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The Principles of Supportive Communication: A Critical Perspective

Abstract: My paper focuses on the concept of supportive communication. While several authors have proposed a list of principles of supportive communication, a review of the most relevant literature on the matter reveals a bewildering complexity. What was initially thought as a straightforward interaction, easily understandable within the theoretical frame of social support, proved to be a much more intricate process, involving verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal content, facework, cognitive heuristics and contextual factors. The problem-focused paradigm has been complemented with the emotion-focused one, and Brant Burleson offered a very useful tool by distinguishing among Low Person-Centeredness, Moderately Person-Centeredness and Highly Person-Centeredness. Along other refined tools, the latter distinction will allow us to have a better grasp of this process and to find better ways to increase the positive outcomes.

Keywords: supportive communication, person-centeredness, message content, perceived support availability, optimal outcomes

1. Introduction

In the last decades, an extensive body of work has been done in order to clarify the characteristics of supportive communication. According to Burleson and MacGeorge (2002, 374), supportive communication comprises “verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid”. Practically, we provide help to others in a myriad of situations and in order to achieve this goal we use a diverse repertoire of messages. Supportive communication has been studied in various life contexts, such

as family (Leach and Braithwaite 1996), bullying (Matsunaga 2011), online communities and support groups (Coulson 2005, Turner, Grube and Meyers 2001, Aakhus and Rumsey 2010, Reagle jr. 2010, Braithwaite, Waldron and Finn 2010, High, Oeldorf-Hirsch and Bellur 2014), educational performance (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens, and Matos 2005, Rosenfeld and Richman 1999) or management skills (Whetten and Cameron 2011). It is exactly the latter context that interests me for the purposes of this paper. What I found both puzzling and challenging was the fact that Whetten and Cameron's esteemed book on management skills accepts the difficult endeavour of presenting the principles of supportive communication (a form of communication considered extremely important for the development of management skills). On the one hand, this proves to be useful both in practical terms and theoretical ones (principles at least simplify matters and offer better ground for understanding/framing what happens in actual interactions). On the other hand, if we review the most relevant literature on supportive communication we get the feeling that it is very difficult to encapsulate all the knowledge in the field in a few principles. Moreover, even if we cannot use the word "contradictions", there are still quite different takes on key matters by Whetten and Cameron in comparison to what we find in interpersonal studies. Thus, it becomes necessary to analyse not only the principles, but also the way in which we could make sense of this explanatory "gap" when we cross borders from interpersonal communication to the field of management.

2. Stating the Principles

In this section I will make a brief presentation of the principles as they are discussed by Whetten and Cameron (2011, 247-257):

- a) Supportive communication is based on congruence, not incongruence
- b) Supportive communication is descriptive, not evaluative
- c) Supportive communication is problem-oriented, not person-oriented
- d) Supportive communication validates rather than invalidates individuals
- e) Supportive communication is specific (useful), not global (nonuseful)
- f) Supportive communication is conjunctive, not disjunctive

- g) Supportive communication is owned, not disowned
- h) Supportive communication requires supportive listening, not one-way message delivery

The first principle indicates the fact that there should be a match between our feelings and our verbal messages. The central idea is that displayed behaviors should match the speech acts of the helper. One key point is the fact that the incongruence can be present without people acknowledging it: you might feel a certain emotion (and the others read it on your bodily expressions), but you are not aware of it. According to the second one, we should focus on describing actual situations and our reactions to it rather than making direct assessments of the other person's behavior. The third principle states that in supportive interactions people must focus first and foremost on problems (perceived as puzzles to be solved) rather than persons, with the caveat that this is done in order to shift away from the eventual appeal to the traits of the person. The fourth principle actually continues what the third one stated, namely the fact that we communicate for the purpose of cooperating and for reaching (relationship) goals (Priem, Haunani Solomon and Steuber 2009), without dismissing what the significant other has to say and without ignoring his or her statements. The fifth principle asserts that within the frame of supportive interactions we usually get specific, meaningful content and not general statements. The conjunctive trait stresses the fact that we should lead our conversations by keeping track of what has been said and done before: we cannot ignore what happened in the early stages of the interaction. The seventh principle underlines the importance of assuming the responsibility for one's utterances and facts. Finally, the eighth principle ensures that supportive communication does not take the form of lecturing.

