanation has to do with the broader communicative frame within which the reflective statement is delivered. In the situated interactive context of eliciting facts leading to a valid medical diagnosis, for example, patients may understand formulations as operating essentially to check the accuracy of a sequence of limited pieces of information under characteristic time pressures. At a more obviously micro-analytic level, the prosodic accompaniment of the verbal content of the reflection may also be crucially important. Variations in pitch can make a statement either interrogative or declarative (Knapp & Hall, 2002). Based upon the linguistic analysis of naturally occurring interactions, Schegloff and Sacks (1973) reported that words spoken with a downward intonation served to terminate topic discussion. Weiner and Goodenough (1977) conceived of reflections as repetition passes (that is, speech acts which serve to forego the opportunity of making a substantive contribution to the continued exploration of the topic), which can be used to bring about a conversational change. However, it was emphasised that in order for reflections to function in this fashion, they must be delivered with a downward rather than a sustained or rising vocal intonation. The corollary of this, it could be argued, is that when reflections are used to facilitate further interviewee exploration, they need to be delivered with a sustained or rising intonation pattern. The depth of the intertwining of verbal and non-verbal modes of communication is increasingly being recognised (e.g. Jones & LeBaron, 2002). Additional features of contemporaneous non-verbal behaviour are also likely to be influential in determining the conversational effects of reflective statements.

Three radically different views of reflecting have been outlined in this section.

According to the person-centred humanist, reflections are a means of accepting the other without condition, of empathising with the other, and helping that person become more fully self-actualising. To the behaviourist, reflections act as social reinforcers to influence the verbal performance of the other by increasing the amount of preordained talk. Lastly, reflections have been depicted as techniques which are used in the organisation and management of conversation not only to maintain or change it but also, under certain circumstances, to bring it to an end.

REFLECTING: FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Functional aspects of reflecting have already been mentioned in this chapter to some extent. The present section, however, will cut across perspectives to concentrate more single-mindedly on the various potential effects claimed for the proper use of this technique (e.g. Cormier & Cormier, 1998; Brammer & MacDonald, 1999; Hill & O'Brien, 1999; Martin, 1999; Hayes, 2002). Many are applicable to reflections generally while others are more specific to paraphrasing or reflecting feeling.

One of the more basic functions of reflecting is to show respect for conversational partners by indicating that they are being fully attended to and that active listening is taking place. Reflecting is widely discussed within the context of listening actively (e.g. Levitt, 2001; Hayes, 2002). Active listening on the part of the therapist, in turn, was reported by Myers (2000) to have had a profound effect on the experiences of therapy by clients. As one client disclosed, 'When a person is not listening I notice that he or she will draw on their interpretation and dismiss my position' (p. 156). Listening demonstrates to speakers that they are sufficiently valued and accepted for another to be interested in them and prepared to become involved. Reflecting has, therefore, the potential to form the basis upon which to build a positive, facilitative relationship typified by openness, trust, respect, and empathy (for a detailed review of listening, see Chapter 9).

Reflections are also frequently used in order to clarify. An accurate paraphrase, by condensing and crystallising what has been said, can often help interviewees to see more clearly the exigencies of their situation (Lindon & Lindon, 2000). Mirroring back the core message contained in the interviewee's previous statement enables issues that are vague and confused to be thought through more clearly and objectively. Since problems and concerns, especially of a personal nature, are things experienced, for the most part at a 'gut' level rather than being intellectualised or even verbalised, it often proves difficult to find the words and indeed thoughts to express them unambiguously. By encapsulating and unobtrusively presenting the most salient features of what has just been said, the exigencies of the helped person's predicament can be made more accessible to them.

In addition to acting as a means of enabling the interviewee to appreciate more clearly experienced concerns, reflecting assists the interviewer to check accuracy of understanding and obtain a clearer realisation of the actualities of circumstances (Wilkins, 2003). By reflecting, the interviewer not only conveys a desire to get to know, but also, when it is accurate, demonstrates to the interviewee the level of understanding accomplished, despite the fact that the original message may have been inchoate and vague. Supported in this way, the interviewee is often motivated to continue to

explore particular themes more deeply, concentrating upon facts, feelings, or both depending upon the content of the reflective statement (Hill & O'Brien, 1999).

Commenting more particularly upon reflecting feeling states, Cormier and Cormier (1998) pointed out that, as a result, interviewees are influenced to devote greater attention to phenomena of this type. They can be assisted to become more completely aware of their feelings by being encouraged to explore and express them in this way. This can be difficult to accomplish and requires tact but is very worthwhile. Egan (2001) noted that while some feelings are quite laudable and easily accepted, many others prompt defensive reactions and, consequently, are either consciously or subconsciously repressed and denied. As a result, people become estranged from these affective facets of their being. Through the reflection of feeling, such individuals can be put more fully in touch with these realities. By using this technique, the interviewer acknowledges the interviewee's right to feel this way and indicates that it is permissible for those feelings to be expressed and discussed (Hargie & Dickson, 2004).

Another function of reflection of feeling, which is mentioned by Brammer (1993), is to help people to 'own' their feelings – to appreciate that ultimately they are the source, and can take responsibility for their affective states. Various ploys commonly used in order to disown feelings include speaking in the second person (e.g. '*You* get depressed being on your own all the time') or third person (e.g. '*One* gets pretty annoyed'), rather than in the first person (e.g. '*I* get depressed being on my own all the time' and '*I* get pretty annoyed'). Lindon and Lindon (2000, p. 136) talked about helping the other to 'find "I" ' through reflecting. Since reflective statements make explicit others' affective experiences, and label them as clearly theirs, they help those people to acknowledge and come to terms with their emotion. Recipients are also encouraged to examine and identify underlying reasons and motives for behaviour, of which they previously may not have been completely aware. Furthermore, they are brought to realise that feelings can have important causal influences upon their actions.

Finally, the possibility of reflective statements being employed in order to regulate conversation by perhaps serving to engineer the termination of discussion should not be overlooked. Martin (1999), for instance, referred to reflections being used to regulate the pace of the transaction. The various propositions outlined in this section differ substantially in terms of their epistemological basis. While most are, for the most part, theoretically derived or experientially grounded, others have emerged from systematic empirical enquiry. The final section of this chapter selectively reviews some of the research that has been conducted into reflecting.

REFLECTING: EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVES

The lack of consistency in the operational definition of reflections and related terms has already been discussed at length. The work of categorising individual investigations and trying to abstract broad and consistent relationships among variables is consequently making that much more difficult. Further disparities in the research conducted relate to the theoretical basis of the enquiry, research design and procedures, number and type of subjects, and dependent variables chosen for

investigation. That apart, research interest in this area seems to have dwindled over the years, with little meaningful work being identified since the preparation of the version of this chapter in the previous edition of the book.

Reflections

Some studies have compared the outcomes of an indirect, reflective style with a range of alternatives, including an intrusive style (Ellison & Firestone, 1974), an evaluative style (Silver, 1970), and both interrogative and predictive approaches (Turkat & Alpher, 1984). Most of this research has an interviewing or counselling orientation. In some cases, the attitudes of both interviewees and external judges to interviewers manifesting contrasting styles have been sought. Silver (1970), for example, found that low-status interviewees felt much more comfortable with interviewers who displayed a reflective rather than a judgemental approach. Ellison and Firestone (1974) reported that subjects observing a reflective interviewer, rather than an intrusive one, who controlled the direction and pace of the interview in a particularly assertive manner, indicated a greater willingness to reveal highly intimate details. The former interviewer was also perceived as passive, easygoing, and non-assertive.

An interrogative approach in which further information was requested and a predictive style which required the interviewer accurately to predict interviewees' reactions in situations yet to be discussed were the alternatives to reflecting examined by Turkat and Alpher (1984). Although impressions were based upon written transcripts, rather than actual interviews, those interviewers who used reflections were regarded as understanding their clients. Empathic understanding together with positive regard were related to the reflective style of interviewing in a study by Zimmer and Anderson (1968), which drew upon the opinions of external judges who viewed a videotaped counselling session. From the painstaking analysis of therapy sessions undertaken by Clare Hill and her colleagues (Hill et al., 1988; Hill, 1989), not only was reflecting discovered to be one of the most common of the identified techniques utilised by therapists, but clients reported that they found it one of the most helpful. They regarded it as providing support and seldom reacted negatively to its use. Such reflections assisted clients in becoming more deeply attuned to their emotional and personal experiences, leading to more profound levels of exploration and greater insights into their circumstances and difficulties. One of the most marked outcomes was an association with significantly reduced levels of anxiety. (It should be noted that 'reflecting' in these studies was actually labelled 'paraphrasing'. Since the latter encompassed a range of different types of reflective statement, it will be included here.)

Other researchers, rather than focusing upon attitudes, have investigated the effects of reflecting upon the actual behaviour of the interviewee. Some form of interviewee self-disclosure has commonly been measured. In a study already introduced, Powell (1968) investigated the effects of reflections on subjects' positive and negative self-referent statements. 'Approval-supportive' and 'open disclosure' were the comparative experimental conditions. The former included interviewer statements supporting subjects' self-references, and the latter referred to the provision of personal detail by the interviewer. Reflections were found to produce a significant increase in

the number of negative, but not positive, self-references. Kennedy, Timmons, and Noblin (1971), while failing to make the distinction between positive and negative instances, similarly reported an increase in interviewee self-statements attributable to this source.

Not all research, however, has attested to the efficacy of the technique of reflecting. According to Hill and Gormally (1977), this procedure was largely ineffective in increasing the use of affective self-referents by experimental subjects. However, not only was a non-contingent procedure of application employed in this study, but the rate of administration was low, thus militating against potential reinforcing influences.

When the effects of reflecting were looked at, not only in terms of the amount of subjects' self-disclosure but on the quality provided as well, intimate detail was associated with this style of interviewing (Vondracek, 1969; Beharry, 1976). A similar result was reported by Mills (1983) in relation to rates, rather than quality, of self-disclosure. Feigenbaum (1977) produced an interesting finding concerning sex differences of subjects. While females disclosed more, and at more intimate levels, in response to reflections, male subjects scored significantly higher on both counts in response to interviewer self-disclosure.

