

THE GEOMETRY OF DIALOGUE

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ELEMENTS OF EXPERIENCING (DIMENSION 1)

4.1. Discussion and references concerning the structure and categorization of experience, and of experience in communication.

There are some forms of experience that are universally understandable, without much need for symbolic mediation. If one sees a person weeping at a funeral or crying out in pain because their hand has been caught in a closing door, one has an immediate, intuitive understanding of what the other person is experiencing. But much, perhaps most, of human experience is not so self-explanatory. Generally speaking, in order for me to tell you what I am experiencing, or for me to understand what you are experiencing, we need some sort of shared vocabulary of experience. Furthermore, in order to convey or understand experience more completely, we need some sort of conventions about how fit together the various elements of experience our culture names (thinking, feeling, wanting, hoping, etc., in European cultures) into a script or structure that “makes sense.” Such shared scripts or structures allow us to convey complex constellations of meaning and feeling. Rather than just saying “Ouch!” or “Hurry up!”, I can say things such as “I need your report right now so that I can complete our departmental budget on time. I’m afraid we’ll be in big trouble if it’s late.”

4.2. Resources for understanding the structure of day-to-day human experiencing?”

This chapter explores the question “What is the structure of day-to-day human experiencing?” Since human experience appears to be fairly malleable, a pragmatic, post-modern translation of this question would be “What would be a good way to imagine the structure of experiencing in everyday life? What sort of division of experiencing would

allow you to express yourself more understandably to others and allow you to listen to others more appreciatively and insightfully?” Many of the books referred to below propose *de facto* structures of experience without naming them as such. Many of the advice-giving books appear to be carrying on and expanding a tradition of communication facilitation known as “sensitivity training” and begun by the National Training Laboratories⁷⁹ in the 1940s.

In designing the first menu of the Six Dimension model to give some structure to the questions “What’s going on inside of me?” and “What’s going on inside of you?”, I have used elements from the following works.

4.2.1. Roy D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*.⁸⁰ This book contains the most explicit discussion I have been able to find concerning the categories of everyday experience. In his section on models of the mind (p. 158), D’Andrade proposes that ordinary Americans understand their inner functioning as composed of five processes arranged in the following causal chain: perceiving, thinking, feeling, wishing and intending. Such a chain connects events in a person’s life to a person’s subsequent acts, as illustrated in D’Andrade’s flow-chart drawing, reproduced below. An example of a report of my experience using this logic might run as follows: “When I saw that car accident at the intersection of Main and Elm^(perceiving) I thought to myself, ‘Oh my God, that’s the third accident at that intersection this year and the City Council still has not put in stop signs there’^(thinking) and I felt so sorry for the people in the accident and so disgusted with the City Council members,^(feeling) I just wanted to drive down to the Street Maintenance Department and take one of those signs and go back to the intersection and put it up myself!”^(wishing and intending) In this report one sees the perception-thought-feeling-wish sequence described by D’Andrade in the figure 4.1, below.

⁷⁹As noted by Robert Bolton in *People Skills* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 289.