The following sections attempt to do not just one, but two things. On the one hand, they include critical remarks and objections to the above principles, on the other hand they aim to show – at least partially – how mainstream interpersonal communication researchers tackle the subsequent problems nowadays.

3. Problem-orientation and person-centeredness

When we say that supportive communication is problem-oriented, we actually put an emphasis on the fact that we focus on behaviors rather than the (perceived) traits of the individual. Thus, we avoid well-known

forms of accusations or placing the blame on the other. What we do is actually focus on the situation itself and not on the persons involved. But, on the other hand, stating that supportive communication is not person-oriented is misleading, to say the least. First of all, recent literature on supportive communication has emphasised the sophistication needed in order to accomplish supportive goals. The caregiver has to be not only perceptive, but also accurate in his actions in order to deliver a comforting message, to decrease emotional distress, to help the receiver improve his or her relationships with others or to contribute to the well-being of the receiver (Burlleson 2009, 22). All this involves detailed processing from both persons involved and mindful understanding of the significant other. Couldn't we, then, characterize this situation as person-centered? I think we have strong arguments to offer the affirmative answer.

During the interpersonal interaction, we have to process verbal content, paraverbal content, nonverbal content and also other non-content features (such as contextual elements), according to Burlleson. In his dual-process theory (inspired by the famous Elaboration Likelihood Model and Heuristic-Systematic Model, created by Petty and Cacioppo, and Chaiken, respectively), the well-being of the receiver is conceived as involving a cognitive level (beliefs, for instance), an emotional level (moods, feelings, emotions) and a behavioural level (for example, coping strategies).

An analysis of the emotional content of the supportive messages, Burlleson thinks, shows that people use three different types of approaches. Low Person-Centered messages (LPC) represent a denial of the feelings of the other person, manifested through criticism and delegitimization, and different forms of teaching/telling the other person what she or he should do. Moderately Person-Centered messages (MPC) "afford an implicit recognition of the other's feelings by attempting to distract the other's attention from the troubling situation, offering expressions of sympathy and condolence, or presenting explanations of the situation that are intended to reduce the other's distress" (Burlleson 2009, 28). Highly Person-Centered (HPC) messages acknowledge fully the other's feelings, interpret them as being legitimate, help the other structure his or her moods and emotions and try to make sense of the thoughts, emotions and behaviors of the other in the larger context of the other person's life. Of course, this implies that constant use of HPC messages would lead to more efficient results of the interaction. Against this background, it is safe to assert that supportive communication can be

problem-oriented, but also person-centered: there is no contradiction between these two traits.

Low Person-Centeredness	Moderately Person-Centeredness	Highly Person-Centeredness
“You are simply wrong.”	“Let’s do something else, shall we?”	“I know so well this makes you upset.”
“You should have done something completely different.”	“I am sorry to hear that.”	“Things like this would have made me crazy, too.”
“You don’t understand.”	“We can talk about this, if you want.”	“It is nerve-racking to try so many times and to still fail.”
“You created the problem.”	“I understand how this works.”	“You are only human.”
“We will do it this way. You don’t get it anyway.”	“I see it is very difficult for you.”	“You are not a hero.”
“You do not perform well enough.”	“You are clearly not happy about this.”	“It took me forever to complete this bothersome task. I can understand.”
“You whine too much.”	“Keep trying!”	“Surely you learnt something from this.”
“You are not working hard enough.”	“Maybe if you used that method, you would have done it.”	“I know it’s frustrating. It is only natural to feel that way. But you are two steps away from finishing the task.”
“You are incompetent.”	“This happened because of time pressure.”	“Do not think for a second you are not smart enough.”
“You have never tried your best.”	“Do your best next time.”	“I can help you with this.”