In an investigation of marital therapists working with couples undergoing therapy, Cline et al. (1984) discovered that therapist reflectiveness correlated positively with subsequent changes in positive social interaction for middle-class husbands but with negative changes for both lower-class husbands and wives. It was also positively related to changes in expression of personal feeling for middle-class husbands and wives. When assessed 3 months after the termination of therapy, a positive relationship emerged between therapist reflections and outcome measures of marital satisfaction, but for lower-class husbands only.

There seems to be little doubt now that there is a strong individual difference factor influencing reactions and outcomes to reflective versus directive styles of engagement. In addition to demographic variables, such as gender and class differences already mentioned, personality characteristics have also been researched. Some evidence, reviewed by Hill (1992), suggests that locus of control, cognitive complexity, and reactance of clients may be important. Locus of control refers to a belief in personally significant events deriving from either internal or external sources, while reactance is a predisposition to perceive and respond to events as restrictions on personal autonomy and freedom. Cognitive complexity relates to the conceptual differentiation and sophistication with which individuals make sense of their circumstances. Hill (1992) came to the conclusion that those high on internality of control and cognitive complexity and low on reactance were more suited to less directive interventions such as reflecting. The potential effects of cultural difference in the counselling relationship have received growing recognition (Ivey & Ivey, 1999). Here is a further variable that may well determine reactions to communication of this type.

In sum, findings would suggest that attitudes toward interviewers who use a reflective style are largely positive. At a more behavioural level, this technique would also seem capable of producing increases in both the amount and intimacy of information which interviewees reveal about themselves, although it would not appear to be significantly more effective than alternative procedures such as interviewer self-disclosures or probes. In the actual therapeutic context, there is some evidence linking

reflecting with positive outcome measures for certain clients. However, the mediating effects of individual differences in demographic and personality factors should not be overlooked.

Reflections of feeling

Studies featuring this skill can be divided into two major categories and one minor. The former encompass: first, experiments, largely laboratory-based, designed to identify effects of reflecting feeling on subjects' verbal behaviour; and, second, studies that have attempted to relate the use of the technique to judgements, by either interviewees or observers, of interviewers in terms of such attributes as empathy, warmth, and respect. In many instances both types of dependent variable have featured in the same investigation. The minor category includes descriptive studies that have charted the use of reflective statements by counsellors such as Carl Rogers. In an analysis of the counselling session captured on film and entitled *Carl Rogers Counsels an Individual on Anger and Hurt*, Lietaer (2004) found that almost 53% of Rogers' contributions took the form of reflections of expressed feeling by the client. A further 5.5% were reflections of underlying feelings.

With respect to the effects of reflecting feeling on judgement of personal/relational qualities, a significant relationship was found with ratings of empathic understanding in research conducted by Uhlemann, Lea, and Stone (1976). These ratings were provided by external judges and were based upon both written responses and audio recordings of actual interviews. Likewise, Ehrlich, D'Augelli, and Danish (1979) found that interviewers who reflected feelings that had not yet been named by interviewees were regarded by the latter as being more expert and trustworthy. A similar procedure, labelled 'sensing unstated feelings' by Nagata, Nay, and Seidman (1983), emerged as a significant predictor of counsellor effectiveness when assessed by surrogate clients after a counselling-type interview.

However, not all findings have been positive. Highlen and Baccus (1977) failed to reveal any significant differences in clients' perceptions of counselling climate, counsellor comfort, or personal satisfaction between clients allocated to a reflection of feeling and to a probe treatment. Similarly, Gallagher and Hargie (1992) found no significant relationships between ratings of counsellors' reflections, on the one hand, and, on the other, separate assessments by counsellors, clients, and judges of empathy, genuineness, and acceptance displayed toward clients. As acknowledged, the small sample size may have been a factor in the outcome of this investigation.

With interviewee verbal behaviour as the dependent variable, the effects of reflections of feeling on interviewees' affective self-reference statements were explored by Merbaum (1963), Barnabei et al. (1974), Highlen and Baccus (1977), and Highlen and Nicholas (1978), among others. With the exception of Barnabei, Cormier and Nye (1974), this interviewing skill was found to promote substantial increases in affective self-talk by subjects. Highlen and Nicholas (1978), however, combined reflections of feeling with interviewer self-referenced affect statements in such a way that it is impossible to attribute the outcome solely to the influence of the former. One possible explanation for the failure by Barnabei et al. (1974) to produce a positive finding

could reside in the fact that reflections of feeling were administered in a random or non-contingent manner. It has already been mentioned that paraphrases used in this indiscriminate way were equally ineffective in producing increases in self-referenced statements.

Paraphrases

Research studies on the skill of reflecting in general, and paraphrasing in particular, are limited. For the most part, these have been experimental in design, conducted in laboratory settings, and have sought to establish the effects of paraphrasing upon various measures of interviewees' verbal behaviour. In some cases, though, paraphrases are defined in such a way as to include affective material (e.g. Hoffnung, 1969), while, in others, affective content is not explicitly excluded (e.g. Kennedy & Zimmer, 1968; Haase & DiMattia, 1976). These definitional inconsistencies have also been noted by Hill and O'Brien (1999) in reviewing research in the area and should be kept in mind when interpreting the following findings.

Kennedy and Zimmer (1968) reported an increase in subjects' self-referenced statements attributable to paraphrasing, while similar findings featuring self-referenced affective statements were noted by both Hoffnung (1969) and Haase and DiMattia (1976). According to Citkowitz (1975), on the other hand, this skill had only limited effect in this respect, although there was a tendency for the association to be more pronounced when initial levels of self-referenced affect statements were relatively high. The subjects in this experiment were chronic schizophrenic in-patients, and the data were collected during clinical interviews.

The distinction between the affective and the factual has been more explicitly acknowledged by others who have researched paraphrasing. Waskow (1962), for instance, investigated the outcome of selective interviewer responding on the factual and affective aspects of subjects' communication in a psychotherapy-like interview. It emerged that a significantly higher percentage of factual responses was given by those subjects who had their contributions paraphrased. Auerswald (1974), and Hill and Gormally (1977) produced more disappointing findings. In both cases, however, paraphrasing took place on an essentially random basis. Affective responses by subjects were also selected as the dependent variable.

The few studies considering the effects of this technique on attitudes toward the interviewer, rather than behavioural changes on the part of the interviewee, have reported largely favourable outcomes. A positive relationship was detailed by Dickson (1981) between the proportion of paraphrases to questions asked by employment advisory personnel and ratings of interviewer competency provided by independent, experienced judges. A comparable outcome emerged when client perceptions of interviewer effectiveness were examined by Nagata et al. (1983).

It would therefore seem that when paraphrases are used contingently and focus upon factual aspects of communication, recipients' verbal performance can be modified accordingly. In addition, paraphrasing seems to promote favourable judgements of the interviewer by both interviewees and external judges. Counselling trainees have also indicated that this is one of the skills they found most useful in conducting interviews (Spooner, 1976).

OVERVIEW

This chapter has been concerned at conceptual, theoretical, practical, and empirical levels with reflecting as an interactive technique. After identifying and attempting to disentangle a number of conceptual confusions, three contrasting theoretical perspectives on the process deriving from humanistic psychology, behavioural psychology, and linguistics were presented. The various functional claims for the skill, based upon theoretical and experiential, as well as empirical, considerations, were discussed. From the research available (although there seems to be little recent work in this field), it would seem that reflections, whether of fact, feeling, or both, are perceived positively by both interviewees and external observers. Many from a humanistic perspective (e.g. Myers, 2000; Wilkins, 2003) are at pains, though, to ensure that qualities such as empathy and positive regard are not defined solely in terms of what they refer to as techniques such as reflecting. There is also evidence that reflections can promote interviewee self-disclosure, but that a range of psychological and demographic characteristics of the interviewee may mediate their effects.

Further research should concentrate upon more naturalistic settings than the psychology laboratory. The possible effects of such interviewer and interviewee variables as sex, status, socio-economic class, and cultural/ethnic background deserve further enquiry, as do situational factors, including the nature of the encounter. Meriting further attention is the impact of the location of the reflection in the sequence of exchanges and the effects which paralinguistic and non-verbal accompaniments may have on the other interactor.

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Explaining

George Brown

EXPLAINING AND QUESTIONING IN many ways represent the core skills of the professions. They underpin many of the skills discussed in this book; they are used in everyday conversation, and they are of importance to teachers, lecturers, doctors, other health professionals, lawyers, architects, and engineers. Despite the ubiquity of explaining, as an area of research, it is still neglected. The reason is, perhaps, that explaining is at the intersection of a wide range of subjects. Epistemology, psychology, linguistics, sociology, and anthropology all contribute to an understanding of the nature of explaining.

This chapter does not attempt to cover all of these areas, but it does not shirk the deeper issues of explaining. An understanding of the deeper issues will assist readers to relate explaining to their own professional and personal experiences. To assist them in this quest, a framework is provided for understanding explanations and the overviews of major findings in various professions. These findings include those primarily concerned with explaining to a group, such as a lecture, class, or a group of managers, and dyadic encounters, such as doctor–patient consultations. The chapter is based on the premise that explaining is a skill. While there have been some naive criticisms of the skills-based approach adopted in this book (e.g. Sanders, 2003), this approach is a powerful heuristic for practitioners, and it provides a useful theoretical framework in which to explore the subtleties of explaining.

A DEFINITION OF EXPLAINING

The etymological root of explaining is *explanare*, to make plain. This root suggests two powerful metaphors: 'to strip bare' and 'to reveal'. These metaphors hint at different purposes of explaining. The first has connotations of getting down to the essentials. The second leans toward revelation, to revealing subtleties, intricacies, and perhaps the uniqueness of an object, action, event, or occurrence. The first metaphor resonates with scientific approaches, such as the development of attribution theory, which seeks to identify the dimensions, through statistical analysis, on which people provide explanations of their behaviour (Hewstone, 1989). The second metaphor resonates with work in discourse analysis and hermeneutics (Antaki, 1994; Potter & Wetherall, 1994), which seeks to tease out the patterns and meanings of speech in a specific context such as a courtroom or classroom.