⁸⁰Roy D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

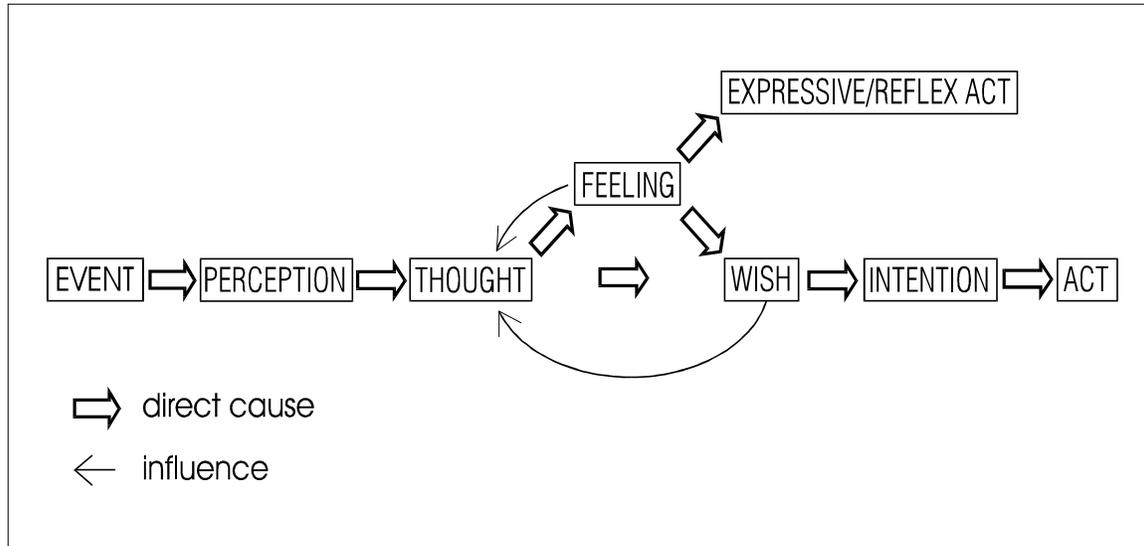


Figure 4.1. A folk model of mental processes and the causal relations among them. From Roy D'Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 162.

D'Andrade's model suggests that there may be universal elements in the communication skill texts of Marshall Rosenberg and Sherod Miller, et al., cited below, from which I have drawn many of the elements of the Six Dimensions model. D'Andrade cites the work of another anthropologist, Anna W. Wierzbicka, who asserts that similar conceptualizations of the structure of experience (as given in Figure 4.1.) appear to be in use in every human culture. Such an assertion of universality is bound to be challenged by other scholars. But for my current purpose of offering well-researched advice to people in English-speaking cultures, I feel it is sufficient for me to offer evidence that the categories presented in Dimension One are in widespread use by many authors and in many cultures. (I hope Wierzbicka is right about the universality issue, because if so that would suggest that the barriers to intercultural communication may not be as great as might have been imagined. But such considerations are beyond the scope of this study.)

4.2.2. Sherod Miller et al., *Straight Talk*,⁸¹ a guide for improved family communication written by three researchers at the University of Minnesota Family

⁸¹Sherod Miller, Daniel Wackman, Elam Nunnally and Carol Saline, *Straight Talk* (New York: Signet, 1982)

Research Center. The “awareness wheel” circular diagram presented in this book is both a model for self-observation and typology of experience directly tied to communicative practice. It includes sensations, interpretations, feelings, intentions and actions. I have adopted all these elements in my model, but not in the configuration presented by the authors. I first started thinking about intentions after reading this book, however the authors mix together various kinds of intentions in the same list: conversational (e.g., “I want to make a complaint...”), situational (e.g., “I want us to complete this job by Friday.”) and relational (e.g., “I want to be a good father.”). I believe that the issues concerning intentions would be better understood if different time scales and contexts of intentions were used to group intentions into separate lists.

4.2.3. Marshall B. Rosenberg, *A Model for Nonviolent Communication*.⁸² Presents a four-part model that applies equally to speaking, responsive listening and understanding one’s own or another person’s experience. It includes

- (1) observing,
- (2) emoting,
- (3) the interpreting and evaluating processes that support the emotions, and
- (4) wanting (expressed in specific action requests).

I have adopted all these elements in my model of experiencing and expanded on them with material from other writers.

4.2.4. Rom Harré, ed., *The Social Construction of Emotions*.⁸³ Presents current thinking and debates about the nature of human feeling, especially the relationship between emotions and the cognitive evaluation that may (some say must) precede or accompany them. The idea that emotions are partly or largely situational performances further complicates the task of coaching people to share their feelings.

4.2.5. Sharon A. Bower and Gordon H. Bower, *Asserting Yourself*.⁸⁴ Presents a four-part “DESC” script for assertive communication:

⁸²Marshall B. Rosenberg, *A Model for Nonviolent Communication*. (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1983).

⁸³Rom Harré, ed., *The Social Construction of Emotions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

⁸⁴Sharon A. Bower and Gordon H. Bower, *Asserting Yourself* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1976).