Samples of LPC, MPC and HPC messages adapted from Burluson 2009 and Jones and Bodie 2014

4. The descriptive standpoint

In my view, this principle holds strong. It is quite obvious that evaluative messages may be perceived as threatening. There are a few reasons for it. First, evaluative communication is judgemental and places labels on people (Whetten and Cameron 2011, 248). When we accuse someone of being “stupid”, “incompetent” or “stubborn”, we practically attack those persons and we would probably get defensive answers. Second, evaluative communication is self-perpetuating. As we project our own thoughts on others, they will do the same. Effective communication is unlikely to happen when both parties built defensive structures. Moreover, we will be also labelled in a similar manner. Of course, it is a known fact that most of the emotionally charged contexts of communication seldom lead to evaluative forms and, henceforth, to quarrels. On the other hand, the descriptive stance is based on the resource of describing the events “as objectively and dispassionately as possible” (Whetten and Cameron 2011, 248). This can be coupled with a depiction of the actual consequences of a behavior or an event. In this vein, we can carefully include suggestions which have the clear benefit of shifting the focus from persons to behaviors. It is, evidently, highly debatable whether supportive communication (and its subsequent descriptive stance) can work and can help people improve and organizations reach their fundamental goals in all the cases and across cultures. The answer would probably be closer to a negative one than to an affirmative one. But we can point out communities and support groups as success tokens: people invest in such entities because they feel included, accepted and not judged harshly. Their problems are tackled as objectively as possible and the pieces of advice they get are more often than not useful and relevant. Whatever the problem, such a support group or community would not immediately label you or ostracize you. This explains also why electronic communities have developed in the past twenty years:

“Virtual communities are a growing source of informational and emotional support for individuals dealing with health concerns. Indeed, virtual support groups may provide several benefits that are not as easily attainable through FtF support groups. For example, virtual communities can overcome temporal or geographic boundaries that FtF groups cannot. In virtual communities, support is available at any time the individual seeks it, and the individual network of support can extend far

beyond the individual's locale." (Welbourne, Blanchard and Boughton 2009, 31-32)

To give another example, in the case of giving advice, Feng and Burleson (2008, 2-3) notice that advice outcomes are influenced by factors such as content, feasibility (how capable is the person of performing the actions recommended), or the absence of limitations. Moreover, facework is not the only element that counts in the evaluation of advice, as one could naively think. People are rather inclined to assess the messages and their efficacy (how much is changed for the better if the person accomplishes the suggested actions). As Feng put it, "the advice-giving process is typically triggered by the helper's perception that the recipient is experiencing a problem and is in need of advice. However, acting simply on the assumption that a problem exists and the target needs advice may be problematic because this assumption can be wrong. As research has shown, unwanted, irrelevant, or redundant advice is counterproductive in the sense that it tends to meet resistance from the recipient" (Feng 2016, 118).

5. Specific content

The verbal content of the supportive messages includes explicit and implicit elements (presuppositions, for example). Burleson (2009, 23) distinguishes between emotion-focused messages and problem-focused messages, but in either case the effective helper uses specific features and not general ones.

The use of nonverbal cues is equally important. On the one hand, feelings are expressed using nonverbal behaviors. On the other hand, nonverbal behaviours indicate the willingness to interact with the significant other. We can include here nodding, vocal warmth or facial expressions. Also, it turns out that features of the helper are equally important (women, for instance, are perceived as being more supportive than men even if there is no difference in terms of message content). For Burleson (2009, 25), men "evaluate supportive messages from attractive female helpers as more helpful than messages from less attractive female helpers, especially when these men are dealing with a mild (rather than moderate) upset, as well as when they are distracted by a noisy interruption".