In standard Modern English, the term 'explain' has come to mean 'make known in detail' (*OED*). It is arguable whether providing more detail improves an explanation. Equally arguable is whether the standard definition covers the many personal meanings of explanations constructed and used by explainers. It was perhaps for this reason that Antaki (1988, p. 4) offered the general principle that explaining is 'Some stretch of talk hearable as being a resolution of some problematic state of affairs.' However, this broad definition does not cover written explanations, and it deliberately leaves open the question of intentions, meanings, and interpretations of utterances. Its core is that there is a problem to be explained in terms of causes, reasons, excuses, or justifications.

A working definition formulated by the author and a colleague (Brown & Atkins, 1986, p. 63) is as follows: 'Explaining is an attempt to provide understanding of a problem to others.' This definition was developed for pragmatic reasons. We wanted a definition that would be helpful to professionals engaged in explaining and which would link transactions between explainers and explainees and the connections made in their heads. The weight of our definition rests on the nature of understanding.

THE NATURE OF UNDERSTANDING

Given that explaining is an attempt to give understanding, it is necessary to explore the nature of understanding – otherwise, one may be accused of explaining the known in terms of an unknown. Put simply, *understanding involves seeing connections which were hitherto not seen*. The connections may be between ideas, between facts, or between ideas and facts.

This apparently simple definition has strong links with much of cognitive psychology. Dewey (1910) described five steps in arriving at understanding, which began with 'felt' difficulty and proceeded to the search for corroborative evidence. His approach also describes neatly the process of explaining to oneself. Thyne (1966) emphasises the importance of recognising the appropriate cues in the information presented. Norman and Bobrow (1975), following the work of Piaget (1954) and Bruner (1966), argued that the aim of cognitive processing is to form a meaningful interpretation of the world. Ausubel (1978) stressed that the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. He highlighted the

importance of anchoring ideas in the learner's cognitive structure, of the use of advanced organisers, and of the learner's meaningful learning set. Pask's (1976) conversational theory of understanding and research on how students learn (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Entwistle & Entwistle, 1997; Biggs, 2003) are built on the proposition that understanding is concerned with forming connections.

Entwistle's (2003) more recent and qualitative work has revealed students' conceptions of understanding. He reports that, for many students, understanding was not merely cognitive but a feeling, including a feeling of satisfaction at creating meaning for themselves. They stressed, above all, coherence and connectiveness and a sense of wholeness, although many recognised that the 'wholeness' was provisional yet irreversible. Once you understood something you could not 'de-understand' it, although your understanding could increase. The composite of their views captures the essence of understanding.

> Understanding? It's the interconnection of lots of disparate things – the feeling that you understand how the whole thing is connected up – you can make sense of it internally. You're making lots of connections which then make sense and it's logical. It's as though one's mind has finally 'locked in' to the pattern. Concepts seem to fit together in a meaningful way, when before the connections did not seem clear, or appropriate, or complete. If you don't understand, it's just everything floating about and you can't quite get everything into place – like jigsaw pieces, you know, suddenly connect and you can see the whole picture. But there is always the feeling you can add more and more and more: that doesn't necessarily mean that you didn't understand it; just that you only understood it up to a point. There is always more to be added. But if you really understand something and what the idea is behind it, you can't not understand it afterwards – you can't 'de-understand' it! And you know you have understood something when you can construct an argument from scratch – when you can explain it so that you feel satisfied with the explanation, when you can discuss a topic with someone and explain and clarify your thoughts if the other person doesn't see what you mean. (Entwistle, 2003, p. 6)

Experts on human information processing have rarely considered understanding. But from Baddeley's (2004) model of memory, it is possible to deduce a model of understanding which is rich with implications for explaining as well as understanding. For an explanation to be understood, the explainee must first perceive there is a gap in knowledge, a puzzle or a problem to be explained. This perception activates the working memory to retrieve schemata from the long-term memory. These schemata may have been stored in any of the procedural, semantic (thoughts and facts) or episodic memories (narratives, events). Cues in the explanation being given are matched to the activated schemata. This matching may lead to assimilation of the explanation into the existing schemata or it may modify the existing schemata. In both, it produces new connections of concepts and/or facts. The degree of stability of those new connections depends in part upon the network of existing concepts and facts. The validity of the new connections, that is, of the understanding, can be tested only by reference to corroborative evidence, which may be from an external source or from other evidence and rules stored in the person's cognitive framework.

If the cues are clear and well-ordered, they can be rapidly processed. If they are confusing, they will not link with existing schemata and may be rapidly forgotten. Given the limitations of sensory and working memory, one should not explain too quickly, and one should chunk the information provided into meaningful and relatively brief sentences. Pauses should be used to separate the chunks of information. Too fast or too distracting explanations cannot be processed by the working memory. The use of analogies, metaphors, and similes will create new connections rapidly with the existing schemata of the explainee. The use of frequent summaries, guiding statements, and cognitive maps can help explainees to change their schemata, which they can then elaborate on subsequently. Personal narratives interwoven with concepts and findings can trigger the procedural, episodic, and semantic memories and so aid storing and retrieval of understanding.

This brief exposition of understanding has obvious implications for providing explanations in many professional contexts. The problem must be presented so as to be recognised as a problem, the cues given must take account of the existing cognitive structure of the explainees, the cues must be highlighted so they can readily be matched, and, if possible, there should be a check on whether understanding has occurred.

TYPES OF EXPLAINING

The literature abounds with typologies of explanations (e.g. Ennis, 1969; Smith & Meux, 1970; Kinneavy, 1971; Hyman, 1974; Turney, Ellis, and Hatton 1983; Rowan, 2003; Pavitt, 2000). In considering these typologies, I (together with a co-author) designed a robust, simple typology which would be relatively easy to use by researchers and practitioners (Brown & Atkins, 1986). The typology consists of three main types of explanation: *the interpretive, the descriptive, and the reason-giving*. They approximate to the questions, What? How? Why? However, the precise form of words matters less than the intention of the question. They may be supplemented with the questions, Who? When? Where? Together, these questions can rapidly provide a framework for many explanations.

Interpretive explanations address the question, 'What?' They interpret or clarify an issue or specify the central meaning of a term or statement. Examples are answers to the questions: What is 'added value'? What is a novel? What does impact mean in physics? What does it mean in management?

Descriptive explanations address the question, 'How?' These explanations describe processes, structures, and procedures, as in: How did the chairperson lead the meeting? How do cats differ anatomically from dogs? How should a chairperson lead a meeting? How do you measure sustainability?

Reason-giving explanations address the question, 'Why?' They involve reasons based on principles or generalisations, motives, obligations, or values. Included in reason-giving explanations are those based on causes and functions (Pavitt, 2000), although some philosophers prefer to distinguish causes and reasons. Examples of reason-giving explanations are answers to the questions: Why do camels have big feet? Why did this fuse blow? Why do heavy smokers run the risk of getting cancer? Why are some people cleverer than others? Why is there more crime in inner-city

areas? Why am I reading this chapter? Why should I keep to deadlines? Why is Shakespeare a greater writer than Harold Robbins?

Of course, a particular explanation may involve all three types of explanation. Thus, in explaining how a bill becomes a law, one may want to describe the process, give reasons for the law, define certain key terms, and consider its implications for legal practice.

THE FUNCTIONS OF EXPLAINING

The primary function of giving an explanation is to give understanding to others, but in giving understanding, one can also fulfil a wide range of other functions. These include *ensuring learning, clarifying ambiguities, helping someone learn a procedure, reducing anxiety, changing attitudes and behaviour, enablement, personal autonomy*, and, last but not least, *improving one's own understanding*. These functions imply that explaining and understanding are not merely cognitive activities but also involve a gamut of motivations, emotions, and conation. Clearly, one needs to take account of the specific function of an explanation when considering the tasks and processes of explaining.

THE TASKS AND PROCESSES OF EXPLAINING

Explaining is an interaction of the explainer, the problem to be explained, and the explainees. The explainer needs to take account of the problem *and* the knowledge, attitudes, and other characteristics of the explainees and use appropriate approaches in the process of explaining. To assist in this process, Hargie and Dickson (2003) suggested a 'P5' approach:

*p*re-assessment of the explainees' knowledge
*p*lanning
*p*reparation
*p*resentation
*p*ost-mortem.

Their approach was developed from the work of French (1994), and our earlier work (Brown & Atkins, 1986). The model is pertinent to formally presented explanations, such as lectures or presentations, and to 'opportunistic explanations' prompted by a question from a client, patient, or student, although in the last, one may have little time to prepare. Some of Hargie and Dickson's suggestions have been incorporated into the approach advocated in this section. It follows the sequence of defining the problem, determining the process, and clarifying and estimating the outcomes.

The problem to be explained and the problem of explainees

First, the explainer has to identify and specify the problem that requires explanation. The problem may be posed initially by the explainer or by the explainee. The problem

presented by a client may require clarification and refinement. It is well known by medical and legal practitioners that the problem presented by a patient or client is not necessarily *the* problem. One has to diagnose and communicate clearly the problem in a way that is acceptable to the client. Herein lies a difficulty of ownership. If patients do not perceive the problem as their own, the proposed solution may not be accepted and acted upon. Even if the problem is accepted, the solution proffered may not be acceptable. More subtly, the solution may be accepted but not acted upon. This observation is relevant to research using the health belief model. Changes in beliefs do not necessarily lead to changes in behaviour (Janz & Becker, 1984). In teaching and management, a similar difficulty may arise. If pupils, students, or employees do not perceive the problem presented as one worthy of solution, they may reject it and the process of acquiring the solution. Rhetoric, persuasion, principles of pedagogy, and power all have a part to play in the acceptance of a problem, and the solution and its implementation.