Describe the behavior of other person that is causing a problem,

Express feelings,

Specify the desired new behavior, and explain the positive

Consequences of complying with the request.

The authors recommend writing and memorizing a script in advance of confronting a person with whom one has a problem, and practicing one's script-writing skills by using scenes from one's past or by writing complaint letters to companies. I have adopted the Bowers' emphasis on describing the positive consequences that would flow from getting one's request granted, and call it "envisioning." It is an element not present in either Rosenberg's or Bolton's approach (noted below). On the other hand, the Bowers seem to me to have built an overly simplistic view of conflict into their model, in that problems, by definition, are always caused by other people's behavior. There is little room here for conflicts of needs, conflicts of interpretations, or mutually accomplished creative problem solving.

4.2.6. Robert Bolton, *People Skills*.⁸⁵ This book is a wide ranging and well documented introduction to communication skills, assertion and conflict resolution. Bolton notes that there are disagreements among various teachers and researchers in this field. He adopts and adapts Gordon's Teacher Effectiveness Training three-part scheme of experience labeling:

(1) describe problem behavior,

(2) disclose feelings evoked, and

(3) explain feeling by describing tangible effect of listener's behavior on speaker.

Bolton's model offers an explanation of feelings that is absent in the Bowers' model, but does not include specifying desired new behavior or explaining positive consequences. I have included Bolton's "tangible effects on me" explanation of feelings in my model as part of a range of "emotion explainers" that includes such items as "how I interpret your behavior" and "what I want/wanted to happen."

⁸⁵Robert Bolton, *People Skills* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

4.2.7. Carroll E. Izard, Jerome Kagan and Robert B. Zajonc, eds., *Emotions, Cognition and Behavior*.⁸⁶ Several of the advice-giving books shown above recommend that a person describe thoughts and feelings to others as if the two were separate internal events, and to investigate the degree to which one's feelings may be the result of one's own thought processes. (This gets elevated to the level of religious dogma in Bandler and Grinder's *The Structure of Magic*,⁸⁷ and is argued more carefully in Lazarus and Folkman's *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*.⁸⁸) The essays in *Emotion, Cognition and Behavior* demonstrate that the relationship between thinking and feeling is complex, variable, the subject of heated debate, and not as neatly summarizable as the advice-givers, myself included, would have everyone believe. Cognitively oriented scholars emphasize that our feelings grow out of our interpretations of whatever is happening, but scholars of emotion point out that the opposite can also be true: a particular mood can influence the kind of interpretations we generate.

4.3. Summary and Workshop Workbook example

In this chapter I have introduced the content of the first of the Six Dimensions, "Experiencing," which is modeled as includes perceiving, thinking, feeling, wanting, and envisioning/anticipating. My goal in organizing this wide array of ideas from psychology and communication studies into a list of five processes is the same as many of the authors cited: to provide people with a rich descriptive vocabulary with which to both express themselves more fully and listen more carefully and appreciatively. Reproduced below is a section from my workshop workbook in which I introduce my adaptation of these ideas to the general public.

[Postscript 2002: Since 1997 when the following exercise was developed, it has become Chapter Three of *The Seven Challenges: A Workbook and Reader About Communicating More Cooperatively*. The *Workbook* is available by contribution or of charge on the Internet at www.coopcomm.org/workbook]

⁸⁶Carroll E. Izard, Jerome Kagan and Robert B. Zajonc, eds., *Emotions, Cognition and Behavior*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁸⁷Bandler and Grinder, *The Structure of Magic*, introduction.

⁸⁸Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping* (New York: Springer, 1984).



Communication works partly by allowing most background information to be implied.

When the consequences of misunderstanding are serious, we need to help our listeners by giving them more details.

Expressing your experience. *Slow down and give your listeners more information about what you are experiencing by using a wide range of “I-statements.”* You are likely to get more of your listener’s empathy if you express more of what you are seeing, hearing, feeling, interpreting, wanting, and envisioning. Listening is a very creative process in which the listener reconstructs the speaker’s experience. The more facets or dimensions of your experience that you share, the easier it will be for your conversation partner to reconstruct your experience and understand what you are feeling. This is equally worthwhile whether you are trying to solve a problem with someone or trying to express appreciation for them.