For Jones and Hansen, supportive interactions are deeply connected with emotional regulation processes. An important part

belongs to coping behaviors. If someone close to us, for instance, has a negative experience, then our immediate reaction seldom is to help our friend by ensuring he or she can cope with the former event. According to Lazarus (1991), coping involves two different appraisal processes. The first process entails an evaluation of the stimulus, namely a “decision” whether the stimulus is harmful or not. The second process (a secondary appraisal) intervenes in the latter situation and it usually entails searching for solutions in order to eliminate the upsetting effects of the stimulus. This is the moment when communication strategies step in (Jones and Hansen 2014, 2): “Positive reappraisal reframes the meaning of a stressful event so that it can culminate in less aversive and perhaps even positive emotional experiences, and one way to increase positively reappraisal abilities is to cultivate mindfulness”. Garland, Gaylord and Park (2009) introduce the mindful coping model, which stresses the importance of decentering (any positive reappraisal must be preceded by detachment from the harmful event or the negative emotions associated with it). Decentering entails the idea that human understanding depends on the relationship between a person’s verbal scripts and the various contexts within which the person takes action. Decentering makes people contextualize emotional experiences. When people change their perspectives, “positive reappraisals of previously interpreted difficult events become possible. The result is emotional improvement. Beneficial emotional support influences the decentering process by helping the distressed person identify different vantage points from which difficult emotions can be understood” (Jones and Hansen 2014, 3).

6. Perceived Support Availability

It is important to notice that supportive communication reaches its goals especially when we find sophisticated forms. On the one hand, more sophistication, many authors argue, implies a broader range of possibilities. On the other hand, sophisticated behaviors represent a better instantiation of the theoretical principles of sensitive help. Burleson (2009, 24) believes that “efforts to provide esteem support will be most helpful when they use emotion-focused, inductive messages to foster reattributions and reappraisals by the recipient”.

Our supportive efforts are inherently interpreted by the recipient. A stable perceived support creates serious ground for mental and physical health. Even though people differ a lot in terms of perceived support, there is a common trait: our everyday conversations and interactions and

our significant relationships constitute its nurturing environment. Jones and Hansen (2014, 1) assert that perceived support depends on the interactions that took place in the (common) past. They also suggest there is a certain mediating mechanism which helps perceived support and received support to efficiently meet. Such a mechanism may be mindfulness, which is defined in terms of attention and awareness to both internal and external stimuli, but everything done in nonreactive fashion. Also, they think there is an increase in terms of the quality of support when the recipient decodes the caregiver's actions as being non-judgemental.

7. Conclusions

Scholarly work on the subject of supportive communication has dramatically increased over the past thirty years. This seems like a perfectly logical evolution when we come to think about the growing awareness about people needing help in both offline and online contexts. In this vein, a review of the main studies in the field shows that scholars went from acknowledging the importance of the person-centered messages to focusing on helpers and the helped. Thus, it turned out that the processing done by the communicators involved played a decisive role in the outcome of the interaction. Some comforting messages, placed in the appropriate context, require little processing from the part of the receiver, for instance. In other cases (a situation somewhat similar to persuasion), all the persons involved should prove interpersonal cognitive complexity in order to reach the goal, say, of mutual understanding and efficient completion of the helping intent. When we evaluate Highly Person-Centeredness messages, to take another example, we usually find a relevant correlation with interpersonal cognitive complexity in terms of both competent listening and repertoire of suitable helping behaviors. The reality of social life has shown countless times that the presence of good intentions and the expectations to offer help/receive help do not always suffice. Many times, caregivers have to be exceptionally flexible and creative in order to grasp the proper approach and the proper moment to implement it. Nevertheless, supportive communication continues to be researched within the frame of social support theories, but with every year we get more nuanced explanatory models. When authors suggest mindfulness as a necessary piece in the explanatory puzzle don't they explain away something that feels simple with the means of something which appears to be even more intricate? On the other hand, Brant

Burleson's intuition about sophistication holds strong as long as we enter the details of mental processing. The existence of suboptimal outcomes (unfruitful discussions, lack of understanding, no actual help delivered, no significant psychological change for the stressed person) is determined not only by the low performance or the skills of the caregiver, but also by others factors.

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