But it is not enough merely to identify the problem. To be a skilled explainer, one has also to take account of the explainees, and their social and cultural backgrounds, motivations, linguistic ability, and previous knowledge – and plan accordingly before embarking upon the explanation. An important point here is empathy. To be a good explainer, one needs to empathise with the explainees, see the world through their eyes, and relate one's explanation to their experiences. But empathy per se is not enough. As an explainer, one has to decide on one's goals *in relation to the explainees*, identify appropriate content, highlight and lowlight the content appropriately, and select appropriate methods and resources to achieve the goals. Once the problem and its possible solution(s) have been identified, the problem might helpfully be expressed in the form of a central question, and that question may be then subdivided into a series of implicit questions or hidden variables. Thus, the explanation of how local anaesthetics work contains the implicit questions, 'What is a local anaesthetic'?' and 'How are nerve impulses transmitted?' These implicit questions or hidden issues can then provide the structure of an explanation.

The process of explaining

The task of the explainer is to state the problem to be explained and present or elicit a series of linked statements, each of which is understood by the explainee and which together lead to a solution of the problem. These linked statements may be labelled 'keys' since they unlock understanding. Each of these keys will contain a key statement. A key statement may be a procedure, a generalisation, a principle, or even an appeal to an ideology or a set of personal values. The key may contain examples, illustrations, metaphors, and perhaps qualifications to the main principle. When the problem to be explained is complex, there might also be a summary of key statements during the explanation as well as a final summary.

The keys are the nub of explaining. But, as emphasised earlier, for an explanation to be understood, it follows that the explainer has to consider not only the problem to be explained but also the characteristics of the explainees. What is appropriate as an explanation of the structure of DNA to postgraduate biochemists is unlikely to be appropriate as an explanation to 11-year-olds. There is no such

thing as the good explanation. What is 'good' for one group may not be good for another. Its quality is contingent upon the degree of understanding it generates in the explainees. For different groups of explainees, the keys of the explanation and the explanation itself will be different, although the *use* of keys and other strategies may not be.

The essence of the process of explaining is that its goal, understanding, is a function of the existing cognitive structure of the explainee as well as of the new information being provided: hence, the importance of similes, analogies, and metaphors. These devices may, as understanding grows, be seen as crude, perhaps even as false, explanations. Hooks and balls may be a very crude analogy for explaining atoms and molecules, but they may be a useful starting point for explaining molecular structure to young children. 'Rotting garden posts' may be an inadequate metaphor for describing the roots of a patient's teeth, but the metaphor might be a useful device for justifying extraction.

The process of explaining is not only concerned with identifying problems and proffering solutions. Sometimes, the task of the explainer is to explain the problem and sometimes to explain the connection between the problem and the solution. A problem such as the relationship between truth and meaning may not have any solution, or it may have several unsatisfactory solutions, but at least the problem may be understood. This point is emphasised, since much high-level teaching and counselling is concerned not with explaining *the* solutions of problems but with explaining the nature of a problem, exploring the possible solutions, and judging their relative merits.

The outcome

The outcome hoped for when explaining is that the explainee understands. The explainer has to check that the explanation is understood. This task is akin to feedback (see Chapter 2), and it is sometimes neglected by doctors, teachers, lawyers, and others. Understanding may be checked on by a variety of methods, including, of course, formal assessments (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997). The most primitive method is to ask, 'Do you understand?' The answer one usually gets is 'Yes'. The response is more a measure of superficial compliance than of understanding. Other methods are to invite the explainee to *recall* the explanation, to *ask questions* of specific points in the explanation, to *apply* the explanation to another situation or related problem, to provide other *examples* of where the explanation might hold, or to *identify* similar sorts of explanations. All of these may be used to measure the success of an explanation, providing the procedures are appropriate and valid.

A check on understanding much favoured by health professionals is a change in behaviour. As a measure of explanatory power, it is weak. The explanation may be understood, but it may not lead to action. The explanation may not be understood or imperfectly understood yet the patient changes behaviour. However, if the purpose of a particular explanation is to change behaviour, and understanding is a mere mediator, then changes in behaviour may be useful outcome measures. But one should bear in mind that such changes in behaviour are unlikely to be sustained unless they are integrated into the cognitive structure of the student, patient, or client.

Summary

To sum up, explaining is an attempt to give understanding to another. It involves identifying the problem to be explained, a process of explaining which uses key statements, and a check on understanding. However, it would be wrong to leave the nature of explaining without pointing out that explaining is only *usually* an intentional activity. One may intend to explain a particular problem, but one may explain points that one did not intend to explain and, alas, one may sometimes not explain what one intended to explain.

PERSPECTIVES ON EXPLAINING AND UNDERSTANDING

Aristotle provided a conceptually illuminating start to the study of explaining. His four causes (*aition*), the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final cause, are the basis of most explanations, although it should be noted that the ancient Greek term for 'cause' includes reasons. His notions of *ēthos* (personality and stance), *pathos* (emotional engagement), and *logos* (modelling and judging argument) laid the foundations of rhetoric (persuasive explanation and argument in speech and written texts) and later studies in this field (e.g. Atkinson, 1984; Cockcroft & Cockcroft, 1993).

Locke, the seventeenth-century empiricist, also had an important influence on the study of understanding and explaining. The following example of his advice is still relevant today:

> Confound not his u*nderstanding* with explications or notions that are above it, or with the variety or number of things that are not to his present purpose. Mark what 'tis his mind aims at in the question and not words he expresses it in; and when you have informed and satisfied him in that you shall see how his thoughts will enlarge themselves, and how by fit answers he may be led on farther than perhaps you could imagine. (John Locke, *Some thoughts on education*, 1693)

Since the time of Galileo, there have been debates about measurement and judgement, appeals to experimentation and appeals to authority, qualitative and quantitative methods, and nomothetic and ideographic approaches. Galileo's famous dictum, '*Measure that which is measurable and make measurable that which is not*', is at the heart of much scientific and pseudo-scientific research and of the fashionable debate of evidence-based approaches in medicine and education. This approach includes the development of models for explanation, prediction, and control. It has an underlying concern with quantitative measurement, with problems of measuring reliability and validity, and with, as far as possible, identical repetition of experiments. Associated with the mode of scientific explanation is often an interest in the organic, in disease-centred models, and in the search for mathematically based generalisations within a closed system of concepts.

In contrast, 'humanistic' or broadly 'phenomenological' approaches are more concerned with personal understanding than with 'scientific' proof; with qualitative methods; with intentions, meanings, and their constructions in different contexts; and

with tentative generalisations based on themes. For example, a 'humanistic' researcher might look at how an individual doctor adduces the relevant hypotheses or explanatory principles; how he or she detects regularities, distinguishes differences, and arrives at decisions. Such a researcher often has an interest in the individual patient's conceptions of illness, in patient-centred models of management, and in a search for interpretations and meanings within the consultation. Not surprisingly, the differences between those who favour scientific explanations and those who favour searches for understanding and meaning spill over into conflicts about research, research funding, and approaches to teaching (Brown, Rohlin & Manogue, 2003). They permeate attitudes toward 'hard' and 'soft' human resources management (Storey, 1992).

The covering law model

At the core of explanation is the triadic principle derived from Aristotle's syllogistic method. There must be:

1   a generalisation or universal law
2   an evidential statement or observation that the situation being considered is an instance of that generalisation
3   a conclusion.

At first sight, procedural explanations do not fit the covering law model (Swift, 1961; Draper, 1988). Certainly, in giving a procedural explanation, it may not be necessary to use the covering law model. Indeed, its use could confuse the explainee, but there should be an explanation based upon the covering law model which justifies the procedure. If not, the procedure is likely to be faulty. Put in different terms, a good practice is always underpinned by a good theory, even if the practitioner is unaware of the theory.

The covering law model is used for scientific explanations based on strong scientific laws or in a weaker form for highly probabilistic explanations or for generalisations believed by an individual or group. Values, obligations, ideologies, or beliefs might form the first statement of an explanation. Kruglanski (1988) points out that at some point individuals stop generating hypotheses and attain closure on a belief. This 'frozen' belief becomes the regularity principle which they use to explain their behaviour.

Many of the errors in explanations can be identified by recasting the explanation in this form and examining the links between the three statements. The generalisation may not hold, the instance may not be an instance of the generalisation, and the conclusion not validly drawn from the principle and instance. More subtly, the instance may fit more appropriately into another generalisation. To complicate matters further, an explanation may be incorrect yet believed, or correct and not believed. Examples of both complications abound in the history of medicine and science, and in history itself.

One should be wary of overextending the first statement of the model lest the explanation become vacuous. Appeals to universals such as 'God's will' or the 'misfiring of neurons' do not pick out *the* reasons for a specific action or event.

Sometimes, one needs to use a counter-factual model (White, 1990) to identify the regulatory principle that has the most explanatory potency. To answer the question, 'Why did the car ferry, the *Herald of Free Enterprise*, sink so *quickly*?', one looks at the question, 'When does a car ferry sink *slowly*?', and looks for the regularity principle that accounts for the difference. This may identify a chain of reasons that could lead to the door of the boardroom.

The link between the first and second statements of the covering law model raises questions about the validity of the method used to obtain the evidence and issues concerning 'truth' and 'phenomenological' truth. Professions and academic disciplines vary in their truth criteria and what counts as acceptable evidence. What might be accepted as evidence in a research journal might not be accepted as evidence in a court of law. The link between the second and third statements raises the question of whether the conclusion is justified by the principle and the evidence (cf. arguments concerning weapons of mass destruction and the war in Iraq). But even if the covering law holds for an explanation, there is the question of whether the explanation provided would be better if it had been derived from a different principle and evidential statement, and the further question of whether the explainer was deliberately attempting to give a false explanation.

There are further difficulties here. Even if an explanation is valid, or believed to be valid, there remains the question of whether it is understood. Now, clearly, it is possible for a scientist or scholar to give an explanation that is not understood in his or her own time, or, as was more frequently the case, the explanation may have been understood but rejected by his or her peers. However, even in such extreme cases, one can assume that the scientists or scholars intended to give understanding to their audience. But is intention enough? On this issue there are various views.