Human communication works by leaving most things unsaid and depending on the listener to fill in the missing information. For example, a receptionist may say to a counselor, “**Your two o’clock is here,**” a sentence which, on the face of it, makes no sense whatsoever. She means “**Your client who made an appointment for two o’clock is here,**” and the listener knows that. It’s amazing how much of the time this abbreviating and implying process works just fine. BUT, in situations of change, ambiguity, conflict or emotional need, our “shorthand” way of speaking may not work at all. Our listeners may fill in a completely different set of details than the one we intended, or our listeners may not understand the significance of what we are saying (they may get some of the details but miss the big picture).

According to various communication researchers, there are five dimensions of experience that your conversation partners can use to recreate your experience inside their minds. The more elements you provide, the higher the probability that your listener’s re-creation will match your experience. I will refer to these as the “five messages.” The table below shows an example of saying more of what you’re experiencing. The shorthand version would be something like “You must stop racing your wheelchair down the hall!” Here are the details of the five messages that are left out in the shorthand version:

The Five Messages		Example (in a hospital):
<i>seeing, hearing...</i>	1. What are you seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing? (facts only)	“John, when I see you racing your wheelchair down the hall...
<i>and feeling...</i>	2. What emotions are you feeling?	...I feel really angry...
<i>because I...</i>	3. What interpretations, wants, needs, memories or anticipation’s of <u>yours</u> support those feelings?	...because I imagine that you are going to hurt yourself and someone else, too...
<i>and now I want...</i>	4. What action, information or commitment do you want now.	...so I want you to promise me right now that you will slow down...
<i>so that...</i>	5. What <u>positive</u> results will that action, information or commitment lead to in the future? (no threats)	...so that you can get out of here in one piece and I can stop worrying about a collision.”

Here are eight examples of statements that give your listener a full range of information about your experience. Notice how a person's feelings can change according to the needs and interpretations they bring to a situation.

<i>Perceiving</i>	<i>Emoting</i>	<i>Thinking</i>	<i>Wanting</i>	<i>Envisioning</i>
<i>1. When I saw/ heard...</i>	<i>2. I felt...</i>	<i>3. because I... (need, want, interpret, associate, etc.)</i>	<i>4. and now I want/ then I wanted...</i>	<i>5. so that/ in order to...</i>
When I saw the bear in the woods with her three cubs...	...I felt overjoyed!...	...because I needed a picture of bears for my wildlife class...	...and I wanted the bear to stand perfectly still...	so I could focus my camera.
	...I felt terrified!...	...because I remembered that bears with cubs are very aggressive...	...and I wanted to get out of there fast...	so that the bear would not pick up my scent.
When I saw the dishes in the sink...	...I felt irritated...	...because I want to start cooking dinner right away...	...and I want to ask you to help me do the dishes right now...	...so that dinner will be ready by the time our guests arrive.
	...I felt happy...	...because I guessed that you had come back from your trip to Mexico...	...and I want you to tell me all about the Aztec ruins you saw...	...so that I can liven up some scenes in the short story I'm writing.
When I saw the flying saucer on your roof...	... felt more excited than I have ever been in my life...	...because I imagined the saucer people would give you the anti-gravity formula...	...and I wanted you to promise that you would share it with me...	...so that we would both get rich and famous.
	...I felt more afraid than I have ever been in my life...	...because I imagined the saucer people were going to kidnap you...	...and I wanted you to run for your life...	...so that you would not get abducted and maybe turned into a zombie.
When I saw the grant application in the office mail..	...I felt delighted...	...because I think our program is good enough to win a large grant...	...and I want to ask you to help me with the budget pages...	...so that we can get the application in before the deadline.
	...I felt depressed...	...because I cannot see clients when I'm filling out forms...	...and I want you to help me with the budget pages...	...so that I can keep up my case work over the next three weeks.