On the one hand, explaining may be seen as a task word such as hunting or fishing; on the other hand, it may be seen as an achievement word such as killing or catching (Ryle, 2000). If explaining is regarded as an achievement word, then the outcome of the explanation takes primacy. As Thyne (1963, p. 126) observed: 'If the teacher really has explained something to his class, they will understand it, and if they do not understand it, despite his efforts, what purported to be an explanation was not an explanation after all.'

Our own view is that the intentional position is too weak and the outcome position too strong. We suggest there is usually an intention to explain, an attempt to explain, and a check on understanding. We recognise that some outcomes may not be attained or attainable, and some explanations, not intended, can deepen understanding. A person may carry away from an explanation much more than the intentions of the explainer.

EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

Most of the experimental evidence on explaining is based on studies of teaching and the doctor–patient consultation. The evidence provided in some professions, such as law and management, tends to be expertise-based rather than evidence-based. While it is easy to disparage such craft knowledge, 'practical' wisdom in a profession may run alongside the evidence collected by research and might be more influential than the

research findings per se. Indeed, it could be argued that unless the research findings are integrated into craft knowledge they are unlikely to have much effect on practice.

The following sections focus primarily upon evidence-based approaches in the different professions. While it may be tempting to read only the sections related to one's own profession, there is much to be gained from exploring findings in other professions, matching these against one's own professional experience, and considering whether the findings provide a springboard for similar explorations in one's own profession.

EXPLAINING IN THE CLASSROOM

Estimates of the proportion of time spent on explaining by teachers vary from 10% to 30%, according to the definition of explaining adopted (Brophy & Good, 1986). Time spent on a task is but a crude measure of its efficacy. More important is the quality: the way the time is spent. As Gage, Belgard, Dell, Hiller, Rosenshine, Unruh et al. (1968, p. 3) wryly observed:

> Some people explain aptly, getting to the heart of the matter with just the right terminology, examples, and organisation of ideas. Other explainers, on the contrary, get us and themselves all mixed up, use terms beyond our level of comprehension, draw inept analogies, and even employ concepts and principles that cannot be understood without an understanding of the very thing being explained.

The remark is apposite to explanations in other professional contexts.

Studies show that the foremost reasons for liking a teacher are clear explanations of lessons, assignments, and difficulties, helpfulness with school work, and fairness (Wragg, 1984). Reviews of the literature (e.g. Wragg & Brown, 1993) also reveal that good explanations are not only clearly structured, but they are also interesting. The main characteristics of effective explaining are summarised in Table 7.1. They were identified in the literature, in discussions with teachers, and in the studies of explaining which the author and colleagues undertook at Nottingham and Exeter (e.g. Brown & Armstrong, 1989; Wragg & Brown, 2001).

Preparation and planning

The maxim, *'Know your subject, know your students'*, appears to be borne out by the evidence. Brown and Armstrong (1984) showed that competent planning and preparation are linked to clarity of explanations in the classroom. They also showed that student teachers trained in methods of preparing, analysing, and presenting explanations were significantly better than a comparable untrained group. The criteria were independent observers' ratings of the videotaped lessons and measures of pupil achievement and interest in the lesson. In a comparison of novice and expert teachers, Carter (1990) observed that novices tended to jump in without giving adequate thought to planning, whereas more expert teachers had developed and used tacit knowledge of pupils, organisational knowledge, and broader cognitive schemata.

Table 7.1 Planning strategies and performance skills in explaining

Planning strategies

- Analyse topics into main parts, or 'keys'
- Establish links between parts
- Determine rules (if any) involved
- Specify kinds of explanation required
- Adapt plan according to learner characteristics

Key skills

Clarity and fluency

- through defining new terms
- through use of explicit language
- through avoiding vagueness

Emphasis and interest

- by variations in gestures
- by use of media and material
- by use of voice and pauses
- by repetition, summarising, paraphrasing, or verbal cueing

Using examples

- clear, appropriate, and concrete in sufficient quantity
- positive and negative where applicable

Organisation

- logical and clear sequence pattern appropriate to task
- use of link words and phrases

Feedback

- opportunities for questions provided to test understanding of main ideas assessed
- expressions of attitudes and values sought

The study by Bennett and Carre (1993) shows there is a strong association between subject knowledge and teaching competence. However, knowledge of subject is a necessary but not sufficient condition of effective explaining. Some people are knowledgeable but remain poor explainers. In a recent study, Calderhead (1996) demonstrated that successful teachers have a sound knowledge base, and build pupil understanding, other pupil characteristics, and resources (time, space, its layout, and equipment) into their planning.

The studies and reviews by many authors provide suggestions on preparation and planning. In his studies of subject knowledge and teaching, Wragg (1993) offers some suggestions on preparation. Brown and Wragg (1993) provide suggestions in their text on questioning, on preparation and planning, including the use of mind mapping to generate ideas and methods, the use of key questions as organising principles, and a method of structuring different types of learning activities. Capel, Leask, and Turner (2002) provide guidelines on explanatory lessons in different school subjects.

Processes, structures, and outcomes

Presentation techniques have been the subject of most studies, and these have demonstrated that explanations which yield greater pupil or student achievement are based on clarity, fluency, emphasis, interest, the use of examples, summaries, and recall or application questions. Clarity, including the use of definitions, yields greater pupil or student achievement. Fluency, including the notions of emphasis, clear transitions, absence of vagueness, and absence of false starts and verbal tangles, have all been shown to be associated with effective presentation (Land, 1985; Cruikshank & Metcalfe, 1994; Brophy, 2002). Studies of expressiveness (Wragg, 1993; Brophy, 2002) show that purposeful variations in voice, gesture, manner, and use of teaching aids all contribute to the interest and effectiveness of an explanation. The pattern, not the frequency, of examples determines the effectiveness of an explanation. The pattern should be associated with both the type of explanation and the pupils' prior knowledge. In teaching an unfamiliar topic, the sequence *examples* → principle should be used; in restructuring pupils' ideas, the sequence *principle* → examples should be used. The principles should be educed or stated, and positive and negative examples provided (Brown & Armstrong, 1984; Rowan, 2003).

Research by Brown and Armstrong (1984) indicated that good explanatory lessons have more keys and more types of keys that vary the cognitive demands on the pupils. These lessons contained: more framing statements, which delineate the beginning and ending of subtopics; more focusing statements, which emphasise the key points; more relevant examples; more rhetorical questions; better use of audio-visual aids; and fewer unfinished summaries. The teachers of low-scoring lessons introduced so many ideas that the pupils became confused. The teachers of high-scoring lessons used simple language and examples to which the pupils could relate. In psychological terms, the teachers activated and built upon the cognitive schemata of their pupils. Opening excerpts from a high-scoring lesson and a low-scoring lesson taught by young teachers to 9-year-olds are given in Table 7.2. Often, one can predict the effectiveness of an explanation from its opening.

Wragg (1993) built upon the earlier work of Brown and Armstrong and, in so doing, identified two major styles of explaining, which might be labelled 'imaginative' and 'instructional'. Imaginative lessons draw out the responses of pupils through open questions and the encouragement of long responses. In instructional lessons, teachers give and elicit principles and examples, and provide summaries. Both styles could be used badly or well. Wragg's work broke new ground in the study of explaining by identifying a form of imaginative explanation. It also confirmed the important characteristics of effective explaining, as shown in Table 7.1.

Feedback and checking understanding

Two common forms of feedback, which provide checks on understanding, are the responses of pupils in class, and the performance of pupils in assignments and standardised assessment tests (SATs). The success of the former depends upon the mode of eliciting feedback. The question, 'Do you understand?', is likely to yield a compliant response. Techniques such as inviting questions in a friendly way, or

Table 7.2 High- and low-scoring explanations

High-scoring	Low-scoring
Orientation *Teacher* – 'Well, first of all I wonder if you could tell me what this is.' *Pupil* – 'A piece of concrete.' *Teacher* – 'Yes, it's a piece of concrete, a slab of concrete, out of my garden. Now, if I wanted to plant a tree or a shrub on here, what would you say was missing?' *Pupil* – 'Soil.' *Teacher* – 'Yes, the soil. And today I want to start by talking about some plants that can grow straight on to a rock.'	**Orientation** *Teacher* – 'I'm going to talk to you about ecological succession. It's not as difficult as it sounds.'
Keys Which plants can grow straight on to rock? How do mosses replace lichens? What plants replace mosses? What is this process called? What other examples of ecological succession are there?	**Keys** In what two ways can we group organisms? Which organisms are consumers? Which organisms are producers? What is it called when we group organisms that depend on each other together? What do we call it when one community takes over from another? How does ecological succession take place on bare rock?

asking recall or application questions, are more likely to be effective (see Chapter 4, for further discussion of the skill of questioning). However, not all teachers (or other professionals) are good at checking or estimating understanding. Bennett and Carre (1993) report that a sample of infant teachers often underestimated the understanding of their brighter pupils and overestimated the understanding of their less able pupils. Probing the deeper misconceptions can change the nature of understanding. For example, Brown and van Lehn (1980) identified 89 mistakes which young children make in subtraction. Resnick and Omanson (1987) used these data to show that these errors are based on two misconceptions and to suggest ways of removing them. Obviously, it is better to spend time on two misconceptions than upon 89 surface errors.

The use of assignments can provide the basis for correcting misunderstandings. The same cannot be said for SATs. Leaving aside the difficulty of determining the effects of teacher behaviour from the abilities, and social and cultural backgrounds of pupils, the feedback is too late to benefit the current pupils and the information is merely a 'mark' for the teacher. It does not provide information on how to improve understanding, although it may help a teacher to train pupils for SATs.

The conclusion to be drawn from this brief review of feedback and checks on understanding is that these are necessary, but we require more studies of processes of teaching that focus upon how teachers analyse and use responses from pupils to develop their own and pupils' understanding.

Summary

Studies of explaining in the classroom indicate that clarity and interest are crucial but complex variables. These variables are valued by pupils and lead to better achievement. Preparation and planning are important aspects of training, and using feedback to check understanding is an important, but relatively neglected, feature of explaining in the classroom.

EXPLAINING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Most studies of explaining in higher education have focused upon the lecture, although explaining also occurs in small-group teaching, laboratory work, and clinical practice. Lectures may be considered to be sets of linked explanations or keys (Brown & Atkins, 1995), or as sets of small 'idea units' (Chafe, 1982), so many of the findings on lectures are relevant to explanations in other teaching contexts. Most of these studies have used students' evaluation of teaching (SET) as the criterion rather than student learning outcomes, although experimental studies in the 1960s did show that well-structured lectures do yield achievement gains (Bligh, 2000). The relationship between SETs and achievement is problematic, but the weight of opinion is that there are moderate to high associations between SET scores and achievement (Wachtel, 1998). This theme is discussed in the section below on checks on understanding and feedback to lecturers.

Views of students and lecturers

Structure, clarity of presentation, and interest are valued by students (Dunkin, 1986; Murray, 1997a; Light, 2001). The main dissatisfactions of students with lecturers appear to be inaudibility, incoherence, failure to pitch at an appropriate level, failure to emphasise main points, being difficult to take notes from, poor audio-visuals, and reading aloud from notes (Eble, 1995; Brown & Manogue, 2001). For lecturers, the most valued characteristics are clarity, interest, logical organisation, and selection of appropriate content. The most learnable techniques were use of diagrams, use of variety of materials, examples, and selection of appropriate content. Science lecturers valued logical and structural characteristics more highly than arts lecturers; science lecturers also considered more features of explaining to be learnable than did arts lecturers (Brown & Daines, 1981). Subsequent research on training in explaining confirmed the views of scientists (Brown, 1982). No recent surveys of these themes have been found in the literature.

Planning and preparation

These areas of research also remain neglected, but Bligh (2000) provides a comprehensive description of possible structures of lectures, while Light and Cox (2001) and Brown and Race (2002) offer some useful guidance in this area. Brown and Manogue (2001) also outline a method of preparation that new lecturers have found helpful.

Structures and processes

Lecturers report that their most common method of organising lectures is the classical approach of subdividing topics and then subdividing subtopics (Brown & Bakhtar, 1988).

Other methods are described by Brown and Manogue (2001). Structured moves which yield high ratings of clarity are shown in Table 7.3. Seven opening moves associated with giving the framework and setting the context were identified by Thompson (1994). Often lecturers mixed these moves in ways which confused students and obscured the links between structure, content, and context.

The key to generating interest is expressiveness supported by the use of examples, a narrative mode of explaining, and the stimulation of curiosity (Brown

Table 7.3 Effective structuring moves in explaining

1. **Signposts**: *These are statements which indicate the structure and direction of an explanation:*
   (a) 'I want to deal briefly with lactation. First, I want to outline the composition of milk; second, its synthesis; third, to examine normal lactation curves.'
   (b) 'Most of you have heard the old wives' tale that eating carrots helps you to see in the dark. Is it true? Let's have a look at the basic biochemical processes involved.'

2. **Frames**: *These are statements which indicate the beginning and end of the subtopic:*
   (a) 'So that ends my discussion of adrenaline. Let's look now at the role of glycogen.' Framing statements are particularly important in complex explanations which may involve topics, subtopics, and even subtopics of subtopics.

3. **Foci**: *These are statements and emphases which highlight the key points of an explanation:*
   (a) 'So the main point is . . .'
   (b) 'Now this is very important . . .'
   (c) 'But be careful. This interaction with penicillin occurs only while the cell walls are growing.'

4. **Links**: *These are words, phrases, or statements which link one part of an explanation to another part, and the explainees' experience:*
   (a) 'So you can see that reduction in blood sugar levels is detected indirectly in the adrenaline gland and directly in the pancreas. This leads to the release of two different hormones.'

& Atkins, 1995). All of these features can raise levels of arousal and attention and thereby increase the probability of learning.

Expressiveness includes enthusiasm, friendliness, humour, and dynamism of speech and gesture. It is based largely upon gesture, eye contact, body movement, facial expression, vocal inflection, and apt choice of vocabulary. It has long been regarded as an essential ingredient of explaining and lecturing. In a review of meta-analyses, d'Appolonia and Abrami (1997) report that highly expressive lecturers score about 1.2 standard deviations higher than low expressives on student ratings. Expressiveness does exert an influence on student learning (Murray, Rushton & Paunonen, 1990). However, expressiveness is only a mediating variable for sustaining attention and generating interest. As indicated, examples, similes, metaphors, the use of a narrative mode, and the use of 'teases', such as provocative questions, also have a role in generating interest as well as contributing to understanding. So, too, does the judicious use of technological aids (Brown & Race, 2002; Downing & Garmon, 2002).

Persuasive explaining may also have a part to play in higher education to motivate students and to help them to accept the challenge of difficult tasks. Some people may object to the use of persuasion, but the order and quality of presentations always have an influence upon an audience, so one should be aware of the processes and use them to good effect (see Chapter 11 for a full discussion of influencing and persuasion). Various rhetorical devices are used in persuasive explaining and lecturing, including pairs of contrasting statements, asking rhetorical questions and then pausing, the use of triple statements, pausing before important points, summarising with punchlines, and powerful metaphors and analogies. Metaphors and analogies are particularly useful when explaining unfamiliar topics or ideas (Cockcroft & Cockcroft, 1993; Atkinson, 1984). Studies of attitude change (e.g. Zimbardo, Ebbesen & Maslach, 1977; Baron & Byrne, 1997) conducted in a wide variety of contexts suggest some basic principles of persuasive explaining and how new attitudes are formed. These are summarised in Table 7.4.

Checks on understanding and feedback from students

A disadvantage of lectures is they do not provide any immediate checks on understanding; hence, some writers advocate the use of activities during lectures (Brown & Atkins, 1995; Biggs, 2003). If these are not used, then observation of non-verbal reactions of the students can provide a clue (see Chapter 3 for further information on non-verbal communication). Subsequent assignments and tests provide measures of achievement, but it is difficult to separate the various effects of student variables such as study time, availability of resources, prior knowledge, and motivation.

Feedback, in the form of SETs, can help lecturers to improve their capacity to explain, providing the right questions are asked and the lecturer wishes to change. Murray's comprehensive review of this area concludes, 'under certain conditions, student evaluation of teaching does lead to improvement of teaching' (Murray, 1997b, p. 41). Earlier studies reported by McKeachie (1994) showed that student evaluations improved teaching only when the ratings were in the middle range and when the lecturers wanted to improve their teaching. A recent study by Blackburn and Brown (2005) identified four clusters of lecturers in physiotherapy who held differing views

Table 7.4 The art of persuasive explanation

1. Know your audience and decide what kinds of arguments may be appealing and interesting.

2. People are more likely to listen to you and accept your suggestions if you are perceived as credible and trustworthy and have expertise.

3. When there are arguments in favour and against your proposal, it is usually better to present both sides (especially with an intelligent audience).

4. If you have to stress risks in what you are proposing, don't overdo the arousal of fear.

5. Say what experts or expert groups do when faced with the problem you are discussing.

6. If the problem is complex for the group, you should draw the conclusions or give them time for discussion. If it is not too complex, let the group members draw their own conclusions.

7. If the suggestions you are making are likely to be challenged by others, describe their views in advance and present your counter-arguments.

8. If you are dealing with a cherished belief, don't dismiss it as an old wives' tale. Instead, say, 'People used to think that . . . but now we know . . .'

9. If the task you are asking a group to perform is highly complex, prepare them for the possibility of failure. Never say a task is easy; rather, say it may not be easy at first.

10. If a task is threatening, admit it and describe how people might feel and what they can do to reduce their anxiety.

on the value of feedback from SETs: *strong positives* who used the ratings to make changes, *thinkers* who reflected upon student evaluations when considering change, *negatives* who rejected SETs, and *non-discriminators* who were uncertain.

Evidence from the meta-analyses of SETs indicates that students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness accounts for 45% of the variations in student learning. One of the three major factors involved includes explaining, clarity, and organisation; the other factors are facilitation, and assessment of student learning, known as 'evaluation' in the USA (d'Apollonia & Abrami, 1997). The most reliable and valid ratings were those based on simple global ratings rather than detailed specific items. These results suggest that carefully designed SETs can be useful for feedback purposes, but using only SETs is not sufficient.

Summary

Studies of explaining in higher education have been confined largely to the lecture method. Students value clear, well-structured, and, to a lesser extent, interesting explanations. Training in explaining can improve the clarity, structure, and interest of

explanations. Explanations with these characteristics also yield higher measures of recall and understanding. Feedback to lecturers can improve their performance, providing that the evaluation forms are well designed and the lecturers are open to the possibility of change.

EXPLAINING IN THE HEALTH PROFESSIONS

It is sometimes forgotten that today's health professionals spend much of their time talking to managers or other health professionals or teaching students. Much of the research reported in this book, including this chapter, is relevant to these tasks. In this section, we focus upon the specific task of talking with patients, which is referred to as the medical consultation or medical interview.

Explaining in the medical consultation

Since most doctors give about 200,000 consultations in a lifetime (Pendleton, Schofield, Tate & Havelock, 2004), it is clear that explaining and questioning are important skills for doctors – and patients. However, studies of the doctor–patient consultation do not usually isolate the skill of explaining from the other skills involved in the consultation. An exception is the study by Kurtz, Silverman, Benson and Draper (2003). But it is possible to identify features of the research on doctor–patient interactions which are relevant, if not crucial, to the processes of explaining.

Views and beliefs

Patients want their doctors to be knowledgeable, trustworthy, interested in them as persons, and able to explain in terms which they understand (Pendleton & Hasler, 1983; Hall & Dornan, 1988; Levinson et al., 1993). For doctors to explain in ways which the patients understand, it is necessary to explore the explanatory framework and health beliefs of patients and take account of these in providing an explanation (Tuckett, Boulton & Olson, 1985; Robinson, 1995). Robinson (1995, p. 12) argues in her review of patients' contribution to the consultation: 'The most important predictor of a positive outcome is that the doctor offers information and advice which fits easily in to the patients pre-consultation framework.'

This suggestion is of particular importance when a doctor is working with patients from relatively unfamiliar cultures or subcultures (Johnson, Hardt & Kleinman, 1995; Ferguson & Candib, 2002). However, one should be wary of overgeneralising on the basis of cultural stereotypes.

Doctors have their own explanatory frameworks and health beliefs, which are culturally bound and influenced by the scientific and organically based culture of their medical education (Brown, Rohlin & Manogue, 2003). For example, anecdotal evidence from numerous workshops that I have given indicates that doctors prefer to work with patients who are able to explain clearly, are not aggressive, accept the doctor's advice, and are clean.

All medical schools in the UK now provide courses on communication, although the duration, quality, and location of these courses vary widely (Hargie, Dickson, Boohan & Hughes, 1998). The recent recommendations of the General Medical Council (2002) include learning outcomes such as the ability to communicate with a diverse range of people and give patients information in a way which they can understand. There is now strong evidence that communication skills, including explaining, can be taught effectively and are sustainable (Aspegren, 1999; Maguire & Pitceathly, 2002).

Structures, processes, and outcomes

The tasks of the consultation have been framed in different formats (Pendleton et al., 2004). The model based on the Calgary-Cambridge Observation Guide (Kurtz, Silverman, Benson & Draper, 2003) consists of *initiation of the session, gathering information, building a relationship, explaining and planning*, and *closing the session*. These tasks are common to the four modes of consultation identified by Roter, Stewart, Putnam, Lipkin, Stiles and Inui (1997) as *paternalisitic* (doctor-centred), *consumerist* (heavily patient-centred), *laissez-faire*, and *mutuality* (patient-centred). The last is the patient-centred or disease-illness model, which is strongly advocated by researchers. The model has been shown to yield greater patient recall, understanding, and compliance, and better health outcomes (Roter, 1989; Roter & Hall, 1992; Ley & Llewelyn, 1995; Stewart, 1995). However, evidence for the use of this model is sparse. Tuckett et al. (1985) reported that it was used in less than 10% of 1300 videotaped consultations. Few consultations contained detailed explanations in response to patients' questions. Pendleton et al. (2004) reported a similar finding based on analyses of videotapes submitted by 3000 candidates for the MRCGP examination. Among the common reasons for failure in the examination were *not* fulfilling the criteria of sharing management options, explaining diagnosis and the effects of treatment, or explaining in language appropriate to the patient. These results are not surprising given the neglect of personal understanding and holistic approaches in medical schools (Brown, Rohlin & Manogue, 2003).

Clear explanations and a friendly approach have been shown to be important determinants of patient recall and satisfaction. Clear explanations take account of a patient's beliefs, concepts, and linguistic register (Tuckett et al., 1985). The use of structuring moves such as signposting, frames, foci, and links, the use of simple visual aids, and summarising and checks on understanding have all been shown to improve clarity (Ley & Llewelyn, 1995; Maguire, 2000). Maguire (2000) and also Harrigan, Oxman and Rosenthal (1985) and Kinnersley, Stott, Peters and Harvey (1999) have shown that friendliness, warmth, and courtesy contribute to patient recall, understanding, and satisfaction. DiMatteo, Hays, and Prince (1986) in a series of laboratory experiments demonstrated that expressiveness and the decoding of patients' non-verbal cues were strongly associated with patient satisfaction.

Most studies have focused upon the doctor's skills rather than those of the patients. However, the effectiveness of a consultation depends also on the patient's ability to explain. Evidence from discourse analyses shows that there may be disjunctions in intentions, meanings, and belief systems of patients and doctors (Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1998; Herxheimer, McPherson, Miller, Sheppherd, Yaphe & Ziebland, 2000).

Such approaches focus upon developing a personal understanding of the patient. Other studies have demonstrated that patients, like doctors, can be trained to provide better explanations and that such training improves both doctor and patient satisfaction with the consultation (Kaplan, Greenfield & Gandek, 1996).

For many medical practitioners, the most powerful test of a consultation is the compliance of patients. Ley and Llewelyn (1995) argue that compliance is a product of satisfaction, which in its turn is a product of understanding and recall. Their review shows well-defined links between recall, understanding, and satisfaction but more tenuous links between satisfaction and compliance. Skilled information gathering and explaining also influence emotional satisfaction, physiological measures, and pain control (Stewart, 1995).

Other researchers prefer the terms 'adherence' or 'concordance'. The latter has connotations of mutually agreed understanding and treatment, which is at the heart of the patient-centred model. Whatever the label, compliance is not high. Silverman, Kurtz, and Draper (1998) reported that about half of patients do not take their medication at all or take it erratically; non-adherence in medications for acute illness is 30–40% and for recommendations on diet about 72%. Stevenson, Cox, Britten, and Dundar (2004) in their review of concordance between health professionals and patients conclude that a patient-centred model is likely to produce greater concordance (compliance) on medication, but evidence for its use is scant. On the basis of a review of improving concordance, Elwyn, Edwards, and Britten (2003) offer useful advice in this area.

However, non-compliance cannot be solely attributed to inadequate information gathering or explaining by a doctor. The better predictors include patients' attitudes, health beliefs, and intentions to comply (Butler, Rollnick & Stott, 1996). Compliance is likely to be influenced by earlier experiences of compliance and non-compliance and the perceived cost/benefits of complying/non-complying. Patients with an 'external' locus of control tend to be fatalistic and feel helpless; those with an internal locus believe events are controllable to some extent through their own actions. 'Externals' *tend* to be poorer compliers than 'internals'. 'Internals' who have a positive attitude to health are more likely to comply and attempt health-related actions (Strickland, 1978). Modifying patients' private theories and causal attributions through discussion and explanation, as well as treating their physical condition, has been shown to contribute to long-term health (Law & Britten, 1995; Marteau, 1995). A summary of processes and outcomes in health improvement is provided in Table 7.5.

Summary

Studies of the medical consultation indicate that what patients value in doctors is warmth, care, concern, and the ability to explain clearly. Patient recall and understanding is enhanced when doctors provide simple, clear, and well-structured explanations. Improved recall and understanding lead to higher patient satisfaction and higher patient compliance, and contribute to health improvement.

Table 7.5 Health improvement: processes and outcomes

Doctor	Patient	Outcome
Friendly, attentive, creates partnership with patient, encourages, is supportive, explains clearly	Tells own story clearly, is encouraged to ask questions, develops treatment with doctor, and takes responsibility for own health tasks	Increases probability of positive health outcome
Cold, distant, non-attentive, frequently interrupts patient, has quick-fire questions, gives several instructions, offers several pieces of advice	Passive, does not ask questions, unduly deferential, superficially agrees to comply	Decreases probability of positive health outcome

EXPLAINING IN OTHER HEALTH PROFESSIONS

Research on explaining in other health professions follows a similar pattern to that of the medical profession.

Dentistry

The General Dental Council (GDC) (2003) recommends that communication skills should be part of the undergraduate curriculum. A survey of the nature and type of courses offered is being undertaken (Manogue, July 2004, personal communication). Furnham (1983) produced evidence-based arguments for the training of dentists in explaining and other communication skills. Pendlebury and Brown (1997) developed courses for vocational trainees on consultation skills, including explaining. Corah (1984) and Gale, Carlsson, Erikson, and Jontell (1984) showed that inadequate explaining led to less anxiety reduction, less positive attitudes to dentistry, and lower levels of satisfaction with dental care. Jepson (1986) reported that co-participation, in which the dentist explains various options of treatment and their probable outcomes, leads to higher levels of compliance. Pendlebury (1988) was the first to propose that the meeting between dentists and patients should be described as a consultation. He outlined the tasks and skills of the consultation and argued for a model based on mutual understanding and agreed treatment. Subsequently, he showed that young dentists who had been trained in communication skills received higher ratings of patient satisfaction and more favourable reports from their senior partners than those who had not received training. This work is to be published posthumously. Overall, however, there remains much work to be done on the dentist–patient consultation.

Nursing

Various nursing initiatives (e.g. CINE, 1986; UKCC, 2001) have strongly advocated training in communication skills. Yet, studies of what nurses actually do, do not appear to be consonant with official wisdom or the wishes of patients or nurses. In her review of nurse–patient communication, Macleod-Clarke (1985) showed that nurses usually only talk to patients when performing some aspect of physical care, and avoided providing explanations on treatment or care. Maguire (1985) in his analysis of nurse–patient interactions pointed to inadequate recognition of patients' problems, insufficient provision of information, and inadequate reassurance and support. In their comprehensive review of nurse–patient communication, Chant, Jenkinson, Randle, and Russell (2002) identified the barriers to effective nurse–patient communication. These findings suggest that the organisational context, role definitions, ward culture, and workloads of nurses inhibit the use of explanations and other communications with patients. At the same time, when nurses are given the opportunity and encouragement to provide explanations to patients, the outcomes are good (Faulkner, 1998). For example, pre-operative information given to patients is related to lower levels of post-operative physiological anxiety, lower analgesic consumption, better sleep patterns, and quicker return to normal appetite. Various intensive qualitative studies, such as McCabe (2004), demonstrate the importance of patient-centred approaches, empathic explanations, continuity of care, and timely reassurances. However, it is not always clear from these studies whether explaining leads to understanding, or whether explaining is merely a signal to patients that their nurses and doctors care. But it is likely that the act of explaining does dispel anxiety, provide reassurance, and, for some patients, at least, provide a deeper understanding.

Pharmacy

Community pharmacists are often the last health professional to see patients before they embark upon self-treatment. Hence, they have an important role in reinforcing and clarifying previously presented information, explaining and justifying procedures, offering suggestions, providing reassurance, and responding to patients' questions. Hospital pharmacists work with a wide range of patients including the terminally ill, the elderly, and stroke patients. Courses on communication skills are now offered in most pharmacy degrees. A communication skills package developed by Morrow and Hargie in 1987 is still in use. Hargie, Morrow, and Woodman (2000) conducted a field study of pharmacist–patient interactions, and found that building rapport and explaining were the primary skills employed, accounting for over 50% of total skill usage. Further support for the use of this skill was produced by Stevenson et al. (2004), who reported that training (interventions), including explaining and questioning, by pharmacists led to increased satisfaction and adherence, and a decrease in the use of over-the-counter medicines and prescribed medicines.

Other health professions

Evidence and training protocols for explaining and other communication skills for other health professionals have been developed in the School of Communication, University of Ulster over the past 25 years. Among the many health professions studied have been speech therapists (Saunders & Caves, 1986), health visitors (Crute, 1986), counsellors (Gallagher, 1987), radiographers (Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 1994), and physiotherapists (Adams, Bell, Saunders & Whittington, 1994). Although social work is not, strictly speaking, part of health care, apparently its clients too appreciate the ability of a social worker to structure explanations, to specify tasks, to provide clear directions, to listen responsively, and to express concern (Dickson & Bamford, 1995). Dickson, Hargie, and Morrow (1997) have published a most useful text on communication skills training for health professions, and Hargie and Dickson (2003) have provided a comprehensive text on skilled interpersonal communication, both of which contain reviews and guidance on explaining.

Law

A substantial part of the work of solicitors and barristers is concerned with explaining orally or in writing to lay or professional clients, colleagues or opposing lawyers, lay or expert witnesses, and members of the judiciary. Interviewing, advocacy, drafting a case, and opinion writing all involve the tasks of identifying the problem to be explained, taking account of the explainees' prior knowledge, and providing clear, persuasive explanations. All legal practice courses approved by the Law Society of England are now required to include practical exercises in *drafting, research, advocacy, interviewing, and negotiation* (DRAIN). Despite the obvious importance of explaining in law, there are no evidence-based studies of the efficacy of training.

Discourse analysts have shown that judges (Tiersma, 2001) often overestimate what patients or jurors know and consequently give poor, ill-planned explanations. The language used by lawyers, judges, and other court officials, and the procedures used to handle evidence, influence the outcomes of cases (Drew, 1992; Brown, 1996; Lacey, 1997; Lees, 1997). Witnesses and victims often feel demeaned by court procedures and resentful that they cannot give their own narrative (Whitehead, 2001).

Much of this research does not appear to have influenced policy or advice on legal skills training. Instead, the profession tends to draw heavily upon its long history of craft knowledge and expertise-based opinions (LeBrun & Johnstone, 1994). Nor has the profession, as yet, appeared to consider analyses from other high-level professions of generic skills. The exception is Nathanson (1997), who has highlighted the importance of explaining, analysing, listening, and questioning as important competences for lawyers.

The interview or consultation in law has, officially, always been regarded as primarily for the benefit of the client. The recent consultation paper of the Law Society of England on regulations for the twenty-first century again stresses that legal competence should focus on client care, an approach which is similar to the emerging view of concordance in the medical profession. It remains to be seen whether evidence will be forthcoming on the practice of this approach.

Management

All members of the professions are enmeshed in a web of professional and governmental organisations, so it is pertinent to consider how organisations manage and might improve communications, including explanations. Successful organisations use internal and external communications effectively (Blundel, 1998; Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 2004) and explaining, particularly clear, persuasive explaining, is, arguably, an important feature of organisational effectiveness, but it is rarely singled out from other communication skills. However, there are studies of organisational communication which are relevant to explaining, and some of these may serve as salutary warnings to the professions and their managers.

Much of organisational communication is predicated on two assumptions: training is effective, and if only employees understand, they will comply. The assumption that training in explaining is effective does not appear to have been tested in management, and, as in the professions, good working conditions are probably as important as training. The second assumption is based on a misunderstanding of understanding, or, at least, a misuse of the term. The assumption that understanding will necessarily lead to change in attitudes and culture is not borne out by the evidence (Thompson & Findlay, 1999). This finding is not surprising. Organisations are interdependent hierarchies that do not necessarily share common values. Groups and individuals may see how more senior groups behave and become cynical about the official 'culture'.

Power difference, language usage, and cultural diversity have been shown to affect organisational communication (Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 2004). The latter is of particular importance in international organisations. The studies by Hofstede (1991) and Javidian and House (1999) reveal differential effects across countries in power distance (status), uncertainty avoidance, assertiveness, commitment to individualism–collectivism, and attitudes to masculinism–femininism. For example, American managers score high on assertiveness and individualism, whereas Hong Kong and Taiwanese score higher on concerns for status and collectivism, and the latter prefer to avoid assertive strategies. All of these affect the processes and success of explanations and of understanding between members of different cultures. Of course, it is also important to recognise that within any cultural group there are individual variations which arise out of the microcontexts of family, school, and community.

High-power talking strategies, which include persuasion, decisive speaking, and clear-cut views, have been shown to be effective in many contexts, whereas low-power talking, which has the characteristics of hesitations, uncertainty, and qualifying statements, does not (Huczynski, 2004). The US presidential election in 2004 provided an example of high- and low-power talkers. However, these characteristics may be culture bound and, even within UK and US cultures, high-power talking strategies may lead to superficial compliance rather than understanding and fundamental change.

Impression management, which includes expressiveness and appearance, contributes to persuasive presentations and reputation (Rosenfeld, Giacolone & Riordan, 2001). Feldman and Klitch (1991) offer somewhat cynical advice on promoting one's self image through ingratiation, exaggeration of one's successes, intimidation of peers, *appearing to be* a team player, distancing oneself from failure, and *displaying* loyalty. These characteristics, they argue, should permeate all aspects of one's work,

including presentations. Again, caution is advocated in the use of such tactics in some organisations and national cultures.

The ethos, or subculture, of an organisation influences the willingness of its members to provide information and explanations. Here the concept of open and closed climates is relevant. Characteristics of open climates are empathy, understanding, transparency, egalitarianism, respect for persons, trust, and honesty. Gibb (1961) argued that these characteristics promote collaboration and willingness to provide information, ideas, and explanations. Closed climates are non-caring, controlling, and deceitful; they generate distrust and unwillingness to share intellectual capital, unless such sharing is to the advantage of the communicator.

Tactics of obfuscation, vagueness, illogical explanations, and language which masks personal meanings can be associated with closed climates. For example, 'right-sizing' may mean, for employees, 'redundancy'; 'team-working' may mean limiting an individual's discretion; 'new working patterns' may mean reducing full-time jobs; 'core' and 'periphery' may mean reducing the organisation's commitments to its staff; and 'flexibility' might mean 'management can do what it wants'. These tactics may be unintentional, but often are not. Hargie, Dickson, and Tourish (2004) provide other examples of miscommunication and offer practical guidance on oral and written communication in organisations.

Although written explanations are not part of the brief of this chapter, it is worth pointing out that there is a hierarchy of communication modes. At the top of the hierarchy are face-to-face communications followed by videoconferencing, telephone conversations, e-mails, and memoranda. As one descends the hierarchy, clues of meaning, opportunities to clarify understanding, or checks on understanding become fewer. Different approaches to explaining are required in these modes. For these reasons alone, it is worth considering the use of communication audits (Hargie & Tourish, 2000), which explore the structures and quality of the communication processes in an organisation. As Hargie, Dickson, and Tourish (1999, p. 313) point out, independent communication audits provide an 'objective picture of what is happening compared with what senior executives think (or have been told) is happening'. The advice is pertinent to all workplaces and organisations, including yours!

OVERVIEW

This chapter has provided a conceptual framework for the exploration of explaining and has brought together studies of explaining from a variety of professions. The framework provides a basis for analysing and providing explanations. The evidence indicates that clear explanations are valued by students, patients, and clients. It leads to better learning gains in educational institutions and, in consultations, to better patient understanding, satisfaction, and improved health outcomes. Expressiveness is valued highly in teaching and in consultations. These contribute to learning gains and health outcomes respectively. Studies in law and in the management of organisations provide some further evidence and some cautionary notes on explaining. The evidence indicates that members of professions can be trained to be better explainers, but one needs also to take account of the contexts and cultures in which they work. The chapter has not reviewed all aspects of explaining – that would be a lifetime's work.

But it has provided a sufficiently robust framework to permit observations and suggestions for further research and development.

The most obvious of these is there is a gap between the findings of researchers and professional practice. Without any further research, closing this gap would improve professional practice. But, in addition, each profession could, with advantage, examine its own approaches to research and practice. In teaching, one might examine ways in which students could be encouraged to incorporate models of explaining into their own thinking. In medicine and law, studies of language and power might unravel the complexities of explaining and personal meaning. Hypotheses derived from practice wisdom should be investigated. Such studies will probably confirm much of practice wisdom – it would be odd if they did not. The studies might also identify dissonances between official policies, the value system of a profession, its practice wisdom, and actual practice. These studies could include explaining to singletons and groups, and they would have implications for training. More importantly, they might lead to a shift from descriptions of practice rooted in ideologies to descriptions of ideologies rooted in practice.

But perhaps the greatest challenge is strengthening the links between explaining in a professional context and its outcomes. This task will require an exploration of explaining, not merely as a cognitive act, but also as an affective act through which persuasion and influence lead to changes in attitudes, which, in their turn, may lead to long-term changes in cognition and behaviour. However, the approach and measurement of such outcomes is a vexing problem for all the professions. It is relatively easy to take short-term measures of understanding and satisfaction; it is more difficult to measure whether changes in cognition and attitudes have stabilised. The difficulties are partly technical, ethical, and economic. There is no satisfactory answer to this issue. One may simply have to rely upon 'weak' generalisations based on the covering law model, referred to in this chapter, and continue to explore explaining and understanding by a diverse range of methods. While the goal of explaining will always remain understanding, it may be that the goal of the professions is understanding that leads to action. It is hoped that this chapter will assist professionals in this task.

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